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### Jean-Luc Nancy: The Infinity of Sense

Jean-Luc Nancy has published over sixty books and over four hundred articles in a career which has spanned just over four decades. Although he was initially best known in the anglophone academic world for his work on community published in the 1980s, since the late 1990s there has been a burgeoning interest in his philosophy as a whole and he has emerged as the most prominent and influential French philosopher working in the wake of Derridean deconstruction.<sup>1</sup> Yet, while Nancy's philosophy is certainly a deconstructive or post-deconstructive thinking, it also, and from a very early stage, decisively diverges from Derrida. Nancy's 'singular-plural' ontology, his thinking of finitude, of shared finite existence, sense and world, uses philosophical terms and figures which would be placed under erasure or arouse a high degree of suspicion when seen from a deconstructive perspective: terms such as 'being', 'presence', 'experience', 'existence', 'truth', 'touch' and even, more recently, theological terms such as 'incarnation' and the 'divine'.

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Nancy has sometimes been characterized as a thinker of finitude whose philosophy is most indebted to Heideggerian thought.<sup>2</sup> Yet such a characterization does not do justice to the diversity and breadth of his thinking. On the one hand, it is more true to say that, like Derrida's thought, Nancy's philosophy grows out of phenomenology in general and could more properly be characterized as *post*-phenomenological. On the other hand, reducing Nancy simply to a thinker of 'finitude' in the Heideggerian mould does not take into account the extent to which he is also, and at the same time, a thinker of infinity, or what one might call the 'infinitude' of finitude. Taken in this light, Nancy should be aligned far more with figures such as

Maurice Blanchot or even Emmanuel Levinas rather than solely or straightforwardly with Heidegger. The diversity of his thought is reflected in its successive periods of development. In the 1970s, Nancy (often with his friend and colleague the late Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe) publishes what are principally philosophical commentaries, on, for instance, Lacan, Hegel, Kant and Descartes. In the 1980s, he begins to develop his important thinking around the question of the political and of community (again with Lacoue-Labarthe).<sup>3</sup> This decade also begins to see the emergence of a more ambitious philosophical thinking in major works such as *The Experience of Freedom* (Nancy 1988a; 1993c). In the 1990s, Nancy publishes the principal works upon which his status as an important philosopher of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century rests. These include a major work of ontology, *Being Singular Plural* (Nancy 1996a; 2000c) and also works which engage ambitiously with the question of thought itself, and with questions of embodiment, world disclosure and sense constitution (*A Finite Thinking* (Nancy 1990a; 2003c), *Corpus* (Nancy 1992a; 2008b), and *The Sense of the World* (Nancy 1993a; 1997e)). From the middle of the 1990s through to the first decade of this century, Nancy develops a sustained engagement with the question of art and with aesthetics. Finally, from the late 1990s onwards, he has also pursued what he calls a 'deconstruction of Christianity', a project which has continued right up to the time of writing this study with the publication of the second of two volumes in early 2010 (Nancy 2005a; 2008c; 2010b). Throughout all these successive stages of his career, Nancy has returned to and reworked elements of his previous work such that, taken as a whole, his philosophy emerges as a complex and sustained engagement with a number of fundamental concerns.

These concerns could be characterized, albeit rather broadly and schematically, as follows. Nancy's philosophy aims to develop an ontology, to think being as coexistence and as a singular plural 'being-with'. It engages in a sustained manner with the interrelated questions of community and of the political. It aims to pose the question of the subject and of a post-deconstructive subjectivity and does so in relation to the questions of embodiment, shared worldly existence, sense perception and sense itself, understood broadly speaking as the pre-symbolic meaningfulness of a shared bodily exposure to the world. It engages with what one might call the 'technicity' of worldly existence and sensory experience and on this basis develops a sustained meditation on the status of the arts. Finally, it aims to think the spacing, sharing and coming to presence of the world in terms of an exposure to/of an infinite excess of sense. There is something in this exposure of worldly existence to, or as, infinite excess that Nancy

will come to call divine and to think in his deconstruction of Christianity. What follows here will seek to explore these interrelated concerns further and show that, despite the diversity of Nancy's philosophical corpus, it nevertheless does form a corpus, albeit one which insists on its own fragmentary status, on its status as philosophy which is itself exposed to infinite excess.

## **Infinitude**

### *Finite thought, embodiment, and sense*

Finitude could perhaps be most easily understood in terms of limits, that is, as the state of being finite, bounded or limited. The task of a finite thinking, then, would be to think thought itself as that which, without renouncing the values of truth or universality, can only think within and at its own limit, touching at its limit and at its own singularity of thought (Nancy 1990a: 13; 2003c: 5). Towards the beginning of *A Finite Thinking*, Nancy argues that this task is inseparable from the question of 'sense' and of the finitude of sense: 'it could be a question of sense's essential finitude – something that would, in turn, demand an essential finitude of thinking' (Nancy 1990a: 13; 2003c: 4). The use of the term 'sense' here is by no means straightforward and, arguably, the entirety of Nancy's philosophy from the beginning of the 1990s onwards can, in one way or another, be viewed as an attempt to elaborate upon its complex status and meaning. Nevertheless, *A Finite Thinking* does begin within an attempt to give an initial definition of this difficult term: 'By "sense" I mean sense in the singular sense taken absolutely: the sense of life, of Man, of the world, the sense of existence; the sense of existence which is or which makes sense, which without sense would not exist' (Nancy 1990a: 10–11; 2003c: 3). What is clear from the outset is that sense, here, has an ontological or existential status. If a world or anything in it can be said to be or to exist, if it can be perceived, taken as an object of thought or simply experienced as such, then that is because it in some way always already *makes sense*, and does so before or prior to conceptual determination, and prior to our giving it a fixed signification, or attributing to it predicates or characteristics. The implications of the ontological status of sense will be explored further as this discussion progresses.

