

Freeing yourself towards Your Own Being-Free. Jean-Luc Nancy on the Metaphysics of Freedom

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Abstract

In this article, a close study of Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Experience of Freedom* is offered. After presenting the book's main argument, i.e. a non-metaphysical thinking of freedom, we turn to the question of subjectivity and freedom in relation to the eventfulness of freedom itself. The article closes by questioning certain surprising tendencies in Nancy's work. So, for instance, one might note a return of the concept of destiny (and therefore of a certain form of metaphysics) in Nancy's debate with Heidegger. Throughout, this essay seeks to relate the theme of freedom to other works of Nancy, including his recent deconstruction of Christianity, and to the debate with Heidegger and Derrida that takes place around the question of the freedom of the human being.

There are perhaps only a few other things more difficult to think of than freedom. Even if one already thinks one is free and disposes of one's liberties at will and at command, or if one rests quietly in the somewhat contradictory idea that someone else will preserve my rights and my liberties, then still one needs to free oneself of all the ideas in which freedom has been comprehended. In short, one still remains obedient to the obligation 'be free' (Nancy 1993: 80) itself!

This strange conflation of a call and an appeal that freedom invokes—this duty to be free if you like—at least makes apparent the necessity that thinking freedom today does not simply entail work declaring one's own freedom. On the contrary, dealing with freedom as a question, deeply rooted into the tradition of Western metaphysics as it is, seems to be inevitable, if only to get rid of these metaphysical remains. This is the starting point of Jean-Luc Nancy's *L'expérience de la liberté* (1988), probably one of the most intriguing writings of this contemporary French philosopher.¹

The revolutionary idea of liberating oneself out from the metaphysical tradition in which we find ourselves, is central to Nancy's thesis. While quoting Saint-Just com-

¹ Despite Nancy's growing popularity, close studies of *The Experience of Freedom* are not many. Recent interpretations include: Roney (2009); Jaran (2010); Gratton (2006).

ments upon the well-established liberties of the French people after the revolution of 1789, Nancy adds: ‘This [means] that France was to free itself for its own being-free and not merely to preserve its instituted freedoms’ (Nancy 1993: 80).

It is with the thought of such an imperative that Nancy approaches Heidegger. [[It goes without saying that this debate would need to return to those editions of the *Gesamtausgabe* that have appeared only after the publication of *L'expérience de la liberté*. Exemplary in this regard are Heidegger (1999: 13, 62 and 85) and the thought of a ‘liberation’ from metaphysics, and Heidegger (2006).]] As always, Nancy is able to weave together the most abstract—mystical and/or poetical—elements of Heidegger’s thought with the very concrete ‘existential’ concerns that occupied Heidegger at the time of *Being and Time*.² In this essay, we will trace this existential dimension of freedom via Nancy’s understanding of birth, and the fact of being thrown, through birth, into freedom. We will, moreover, point to the limits of Nancy’s enterprise.³ This limit, in Nancy’s *Experience of Freedom*, is centered around his thinking of ‘destiny’. Despite the standard citations of Nancy criticizing in Heidegger everything that would even resemble from afar the notion of a common destiny or *Geschick*, it is precisely this that in Nancy’s work will return and which seems to make the project of thinking freedom founder—once again. Finally, we will also indicate that several fundamental themes of *The Experience of Freedom* return in Nancy’s notorious deconstruction of Christianity.

1. Freedom as a Metaphysical Question

Since freedom is a metaphysical question, thinking freedom, Nancy argues, can only ever happen once the metaphysical tradition of foundationalism has, well, foundered. Once such a foundering has taken place, the human being finds itself, according to Nancy, at a crossroads: the freedom of existence, abandoned solely to its own existence (and for which no essence can any longer be found, no proper representation appropriately conceived) is ‘attested by the event and the experience of our time: the closure of significations’ (Nancy 1993: 14). But closure is always and already *dis-enclosure*—and here one might note the very origin of Nancy’s deconstruction of Christianity: ‘there is in fact a hatching [*éclosion*] correlative to closure’ (Nancy 1993: 15). The reason for this, Nancy writes, is ‘because the event of closure itself makes history’ (ibid.). The end(ing) of metaphysics, then, is not the work of some subject that simply wills it to be overcome. The event of the ending of metaphysics is what makes up our history and which, through its very event, appeals to us to think through this very ending that ought to yield an entirely new conception of the history itself: no longer as the unfolding of a finality or as an ongoing process that allows for no interruption, but rather as history ‘surprising itself’ (ibid.) with an unforeseeability and im-providence that offers to thought and to existence its very freedom.

There is hope here: the hope for a free relation to history and everything we encounter there. Nancy is, in *The Experience of Freedom*, happy to announce such a hope: ‘not the hope that things ‘finally turn out well’, and even less that they ‘turn into good’, but [the hope] which [...] tend[s] in spite of everything toward a liberation’ (Nancy 1993: 18).

