



Philosophical Themes in Jean Luc Nancy

Dr Chung Chin-Yi

Research scholar, National University of Singapore

Enigma719@hotmail.com

Abstract:

Nancy argues in A Finite Thinking that art no longer represents the idea or Truth because there is nothing that resides outside the finite as the ultimate reality is finitude rather than an infinite that informs the finite. (FT 23) Without representation, there is no double concept that refers to something external as a mere simulacrum, rather the simulacrum is all there is as a birthing to presence. There is no simulacrum as a copy of an ideal infinite form such as beauty. Rather the painting or poetry is radically finite, its own limit, deriving its beauty and existence from its own particularity and specificity rather than owing this beauty to a transcendental absolute of Beauty.

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Transcendentalism

Traditionally conceived, the transcendental is that which conditions knowledge and perception in phenomenology by giving it the properties of space and time. Tradition has posited the transcendental as the condition of possibility of the empirical, from Plato's Forms to Aristotle's morphe and Kant's synthetic a priori. The Transcendental in philosophy is that which goes beyond (transcends) empiricism and denotes the sphere of metaphysics or the ideal which transcends the empirical. The word transcendental means "going beyond", based on its Latin root, *transcendere*, to climb or go beyond, from *trans* and *scando*. In Husserl's thought, the transcendental is the ground of the empirical, and the transcendental ego which consciousness must be reduced to is the absolute that grounds consciousness and conditions our knowledge and perception of objects by uniting them in continuous unities of space and time. The transcendental is what is experienced in order to

ascertain the *a priori* fundamental principles or structuring processes of all knowledge.

In Phenomenology, Husserl is the main advocate for the transcendental. Husserl, in attempting to bracket the natural world through his transcendental reduction, was seeking an absolute foundation in which to ground science. This a priori grounding would establish science in a solid and unshakeable foundation that subsequently resolved all the crises of foundations in the European sciences. Husserl seeks to overcome psychologism and relativism through establishing an a priori and absolute foundation for science.

Husserl thus seeks a science that grounds itself radically as an a priori science, its justification and method would lie in its absolute ideal foundation which would resolve problems that involved crises of foundations and logical paradox. This also included problems of subjectivism- in positing the a priori as the unshakeable ground of phenomenology Husserl sought a method in which to objectify the sciences and find a radical foundation upon which the unquestionable certainty and objectivity of the sciences would be founded through the transcendental reduction. Transcendental reduction is a method at which one arrives at apodictic certainty – at the essences which form the a priori conditions upon which empirical phenomenology is premised. Phenomenology is eidetic phenomenology – it seeks to arrive at the genetic foundations of thought, as Husserl puts it- moves phenomenology from static to genetic – in arriving at the pure, invariant, essential forms which synthesize perceptions into coherent unities and without which perception would be impossible. Husserl sought, through the eidetic reduction, to arrive at the essential



structures of the pure mental process; in this sense the transcendental reduction is a purifying process of bracketing everything contingent, empirical and relative to arrive at the absolute and a priori foundations that structure mental processes.

According to Nancy in *The Birth to Presence*, the transcendental ground of existence in the form of God does not exist. God is not simply dead, but death itself. (BP 49) God is present but as an absence, as a nothing, a nowhere that can be located in the empirical realm and hence Nancy decidedly pronounces that the supersensible and transcendental realm is a fiction and simply does not exist. The ontological statement that God makes, in saying "I am" according to Nancy is a fiction because God is present only as an absence, as a God who is dead. Thus according to Nancy, Christianity is a paralyzed religion because it is predicated on the existence of a transcendent God which simply does not exist, is dead, or has abandoned his creation. Thus the psalmist renders his prayers to a void, because the ultimate reality of God is that he is a nothing, nowhere to be found, present only as an absence.

Further on in *The Birth to Presence*, Nancy names all the transcendentalists in the form of Fichte, Schelling, Schlegel, Hegel and Novalis and argues that they share the same preoccupation with the One. (BP 62) For Kant it is beauty, and then becomes emptied in different ways by Fichte, Hegel, Schlegel and Schelling. According to Nancy however, the One as One does not exist, this is consistent with his claim that God does not exist. Nancy argues that supersensible or transcendental realm exists only as an absence, a nothing and nowhere to be found, something which has no empirical verifiability and hence no actual existence. Nancy argues that the One, or incommensurable simply does not exist. Nancy argues that eternity and truth can only exist in the moment, not in a supersensible realm to be located elsewhere as Nancy thinks the transcendental does not exist. Poetry does not exist because of Beauty as the One, the poem is Beauty because of its own

specific material beauty rather than because of the transcendental ideal of Beauty.