What is worth underlining at this stage is that finitude, for Nancy, is not conceived as a kind of enclosure of thought within its own

limits. He is not trying to argue that finite thinking is some kind of prison house which would deprive thought of any access to truth, or condemn it to be rooted in determinable specificities of historical context or situation. Nancy's finite thinking is not a relativism or perspectivism where one point of view has exactly the same value as any other. Nor is finitude here a limitation of thought which would imply an existence, beyond the limit, of a limitlessness or of an infinite (and therefore theological) transcendence. Already in *A Finite Thinking* Nancy understands finitude in terms of a limitation which is always, one might say always already, delimited or exposed to a certain limitlessness of actual and material worldly existence. Finite thinking is 'not a thinking of limitation, which implies the unlimitedness of a beyond, but a thinking of the limit as that on which, infinitely finite, existence arises [*s'enlève*] and to which it is exposed [*s'expose*]' (Nancy 1990a: 48–9; 2003c: 27). Any understanding of Nancy as a thinker of finitude needs to engage with the difficult logic of the limit which is being articulated here and, in particular, needs to engage with the force and implications of the formulation 'infinitely finite' (*infiniment finie*). Such a formulation is no doubt highly indebted to the thought and writing of Blanchot in texts such as *The Infinite Conversation* (Blanchot 1993) and clearly signals that Nancy's thinking of finitude is in no way reducible to the thought of an existence which would simply be enclosed within finite limits (e.g. those of contingency, mortality, language). At the same time, Nancy's use of French reflexive verb forms such as *s'enlever* and *s'exposer* can appear to be rather opaque, particularly to those unfamiliar with his thought.

The best way to tease out what might be at stake in these perhaps elliptical formulations is to turn to Nancy's thinking of sense and embodiment such as it is developed in texts such as *Corpus*, *The Sense of the World* and elsewhere. As has already been indicated, sense, for Nancy, has an ontological status: sense is always the sense of an existence which in some way always already makes sense. Yet, as the sense *of* existence, sense here is always engaged with a certain kind of materiality or concreteness. This materiality is, first and foremost, that of sensing bodies which perceive a world through the senses and through sensory experience more generally. Nancy is interested in the way that the spatiality of worldly existence is disclosed to us through situated and embodied being. In this context, his ontology of sense is also and at the same time an ontology of bodies. Sense and bodies are co-articulated in a fundamental way which discloses the world to us as existing. In *Corpus*, Nancy speaks of an 'Ontology of the body' and argues that 'bodies are existence,



the very act of ex-istence, being' (Nancy 1992a: 20; 2008b: 19). At the same time, he also speaks of the body as a 'body of sense' (Nancy 1992a: 24; 2008b: 25) and argues that '*The body is the architectonics of sense*' (Nancy 1992a: 25; 2008b: 25). Being, then, is disclosed in an organization or structure in which sense and bodies are engaged to form the element in which the existence of a spatial, material world can be experienced as such.

These points are developed further in *The Sense of the World* where Nancy argues that this co-articulation of sense and bodies needs to be understood as 'being-toward-the-world'. The original French term *être-au-monde* can translate both as being-in-the-world and as being-toward-the-world, depending on what kind of inflection one gives to the preposition *à* which can have many meanings, including 'at', 'to', 'with' and 'in'. Nancy is trying to think sense as a horizon of shared meaningfulness to which bodies are *exposed* in their apprehension or perception of a world and in the interaction of bodies with the world and each other: their touching, their contact, their mutual spacing and crossing. In this context the co-articulation of sense and bodies is always a 'toward' rather than simply an 'in', insofar as the meaningfulness of the world is experienced always in a projection of bodily sensory experience towards the world and others or, in Nancy's preferred term, its 'exposure' to them. It should be underlined that sense, here, is not yet signification in any fixed or determinable form; it is not articulated in a relation of signifier to signified or in a symbolic order in the structuralist/Lacanian sense: "'being-toward-the-world", if it takes place (and it does take place), is caught up in sense well before all signification. It makes, demands or proposes sense this side of or beyond all signification . . . Thus, *world* is not merely the correlative of *sense*; it is structured as *sense*, and reciprocally, *sense* is structured as *world*' (Nancy 1993a: 17–18; 1997e: 7–8). Understanding the way in which sense, for Nancy, is a horizon of meaningfulness 'well before all signification' is central to understanding his philosophy as a whole.<sup>4</sup> Proposing the sense of the world as an instance which is prior or anterior to any symbolic order or signifying process is also to confer upon it a certain materiality or concreteness, a materiality which is of a different order than any 'materiality of the signifier' or of discourse as material practice. Nancy is trying to think about the way our embodied sense perception and bodily engagements with a world are always caught up in sense such that something always already makes sense in the very moment that it is sensed or perceived. He articulates this engagement of the senses with sense using the figure of 'touch': 'It is not a matter of signification, but of the sense of the world as its very

*concreteness*, that on which our existence *touches* and by which it is *touched*, in all possible senses' (Nancy 1993a: 22; 1997e: 10). As is often the case, Nancy is using an apparently straightforward everyday term in a way which is in fact very complex and which resonates with a philosophical register which has a long history within the canon of European philosophy.<sup>5</sup>

It is impossible, within the context of this short discussion, to do full justice to the richness and complexity of Nancy's use of the figure of touch. Nevertheless, some insight can be gleaned from an important passage in *The Muses*, Nancy's first major book on art published in 1994: 'Touch is nothing other than the touch of sense altogether and of all the senses. It is their sensuality as such . . . touch presents the proper moment of sensible exteriority, it presents it *as such and as sensible*' (Nancy 1994: 35; 1996b: 17). 'Touch *forms one body* with sensing, or it makes of sensing a body, it is simply the *corpus* of the senses' (Nancy 1994: 35–6; 1996b: 17). It is the figure of touch here which acts as the hinge or point of articulation between sense understood as a horizon of meaningfulness and the senses understood in terms of the different forms of bodily sense perception (hearing, seeing, touch, taste, etc.). Touch at once becomes the privileged sense of all the five senses insofar as all five could be said to be a kind of contact or proximity in distance with a sensible exteriority. At the same time, touch becomes the figure by which the always already meaningful dimension of sensible experience can be thought: when we perceive or sense something, we 'touch on' or 'at' its sense in a way which is not yet a determined or determinable signification. One can perhaps begin to see here the way in which Nancy uses the term 'touch' to describe, one might say post-phenomenologically, the sense of the world, the sense which the world *is* insofar as it is both meaningful and at the same time embodied, material or concrete. In the figure of touch, Nancy is decisively shifting away from the figures of seeing, viewing and other optical metaphors which run through phenomenological discourse: '*world* invites us to no longer think on the level of the phenomenon (as surging forth, appearing, becoming visible, brilliance, occurrence, event), but on the level, let us say for the moment, of disposition (spacing, touching, contact, crossing)' (Nancy 1993a: 34, n. 19; 1997e: 176). The figure of touch, then, reorganizes the phenomenological discourse of world disclosure and sense constitution around a language of spacing and the mutual contact of bodies in a shared material world. In this manner, the question of phenomenality gives way to the question of shared material existence.