2 Fynsk, 1991: xii notes that ‘Nancy folds the later Heidegger [...] back into the earlier.’

3 See the anticipatory note in Nancy (1983:11n.1) and the return to the book in Nancy (1993b:33-34n. 1).

It is precisely here that we should return, in order to rethink the question of freedom, to Heidegger's account of metaphysics. For even if we were to turn to Heidegger's then unpublished volume on *Metaphysik und Nihilismus* (Heidegger 1999), it is, for this question concerning the beginning and ending of metaphysics, more than necessary to meditate on Heidegger's view on how exactly the overcoming of metaphysics can (or cannot) be performed. This is, of course, also the case for the question of (metaphysical) freedom. First of all, we need to be clear about 'that which is to be overcome'⁴ in order to have any idea at all as to what 'overcoming itself' might mean. Secondly, any such overcoming will entail not only that the metaphysical tradition cannot be that easily shed but also that the ending of metaphysics is a historical event that has not yet ceased to unfolding. This is why Heidegger could write: 'The end of metaphysics. End does not mean simply coming to an end and conclusion; since with the end it is an indifferent and oblivious continuation [*Fortdauern*] that first begins' (Heidegger 1999: 41).⁵

Nancy starts the discussion of his post-metaphysical idea of freedom by noting that freedom is not easily accommodated in philosophical discourse. On the contrary, it is freedom that unsettles the course of things and renders inoperative any system that tries to enclose the thought of freedom. Nancy, for instance, notes Kant's hesitancy about freedom's 'particular kind of causality' (Nancy 1993: 25ff.) that disrupts the borderlines between the transcendental and empirical realm. In Heidegger, Nancy sees what we could ultimately call a shrinking back from the question of freedom: Heidegger substitutes the freedom of the human being for the freedom of being itself. Once again, the thought of freedom is covered up with theoretical determinations—positing and representing freedom as 'the free region', *das Freie* (Nancy 1993: 40)—and in so doing loses sight of its practical and empirical implications.

This, then, will be the space where Nancy starts: 'from Kant to Hegel, certainly to Nietzsche, and probably even [in] Heidegger [...] the thought of freedom is fulfilled [...] in a comprehension of the necessity of necessity' (Nancy 1993: 46). However for Nancy, freedom must be thought out of the absence and the lack of any necessity. When all the metaphysical and modern causal explanations of the world have withered away, what is left for us to understand is the mere facticity of a world without any ultimate significations and without any sufficient reason. This world is one in which nothing happens necessarily—not the unfolding and causation of an arche— but rather a world in which (the) nothing necessarily happens, in which it is nothing in particular that is destined to us (Cf. Nancy 1993: 37-38).

It is into such a world where nothing happens—rather, where 'nothing' is happening—that we are *thrown*. It is therefore no surprise to perceive that the opening pages of *The Experience of Freedom* are hardly distinguishable from Heidegger's account of

4 Heidegger (1999: 11), 'die Überwindung muss [...] erst das zu Überwindende als ein solches auszumachen' [the overcoming must [...] first point out that which is to be overcome as such]. If it is a matter of folding the later Heidegger back onto the earlier one, then one should of course ask whether or not such a procedure to overcome metaphysics does entail a fundamental continuity with the project of 'destroying' traditional ontology in Heidegger (1967: 41-44).

5 We will not query here whether indeed an ontic and empirical beginning could be ascribed to ontotheology. This is a difficult, and perhaps unanswered, question even in Heidegger. Let us simply note that, despite Heidegger's reservations about a sort of chronology of metaphysics, he did not hesitate, first, to single out Socrates as the instigator of all things ontotheological and, second, to report on the 'first beginning' as if it was a historical state of affairs (as opposed to the *Seynsgeschichte*) after all. See Heidegger (1999: 89 and 96 respectively).

thrownness. However, Nancy gives a particular ring to ‘the who’ to whom the nothing happens, for his account of the human being will not be and cannot be that of an autonomous subject nor that of Dasein in all its heroic resoluteness. On the contrary, such a thrown being can only be a singular being. With this thought of singularity, Nancy advances the temporal aspect of Heidegger’s *Jemeinigkeit*, for singularity only ever occurs where each moment differs essentially from another and the ‘subject’ to which the world happens cannot remain the same, distant subjectivity uncontaminated by this very happening. This is what Nancy coins as ‘just once, this time [*une seule fois, celle-ci*]’ (Nancy 1993: 66; 1988: 91): *Each time* something happens to someone, it will differ absolutely from all previous happenings: there is no continuity or sameness in this process (except, perhaps, of this very happening itself). Nancy adds: ‘each time freedom is singularly *born*’ (Nancy 1993: 66). This ‘each time’, obviously, will have its effects on just how to consider the *Jemeinigkeit* of Dasein. No longer will the I or ego be the first on scene; the ego is rather delivered to itself by the very fact of something happening ‘each time’. I am not ‘there’ each time something happens, but rather: each time something happens, I am brought to be ‘there’.

2. The ‘There’ of the Ego

This ego, then, can no longer return to its properties or to its own most substance. This ego is obliged to face what Nancy calls ‘the withdrawal of all substance’ (Nancy 1993: 67) and is, as a singular non-essential being, immediately thrown into a relation. But this ‘throw’ is itself nothing substantial. It has no substance, and there is no essence to be appropriated. Nancy writes: ‘Singularity [...] installs relation as the withdrawal of identity, and communication as the withdrawal of communion’ (Nancy 1993: 68).⁶

Singularity, therefore, is of crucial importance for freedom. Such singular thrownness is what we can call the act of freedom. Freedom opens us to the world, and to each other, each time. Again, there is hope here, for the withdrawal of all substances and essences is nothing less than a liberation: ‘freedom is not, but it frees being and frees from being [...] and gives relation’ (Nancy 1993: 68).