Further on in *The Birth to Presence* Nancy argues there is no such thing as the thing-in-itself. Objects are constituted by their state of being there, that is, their existential particularity in the here and now rather than deriving their existence from an ontologically separate supersensible realm as origin. (BP 171) These things are in a process of continually coming into presence, not from elsewhere, from the supersensible realm of thing-in-themselves but radically material, situated in the here and now, located in their material specificity as being there. As argued by Nancy, the world of things is without precedent. In the same way, thought does not correspond to a spiritual realm of existence but entirely with itself. Nancy thus argues that thought is irreducibly material and finite. The absolute necessity in Nancy's thought is thus the necessity of existence, as experience of freedom. This is the coming of the world, to the world and in the world. The world is radically coming to presence as a process of becoming what it is, originating only from itself in a radically finite sense and not from a transcendental realm of things-in-themselves. Nancy argues that the thing exists only as the withdrawal of its cause. In other words, transcendental forms such as God, the supersensible thing-in-itself and ideals such as Beauty and Truth do not exist, all that exists in the radically finite thing which becomes-toward-the-world. The thing coincides entirely with itself. (BP 181)

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a science of knowledge that examines the processes of consciousness. Originally founded by Husserl on the doctrine of intentionality to return to the things themselves as a purer science of knowledge that was presuppositionless and based on strict observation of phenomena, phenomenology has witnessed a split into opposing camps of transcendental idealism espoused by Husserl and an empirical psychology espoused by his followers and detractors, Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-



Ponty, Levinas and Ricoeur. Subsequently phenomenology has seen a split along the lines of idealism and post-metaphysics, not unlike the split in metaphysics between idealism and realism.

Phenomenology is divided between transcendental idealism and empirical psychology, or the radical empiricism of Levinas, Ricoeur and Merleau-Ponty. The question arises as to which can claim to be a more rigorous and faithful reading of phenomena. The act of bracketing, which takes place in Husserl's phenomenology as an exclusion of the empirical witnesses a reversal in Heidegger's phenomenology. This is because bracketing radicalizes intentionality, to return to the anthropological and situated realm of Being. Likewise, Levinas, Merleau-Ponty, Ricoeur and Blanchot espouse a negative phenomenology or radical empiricism. Phenomenology took the form of transcendental idealism with Husserl and arguably took a more existentialist turn with Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty.

Jean-Luc Nancy defines phenomenology as 'appearance'. Nancy opposes Husserl's epoche and argues that there is no ideal to be bracketed as all sense is already self-constituted or immanent to itself. In *A Finite Thinking* and *The Birth to Presence*, Nancy argues that essence as described by Husserl or the transcendental ground of meaning or *a priori* does not exist. What does exist is sense or the corporeal which is immediately present to itself and comes into existence as a birth to presence that does not require a transcendent as its ontological ground. Nancy disputes the existence of God and Kant, Schelling and Hegel's *a priori* which sense merely represents. Nancy argues that all sense is presentation and not representation as the transcendent is a fiction. (BP 46) In doing so Nancy does away with the Idea and the concept which sense and language merely represents, as Nancy argues that corporeality is not animated by the telos of the supersensible but by its own coming to presence, immediately present to itself and not derived from a sphere of the beyond or supersensible. As Nancy argues in *The Birth to*

Presence, Psyche knows nothing of herself. (BP 199) That is Psyche is all matter and no form, Psyche's extension is not determined by an essence but its own corporeality and physicality, immediately present to itself. Nancy thus removes the notion of cause in his phenomenology, arguing that matter is its own precedent, it is not preceded by supersensible or transcendental form but animated by its own birthing to presence of sense.