*Being singular plural*

If this thinking of sense and bodies represents a decisive shift away from a phenomenological discourse, it does not, as has already been emphasized, attempt to break with ontology, as would, in different ways, Levinas, Blanchot and Derrida. Again, though, care needs to be taken to understand the way in which Nancy uses the language of being, since, as before, his ontology of finitude is inseparable from a thinking of the infinite. If, for Levinas, ontology and finitude represent a gesture of enclosure (of existence) and, indeed, of violent foreclosure (of the ethical moment), this is decisively not the case for Nancy.<sup>6</sup> This is made very clear in a text such as *Being Singular Plural* where, as the title suggests, ontology occupies a central position. Building upon previous works and, in particular, upon *A Finite Thinking* and *The Sense of the World*, Nancy reiterates the ontological status conferred on sense: 'Being itself is given to us as sense' (Nancy 1996a: 20; 2000c: 2; translation modified). The language of being is used here without inverted commas and without being subjected to any irony or erasure. Yet being is thought in *Being Singular Plural* strictly and rigorously in terms of the infinite and irreducible excess of being over itself. The language Nancy uses to describe this excess of being over itself is that of being-with, coexistence, and the singular plurality of origins deployed within the logic of thinking at the limit of thought discussed above. Despite the lines of polemical opposition that separate the two philosophers, there is much that is shared here with Alain Badiou's ontology of inconsistent multiplicity elaborated in chapter 6. Nancy's thinking of embodiment and sense is clearly unequivocally and diametrically opposed to Badiou's subtractive approach to ontology and to his affirmation of a certain Platonism. However, Nancean singular plurality and Badiou's inconsistent multiplicity both affirm the actual infinity of being, its irreducible excess over itself, and its irreducibility to any horizon of unity, or any mode of substance or ground. Granted, Badiou would say that the Nancean discourse of thinking at the limit is not an *adequate* means to think the infinite excess of being over itself (this is reserved for the discourse of mathematics alone) but this should not detract from the similarity of their respective positions in this regard.

Nancy's arguments run broadly as follows: if being is given to us as sense, this is so only insofar as a fundamental privilege is accorded to the 'us' or the 'we' of this donation and only insofar as sense is always and only an element which is *shared*. As Nancy himself puts

it, 'sense is itself the sharing of being' (Nancy 1996a: 20; 2000c: 2). It is worth noting here that, as well as drawing attention to its ontological status, this discussion has also repeatedly described sense as being a 'shared horizon of meaningfulness'. It is this motif of sharing which comes to the foreground in *Being Singular Plural*: "'sense'", used absolutely in this way, has become the bared name of our being-with-one-another. We do not "have" sense or meaning any more because we are ourselves sense – entirely, without reserve, infinitely, with no sense other than "us" (Nancy 1996a: 19; 2000c: 1). Meaningfulness here is not something we can ever experience in isolation. As a shared horizon, sense is pre-subjective in that it is prior to conscious thought or cognition. It is also impersonal in that it is prior to any individual identity. Sense, in its sharing and understood as the being-of-all-with-each-other, is that from which any experience of self-reflexivity, individual subjectivity or of personal individuation can arise as such. Being is therefore always being-with and the 'we', for Nancy, is always primordial.

Yet if sense is what we *are*, special attention also needs to be given to his use of the words 'without reserve, *infinitely*' (my emphasis). The key point to note in this regard is that sense, as a horizon of meaningfulness to which bodies are exposed, or upon which they 'touch' in sensory experience, is never, for Nancy, a homogeneous element which can come to be fully determined within a system of signification. Sense is not something that can return to itself in an instance of self-sameness or in a way which would allow it to form a closed circuit of stable meaning. Neither can it be held in reserve nor gathered into the work of a concept. Sense is always exposed in its irreducible singularity and in the irreducible plurality of its exposure. This 'singular plurality' of sense is nothing other than the multiplicity of bodies which, in each and every instant, live, make and share sense. 'A singularity is always a body', Nancy writes, 'and all bodies are singularities' (Nancy 1996a: 37; 2000c: 18). It is here that the register of the infinite is engaged within Nancy's thinking of finite, corporeal being: "'finitude" signifies: the infinite singularity of sense, the infinite singularity of access to truth. Finitude is the origin, that is, it is an infinity [*une infinitude*] of origins' (Nancy 1996a: 33; 2000c: 15). Sense here is not an enclosed or delimited point of origin or stable and fixed grounding of existence. As that to which bodies are exposed in their touch, contact and spacing, sense is only ever a passage or movement (of exposure), which can never be limited, de-limited or contained. It may be what we are; indeed, it is the very truth of what we are and of our being-of-all-with-each-other. Yet it is so only as an infinite excess of sense over any and all finite limits, as the exposure of bodies

it, 'sense is itself the sharing of being' (Nancy 1996a: 20; 2000c: 2). It is worth noting here that, as well as drawing attention to its ontological status, this discussion has also repeatedly described sense as being a 'shared horizon of meaningfulness'. It is this motif of sharing which comes to the foreground in *Being Singular Plural*: "'sense'", used absolutely in this way, has become the bared name of our being-with-one-another. We do not "have" sense or meaning any more because we are ourselves sense – entirely, without reserve, infinitely, with no sense other than "us" (Nancy 1996a: 19; 2000c: 1). Meaningfulness here is not something we can ever experience in isolation. As a shared horizon, sense is pre-subjective in that it is prior to conscious thought or cognition. It is also impersonal in that it is prior to any individual identity. Sense, in its sharing and understood as the being-of-all-with-each-other, is that from which any experience of self-reflexivity, individual subjectivity or of personal individuation can arise as such. Being is therefore always being-with and the 'we', for Nancy, is always primordial.

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to that excess and, with that, as the disclosure of a shared meaningful world.

