

## LEVINAS, NANCY, AND THE BEING OF PLURALITY

**Mark Kourie**  
**Benda Hofmeyr**  
*Department of Philosophy*  
*University of Pretoria, South Africa*

*This essay critically considers the differences and complementarities between Emmanuel Levinas's and Jean-Luc Nancy's respective accounts of ontology and ethics. A comparative reading reveals that while both insist upon a relational conceptualization of subjectivity, they base relationality on differing notions of alterity. The simultaneous proximity and distance between these two thinkers' respective transphenomenological quests yield critical force that enables a mutual critique, while opening up productive avenues for overcoming some of the problems inherent to their views.*

### DELIMITING THE PROBLEMATICS

Emmanuel Levinas and Jean-Luc Nancy, while taking Martin Heidegger as their main interlocuter, provide rigorous critiques of Heidegger's resuscitation of the question of the meaning of Being (*Sein*). Where Levinas identifies a grave insufficiency in Heidegger's ontology, and one which necessitates a metaphysics based upon something "otherwise than Being," Nancy deconstructs the individualism which haunts Heidegger's *Being and time*, and asserts that Heidegger failed to give a sufficient analysis of being-with. The result of this critique yields both thinkers providing an understanding of the necessary limitations of the phenomenological articulation of ontology. Where Levinas's phenomenology is best understood as a trans-phenomenological quest for the Good beyond Being, showing that ontology is insufficient to motivate ethics, Nancy envisages a theory of Being which questions the legitimacy of presupposing that phenomenology interrogates a world already unified by the ubiquity of Being. Both thinkers, therefore, depart from Heidegger's existential phenomenology in their respective pursuits of a fundamental or constitutive plurality which supports their complimentary convictions that there cannot be a self without the Other. The particularities of their respective developments and critiques of Heidegger's thought form the subject of an abundance of scholarship. It will not, however, be our main concern here. It nevertheless constitutes a necessary point of departure for what we will focus on in this essay: the striking similarity between Levinas's and Nancy's perspectives of Being, on the one hand, and

the odds at which they stand with respect to the implications of this perspective for understanding ethics, on the other. As we shall see, while both thinkers emphasize the necessity of alterity for the question of Being to have any meaning, the nature of this alterity and its implications for ethics differs significantly between the two thinkers. Levinas's approach is of an *ethical* metaphysics, which fundamentally critiques traditional ontology, seeking instead to recognize the Good as *beyond* Being. For his part, Nancy envisages an ontology which is inherently heteronomous, and insists that responsibility towards alterity is not made possible by a Good beyond Being, but arises from a co-ontological *being-with*. Hence, in this essay we critically compare their respective conceptions of ontology and ethics in an attempt to come to an instructive understanding of—what we consider to be—their *complementary* articulations of relational subjectivity.

## INTRODUCING BEING

The history of Western ontology, from its Greek inception, might be crudely summarized as the development and refinement of the Parmenidean view, which construes Being as the unchanging and absolute real unity which lies behind the appearance of change and multiplicity. However, Heidegger's *destruktion* of the history of Western metaphysics, that is, the assumption that we can know anything about Being as removed from our own subjective questioning of it, signalled the ushering in of less absolutist conceptions of Being. What this means is that when we speak of Being—and particularly with respect to how we discuss the treatment it receives in Levinas and Nancy—we cannot isolate it as independent from the self that questions it.

For the Heidegger of *Sein und Zeit* (1927), we can thus come to some understanding of Being only by examining the fundamental structures of *our* own existence. Most significantly, we exist as *Dasein* (there-being). In other words, we only exist inasmuch as we are there, and it is only in terms of *Dasein* that any insight into the meaning of Being as such can be formulated. Furthermore, one of the fundamental lemmas in Heidegger's analysis is that Being is not a substance to be found in the essence of things, but it is better understood as that which 'allows beings to exist. This characteristic of Being refers to the verbal quality of existing and is coined by Heidegger as the German phrase *es gibt* (there is), which comes from the German *geben* (meaning "to give"). In terms of the *es gibt*, all the particular beings which exist do so by virtue of an implicit "generosity" inherent to the character of Being itself.