Nancy is quick to point out that this happening is finite and, in a sense, utterly contingent. In an extremely dense phrase, he comments on the non-necessity of the happening of freedom and of the world. Nancy here on argues that from the very fact of imagining there not being existence or anything existent, ‘existence can be recognized’ (Nancy 1993: 53). As soon as ‘there is something’, the nothing, too, is there, for ‘if there were no existence, then there would not be nothing and yet there would not be ‘something’ (ibid.).

The paradoxical liaison between ‘existence (something)’ and ‘nothing’ can be explained by referring to the question of origin or *creation ex nihilo*. Nancy’s *Being singular plural* starts out with the theme of *creatio ex nihilo*, Christianity’s notion that God created the world from nothing, in order ultimately only to retain the ‘ex’ as the creation-in-act, the act of the surging forth or the emergence of origin itself. *Ex nihilo*, according to Nancy, does not mean that a creator creates from nothing. The creator himself is nihil. The nihil is not something out of which the created order can spring, a something that precedes the created, but it is also not a nothing that precedes the created.

The nothing is nothing other than the singular plural emergence of the world. That is, the spacing (espacement) between us, from being placed together in and through (a)

⁶ It may be clear that these themes will be echoed in Nancy (2000: 28) on being as communication.

space, from being at a distance or in proximity. Therefore, origin is shared from the beginning. The 'ex' of the emergence of something from nothing cannot be traced back to a single point or a single cause. To such an origin, we are not granted access. The world is, thus, 'supplemented' from the outset. For a nothing to be the origin of something, it must differ from itself; it must be a being in order to be an origin. The unique or singular event of creation is thus not something that ever happened and from which everything emerged. Existence, therefore, is the beginning and end that we are.

And yet, since there is existence, the existing of the existent 'cannot derive from a necessity for essence, [it] can only be given' (ibid.). It is this gift, then, which opens a gap between existence and substance. For this gift is not necessary and thus installs a cleft between 'it is' and 'there is'. Again, it can be imagined that there would be nothing existent, but, as soon as one imagines this, it means that there is existence delivered over to the nothingness of such a contingent givenness. If it was necessary, Nancy argues, 'there would be only [...] the repletion always already realized and drawn back to itself, of the general and immanent being of what, even as it is *all*, cannot be *something*' (ibid.). Such a being would, in a way, suffocate from its own essence and never properly experience the rift between substance and the contingency of its givenness, the rift, in short, that is existence recognizing it is there on the basis of the fact that it could also not be there. This, finally, is what Nancy understands by Heidegger's famous phrase that 'the essence of Dasein is its existence.'⁷

Such suffocation happens, according to Nancy, in the modern idea of freedom and of the corresponding autonomous subject. Nancy judges the modern account of freedom and its insistence on a subsistent subjectivity insufficient to think freedom; if we are all singular beings, as Nancy writes, it is obvious that no one can be free alone. Yet, following Heidegger's lead, we argue that it is possible to extend Nancy's argument to traditional Aristotelian metaphysics and its contemporary avatars, for it is there that begins 'the major philosophical ideology of freedom' that made possible the idea that 'to be free is to assume necessity' (Nancy 1993: 46).

The Experience of Freedom asks how we can still understand freedom if there is no first cause, God, Idea, or self-causing subject to guarantee our freedom, if all forms of necessity are absent and how our thrown existence can comport itself with regard to 'the free call to freedom' rather than revel in 'the self-sufficiency and self-satisfaction of a liberal, even libertarian, individualism' (Nancy, 1993: 34) that can be taken as the outcome of all accounts of modern subjectivity.

To respond to the call of freedom, we must, according to Nancy:

'think not so much in terms of new laws (even though we also have to make them), and we do not have to invent a 'morality' [...]. But above all, what is incumbent on us is an absolute determination, an absolutely originary, archi-originary determination of ethics and praxis—not a law or an ultimate value, but that by which there can be a relation to law or to value: decision, freedom' (Nancy 1993: 163).

The philosophical task posed by the problem of freedom, therefore, lies not in inventing calculi that enables us to mitigate the freedoms of different people in a juridical manner. Such would be the task of politicians and lawyers. Philosophy must rather investigate the ontological contours that make freedom possible, and upon which any

⁷ The phrase can be found in Nancy (1993: 9). See also Heidegger (1967: 67).

possible politics of freedom depends.⁸ For Nancy, this ontological place is, first and foremost, existence.