These are difficult formulations and, to a certain extent, the difficulty of Nancy's thinking here is irreducible, since, on its own terms, it is aiming to elaborate a thought of being which is always in excess of thought. Nancy's is a paradoxical ontology insofar as being (envisaged as being-with) always escapes the conceptual or figural grasp of ontological disclosure. It exceeds any and all possible reductions to the identity or limits of a *logos*. This is the kind of paradoxical or aporetic logic with which readers of much twentieth-century French thought will be familiar.<sup>7</sup> Yet ultimately, perhaps, Nancy is trying to think something that is quite straightforward and accessible, namely that we experience a world together whose meaningfulness is both shared and always already available to us in the most basic material sense of perceptions and worldly interactions. Such concrete meaningfulness is what allows us to have a sense of an individual self and to produce thought, symbolic forms, linguistic meaning or abstract concepts and signification. Yet, at the same time, it is never reducible to any of these instances. It is infinitely refractory, infinitely plural and is so only in the multiplicity of singular bodies which are exposed to sense. It is the emphasis on the singularity and plurality of bodies which means that Nancy's thinking, for all its paradoxical force, and for all its post-deconstructive and post-phenomenological rigour, can also persist with the far more accessible ontological language of being-with, as in, for example, the following sentence: 'In being-with and as being-with, we have always already begun to understand sense, and to understand ourselves and the world as sense. And this understanding is always already completed, whole, full, and infinite' (Nancy 1996a: 122; 2000c: 98). Despite the difficulty of his formulations, Nancy is aiming to think the very straightforward thought that, before we are anything which can resemble an individual self or subject, we *are* firstly together in a shared meaningfulness, and that this being together or sharing overflows any possibility of stable conceptualization, signification or determination.

Yet, from this thinking of shared sense and world in which the 'we' is always primordial, an account of individual subjectivity or self does emerge. In fact, Nancy's attempt to elaborate the conditions of what one might call a post-deconstructive subjectivity dates back to the earliest phase of his career in works such as *Ego Sum* (Nancy 1979).<sup>8</sup> The subject here is, as one might now expect, very much to be understood as a 'body-subject' and recalls in various ways the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty as elaborated in key texts such as *Phenomenology of Perception* and *The Visible and the Invisible* (Merleau-Ponty 1968;

2002). Yet the Nancean body-subject diverges in key ways from the 'body-proper' of Merleau-Pontean phenomenology. Nancy's body, for instance, has no gathered unity or propriety since it is always exposed, projected outside itself, as it touches on the sense of the world. Bodily experience here is irreducibly fractured or fragmented. As has been shown already, the exposure to sense never returns to itself, it occurs as an infinite and non-totalizable plurality of singular instances. In this context, the individual, the subject or the self can never be said to form a coherent unit or substantive ground. Rather they *are formed* in a multiplicity or plurality of singularities always exposed to a worldly exteriority or, as Nancy puts it: 'The individual is an intersection of singularities, the discrete exposition of their simultaneity, an exposition that is both discrete and transitory' (Nancy 1996a: 109; 2000c: 85). Perhaps the best terms to use in this context are 'subject' or 'self' rather than the term 'individual'. This is because the (body-)subject in Nancy emerges only in and through a certain *self-reflexivity* which is made possible by the exposure of finite sensory experience to the infinity of sense.

This self-reflexive structure has been best described by Nancy in a more recent text entitled *Listening* (Nancy 2002b; 2007d). In this short work, the dimension of sound and the faculty of listening is used to think once more the relation of bodily sensing to sense. The question of 'self', of individual consciousness and self-reflexive experience has a central place in the argument of *Listening*. Listening is chosen here insofar as it is paradigmatic of the way in which all the senses, in their exposure to sense, allow what Nancy calls an 'access-to-self', a kind of sensible-intelligible reflexivity of sensory experience which gives us self-awareness or self-consciousness in the first instance: 'All perceptible registers make up this access to "self" (which is also to say, to "sense"). But the fact that they are many – and without any possible totalizing – marks this same access, at once, with an internal diffraction, which perhaps in turn lets itself be analyzed in terms of sending [*renvoi*], echoes, resonances and rhythms' (Nancy 2002b: 31, n. 1; 2007d: 73, n. 23; translation modified). It is interesting to note here that, for Nancy, 'access-to-self' and 'access-to-sense' are more or less co-constitutive or covalent. He is arguing in effect that our sense of self emerges only in and through the exposure of finite sensory experience to the infinity of sense.<sup>9</sup> It is interesting also that this exposure of the finite to the infinite is described in terms of a rhythm, a referral (*renvoi*), or an echoing and resonance. This rhythm or resonance would be that of the successive singular and plural exposures of bodily sensing to sense in each and every instance of sensory experience. The Nancean self, then, emerges

as nothing other than this syncopated rhythm of successive instances of exposure to sense. This is not a self which is grounded in any way or formed in any kind of substance. It is not a self endowed with any fixed identity or stability; it is a being-always-already-outside-of-itself or an irreducible exteriority. Nancy articulates this in the following terms: 'Access to self: neither to a proper self (I), nor to the self of another, but to the form or structure of the *self* as such, that is to say, to the form, structure, and movement of an infinite referral [*renvoi*], since it refers to something [itself] that is nothing outside of the referral' (Nancy 2002b: 25; 2007d: 9). Nancy is repeating here the thinking of sense, embodiment and exposure developed in the 1990s in *The Sense of the World* and *Being Singular Plural*. Yet he is doing so using the language of an infinite referral of the senses via the infinity of sense and doing so in such a way as to develop much more his thinking of the singular self, rather, than say, of collective being-with. Clearly, the primordially of coexistence or being-with has not been abandoned in *Listening*, since the sense engaged in the 'infinite referral [*envoi infini*]' of sense experience is, as ever, a shared element in which existence is given as such and as shared. It might be noted here that, as with the renewed conception of 'self' elaborated by Marion and discussed in the previous chapter, Nancy's 'access to self' appears to be very different from a constitutive (transcendental or phenomenological) ego or consciousness. Once again, this is a self that is constituted rather than constitutive. In this case, though, the self is constituted in the infinite referral of, or exposure to, sense, rather than in the giving of a primordial and absolutely unconditioned givenness.