### Levinas's Conception of Being

If at the beginning our reflections are in large measure inspired by the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, where we find the concept of ontology and of the relationship which man sustains with Being, they are also governed by a profound need to leave the climate of that philosophy, and by the conviction that we cannot leave it for a philosophy that would be pre-Heideggerian. (Levinas 2003, 19)

Like Heidegger, Levinas understands existence in its verbal sense as the self-unfolding *act* of Being that is attested to in the manifestation of particular beings. Unlike his one-time teacher, however, for him existence signals an unbearable heaviness of Being, as if being a Jew as opposed to a German in Europe in the years preceding World War II cast a different light on the human existential condition. Levinas (2003, 57) identifies the source of this heaviness as the “there is” (*il y a* in French, unlike the German *es gibt*). Indeed, should we proceed to imagine an existence without any particular beings within it, Levinas contends, we would discover that Being is in actual fact devoid of any generosity. Being is construed as not only that which animates all beings, but also that which persists in the hypothetical absence of all beings. This character of Being, for Levinas, is not a void left by nothingness, but the haunting excluded middle between Being and nothingness (cf. Levinas 2003, 57; Levinas 1987, 46-49, 57-60). The reverse side of Being’s generosity is thus its absolute anonymity, its sheer and all-encompassing ubiquity from which there is seemingly no escape. From the moment of its inception, then, Levinas’s thought was animated by the need to escape Being (cf. Levinas 1935), but he only managed to formulate a way in which this impossible need might be met forty years later in his second magnum opus—hence, the title: *Otherwise than Being and beyond Essence* (1974).

To recall, the radical thought which underpins Heidegger’s ontology is his assertion that ontology is inseparable from our subjectivity. Along the same lines, when Levinas identifies a heaviness in Being as such, this heaviness is experienced directly by we who seek to understand the meaning of Being. Indeed, this haunting excluded middle informs our very being, turning it into a suffocating enchainment from which we cannot extricate ourselves, not even by way of death. For while my death may be the cessation of my being, it can provide no relief from the gravity of existence, since once I die there is nobody there to feel that weight or the relief of the alleviation of the existential burden. For Levinas (1935, 55), this implies that our existence is always haunted by the paradoxical need to escape from Being itself—to get out of one’s very own existence.

If Being permeates all that exists then escape must signal something (or someone) “otherwise than Being, or beyond Essence.” Ultimately, it is the alterity of the Other person which affords this opportunity for escape, since the Other is impossibly beyond my own existence and beyond the bounds of phenomenology. For Levinas, the ethical question of relating to alterity, which breaks open the self-sufficiency of our inherently egoist existence, supplants the question of Being or ontology as “first philosophy.”

### **Nancy’s Conception of Being-with**

Therefore it is not the case that the “with” is an addition to some prior Being; instead, the “with” is at the heart of Being. In this respect, it is absolutely necessary to reverse the order of philosophical exposition, for which it has been a matter of course that the “with”—and the other that goes along with it—always comes second, even though this succession is contradicted by the underlying logic in the question here. (Nancy 2000, 30)

Where Levinas’s critique of Heidegger amounts to a critique of ontology in general, Nancy’s critique of Heidegger amounts to a reworking of Heidegger’s ontology which

asserts the relation “with” as radically fundamental to Being itself. Nancy reminds us that Heidegger (2010, 111) indicates *Dasein* (being-there) as always already *Mitsein* (being-with), and indeed the two terms are worth joining as *Mitdasein*. But as Nancy (2008, 2) notes, Heidegger fails to think this concept through with sufficient rigour, despite asserting its “equiprimordiality” with the other structures revealed by the existential analytic in *Being and time*. *Mitdasein*, for Nancy, is structured by an essential openness to the relation “with.” For Nancy, then, this openness must be understood as a patent “sense of the world” which precedes—and is the condition of possibility for—any signification or meaning of the world (Watkin 2009, 137-38). This stands in contrast to the implicitly individualistic character of Heidegger’s conception of authenticity. For Nancy, Heidegger’s dichotomy between authenticity and inauthenticity is not only entangled with risky political consequences (Nancy 2008), but also rests upon a flawed opposition between undifferentiated Being and authentic Being (Nancy 2000, 10). Nancy’s emphasis here is specifically on the irreducible relational orientation of *Dasein* to the world and to others, not as a consequence of Being, but its most definitive characteristic.

Hence, Nancy configures *Mitdasein* to indicate that all *Dasein* are constituted as openings which “intersect each other in some way...[letting] their properties interfere with one another, but without merging into a unique *Dasein*” (Nancy 2008, 2). *Mitdasein* therefore entails that the openness of the “there” in “being-there” is always exposed to and in relation with the “theres” of others, rather than imply a common spatiality or locality which some or all *Dasein* share. In a sense, *Mitdasein* refers to the unavoidable entanglement of many *Dasein* with one another, not because of shared properties, but as the very condition of *Dasein*’s possibility. Ultimately, since to *be there* is to *be with*, Nancy’s ontology amounts to a co-existential analytic, which repudiates any notion of a unitary, undifferentiated Being (*Sein*) which precedes *Dasein* and that into which it is thrown. For Nancy, as we shall later discover, Being itself must be conceived as a *being-singular-plural*, where singularity, plurality, and the relation between the two, are the fundamental co-constituents of Being itself.