In order to understand how this contrasts with the traditional, Aristotelian understanding of freedom, it will be helpful to turn to Alasdair MacIntyre's recent communitarian interpretation of freedom.⁹ MacIntyre aims to re-introduce a metaphysical foundation precisely in order to 'save' freedom. In the liberalist critique of MacIntyre's ideal of the Aristotelian *polis*, the (liberalist) fear is that his reconstruction of the Aristotelian community allows no place for individual freedom.¹⁰ For Nancy too, returning to Aristotle can never be a satisfying solution to the search for a truly contemporary account of freedom. An entire philosophical history stands between us and Aristotle. For Aristotle, a certain conception of freedom [*eleutheria*] plays an important role. If, however, in the polis a space for the ethical flourishing of its citizens is offered, this space is not open(ed) to and for everyone: only *he* who is born free and who has free time [*scholè*] can achieve excellence. The Greek aristocrat's free ontological status is bestowed on him by birth. Being free is not a property through which one constitutes oneself as an individual. One acquires one's freedom as a condition that precedes the singular individual. It only exists within the context of a *polis* and by the grace of a universal *causa* that lies at the foundation of reality. In Aristotle, in other words, the Unmoved Mover is the *causa finalis* that sets everything in motion but which itself remains unmoved, namely, the first cause of the perfect form that procures the coherence of the world.

This conception of freedom takes a new (theological) turn in Augustine. It accordingly also differs in its conception of the grounds of freedom. In the ancient Greek view, the aristocrat is the one who acts rationally and is not the slave of his passions. In Augustine, on the contrary, the question is primarily that of evil. If the goodness of the *causa finalis* is the Creator, the infinite, one of the problems for Christianity is obviously the question of how there can be evil in the world. Augustine's solution would put its stamp on the entire subsequent scholastic tradition: it is not God but rather the free will of the human being is the cause of the evil.

This *liberum arbitrium* comes under pressure with philosophical modernity, when the question of freedom becomes that of (in)determinism. From Descartes and Spinoza to Kant, the debate rages fiercely around the relation between causality and freedom; both at the epistemological, ethical and political level. It is not just that freedom is no longer the privilege of one or the other *social type*, as Jacques Lacan noted¹¹; it is also that Aristotle's Unmoved Mover and the whole system of the *causa finalis* has been replaced by a mechanically-ordered universe.

It falls to Kant to offer a possible solution. Whilst empirical reality may be entirely determined, as a human being I am nevertheless capable of being the cause of my own actions. The question of freedom becomes the question of a self-causing, free subject; of self-determination and self-actualization on the one hand, and determining factors from the outside, on the other. For Nancy, Kant is one of the last major figures of a metaphysical tradition that always ranks freedom under the *causa* of an essence, a first

8 See also Nancy (2001: 137), 'The question of freedom amounts to nothing else than to the program of an ontology in which freedom is no longer a property of a being, but in which, on the contrary, being would be the property opened by freedom'. Our translation.

9 See MacIntyre (1981).

10 See for this critique Delany (1991).

11 Lacan (1986: 32).

principle, or a self-causal subject, but that in this way at the same time annuls the freedom it sought to protect.¹² To think the freedom of existence or the existence of freedom, and to reach a finite freedom, we must go beyond Kant to discover the radical freedom, free from every form of necessity or causality.

It is only with Heidegger that a *finite* freedom comes into view. Heidegger no longer thinks freedom as a property and possession of the subject, as a form of causality, but as a manner of existing where autonomy is from the outset thrown into existence and thus can no longer subsist solely through its pure autonomous constitution.¹³ This is why for Heidegger, freedom is inseparably bound to existence. Nonetheless, Nancy charges Heidegger from ultimately shrinking away from the question of freedom as he suspects that Heidegger himself was never able to fully abandon the metaphysical concept of freedom altogether (Nancy 1993: 39-40). In fact, at a certain moment in his oeuvre, Heidegger, at least for Nancy, simply seems to dispense with the question of freedom and no longer enquires systematically into what the essence of freedom is. At that moment, Nancy argues, Heidegger makes the ontological primacy of freedom subordinate to that of truth and of a more authentic freedom of being. One might say that for Nancy, being belongs to freedom whereas for Heidegger, on the contrary, freedom belongs to being.¹⁴ With this reversal, Heidegger, according to Nancy, abandons the specific existential factuality of freedom and theory once again overrides praxis (Nancy 1993: 41-42). Nancy does not, however, radically dismiss Heidegger, just as he does not simply dismiss metaphysical thought as such. It is never simply a matter of getting rid of something, but rather of exhausting existing concepts from the history of thought.

Nancy therefore tries to expand Heidegger's claim that existence is always thrown into an 'essenceless ek-sistence' in the direction of, as we have already noted, another determination of the 'there' of the ego or of Dasein even. Another name for the impossibility of grounding oneself, of giving oneself an essence, is what Nancy calls *naked existence*.¹⁵ We cannot fall back on any essence or on the certainty of a first principle, and it is this that constitutes our finite world. This world, then, is first of all a world into which we are thrown as finite and contingent beings. Secondly, it is a world that, though without any stable signifiers and significations, is not bereft of meaning. Rather, it is finally a world without essence(s), but as a result all the more one of existence(s) and singularities. It is our being open to 'nothing but' world which constitutes freedom:

'In and through ethical, juridical, material, and civil liberties, one must free *that through which* alone these liberties *are*, on the one hand, *ultimately possible* and thinkable, and on the other, capable of receiving a destination other than that of their immanent self-consumption: a transcendence of existence such that existence, as existence-in-the-world, which has nothing to do with any other world, transcends [...] the

12 Nancy portrays metaphysical freedom as 'the figuration of freedom in a supreme being', as '*causa sui et mundi* of a supreme being (or of a subject being)' and as 'the infinite transcendence of the Subject's absolute self-presence', see Nancy (1993: 11, 39 and 34 respectively).