Nancy, in *The Sense of the World* argues that the distinction between Being as such and being as being is untenable. (SW 13) Nancy argues against the abstraction of truth into a separate ontological realm which precedes the existence of the object. According to Nancy, truth allows us to glimpse sense as its own internal difference, sense is deferred and differs from truth by its own internal difference which is difference, and as such as is difference which is effectively a non-difference. According to Derrida, the transcendental and the empirical are the same, separated by difference, a difference which is nothing or a non-difference, and Nancy furthers this by arguing that sense and truth belong to each other and are inseparable, necessary to informing and maintaining each other's existence. Hence according to Nancy, there is no difference between essence and existence, but he furthers this non-distinction between truth and sense by arguing that truth gives way to sense and has to be adequately exemplified in all its fullness and presence by sense.

According to Nancy in *The Sense of the World*, truth must expose itself to sense. (SW 17) What this means is that truth is necessarily embodied and experienced in a corporeal form. In this way, Nancy pronounces the end of philosophy as the abstraction of truth as an ontologically separate sphere must come to an end, the ultimate reality is sense. Doing away with the transcendental realm of truth or essence that precedes the thing, arguing there is no reified thing in itself which belongs to an ontologically separate sphere, Nancy argues that it becomes a matter of praxis, which means translating practically into exemplification in the actual world.



Nancy argues in *The Sense of the World* that the curtain has fallen on the metaphysical scene, metaphysics as a scene of representation which merely represents essence or truth as an abstracted realm separate from sense, because sense is the ultimate reality and the abstracted *a priori* or transcendental realm is a fiction. (SW 18)

Hence according to Nancy in *The Sense of the World*, the ultimate reality is finitude. (SW 29) The infinite does not inform the finite according to Nancy, and finitude is not absence or privation but all of existence, the privation of essence is a privation of nothing because according to Nancy, the transcendental ground and absolutes such as God and the supersensible simply do not exist. Instead existence is its own essence. Essence is immanent to existence and contained fully in existence, Nancy shifts over from the privilege of the transcendent in philosophy which holds in phenomenologies like Husserl's to privilege existence or finitude. Indeed Nancy argues that existence should be without essence, since God does not exist. Existence should be toward what it is essentially not, that is, its own existence, toward death, which is the nullity of essence.

Existence thus exists without essence according to Nancy, as a form of death to essence and as a result of its fundamental finitude, its being-toward-the-world as Nancy affirms the corporeal and the finite as the ultimate reality. Nancy defines philosophy in *The Sense of the World* as *differance*, (SW 14) which is the coming ultimately of sense, of sense as the ultimate realization of truth which is dead to essence because it is praxis and writing, existing as being-toward-the-world rather than informed by a transcendent or supersensible realm, because according to Nancy, the transcendental ground of God and the *a priori* is a fiction.

Experience

According to Jean-Luc Nancy in *On The Raising of the Body*, there is no transcendental or supersensible realm that determines existence. Logos is not distinct from the figure of the image, because there exists nothing behind the image, the image does not conceal any transcendental or

divine reality, but is fully present to itself as its full finite reality. There is nothing and no one to show, nothing and no one to unveil or reveal. Experience is thus a full access to reality in all its presence in the here and now because there is no concealed or hidden transcendental truth. According to Jean-Luc Nancy, revelation constitutes the identity of the revealable and the revealed, of the 'divine' and the 'human' or 'worldly'. Revelation carries along with it the identity of the image and the original, thereby implying the identity of the visible and the invisible. Thus Nancy would argue that we have full access to ultimate reality as it does not belong to a transcendent ontological sphere existing above and beyond what we experience. (RB 74) Our experience of existence as it is in the here and now is all there is to reality, there is no ontologically separate supersensible realm as experience is radically finite and circumscribed to the here and now rather than belong to the transcendental beyond.

Jean-Luc Nancy also defines religious experience in *On The Raising of the Body* not as transcendental realm of concealed truths for those who have to the intuition or ability to unlock its hidden message or truth, but is to do with an aptitude of listening. Jean Luc Nancy cites Jesus saying 'He who has ears let him hear'. (RB 11) But the failure to understand spiritual messages in parables thus not result from the inability to decipher a hidden message in the text itself, Jean-Luc Nancy ascribes the problem to the listener, the obscurity is not in the message, but in the listener's heart. There is no hidden, divine reality to unlock, there is only the confusion on the part of the listener when he fails to understand the spiritual or religious message. This goes in tandem with Nancy's argument that there is no ultimate, transcendent or divine reality, the only reality that exists is what we experience immediately in the present because ontologically, reality is finite and belongs to the sensible and corporeal, there is no supersensible truth or transcendental reality to unlock because experience is fully present to the senses in the here and now, the senses do not conceal a further hidden ontological reality of spiritual or divine



truths as experience is fully present to itself in the here and now.