## BEING VS. BEING-WITH: DIFFERENT VIEWS OF BEING AND ALTERITY

Following their respective critiques of Heidegger, Levinas and Nancy therefore present us with two divergent conceptualizations of Being, which articulate into divergent formulations of relational subjectivity, plurality, and alterity. Levinas’s ethical subject, as we shall see, is premised on the opposition between Being and the Good—*beyond* Being, which seems to lead to the irreparable fissure between self and other. In other words, in order to access the Good, the self has to somehow extricate itself from its very existence, which is, by its very definition, self-persistent and other-disregarding. For his part, Nancy does not oppose Being to a Good beyond this world, but rather insists upon a radical reconceptualized notion of Being in terms of Being-with.

### Nancy’s Conception of Alterity as Trans-immanence

Nancy (2000, 30) asserts that “only what exists exists.” By insisting upon this tautology, Nancy rejects the existence of an absolute Being (as God or as originating

principle) which exists independently of the multiplicity of existing beings. Moreover, it indicates that Nancy denies the possibility of anything otherwise than Being, of an absolute Other not of this world. But if Being is neither an absolute principle which gives existence to existing things, nor a substantial essence underpinning all existence, how does the world come to exist at all? Moreover, if there is no Other beyond Being, does Nancy's view not overtly deny the possibility of ethics by denying alterity as Simon Critchley (1999, 65-66) and Robert L. Bernasconi (1993, 12) suggest?

On the contrary, Nancy (2000, 10-15) stresses the importance of alterity, but he configures it as a fundamental component of being-singular-plural that is *within* the world. Indeed, alterity is precisely that which is responsible for the emergence of a pluralistic world of difference: that fragmented conception of Being as constituted by the plurality of singular things that exist. World originates not from some onto-theological creator or principle, but simultaneously from every singular being at each time in each place (Devisch 2006). The coexistence which underpins Being itself is predicated upon this plurality of different origins of world, and it is in this difference of origin that Nancy locates alterity.

On this view, the relation to alterity is not considered one in which Being is transcended by virtue of a metaphysical Other. For Nancy, the relation with difference is a *trans-immanence*: a transcendence to that which is different *in* the world rather than to that which is beyond the world. To get ahead of ourselves, Nancy uses this relationality as a basis for both ethics and community, although his formulations are not without their problems when considered from a Levinasian perspective. For now, however, we must shelve these questions, as it is first incumbent on us to show how Levinas—in contrast to Nancy—justifies a notion of alterity beyond Being.

### Levinas's Conception of Alterity as Beyond Being

Levinas's insistence upon the opposition between Being and the Good is intended to avoid the trap of onto-theology, which confuses Being with the creator God. Instead, the Jewish Levinas follows the pagan Plato in postulating the Good as beyond Being. If the Good is beyond Being, then metaphysics must oppose Being to the Good.<sup>1</sup> Being is hence conceived negatively as "evil." Evil here does not signify that which is *ethically* wrong, however, for that would be to confuse ontology—which is a-ethical or ethically neutral—with how one "ought to be." Rather, it signifies the inescapable reverse-side of the event of Being that we discussed earlier: the *il y a*. All that there is, *is* by virtue of Being (its front-side), but Being is evil in its all-encompassing inexorability from which there is seemingly no escape.

Even though Levinas is hailed as a philosopher of ethics par excellence, his ethical metaphysics were never intended as prescriptive normative framework for distinguishing right from wrong. Of interest to him, is rather the condition of possibility for ethical action. Ethics, in Levinas's view, occurs "prior" to and is even more fundamental than Being. The Good is *beyond* Being because only ethics is able to disturb the complacency of Being understood as that which works to bring everything other under its self-same sway. What "is" (ontology) only becomes what "ought to be" in the "social" domain beyond ontology (Levinas 1985, 58), i.e., ethics only becomes possible when I am

confronted by the Other. Put differently, should I reduce other people to my own mere conceptions of them, no matter how noble or loving such conceptions may be, I deny them the status of being otherwise than my being. When I am faced by an Other person, I am faced by a resistance to this reduction, for how can I truly ever summarize another person's existence purely in terms of my own thoughts? Levinas (1957, 55) identifies this resistance not only as a resistance to conceptualization, but as the commandment "You shall not kill." The Other's mortality is infinitely more possible for me to experience than my own, since I cannot experience my own death. My being is, therefore, not my primary concern. Rather it is the being of the Other person and whether I am complicit in his or her mortality. In the face of the Other, I am thus confronted with the fact that my own being might place the continued existence of another at risk. To justify my existence I must be held accountable for the risk it places on his/her existence. Thus the question of first philosophy does not regard the meaning of Being, "[n]ot 'why being rather than nothing?', but how being justifies itself" (Levinas 1989, 86).