13 Lyotard and Nancy have both indicated that Kant's autonomous subject always and already is tainted by the heteronomy of the law. This deconstructive reading of Kant is, of course, not proclaimed by Kant himself. See Nancy (1985) and Lyotard (1985).

14 Nancy (1993: 33-43) refers most often to Heidegger (2002: 203) and Heidegger (1995: 192) 'Freedom forfeited its role originally in the history of Being.'

15 For Nancy, the facticity of a *naked existence*, thrown into 'nothing but world' is also the challenge of globalization. See Nancy (2007).

‘essence’ that it is in the finitude in which it insists. Only a finite being can be free (and a finite being is an existent), for the infinite being encloses the necessity of its freedom, which it seals to its being. It is therefore a question of nothing other than liberating human freedom from the immanence of an infinite foundation or finality, and liberating it therefore from its own infinite projection to infinity, where transcendence (existence) itself is transcended and hereby annulled. It is a question of letting freedom exist for itself. Freedom perhaps designates nothing more and nothing less than existence itself.’ (Nancy 1993: 13-14).

Here we can see that, through querying for the condition of possibility of the modern subject’s freedom, Nancy’s own approach remains a transcendental one. This transcendental condition of possibility of freedom is subsequently located in the transcendence of existence. Existing means, as Nancy elsewhere argues, *transcending finitely* or being *transimmanent* (Nancy 1998: 56). Transimmanence is not a specific relation to the world and to others but, according to Nancy, the most basic ontological characteristic of Dasein: it is the condition of possibility for a relation to others and to the world. An initial freedom precedes the freedom of the subject, which makes this subjective freedom possible, and undoes in advance all immanence or ‘essence’ of the subject. However, this initial—should we say: *a priori*?—freedom is not, and cannot be, a property of the subject. On the contrary, it is from this prior freedom that the subject always and already receives its freedom, which it can only subsequently appropriate as if it would be its own property. Consider the following passage:

‘If existence transcends, if it is the being-outside-of-itself of the being-shared, it is therefore what it is by being outside of itself [*elle est hors de soi ce qu’elle est*]: which amounts to saying that it has its essence in the existence it is, essentially in-essential. This fundamental structure [...] does not answer to a dialectic of immediatizing mediation (which recuperates the essence beyond its negation), nor to an ‘ec-stasy’ sublimated in reappropriation. Outside of itself, it is freedom, not property: neither the freedom of representation, nor of will, nor of the possessed object. Freedom as the ‘self’ of the being-outside-of-itself does not return to or belong to itself. Generally speaking, freedom can in no way take the form of a property, since it is only from freedom that there can be appropriation of anything—even of ‘oneself’ (Nancy 1993: 70; 1988: 95)

In this dense passage, Nancy points at two things. Not only can freedom never be an essential property through which a subject constitutes itself by appropriating it, but it also is not a pure heteronomy through which the self could, in a later phase, dialectically sublimate its ecstatic outside to an immanent self, for this would mean that freedom would once again be some sort of external constraint or heteronymous law that would render the inner freedom of the subject inoperative. On the contrary, for Nancy, freedom first of all installs a difference, a being-outside-oneself, that hinders any dialectical sublation. As a ‘predialectical burst’ (Nancy 1993: 81), both *in* and *as* this difference that freedom installs the rift between substance and that which no longer pertains to essence, namely: existence.

Supporting this conclusion is Nancy’s account of Kant’s famous example of the subject, showing itself to be free, as soon as it decides to get up from its chair. ‘In a sense,’ Nancy argues, ‘Kant is correct: if right now I get up from my chair, there is no other causality that comes to interfere [...] in the mechanical causality of the world, but there is inevitably in this event a coming-up of what does not come there and of what does not appear there’ (Nancy 1993: 116). This difficult passage might be elucidated

as follows: it is true that the subject shows itself to be free when it is free to decide to get up from the chair or to go here rather than there, but the very fact that such a getting up is possible at all, is not a power or property of the subject itself. Rather, such a power is always and already *given* to existence in the first place: it is out from the already of the happening and the event of the world that the 'smaller' happening of getting out of the chair is possible. But—and this is Nancy's point—this event itself does not and cannot appear. The 'appearing of appearance', or the 'experience of experience' (Nancy 1993: 87), is itself *non-phenomenological*¹⁶; it cannot appear as such, and cannot be experienced. It is rather that which makes all appearance and experience possible by retreating from the realm of experience, and by opening up the gap in which existence always and already installs itself (or finds itself to be already installed 'there'). Such indeed might be 'the nonphenomenal truth of the phenomenal itself as such' (Nancy 2000: 161).

3. A Differential Freedom

A new problem arises: if the 'there' of the ego experiences freedom in a transcendental way, the question indeed is just how to understand this 'transcendentalism' correctly. In fact, Nancy's transcendental experience of freedom is fundamentally indebted to Derrida's *différance*. Only in a note does Nancy mention that freedom is *différance* (Nancy 1993: 186n8). But Derrida, in turn, has almost identified Nancy's concept of spacing with his own tracing of 'différance'.¹⁷ Let us therefore take a closer look at this complicated concept in order to see how the referral or the withdrawal of presence might itself, in Nancy, come to presence.