It might be useful to pause here briefly in order to highlight a potential limitation of Nancy's thinking of sense as being-with. It is arguable that the emphasis he places on a fundamental and originary sharing of sense as the element of communal being does not altogether do justice to, or sufficiently account for, the way in which the share of being is unevenly or unequally distributed or divided. Certainly, Nancy sees in the originary sharing of being a starting point for any political affirmation of justice or equality (Nancy 1991b: 51; 2002a: 73, 177; 2007c: 61, 111). In this context, inequality, oppression or evil would all be understood by Nancy as a form of violence done to, or foreclosure of, a more primordial ontological sharing which is always already shared equally. Yet there is a question as to whether Nancy's affirmation of an originary sharing is not a little too optimistic and whether it is able to articulate a more originary violence or unequal division of the share (on this point, see Howard Caygill in Sheppard and Sparks 1997: 30–1). If this is a thinking of embodied



being-with understood as *finitude*, i.e. as an existence marked by birth and death, does it account for the fact that some bodies will be *born into* and *as* an unequal share of material existence? That is to say, bodies are always born into different sites of a material existence that are shared unequally, depending upon the distribution of bodies across different geographical and geopolitical situations, and they are born as bodies bearing different markers of identity that will determine or influence their share of existence (e.g. colour, ethnicity, biological sex and, of course, social class). Arguably, Rancière's thinking of the 'distribution of the sensible' which articulates a fundamental sharing *and* a hierarchical, exclusory or unequal distribution of material sensible-intelligible existence does more to philosophically articulate the violence of ontological sharing than does Nancy's thinking of being-with.

This reservation aside, it should by now be clear the extent to which Nancy's thinking of sense and infinity lies at the very centre of all his thinking, of existence, of world, embodiment, sensory experience and of subjectivity or self. As his philosophy develops from the mid-1990s onwards, it becomes increasingly preoccupied with questions of art and aesthetics and with the question of the legacy of Christianity. However, this shift in emphasis does not necessarily articulate a radical break in his thinking. Indeed, as will become clear, the inter-related motifs of sensory experience, sense and embodiment continue to play a central role, albeit within the context of a seemingly different set of concerns.

## Art and incarnation

### *The arts*

The emphasis Nancy places on the multiplicity of the arts has been matched by the diversity and range of his writing in this area. He has written extensively on painting (and specifically on, for example, Christian art and on portraiture), on film, on sculpture and installation art, but also on poetry and on prose literature. Much of this writing takes the form of individual full-length works, for example, *The Muses* (Nancy 1994; 1996b), *Le Regard du portrait* (Nancy 2000a), *Visitation (de la peinture chrétienne)* (Nancy 2001e), *L'Évidence du film* (Nancy 2001c), *The Ground of the Image* (Nancy 2003b; 2005b) and *Noli me tangere* (Nancy 2003a; 2008d). However, Nancy has also written many shorter pieces, often published in exhibition catalogues

and in collaboration with artists themselves (some of these pieces have been collected in English translation in the second volume of *The Muses*, entitled *Multiple Arts* (Nancy 2006)).

Yet despite the diversity of this writing on the question of art, a number of distinct tendencies can be discerned. First and foremost, it should be underlined that Nancy's thinking here arises from, and is very closely connected to, his wider thinking about sense experience, embodiment and world disclosure. In this context, one might say that his formulations in relation to aesthetics (i.e. the arts) are inseparable from his thinking about the aesthetic (i.e. sense experience). Nancy, perhaps more than any other contemporary French thinker, restores the philosophical questioning of aesthetics to its original meaning, that of *aisthesis* (the ancient Greek noun referring to perception from the senses).<sup>10</sup> At the same time, and unlike traditional enlightenment aesthetics (of, say, Hegel), Nancy does not aim to subsume the specificity of individual art forms into any unified or overarching concept of Art. All his thinking here is directed towards an affirmation of the irreducible multiplicity of the arts in order then to relate this to the irreducible multiplicity (or singular plurality) of sense experience. This means that Nancy almost always talks about art in relation to a specific art form (painting, film, etc.) and more often than not in relation to the work of a particular artist (e.g. Abbas Kiarostami, On Kawara, Michel Deguy, Titian and so on). This also means, of course, that when he does talk about any one particular art form or comments on an individual artist he is also, through his discussion of a particular instance, aiming also to elaborate a more general philosophical understanding about the multiplicity of the arts. When he more directly engages with the philosophical tradition of aesthetics (as in, for instance, his discussion of Hegel in *The Muses*), he does so in order to deconstruct the unified and all-embracing conceptions of Art that the tradition has in different ways elaborated.<sup>11</sup> To read the full range of Nancy's writings on art is, therefore, to be confronted with a strong sense of diversity (of forms and of individual engagements with artists and artworks). Yet to read his writing on art is also, and at the same time, to encounter a sustained concern to elaborate a logic of aesthetic presentation which informs all artworks and underpins the irreducible plurality of the arts as a whole.

First and foremost, Nancy wants to distance or differentiate his account from any phenomenological understanding of art and he makes this very explicit in *The Muses*, his first major work on the subject: 'The objects of art do not depend on a phenomenology ... because they are prior to the phenomenon itself' (Nancy

1994: 61; 1996b: 33). If artworks present to us some kind of sensible–intelligible form, this is not, Nancy argues, because they are *re*-presenting the world of phenomena according to a logic of mimesis. That is to say, they are not straightforward copies of the objects or people that we recognize or perceive in the world around us, nor are they reproductions of their abstract idea or underlying essence. Nancy’s refusal to understand works of art according to any representational logic is fundamental to his account of art as a whole and remains a constant throughout all his writing on the subject. If, however, the objects of art are non-representational and are in some way ‘prior to the phenomenon’, this is because, Nancy continues: ‘They are of the patency of the world [*Elles sont de la patence du monde*]’ (Nancy 1994: 61; 1996b: 33). To say that artworks are ‘of the patency of the world’ may appear to be a rather oblique or obscure formulation. What is meant here can best be understood by returning briefly to Nancy’s thinking of sense and world disclosure which, it has already been emphasized, is intimately related to the account he gives of the arts and of artworks.