For Levinas, only a transcendent Other (the Good *beyond* Being) is invested with the power to confront and critique my being. The transcendent Other (ultimately God) becomes manifest in, and addresses me through, the face of the Other person (my neighbour). Levinas contends that ethical action (putting the interest of another before my own) would mean a (momentary) suspension of the very essence of Being—the ontological drive to persist in one's own being. Contrary to Nancy's insistence then, ontology cannot be ethical for Levinas. The possibility of ethics only arises when a transcendent alterity challenges my ontological self-interestedness and enables being-for-another. I am nevertheless always-already ontologically susceptible to this confrontation, because the transcendent Other confronts me from with-out in the face of my neighbour, but is also already lodged with-in the self as a kind of predisposition. The transcendent Other is, therefore, paradoxically also immanent or *with-in* the self.

### **Ontology as Ethics in Nancy**

In apparent opposition to Levinas, Nancy (2000, 21) asserts that "only ontology...may be ethical in a consistent manner." To suppose an Other beyond Being, for Nancy, belies a search for a point of reference beyond the world. But Nancy (1992, 374-75) insists that such points of reference, amongst which he includes "God," "Man," "History," and "Science," can no longer provide real guidance in coming to terms with our relational existence. Instead, community—as the necessary connotation of openness and exposure—must be understood as ontologically primary since the relation "with" is the fundamental character of Being. There is no essential meaning or configuration of this relation, but rather it is its lack of any essential meaning which makes it common to all (Nancy 1992, 375). Ontology, for Nancy (2000, 46-47), is the most pressing question because it not only calls for us to think existence, but to do so in the face of our shifting contemporary conditions. The ethics that ontology might reveal pertains not to normative prescriptions, but serves as a means of opening up the possibility of action in light of the oft-times paralyzing situations facing our contemporary existence. These situations, for Nancy, include (*inter alia*) the questions of world in the face of pluralistic accounts thereof, of global capital in the face of community, of de-westernizing in the face of

metaphysics' ending, and of technology in the face of our ecological crises (Nancy 2000, 46-47). If ontology must take relationality, being-with and difference, as axiomatic, and if ontology cannot be divorced from subjectivity, then the thinking of existence is not simply an arena of abstract principles concerning particulars and universals. Rather it is a task of making sense of our fundamental relatedness without recourse to ideal configurations thereof, a task which becomes an ever more pressing one in the postcolonial, hypertechnological, and globalized world.

### PLURALITY AND ALTERITY

Despite their differing opinions on the ethical status of ontology, Levinas and Nancy arrive at a similar emphasis on the importance of plurality. Where Levinas begins with existential meditations on the solitude of Being in which it breaks open to reveal a plurality in the face of alterity (Levinas 1987, 85), Nancy begins with plurality as an irreducible character of existence itself. Indeed, both thinkers have the wherewithal to question the Parmenidean unity which circumscribes almost the whole history of thinking Being. Although Nancy's *oeuvre* offers little by way of an exhaustive treatment of Levinas's philosophy, it seems difficult to deny the latter thinker's influence upon the former. Indeed, Linnell Secomb (2007, 452) notes how Nancy's treatment of Levinas in his 1986 essay "Shattered love" is the dissemination of "the gift of Levinasian ethics...[constituting] both a critique and further elaboration." In a certain sense, one could consider Levinas's treatment of plurality and alterity to open the door which Nancy was later to walk through.

Although both Levinas and Nancy insist upon plurality, the two thinkers diverge upon the status of alterity and therefore on the categories "Same" and "Other." Where the Levinasian Other designates an Other beyond our ontologically circumscribed world, Nancy locates alterity expressly *within* the world as one of the principles which sanctions the notion of being-singular-plural. The difference between Levinas and Nancy is thus both subtle and radical: for Levinas, the Other is beyond Being yet retains the power to confront Being, since the Other is also, as we shall see, within the self. For Nancy, on the other hand, Being, by virtue of being-singular-plural, is inherently always already a confrontation with alterity.