Jean-Luc Nancy cites Jesus' injunction in *On The Raising of the Body*, "Do not touch me" to define Christianity as the religion of the untouchable as it is a religion of the otherworldly and of the transcendental beyond. Yet paradoxically Christianity is touchable, since the body of Christ is given to be eaten and drunk. However Jean-Luc Nancy argues that the ultimate reality of Christianity is not the reality that Christ has risen to a transcendent or otherworldly realm but the reality of Christ's disappearance, in the emptiness of the tomb. The ultimate reality of Christianity for Nancy is not that Christ has risen but that Christ has disappeared and is absent from the tomb, and becomes untouchable for his believers. (RB 13) The truth of Christ's resurrection according to Nancy is not the fact that Christ rose from the dead but the ultimate reality that Christ is dead and has disappeared from the material world, and is, as such, untouchable, a reality that cannot be accessed by the senses and thus a non-reality since according to Nancy, there exists no transcendental ontological realm beyond the finite.

The ultimate experience of Christ according to Nancy in *On The Raising of the Body* is not his resurrection but his disappearance and absence, the vacating of the tomb. (RB 15) Because Christ is no longer situated materially in the world, Nancy argues that Christ becomes an experience of absence and inaccessibility to his followers. Nancy further argues that the divine henceforth has no place in the world or outside of it, for there is no otherworld. What is 'not of this world' is not elsewhere, it is the opening of the world, the separation, the parting and the raiding. Thus 'revelation' is not the sudden appearance of celestial glory. It consists of the departure of the body raised into glory. It consists of absence and absencing, thus what one witnesses is not celestial glory but departure and absence. It does not exist in this world and hence, is not an experience of this world at all, but an experience of its absence from the world. Nancy also argues that the carnal body reveals

the glorious body, and hence it is Christ's physical body that reveals his resurrected body, the ultimate reality is Christ's corporeal body in its resurrected state. Otherwise, it does not exist at all, if it does not belong to this world it belongs to nowhere because according to Jean-Luc Nancy there is no otherworld.

In *Of Being Singular Plural*, Nancy argues that meaning does not belong to an extrinsic realm to be deciphered. We ourselves are meaning. (BSP 1) In other words, we are the source of the creation of meaning in the world. We are the element in which significations can be produced and circulate. Meaning derives its existence from its ability to be communicated, and as a result we are singularities which derive the creation of our worlds of meaning through communication with the plural. Being itself has no meaning. It is produced and circulated amongst ourselves as singular and others as the plural as the site at which meaning is created and intersects. There is no meaning if meaning is not shared. According to Nancy, meaning is the sharing of Being. The 'creation of the world' is thus the explosion of presence in the original multiplicity of division. This is an explosion of nothing, spacing as meaning and circulation. The *nihil* of creation is the truth of meaning, but meaning comes about by its shared nature. There is thus no meaning created in isolation, but communicated and shared, being singular plural.

Empiricism

In contrast to the transcendental, empiricism is a theory of knowledge which asserts that knowledge arises from experience. Empiricism emphasizes the role of experience and evidence especially sensory perception, in the formation of ideas, while debating the notion of innate ideas. All knowledge of real existence must be based on the senses or self-consciousness. Empiricism asserts that no claims to real existence can be justified independently of experience, or a priori. Empiricism is thus scepticism towards idealism or the transcendental and a view that all justification of beliefs about real existence is dependent on experience, or empirical.