Heidegger's reservations in *Being And Time* towards the subject's full presence lie in the way such a subject is based on an understanding of being that is focused exclusively on the present. Such a conception of being does not take into account the horizon opened up by temporality out of which *being* emerges. This movement of difference undoes all self-sufficiency or full presence in advance. Heidegger employs the ontic-ontological difference to clarify how this movement comes into existence. He strives for a new understanding of being that takes account of dimensions of time other than just presence.

For Derrida, Heidegger does not go far enough. Derrida, therefore, highlights *différance* as the next step in the settling of accounts with the metaphysics of presence and its conception of the subject that accompanies it. More emphatically than Heidegger, he emphasizes that because of this ontic-ontological difference, every form of permanent presence (of being) and full-presence to oneself (of the subject) is always already lost. Derrida thus radicalizes this difference by revealing its differential structure, indicating the structurally absent moment in the coming-into-presence of every phenomenon in more explicit terms and shows how, as a result of this, ontological difference also differs from itself:

'Since Being has never had a 'meaning,' has never been thought or said as such, except by dissimulating itself in beings, then *différance*, in a certain and very strange way, (is) 'older' than the ontological difference or than the truth of Being. When it has

16 Nancy quite deliberately abandons phenomenology's methods here, see for instance, Nancy (1993: 94), 'here no doubt is where the possibilities for a general phenomenology end'. One can note this abandonment in Nancy's other works as well, see Nancy (2000: 61, 200n. 53 and 169), 'the event is not 'presentable' [...] it exceeds the resources of any phenomenology' and Nancy (2008: 111).

17 Derrida (2005: 321n. 22), '[this] spacing (which I have defined as *différance* or the very trace itself)'

this age, it can be called the play of the trace. The play of a trace which no longer belongs to the horizon of Being, but whose play transports and encloses the meaning of Being: the play of the trace, or the *différance*, which has no meaning and is not. [...] There is no maintaining, and no depth to, this bottomless chessboard on which Being is put into play' (Derrida 1982: 22).

In short, Derrida's argument comes down to this: the Heideggerian difference between being and beings as such 'is' not so much a difference but rather a trace that effaces itself at the moment it presents itself. Heidegger had already realized that difference as such cannot appear, because being itself is not present as such in this or that being: this is why being can only be forgotten. But Derrida goes a step further and claims that the difference between being and beings as such cannot be defined as difference. Nancy comments:

'Being which *is* (transitively) beings only differs from the latter insofar as this very difference differs from a difference between 'being' (intransitive) and beings. This last difference (which is most often taken to be the sense of the 'ontico-ontological difference') differs, therefore, from itself: being does not occur as 'being'' (Nancy 2003: 321n. 11)

Nancy's cryptic rephrasing of Derrida is his way of saying that the ontico-ontological difference also differs from itself, that is, that it is *as* differing: all original presence is always and already lost. As Derrida demonstrates, all existence is necessarily inscribed in this movement of *différance*. But this is what 'spacing' is about: what is can only exist through that which is not present to itself, through being positioned in space, through a difference with and thus a relation to itself and to others.

This makes up the finitude of our existence or the spacing of the world: the fact that there is something we cannot complete and are nevertheless exposed to, this is what constitutes the incompleteness [*'infinition'*] or finitude of the world. To Nancy, all existence is necessarily inscribed in this movement of *différance*. Only with this movement of differing is existence possible. Spacing, therefore, is what is can only exist through that which is not present to itself, through being positioned in space, through a difference with and thus a relation to itself and to others.

Freedom differs in similar ways, for if freedom first makes existence possible, freedom as such does not exist (Nancy 1993: 167):

'Freedom is absolute. [It is] the absolutization of the absolute itself. To be absolute is to be detached from everything, [from] every relation and every presence, including from itself. The absolute is being no longer located somewhere, away from or beyond beings. [It] is not an entity-being, but is being-withdrawn into self short of itself, in the ab-solution of its own essence and taking place only as this absolution' (Nancy 1993: 109)

This is the kenosis of the retreat of all essence: freedom, by its very absolution and withdrawal from all things essential, leaves a gap and a space for existence to take place in and as a world without essences. As Pablo Sanges Ghetti points out, it is 'the immeasurable spacing of freedom, one that allows the singular to come, and second the measures, the technique, and the very accountable tradition that produces a measurable space, without it there is no chance for any event' (Ghetti 2005: 264-265). This coming into being, this beginning or origin thus cannot lead to a first principle or an original presence from which everything emerges. It is, in Nancy's words, 'not an origin in either time or being. It is only the origin of a possible origin' (Nancy 1993:

113); that is, freedom's rule is that it makes all relations and all presencing possible because it cannot be reduced to relationality or presence itself.¹⁸

But such a retreat does not mean that there is nothing presencing here: rather the withdrawal of essence gives way to free arising of existence in its own singular and plural way.