Nancy, it will be recalled, seeks, in works such as *The Sense of the World*, to move away from the optical metaphors (of seeing, looking, lighting, revealing, etc.) which inform phenomenological accounts of meaning constitution and world disclosure. His use of the terms ‘patent’ and ‘patency’ need to be understood within the context of this discursive displacement. In this specific instance, though, it is the language of donation and giving (so central to phenomenology and to a thinker like Marion) which he is aiming to displace. The question of the intelligibility of worldly appearance is addressed once again in *The Muses*. He writes: ‘In truth it is not a question of donation, nor of intention, nor even of a signifying. The coming [*venue*] of the world is not even a coming. The world is simply patent [*patent*]’ (Nancy 1994: 60; 1996b: 33). The original French term used by Nancy, *patent*, means to be evident or manifest (as in something which is ‘evidently’ or ‘manifestly’ obvious).<sup>12</sup> Phenomenal appearance, Nancy argues, is not given as such and nor is it presented according to an event of donation. Rather, the world, and more specifically the sense of the world (which, as has been shown, is what the world *is*) is simply always already available to us as the medium of existence. It is never fully present, presented or given as such, but, as was shown earlier, it is always that upon which we touch when we experience the world as (always already) meaningful. Thus the appearance of an intelligible world is simply evident, manifest, patent. In this context, the objects of art are not at all representational but are rather ‘of the patency of world’ insofar as they ‘touch upon’ the sense of the world just as we,

albeit in a different manner, also 'touch upon' that sense in our embodied sensory perceptions. An important and revealing comment made by Nancy in *The Sense of the World* may clarify what is at stake here. Sense, he writes, is that which 'exceeds the phenomenon in the phenomenon itself' (Nancy 1993a: 35; 1997e: 17). The images or forms presented by works of art are not representational in that they do not retrace, re-present or copy the exterior forms of phenomena. Rather, the images and forms of art, being prior to the phenomenon, give some kind of access to the sense of the world or, as Nancy himself puts it: 'Art isolates or forces . . . the moment of the world as such, the being-world of the world' (Nancy 1994: 37; 1996b: 16).

Art here enjoys a privileged status insofar as it allows some kind of exposure, or indirect access, to the sense or truth of the world. For if, as was shown earlier, sense is that ungraspable horizon of meaningfulness which is always and only ever an excess over language, thought and representation, art nevertheless touches upon, or is exposed to, that excess. 'Art', Nancy writes, 'forces a sense to touch itself, to be this sense that it is' (Nancy 1994: 42; 1996b: 21). This may appear still to be a rather dense and difficult formulation. Yet what Nancy is trying to think here is, perhaps, entirely simple or straightforward. We know very well that works of art have an impact upon us in an intense and direct (and at times very physical) manner. They make sense in some more or less diffuse fashion and in a way which seems intimately bound up with the refractory nature of our shared experience of the world and with the affective states (both individual and collective) which shape that experience. We are used to the notion that engaging with a work of art can give us access to some form of truth, a truth of what we are or of the way the world is. We may also know that works of art do this in a way which can never be entirely reduced to any single determinate signification, nor any one codified meaning or interpretation. In situating the images and forms of art 'prior to the phenomenon' and in arguing that they expose or touch upon the diffuse horizon of sense that the world is (without ever directly presenting or re-presenting sense), Nancy's account gives a powerful philosophical explanation of all the things we may more intuitively know or feel that art does, and of all the things which have historically given art such a privileged status and value.

It might not be surprising in this context that Nancy has written extensively on the tradition of Christian painting and the relation that art can maintain to the dimension of the sacred or divine transcendence. For if it is true that art touches upon, or is exposed to, the excessive and ungraspable horizon of sense that the world *is*,

then its intimate relation to the dimension of transcendence, or to the way in which human culture understands transcendence, would appear to be both necessary and inevitable. However, Nancy's corporeal ontology of sense does not directly invoke the category of transcendence, at least not in any straightforward manner. If, in works such as *The Sense of the World*, sense is an excessive and ungraspable horizon, it is only transcendent insofar as it is also and at the very same time immanent. Insofar as sense infinitely exceeds or transcends the limits of finite existence, it does so only as a material immanence. Sense is therefore what Nancy comes to term a 'trans-immanence'. It is this notion of trans-immanence that he invokes when he comes to elaborate the way in which art 'touches upon' sense in *The Muses*. Art, he writes: 'touches on the immanence and transcendence of touch, or put another way: it touches on the trans-immanence of being-in-the-world' (Nancy 1994: 36; 1996b: 18). To say that art touches on touch may once again appear to be a rather opaque formulation. It should be recalled from earlier in the discussion, however, that touch for Nancy is the key term which articulates our shared experience of the world as a contact(-in-distance) of the horizon of sense and embodied sense perception. So art, for Nancy, touches on that very touch on sense which discloses the world to us in the most fundamental manner. It is in this context that he can argue that art touches the trans-immanent being-to-the-world, or, in a more recent text, that it is a 'concentration of world' (Nancy 2003b: 27; 2005b: 10), or, indeed, that 'art touches the real' (Nancy 2003b: 54; 2005b: 25).

Nancy, then, has developed an account of art which places it outside of any logic of representation or mimesis but which nevertheless affirms the possibility of realism. The critique of representation and realism as developed in the twentieth century by the *nouveau romanciers*, by structuralist and post-structuralist criticism and also by Derridean deconstruction has not been rejected by Nancy in favour of some return to an earlier aesthetic model.<sup>13</sup> Rather, he has developed what Derrida himself termed an 'absolute post-deconstructive realism' (Derrida 2000: 60; 2006: 46). If art 'touches the real', it is not because it can signify or codify worldly experience and re-present it to us (which of course it does, but this codification is a construct and far from real). Art touches the real because its presentation of sensible-intelligible forms disengages the senses from signification and thereby also disengages the world from signification, thus exposing us to 'the moment of the world as such, the being-world of the world' (Nancy 1994: 37; 1996b: 16).

### *Incarnation*

If it is surprising to some that a French philosopher working in the wake of Derridean deconstruction may come to elaborate an, albeit heterodox, realist aesthetic, then it is perhaps even more startling that he should have come over the past decade and a half to engage so closely with Christianity and with questions relating to monotheism more generally. From the beginning of his career, Nancy's thought has aligned itself closely with a variety of philosophical legacies that are distinctly and often virulently anti- or a-theological: for instance, the legacy of the Nietzschean 'death of God', of Heidegger's destruction of 'onto-theology', or of Bataille's 'a-cephalic' thought. Yet we also know that as a youth and at the very beginning of his career, Nancy was an active and engaged Christian and, indeed, his very first published articles in the 1960s appeared in the Catholic journal *Esprit*. However much such biographical knowledge may be thought to be useful here, what rapidly becomes clear when one reads Nancy's writing on Christianity is that it is, like his writing on art, intimately connected to the rest of his work and, in many respects, functions as a means of re-elaborating its central concerns, albeit in a different register and in a rather different context.