Nancy is arguably an empiricist, because Nancy disputes and is sceptical of the existence of the transcendental and argues that existence is marked by its finitude. According to Nancy in *A Finite Thinking*, finitude designates the 'essential' multiplicity and the 'essential' nonreabsorption of sense or of being.(FT 9) That is, existence exists without essence, it exists in the absence of Ground. The groundlessness is a form of nothingness that grounds existence as existence owes its being entirely to itself and not to transcendent Being or an ontological separate transcendental realm of things-in-themselves. Finitude means that there is no excess of the supersensible or transcendental determining being as being, rather being is its own appropriation, whose origin resides entirely in itself and rests on a groundlessness because the transcendental origin is a myth and does not exist according to Nancy. In other words, existence is its own absolute as the ultimate reality is finitude. Objects owe their telos to a being-toward-the-world and a radical materiality rather than an origin in a transcendent realm of the supersensible thing-in-itself.

According to Nancy, existence is its own essence.(SW 4) In *The Sense of the World*, Nancy had argued that the distinction between truth or essence and existence or between Being and beings must be broken down because being in its corporeal form is all there is, the idea of transcendental forms such as beauty animating sense must be abandoned because objects are radically limited by their finitude and do not owe their existence to a transcendental or supersensible realm. According to Nancy, a finite thinking is a source of freedom.(FT 13) Freedom from being enchained and determined by a non-existing unity or supersensible realm such as God because God is present only as an absence, as a nothingness that is not to be located anywhere in the world, non-empirically verifiable and hence according to Nancy, non-existent.

Nancy argues in *A Finite Thinking* that art no longer represents the idea or Truth because there is nothing that resides outside the finite as the

ultimate reality is finitude rather than an infinite that informs the finite. (FT 23) Without representation, there is no double concept that refers to something external as a mere simulacrum, rather the simulacrum is all there is as a birthing to presence. There is no simulacrum as a copy of an ideal infinite form such as beauty. Rather the painting or poetry is radically finite, its own limit, deriving its beauty and existence from its own particularity and specificity rather than owing this beauty to a transcendental absolute of Beauty.

There is thus according to Nancy no foundation of sense as objects are ultimately finite and groundless, only a coming-to-be of sense.(FT 27) That is objects are immanently formed in a process of becoming what they are as finite objects rather than deriving their existence from a transcendental or supersensible realm of which they are mere simulacrum. The simulacrum as the finite object is all that exists because according to Nancy, there is no ontologically separate transcendental realm that determines their status as objects.

According to Nancy in *A Finite Thinking*, sense is truth freed up in its naked power, concealing nothing because there is nothing to conceal.(FT 37)There is nothing that lies beyond the material or finite object. The object does not conceal a supersensible realm of Beauty and Truth because everything is revealed in the nakedness of the object. Sense is truth present entirely to itself, naked because it does not conceal anything other than its own radically finite existence.

Further on in *A Finite Thinking*, Nancy argues that the origin of sense is sense itself rather than a transcendental realm of objects of things-in-themselves. (FT 92) Sense is the duplication of the origin and the relation that is opened, in the origin, between the origin and the end, and the pleasure, for the origin, of enjoying that which it originates. (that of which it is the origin and the fact that it originates). Hence sense owes its origin entirely to itself and thus empiricism is its own absolute, its origin being immanent to itself rather than existing in a transcendental sphere that lies beyond. That is to

say, the totality of sense derives entirely from itself. Writing is not simply a medium of communication for content, writing or the embodiment of sense is all there is. Furthering Derrida's thought that writing is not merely an instrument of communication, Nancy affirms the corporeal and bodily nature of writing as all there is to the content. Writing does not transmit a transcendent idea or abstract content because there is nothing outside writing, writing in all its corporeality and embodiment is all there is to the message and content. In other words for Nancy the ultimate reality of an object is its corporeal or finite state. This commits Nancy to a form of radical empiricism as Nancy argues that the embodied nature of an object is its ultimate reality.

Nancy argues that experience is not divisible into *a priori* and *a posteriori*. Rather experience aims from the outset as the *a priori* at the *a posteriori*. In other words, objects are immanently rather than transcendently formed, in a process of birthing to presence and becoming-toward-the-world, radically finite, rather than preceded by a transcendental thing-in-itself. (FT 100)The object is formed immanently towards the givenness of the material, sensible manifold, its heterogeneity and the problematic character of its unity qua

unity. This *a priori* is not a transcendental schema but a feeling of unity that informs the subject- the representation of unity immanently formed, delighting in itself.

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