'The absolute is the being of beings, which in no way is their essence but only the withdrawal of essence, its ab-solution, its dis-solution, and even [its] solution, in the fact of existence, in its *singularity*, in the *material* intensity of its coming' (Nancy 1993: 109).¹⁹

Freedom, then, 'spaces' existence both by leaving space and time to all beings and by delivering beings, through retreating, to their empirical place where no essentiality can any longer stifle this existence. This retreat, therefore, *is* its generosity: freedom refuses to fill in the blank that the retreat leaves open and, in this way, *gives* way to the being-free of existents. This is why the retreat of presence needs also to be thought as presencing, as coming into being as an *advent*, a *surprise*, and a *gift* (Nancy 1993: 19, 54-56, 114-118, 146). This is Nancy's hope: freedom throws us into a world where, precisely because nothing (substantial) is given, anything can happen.²⁰

4. Retreat, Destiny, Ontodicy

Nancy's thought, therefore, tries to convey the basics of the human experience of freedom: 'the experience of having nothing given, nothing founded [...] the inaugural experience of experience itself [which] experiences the nothing as the real [and] as the stroke of luck it offers' (Nancy 1993: 86). The experience that comes closest to experiencing this, for Nancy, is the experience of *birth*. Birth can be likened to the empirical-transcendental experience of freedom Nancy is describing, since indeed my own birth must have been an 'experience' for me, but one that I never could have undergone consciously and thus 'experience' as a subject. As my birth escapes me but simultaneously enables me to be, so 'I experiment *that I am* in the experience of myself,' (Nancy 1993: 87) and that I already was before any substance, identity or essence came to constitute itself. Such a substance would only hinder the sheer fact of the existence 'that I am', each time anew: 'I experiment that the withdrawal of essence *is* an affirmation of existence' (Nancy 1993: 88).²¹

Such a withdrawal, and the spacing it provides in its retreat, is in this work of Nancy thus given an ontological basis. It is this *ontology of the retreat* that lies at the basis of Nancy's later work on community and on the 'retreat' of Christianity in the West. The

18 See also Nancy (1991: 5), 'Freedom is not a quality, nor an operation of the existent: it is her/his/its coming into the presence of existence. If presence is presence to presence and not to self (nor of self), this is because it is, in each case, presence *in* common. The coming into presence is plural 'in each case ours' as much as 'mine'. This community without the essence of a community, without a common being, is the ontological condition of existence as presence-to'.

19 Nancy repeatedly stresses the anti-dialectical strand of this, see Nancy (1993: 81), Freedom 'is a pre-dialectical burst, the deepening and intensification of negativity up to the point of affirmation' and (1993: 82), freedom 'as the negation of negation, affirms itself by making itself intense'.

20 What happens can be good as well as evil. It is here that Nancy's reasons lie to totally reject the tradition in which evil was considered to be only a lesser good. Evil, for Nancy, too has a positivity. Evil lies, for Nancy, more in the seduction of one or the other essence (in racism for instance) than in its deviation from the Good, see for this Nancy (1993: 121-142), esp. 128 where it is stated that fury 'executes' the withdrawal of presence through 'ruining' all presencing of singularities.

21 Elsewhere, in a small chapter on freedom which reads like a summary of *The Experience of Freedom*, Nancy relates the phenomenon of birth to 'the creation of the world', see Nancy (2002: 73).

presence and absence of such a retreat, its appearing in never appearing is what is shared out in being-in-common, for this 'being-in-common is what presents me this *never*: my birth and my death are present to me and are my own only through the births and deaths of others, for whom in turn their births and deaths are neither present nor their own. We share what divides us: the freedom of an incalculable *coming* to presence of being' (Nancy 1993: 95). The problem with this ontology, this retreat and its spacing is, Nancy reminds us, that 'the ontological condition required here is not a *status*', a state or even a substance, but 'consists' rather 'in a releasing of being' (Nancy 1993: 92), in a fleeing of all fixed substances through which 'the withdrawal of presence [...] lets itself come to presence' (Nancy, 1993: 105). In this way, the ontology of the retreat (of substance, of essence, etc.) *is* the coming-into-presence or presenting of *différance*.

Yet, in making a substantial step towards a thought of freedom that opens up onto the world, Nancy's thought is not free from difficulties. These, we contend, manifest themselves on two levels: the first is what one could call the problem of 'freedom's rule' over human beings, which constitutes a return of a metaphysical idea of destiny; the second pertains to the level of ethics: if indeed freedom rules over human beings, what is there to be done exactly to heal 'our world [of] universal barbarism' (Nancy 1993: 128)?

Nancy is, of course, aware, that the primacy of beings over being might give way to a new version of ontotheology and metaphysics. The ontological ground for this return is that since, through the retreat of presence, the world consists (without consisting) solely in a multiplicity of beings, thus *beings* are now the one filling the gap once all subsistent being (whether it be Heidegger's *Sein* or metaphysics' conception of the highest being) has retreated: beings can assume the role of the highest being when they substitute themselves for Being. Therefore, we must refrain from 'absolutizing' both Being and beings. In Nancy's words: 'if the being of beings is the being of *beings*' (Nancy 1993: 160), then indeed:

'One runs[s] the risk of simply and naively reconstituting a metaphysics, in the sense in which this word designates 'the forgetting of being' and the forgetting of this forgetting. Which means: the forgetting of the difference between being and beings [...] permits no positing of *beings* to be imposed on being. [...] But this difference *is not* [...] It is itself the very: effacing of this difference, [it] in effect retreats into its own difference. This retreat is the *identity of being and beings*: existence. Or more precisely: freedom [as] *the withdrawal of every positing of being, including its being posited as differing from being*' (Nancy 1993: 166-167, his italics).