Levinas's phenomenological analyses up to and including the better part of *Totality and infinity* (1979) focus on the immanent plight of the isolated existent in the world. As such, these analyses create the impression of an irreparable fissure between self and Other. It only becomes evident in Levinas's mature works (and especially in his 1991 work and in the works following it) that the apparently isolated existent is always-already infected by an other lodged with-in it. The absolute alterity of the transcendent Other, as we have seen, confronts me by way of the face of my neighbour, the other person. I am affected by this confrontation, because of an inherent susceptibility to be affected by the needs and fate of others. Levinas's infamous face-to-face relation between the self and the Other can, therefore, be articulated more accurately as the Other-*in*-the-self. For him, humanity is constituted by a fundamental fraternity or mutual connectedness by virtue of a fundamental responsibility for the Other.

The fraternity which Levinas labours to configure in terms of the relation between the Same and the Other is somewhat akin to Nancy's thought on community. To recall,

Nancy reflects on his own thought as a more robust development of *Mitdasein* than Heidegger (2010) gives in *Being and time*. For Nancy, the very being of *Mitdasein* is defined by its openness to making sense of the world, and thus this openness must be prior to any given meaning or signification of the world. As this opening of sense, *Dasein* is also always already exposed to that which exceeds it. In the introduction to *Inoperative community*, Nancy (1991, xxxvii-xxxviii) defines exposure as

...“posed” in exteriority...having to do with an outside *in the very intimacy* of an inside... whose reality is that of “my” face always exposed to others, always turned toward an other and faced by him or her, never facing myself.

This quote carries obvious Levinasian undertones, and hence it is quite possible to detect much of Levinas’s influence in Nancy’s thought. But exposure, for Nancy, implies an irrevocable contact between different beings, rather than the possible interpenetration of the Good metaphysical Other with the banality of Being, as some might interpret Levinas’s ethical metaphysics. Being confronts itself as different, precisely because (a) Being is the plurality of singular beings rather than the abstraction which unifies them into a totality (to recall, “only what exists exists”); and (b) this plurality requires that each and every singular being is at once different and yet exposed to that with which it is in relation (being-singular-plural is thus predicated upon difference).

It is in these terms that Nancy rejects a vision of community as the sharing of a common property, activity, or substance. Community, rather than being predicated on having something in common, is defined by *existing* in common. Indeed, we do not possess our existence, but we are our existence. And as exposure and openness, our being-together is characterized by the shifting and yet shared border at which our different existences touch one another. Again, on Nancy’s view, it is important to emphasize that existence does not precede this contact, but is defined by it. Indeed, if the condition of possibility *par excellence* for our existence is our exposure to others; and this exposure implies a relation with alterity that is radically different despite existing within the world; then—to paraphrase Nancy (2001)—it is precisely those “with whom we have nothing in common” that exist “*in common with us*.” Stated less flamboyantly, if one has “to be” before one “is something,” and “to be” is always already relational, then our relatedness preexists, and is indeed the condition of possibility for, relations of blood, heritage, affiliation or institution. The transimmanent relations to alterity, which define being-singular-plural, are thus also the basis of community. Hence, being-in-common extends even to those who are the most different from us, inasmuch as being-singular-plural originates in the alterity of each being.

At issue, then, between Levinas and Nancy, is the exact difference and/or complementarities between the “*in*” of the Other-*in-the-Same* and the “*with*” of the Being-*with*.

## THE CRITICAL VALUE OF A COMPARATIVE READING

A critical comparative reading of Levinas’s and Nancy’s respective insistence upon a fundamental or (trans-)ontological plurality throws certain problems in their



respective conceptions into relief. Hence, two problems can be identified in Nancy's relational ontology and his assertion of its ethical status. Firstly, if Nancy insists that being-with is the fact that pure difference is "in relation," what accounts for the "connection/relatedness" between those who have *nothing* in common? In other words, if being-with is the mere fact of a "shared border," how does this qualify the connection between the self and the other? Secondly, in what precise sense is ontology ethical and ethics ontological as Nancy (2000, 123) insists? It remains only problematically evident how an "ought" (what kind of relationship *should* I have with my neighbour, my coincidental co-existent) can be derived from the "is" (the fact of a necessary co-existence that precedes its signification).