Nancy's project of a 'deconstruction of Christianity' was first announced in an article bearing that name published in the journal *Études Philosophiques* in 1998.<sup>14</sup> Since then, he has published two volumes on the topic, *Dis-enclosure* (Nancy 2005a; 2008c) and *L'Adoration* (Nancy 2010b). Perhaps the most important thing to note about this endeavour is that the 'deconstruction' at work here is not construed as something that the sceptical philosopher performs *upon* Christianity by way of a more or less critical or destructive reading of the Bible or of religious or theological doctrines. Rather, Nancy argues, the deconstruction at work here is part of the internal logic and historical unfolding of Christianity itself. That is to say, Christianity is inherently auto- or self-deconstructive. This logic of auto-deconstruction is very similar to the deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence such as it is thought by Derrida. Indeed, even in much earlier texts such as *Corpus*, Christianity is explicitly aligned with the metaphysics of presence. Here, Nancy suggests that the words of the Eucharist, *Hoc est enim corpus meum*, are an assertion, tirelessly repeated in Christian ritual, of the immediate presence of God. The Eucharist is an affirmation that 'God's body is *there*' (Nancy 1992a: 7; 2008b: 3). Such an affirmation of immediate presence

reassures the believer about the solidity and reliability of the world of appearances; it calms and soothes, 'allays all our doubts about appearances, conferring, on the real, the final touch of its pure Idea: its reality, its existence' (Nancy 1992a: 8; 2008b: 5).<sup>15</sup> This alignment of Christianity with the metaphysics of presence is taken up once again in *Dis-enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity I*. An affirmation of presence, Nancy argues, lies also at the very heart of the Christian doctrine of incarnation (which itself lies at the very heart of Christianity as a whole). In its most orthodox version, Christian incarnation is the doctrine of '*homoousia*, consubstantiality, the identity or community of being and substance between the Father and the Son' (Nancy 2005a: 219; 2008c: 151). Incarnation is thought here as the 'presencing' of divine spirit in fleshy matter, and this real and immediate presence of the divine is then endlessly reaffirmed in the ritual of the Eucharist. If metaphysics is the gesture by which thought grounds or authenticates the being and presence of beings with reference to some transcendent causal principle, then Christianity is metaphysics par excellence. It is a religion which seemingly installs an affirmation of presence as its first and final gesture.

In this context, Nancy points out towards the beginning of *Dis-enclosure* that all the most vigorous critics of the metaphysical tradition (he cites Nietzsche, Heidegger and Wittgenstein, Derrida and Deleuze) have easily shown that it is from *within* the very structure or system of metaphysics that metaphysics itself is undone. Metaphysics, they show in various ways, is necessarily exposed to an unsettling excess which destabilizes or un-grounds all that would seek to secure a stable foundation for the being of beings (Nancy 2005a: 16–17; 2008c: 7). They have shown, Nancy argues, that 'metaphysics deconstructs itself constitutively, and, in deconstructing itself, it dis-encloses [*déclot*] in itself the presence and certainty of the world founded on reason' (Nancy 2005a: 17; 2008c: 7). Metaphysics can be seen to be a form of closure by which beings, grounded in presence, are therefore in a certain sense 'enclosed' within the determinate finite limits which assure their self-identity. Yet, at the very same time, this instance of closure or enclosure is always and unavoidably exceeded, and metaphysics opens onto an excess or absence of ground. In its constitutive gesture of foundation and closure, metaphysics is inevitably exposed to what Nancy comes to call its 'dis-enclosure': 'closure invariably dis-encloses itself' (Nancy 2005a: 17; 2008c: 7).

As metaphysical through and through, Christianity, Nancy argues, is no different. It necessarily comes, despite itself, to untie the logic of foundation, grounding and presence which it appears so tirelessly

to affirm. In order to demonstrate that this is so, Nancy turns to a more sustained analysis of the question of incarnation and, more specifically, to the Pauline doctrine of incarnation conceived of as *kenosis*. This doctrine occupies a rather marginal and disputed status within Christology and Christian theology more generally. As was indicated earlier, the doctrine of 'hypostatic union' provides a far more orthodox understanding of incarnation. The hypostatic union of divine spirit and mortal flesh, it will be recalled, describes the way in which the two would be conjoined in the body of Christ in a manner which affirms their shared essence (*homoousia*) and consubstantiality. *Kenosis*, a more heterodox and marginal doctrine, describes what, for Nancy, is nevertheless most fundamentally at stake in the inner logic of Christian incarnation. It describes the movement by which God is thought to empty or void himself of his divinity in the event of incarnation. That is to say, in becoming flesh (in the body of Christ), God renounces divine status and attributes. Nancy pushes this notion even further by insisting that *kenosis* is the movement by which "god" made himself "body" in emptying himself of himself. *Kenosis* is therefore and far more radically 'the emptying-out of God, or his "emptying-himself out-of-himself"' (Nancy 2005a: 127; 2008c: 83). God does not simply renounce divinity or specific divine attributes in becoming incarnate. Rather, the very site, space and substance of divinity themselves are voided or evacuated.

This is maybe a radical reading of the doctrine of *kenosis* but, Nancy argues, the movement of 'emptying out' that it articulates in reality forms the most fundamental core and inner theological structure of Christianity itself. *Kenosis*, therefore, is decisive for Nancy's understanding of Christianity's auto- or self-deconstruction. From the perspective of this seeming marginal but in fact central doctrine, the Christian God is not a God of presence who is able to guarantee or ground the being of beings. Rather He is a God who alienates, atheizes or atheologizes himself in the very act of incarnation: in 'emptying' themselves out into matter, both God and the divine, as transcendent or founding principles, are emptied of substance, presence and auto-sufficiency. God becomes nothing, and that 'something' which He becomes (Christ's body and, by extension, all material bodies or beings) is devoid of all foundation or guarantee of presence. As Nancy puts it: 'The "body" of the "incarnation" is therefore the place, or rather the taking place, the event, of that disappearance' (Nancy 2005a: 127; 2008c: 83).