However, a possible return of metaphysics may not only occur when beings, in all their essence and substantiality, impose themselves on being—as Nancy seems to think, — metaphysics is also on the verge of making a comeback when some kind of 'destiny' can be re-introduced into the idea of freedom. It is here that Nancy's limit is to be situated, for although Nancy is well-known for objecting to everything in Heidegger that even remotely resembles the idea of a destiny or a *Geschick*²², *The Experience of Freedom* comes quite close to reinstating precisely this idea of destiny. But this destiny comes in disguise: it is freedom that *rules* over human beings. So, just as in Heidegger, Being might be taken to speak through this being able to listen to it better than any other being, so too freedom, in Nancy's work, which comes dangerously close to the idea of destiny. Consider, first, Nancy's question, answered in the

22 One could point to several passages throughout Nancy's work, see, for instance Nancy (1983: 183-184).

affirmative, ‘whether we are still free when we are free *to the point that being is what is free in us, before us, and ultimately for us*’ (Nancy 1993: 96, italics ours)? Freedom then, according to Nancy, ‘possesses’ (ibid.) us rather than we possess freedom. We may turn to Nancy’s book *The Birth to Presence* in order to question this account of freedom’s rule. There Nancy states:

‘freedom would mean: to have history, in its happening, as one’s destiny. It means that only freedom can originally open us [...] to something like ‘causality’ or ‘destiny;’ it does not mean that we are ‘free’ of causality or destiny, but [rather that we are] *destined* to deal with them’ (Nancy 2003c: 157).

It is true that Nancy, in *The Experience of Freedom*, tries to deconstruct the distinction between freedom and destiny, but if we stick to these two passages, then it does seem that Nancy is envisaging yet another way to reconstitute metaphysics, next to imposing *a* being (or even beings) on being, i.e., that it is perhaps not possible to easily rid ourselves of causality and destiny. We could even say that Nancy has surprised even himself when affirming freedom as a *force* forcing, and imposing on human beings the acceptance of history as their destiny. But what finally would be the difference here between one or the other highest being overlooking everything that is controlling the destiny of the people despite themselves, and a freedom that is free in us, possessing us, forcing us to be free rather than proceeding to a genuine liberation?

‘Freedom,’ Nancy argues, ‘must be [distinguished] from every concept of freedom opposed [...] to something like fatality’ (Nancy 1993: 110). Freedom, as Nancy elaborates it, is not opposed to fatality, if not it would presuppose an ontological consistency, in the sense that the ‘course of events’ is heading continuously and progressively towards one or the other determinate goal. Freedom then would only be a freedom with regard to this course of events. Nancy, on the contrary, wants to advance a thought of discontinuity: ‘the *course* of events should not be denied, but rather brought to light as the course of *events* and as the eventfulness of the very ‘course’ as such’ (Nancy 1993: 111). Freedom, in this sense, would move history from event to event, from one discontinuous event to the next, but, freedom itself, according to Nancy, ‘does not mingle’ (Nancy 1993: 116) with this history, in which one or the other people can take up (what they think is) their destiny or erect themselves as disposing arbitrarily of a free will and subjectivity. In short, the human being can expose him- or herself ‘in an arbitrary and/or destinal mode, but this exposure itself will be neither arbitrary nor destinal’ (ibid.).²³

Again: ‘true’ freedom *does not mingle* with the figures in which this freedom would be constituted. But does not Nancy himself here reinstate the metaphysical mode he had just rejected? If the ‘true’ freedom is ‘out there’ and ‘does not mingle’ with the finite figures of freedom one knows in and out of history, is not this ‘genuine’ freedom then forever on the verge of becoming nevertheless a ‘status’, substantialized, and *a* being amongst beings (although higher than them or beyond them)?

It is here that we encounter what Derrida has called ‘the most necessary debate’ (Derrida 2005: 21) with Heidegger and it is no surprise seeing Nancy moving in the direction to Heidegger’s thinking of destination as if someone or something is forcing us automatically and mechanically nevertheless (Nancy 1993: 119). But this move of course brings Nancy very close to everything that he has up until now rejected and

23 This is also the reason why Derrida questions Nancy on the status of ethics in this thought of freedom. If freedom ‘does not mingle’ with concrete history, how then are we to discriminate between the different degrees of freedom allotted to people in different states? See Derrida (2006: 54ff.).

continues to do so, for not only does Nancy have recourse to the idea of destiny here, but he even comes close to affirming the ontodicy, of which he had just detected in Heidegger's thought. If ontodicy is to be understood as if the course of being remains indifferent to whatever happens in history, be it good or bad, and if Nancy detects something like it in Heidegger's thought, one still has to ask why Nancy would be compelled to at least 'suspect, despite everything, a secret egoity of being' (Nancy 1993: 134). If freedom indeed does not mingle with the historical events in which it takes place (and which place it opens rather), is then this freedom not just as *indifferent* to history as Nancy suspects of Heidegger's b/Being? The question at least shows that the question of metaphysics is not appropriately dealt with when restricting it to 'imposing a being on being'; it would also entail asking why concepts such as destiny, causality, and theodicy *cannot stop coming back*. It is of this recurrence, perhaps, that Nancy says too little, and possibly one in which he too falls prey.

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