For his part, Levinas makes no claim to offer a theory of ethics. His only claim is that the primacy of ethics as "first philosophy" (Aristotle's term for "metaphysics") accounts for the *possibility* of ethical action. Put differently, the ontological fact that the self is always-already infected by an orientation towards the Other enables the self-directed ego to momentarily suppress its own needs for the sake of another. That condition consists in a confrontation by the absolute alterity of the Other (person) that disrupts my egocentric ways, i.e., the tendency to reduce all forms of otherness to the same. But this face-to-face relation is oftentimes discounted as an impracticable absolutization of difference, which severs sameness and alterity irremediably. How can I offer aid if the I can never come to know or understand what the Other needs? Would every attempt to intervene in the affairs of the needy Other, not always and per definition amount to a reduction of his/her needs to my necessarily inaccurate assessment thereof? Before offering our perspective on how these problems might be overcome by way of a complementary reading situating the two thinkers side-by-side, it might be instructive to critically consider other scholarly perspectives on the discrepancy between the two thinkers' approaches to ethics.

### **SITUATING THE PROBLEMATICS WITHIN THE EXISTING DEBATE**

Bernasconi (1993, 12) argues that Nancy's thought on community "obliterates alterity" because Nancy considers the face of the Other as secondary to the "in-common" of being. Similarly, Critchley (1999, 65) maintains that Nancy's emphasis on being-with renders a version of alterity that neutralizes ethical transcendence in the Levinasian sense, thereby risking an ethics devoid of the radical alterity of the Other and its concomitant call to responsibility. In Nancy's defense, Christopher Watkins (2009, 61, 181-82) notes that both Critchley and Bernasconi too readily apply the binary of same and other to Nancy's arguments on being-with and community, where such arguments seek precisely to question the very possibility of sameness itself whilst maintaining the possibilities of sharing, solidarity, alterity, and community. Indeed, for Watkins (2009, 61, 181-82), Nancy's thought on the constitutive singular-plural character of the self underscores the very possibility of an ethical relation with alterity.

In a recent work on Nancy, Daniele Rugo (2013) argues that Levinas fails to appreciate Heidegger's notions of being-in-the-world and being-with as *existentials*, a

misreading which Rugo further argues situates Levinas in closer agreement with the implications of Heidegger's being-with as elaborated upon by Nancy. Although Rugo (2013, 114) admits that a schematized reading of Levinas's analyses of worldly experience does not do justice to the latter's ultimate purpose, Rugo premises her critique of Levinas precisely upon such a faulty schematization, which seeks to understand Levinas's analyses in terms of a Nancean reading of Heidegger. In the process, Rugo establishes the Levinasian relation to alterity as at best an idealised humanistic form of being-with. While the nuances of congruence and incongruence between Levinas and Heidegger are certainly interesting, Rugo nonetheless loses sight of the forest for the trees. Levinas labours to establish ethics as first philosophy, that is, as a question prior to any question of the meaning of Being. This question, Levinas (1989,85) writes, is "to ask myself if my being is justified, if the *Da* of my *Dasein* is not already the usurpation of somebody else's place." Even if Levinas articulates this in a Heideggerian idiom, it is his destination not the route by which he arrives at it that carries the force of his thinking. Nancy's co-existential analytic cannot permit the posing of this question, since "my place" is already there-with. *Mitdasein*, although implicated in an ethos of solidarity, does not place the same demand upon me as the face-to-face encounter with the Other. According to Levinas (1989, 85), the other beside me does not confront me as does the Other facing me and therefore fails to ask whether I "ought to fear injustice more than death, to prefer to suffer than to commit injustice, and to prefer that which justifies being over that which assures it." Even if the logic of being-with that Nancy's work deftly develops may formulate ethics as a call to enact sense in the simultaneity of singularity and plurality (Rugo 2013, 145), it remains unclear how an "ought" (that would specify the nature of the relation between coincidental co-existents) might be derived from the "is" (of our necessary co-existence). The problem therefore remains whether one asserts being-with as most fundamental, as Watkin and Rugo suggest, or whether as Critchley (1999, 66) muses that

...perhaps ontology is not fundamental. That is, perhaps I am never fundamentally "with" the other and the relation to the other is, as Sartre suggested, a hole in the world, a tear in the ontological fabric of *In-der-Welt-sein*. Perhaps, I am also "without" the other, and perhaps, most of all, in love—in a relation that demands my acknowledgement because it exceeds the bounds of knowledge. Perhaps, the co-existential structures of being-with overlay a prior level of "being-without," a being-without the other that is without being.

Is there a way out of this problem that at once does not gloss over the nature of ethics as first philosophy by reducing Levinas to a covert Heideggerian and Nancean? Could it be that both Levinas and Nancy share a perspective on ontology, which the aforementioned scholars have neglected to appreciate? Is it not the case that both thinkers emphasize the predication of Being as necessarily upon an alterity inaccessible to the singular being? Can Levinasian first philosophy complement, rather than clash with, the Nancean solidarity of being-with?