According to Nancy's reading of *kenosis*, then, the real inner structure of Christian incarnation enacts a withdrawal of presence and an 'emptying out' or vanishing of divine substance. This is extended by



Nancy to include the broader Christian (and indeed monotheistic) understanding of divine creation itself. Seen from a 'kenotic' perspective, the act of creation by which the Christian or monotheistic God brings the universe into being would also be a voiding of divine substance. In becoming world, as in becoming flesh, the space or site of divine substance is 'emptied out' in such a way that material existence is underpinned by nothing other than that void or empty space that has been vacated. That is to say, in rather blunt terms, that material 'created' existence has no transcendent guarantee, ground or foundation whatsoever. From this perspective, the more traditional doctrine of a supremely powerful and supremely present God of efficient causes, one who creates the world of substance from nothing (*ex nihilo*), would be an illusion of metaphysics. Such a supremely powerful and supremely 'substantial' God would simply be the product of a metaphysical appropriation of Christianity. The orthodox doctrine of incarnation conceived as hypostatic union would likewise be the result of such a metaphysical appropriation. Within the inner structure of Christianity itself, therefore, the metaphysical doctrine of creation (as the production of something from nothing) would always conceal or be internally inhabited by the void or 'nothing' of kenotic creation, just as the metaphysical understanding of incarnation would always be doubled or haunted by the doctrine of *kenosis* itself. This inner logic of voiding or absence, indeed of self-atheizing, would be the sombre double of Christianity's affirmation of presence and the very motor of its auto- or self-deconstruction.

These meditations on the inner structure of Christian incarnation and monotheistic creation may appear to be at some considerable remove from the philosophy of sense, embodiment and shared worldly existence which underpins Nancy's ontology of being-with. In fact, they need to be understood as a further development and radicalization of that philosophy. This is so in two distinct yet inter-related ways.

Firstly, the elaboration of Christianity's auto-deconstruction allows Nancy to rethink, albeit speculatively, the entire historical-philosophical framework in which modernity and the destruction or deconstruction of metaphysics can be understood. If Christianity is truly self-deconstructing, then the whole trajectory of modern, secularizing and atheistic thought may come to be viewed differently. For instance, the tradition of scientific humanism (as inaugurated in the work of early modern philosophers such as Descartes) will easily appear from this perspective to be a secular double or logical extension of Christianity's metaphysical moment. Insofar as it aims to establish firm foundations for the empirical study of the natural world

and thereby (like the Eucharist) to guarantee the reliability of worldly appearances, scientific humanism would be a metaphysics of presence par excellence. By the same token, the anti-foundationalist tradition – that tradition which is perhaps most dramatically and virulently embodied in the Nietzschean ‘death of God’ – would appear to be not the antithesis of Christianity, but rather the necessary historical–philosophical unfolding of its most fundamental inner logic. Atheism here, in whatever guise, emerges as an extension and development of Christianity and not as its negation. To this extent, Nancy is very clear that, henceforth, atheism and the theist–atheist opposition need to be understood in an entirely new light. The terms of the theist–atheist opposition are deconstructed insofar the two poles are not pure opposites but contaminate and mutually inhabit each other at the most fundamental level. If, in response to the deconstruction of Christianity, one were to ask Nancy whether he was a theist or an atheist, a believer with faith or a faithless unbeliever, he would no doubt insist that the movement of auto-deconstruction he describes would make the very terms in which such a question is posed redundant or inoperative.<sup>16</sup>

Secondly, Nancy’s deconstruction of Christianity offers him a means of replaying, developing and further radicalizing the bodily ontology and the thinking of sense, world and being-with which were discussed earlier in this chapter and which form the very centre of his philosophy as a whole. His finite thinking, it may be recalled, was shown to be a thought of ‘infinite’ according to which the being of worldly appearances is disclosed only in an exposure of finite sensory experience to the infinite excess of sense. In his writing on Christianity, Nancy appears to be taking kenotic incarnation as paradigmatic of the shared bodily existence that he elaborated at such great length in the early to mid-1990s. He writes in *Dis-enclosure*, for instance, that the incarnate body is ‘ultimately, itself, the ontological void, vacuity as a diversifying opening of appearing. The principle of the world is set or *poised* on this void: nothing else organizes it’ (Nancy 2005a: 98; 2008c: 68). What this suggests is that incarnation here should be seen as a model or paradigm of worldly embodied existence coming into being in an absence of ground and in a voiding of substance. Likewise, monotheistic creation in general must also be viewed as a model for this coming into being of worldly appearances. Creation here describes the ‘patency’ of a world which is opened up over an ontological void.

In this context, it is worth noting that some contemporary critics and philosophers, for example Alain Badiou, have responded critically to Nancy’s philosophy of finitude. They have judged it very

negatively insofar as finitude itself might arguably *only ever* be understood as a form of limitation or enclosure of being (and therefore as a continuation of metaphysics).<sup>17</sup> Against this, Nancy's thinking of *kenosis* and kenotic creation give a sustained re-elaboration of the (in)finity of embodied existence as 'dis-enclosure' and as an opening onto ontological absence or void. The 'deconstruction of Christianity' therefore re-emphasizes and further radicalizes the central and persistent Nancean argument that 'finiteness does not limit infinity; on the contrary, finiteness should give it its expansion and its truth' (Nancy 2005a: 32; 2008c: 18).

It can be concluded from all this that Nancy's thinking of shared embodied existence has developed in his most recent writing into an a-theology. This is an a-theology which overturns the traditional opposition of theism and atheism. Insofar as he leaves open a space for the divine, he does so only to the extent that the divine itself is understood as the ontological void upon which shared existence is itself opened.<sup>18</sup> By the same token, if this is a philosophy of infinite excess, it is so only insofar as that excess is conceived of as the void which opens up between bodies as they 'touch on' sense. Nancy can therefore write sentences such as: 'Divine is the sharing that creates a world' (Nancy 2005a: 103; 2008c: 72; translation modified). The divine persists in his thought as the emptiness and absence which is opened up in the trans-immanence of being-with.

What this means is that Nancy's 'deconstruction of Christianity' does not in any way signal a simple or straightforward return to the reassurance of theological doctrine, faith or religious observance. It may mean however that, within the overall trajectory of Nancy's post-phenomenological and post-deconstructive philosophy of existence, the site which was once occupied by the sacred, by transcendence and by the absolute demand of divine Law still persists and still occupies a central, albeit empty, position. Yet if such a site or space does persist in Nancy's thought, it does so not just as the opening void of our worldly existence. The 'divine sharing' which makes the world is also an absolute demand made upon us by the infinite excess of being-with. This is a demand which carries with it all the force once exerted by the sacred, by transcendence and by divine Law. It is the demand that we become what we are, that shared (in)finite existence be fully and properly shared.