## OVERCOMING THE PROBLEMS TOGETHER

A comparative reading, therefore, seems to raise a number of difficult questions and draws our attention to what might be construed as problematic in the work of these two thinkers. The critical value of a comparative reading is precisely located in the fact that the simultaneous proximity and distance of their thought enables the one to effectively lay bare the loopholes in the thinking of the other. In addition, however, it harbours the potential to open up potentially fruitful complementarities that could help us to overcome some of the difficulties. In both cases it is the proximity of the Other “in” or “with” the self that introduces the possibility of altruistic, other-respecting behaviour. Both insist upon a relational account of subjectivity in which the relation is not a gap crossed between self-enclosed individuals, but a juxta- or super-imposition that resists conflation. Nancy’s insistence upon a constitutive co-existential ontology situates the self and the other side-by-side, vehemently disavowing the existence of any self prior to a fundamental co-existence with-others. Although, as we have seen, he insists that ontology (or co-ontology) is always already an originary ethics, Levinasians would almost certainly accuse Nancy of a “neutralizing of ethical transcendence” (Critchley 1999, 65). In other words, his reduction of intersubjectivity to ontological relatedness strips the relation of the critical force held in a relation with the Good as beyond Being. The relation with the other is a mere condition that founds the self co-constitutively, reinforcing it while risking the very same other-reductive violence that Levinas uncovered. Nancy’s relation between the self and the other, therefore, appears to be anything but a confrontation with the power to critique my very being, and may amount to a disengaged relation of being side-by-side.

The Levinasian critique of Nancy, however, may be less charitable to Nancy’s view than it ought to be. To recall, the Nancean understanding of community is one where the *reticulated multiplicity of beings as open and exposed to one another* is a reality of *facing others*, rather than a mere collectivity of side-by-sideness. Indeed, the relation with others occurs at the limit of one’s finite being, the moment of touching upon the untouchable.<sup>2</sup> Although the beyond of one’s being is, on the Nancean view, not an infinite alterity indicating something beyond Being as such, it is a relationship with alterity which transcends *my* being inasmuch as my being is finite.

Thus in response to the first question formulated in a previous section (“Conception of being-with”), Nancy’s project is not to establish the nature or character of the relation between self and other. Indeed, such a relation can take an indefinite number of different forms, inasmuch as the content of each relation between self and other is unique to its context. The shared border and contact, which characterizes the relational structure of existence, is rather to be understood as the condition of possibility for existence as such. The existence of the relation needs no qualification because it qualifies existence.

With respect to the second objection, namely of the Humean problem found when making “ought” claims based on ‘is’ claims, Nancy objects in the following manner. His claim that ontology is ethical in a consistent manner is not an attempt to outline prescriptions or values by which action can be judged as moral or not. Rather, he describes his task as the attempt to understand “what makes *action* [*l’agir*] as such”

(Nancy 1999, 14). Action here is to be understood in terms of the Greek *praxis*, thus not as the causal chain of action and effect which underscores moral judgements. For Nancy, the *Seinsfrage* (which he re-asserts as the *Mitseinsfrage*) is precisely a question of the active relation *Dasein* has with Being, a relation which is characterized as “making sense.” If the question of Being cannot be divorced from the being who asks the question, then ontology is an activity of making sense of one’s existence. As such, the task at hand is not an attempt to derive moral principles from an abstract ontology, but rather it is via a rigorous ontological investigation that one can reveal the essentially ethical character of *Dasein*’s existence.

Nancy’s project is thus akin to Levinas’s inasmuch as his interest is the condition of possibility for ethics. Indeed, Nancy’s assertion that ontology is ethical is comparable to Levinas’s own project of establishing ethics as first philosophy. The key difference is simply that where Levinas argues that the difference between Self and Other is a metaphysical one (that is, a difference between Being and something Otherwise than Being); Nancy re-formulates this difference within the structure of Being itself inasmuch as Being is fundamentally constituted by an infinite plurality of irreducibly different beings as co-originating the world.

Nancy’s relational co-ontology is thus not without its own critical force. In fact, it perpetually unworks all figures of community founded upon some common essence (e.g., the individual, state, nation, class, etc.), since it insists upon an existential multiplicity of selves that is ontologically prior to unique individual subjects. There is no essential self (whether black, white, gay or straight, male or female) that exists prior to our fundamental relatedness to others. Such qualifications seem to be mere *ontic* modifications of a fundamental ontological structure.

From a Levinasian perspective, as we have seen, it is precisely this disavowal of the difference between the ontological Self and the metaphysical Other (which he would term “ethics”) that strips the encounter with the other person of its critical force. Herein Levinas identifies the limits of phenomenology as an inherently ontological venture—capable only of *acknowledging* the Other by reducing him to the categories of the same. For Nancy, on the other hand, the limits of phenomenology are precisely situated in its insistence upon the distinctness of phenomena from that of the undetermined nature of Being(-singular-plural). It is such an insistence that founds (inoperative) models of community in the name of some essence (be it the individual, state, nation, class, etc.) that subjects have in common at the expense of a fundamental, relational, and undetermined being-in-common.

## CONCLUSION

Despite the differences between Levinas and Nancy, their critical endeavours can be construed as complementary “trans-phenomenological” quests that seek to address the other-reductive violence of an ontology that seeks to subject all forms of alterity to the identifying force of the Same. Both remain steeped in the phenomenological tradition, but seem to push the boundaries of the phenomenological method by insisting upon the limits of our understanding and autonomy, limits that are not restrictive but precisely constitutive of our very phenomenal being. Hence, we are forced to confront the

constitutive other-connectedness of our existential condition, the realization that there cannot be a Self without the [O]ther—that all forms of life are other-connected and/or Other-infected. Whether that other is “with” [Nancy] or “within” [Levinas] us, from the perspective of these philosophers, the autonomy of identity is once and for all deposed from its age-old ontological throne. It is beyond the scope of the present essay to consider the far-reaching implications of this deposition. Suffice it to say that it is in no small measure responsible for the decisive shift in contemporary Continental thought away from moral philosophies centred upon the autonomous rational Subject capable of distinguishing good from evil, towards ethical considerations that seek to recognize an inherent heteronomy or responsibility towards an alterity from which we can no longer distinguish ourselves. Herein perhaps lies the key to addressing the crisis of our globalized yet radically individualistic world.

## NOTES

1. Cf. Levinas 1991, 18-19: “Arising at the apex of essence, goodness is other than being” and “[t]he beyond being, being’s other or the otherwise than being ... as been recognized as the Good by Plato.”

2. One should understand this in the chiasmic sense where what is touched is defined by what cannot be touched in conjunction. Touching is defined by its limits, and these limits in turn are the limits of one’s being. Derrida (2005, 68) puts it thus:

What [touching] thus brings into contact, or rather into contiguity, *partes extra partes*, is first of all contact and noncontact. And this contact without contact, this barely touching touch is unlike any other, in the very place where all it touches is the other.

## REFERENCES

- Bernasconi, Robert L. 1993. On deconstructing nostalgia for community within the West: The debate between Nancy and Blanchot. *Research in Phenomenology* 23 (1).
- Critchley, Simon. 1999. With Being-with? Notes on Jean-Luc Nancy’s rewriting of *Being and time*. *Studies in Practical Philosophy* 1(1).
- Derrida, Jacques. 2005. *On touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*. Translated by Christine Irizarry. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Devisch, Ignaas. 2006. The sense of Being(-)with Jean-Luc Nancy. *Culture Machine* 8. Available at <http://www.culturemachine.net/index.php/cm/article/view/36/44>. Accessed: 11 August 2011.
- Heidegger, Martin. 2010. *Being and time*. Translated by Joan Stambaugh. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. 1987. Philosophy and the idea of infinity. *Collected philosophical papers*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1979 [1961]. *Totality and infinity. An essay on exteriority*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1985. *Ethics and infinity*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.

- \_\_\_\_\_. 1987. *Time and the other*. Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1989. *The Levinas reader*. Edited by Sean Hand. Cambridge: Basil Blackwell.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1991. *Otherwise than Being or beyond Essence*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1935. *On escape*. Translated by Bettina Bergo. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc. 1991. *The inoperative community*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1999. Heidegger's "Originary ethics." *Studies in Practical Philosophy* 1 (1).
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2001. Love and community: A round-table discussion with Jean-Luc Nancy, Avital Ronell, and Wolfgang Schirmacher, August 2001. European Graduate School EGS. Available at <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/nancy/nancyroundtable-discussion2001.html>. Accessed 1 June 2007.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2000. *Being singular plural*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2008. "The Being-with of Being-there." *Continental Philosophy Review* 41 (1).
- Rugo, Daniele. 2013. *Jean-Luc Nancy and the thinking of otherness*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Secomb, Linnell, 2006. Amorous politics: Between Derrida and Nancy. *Social Semiotics*.16 (3).
- Watkin, Christopher. 2009. *Phenomenology or deconstruction? The question of ontology in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Paul Ricoeur and Jean-Luc Nancy*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

*Submitted: 31 July 1914; revised: 11 March 2016*