Jean-Luc Nancy

‘This thought of “sharing” (partition, repartition, part, participation, separation, communication, discord, cleavage, devolution, destination) has started to unravel.’

The Ontology of Being-With
Jean-Luc Nancy works on an ontology whose fundamental concept is not Heidegger’s ‘Dasein’ but rather ‘Dasein-with’ (Mitdasein): our existence is being-with-others; we are always only individuals as a collective group. ‘Being’ is ‘singularly plural and plurally singular’. In the context of this attempt to define our existence as ‘being-with’, the word ‘with’ acquires a philosophical meaning that allows communality to be understood as ‘distant closeness’. The notion of ‘being-with-others’ as both neighbourly yet distant sheds new light on the concepts of ‘sharing’ and ‘communication’: sharing proves to be something that eludes consensus because it presupposes and reinforces the idea of a splitting and separation. And communication functions without reference to heterogeneity and difference, without attributes to be shared with others and indeed also without the person of a mediator. It is not the concept of ‘medium’ but rather ‘mediation’ that is important for Nancy. I will now reconstruct a sketch of how this concept inspires a non-instrumental yet nevertheless materialistic notion of mediality. This inspiration becomes clear as soon as it is understood how ‘sharing’ constitutes the matrix that is ‘community’ – a matrix that at the same time also turns out to be a ‘milieu’ in which mediation can take place without a mediator.

What does ‘communality’ even mean after the end of communism? This is a question that Nancy raises and that worries him. He can still only conceive of the human condition as the common condition; however, the sociality of the human mode of Dasein can now no longer be understood as the common bond of shared attributes or an all-encompassing collective agency. Instead, it is necessary to think of community on the basis of a ‘common existence’. To begin with, for Nancy commonality is common and ordinary. This is precisely Nancy’s characteristic way of thinking about community. It is based on a concept of communication or ‘sharing-with’ that does not represent the exchange or communication of ideas; rather, it is conceived as the splitting and fragmentation of bodies.

Nancy’s explication of our social existence in terms of ‘being-with’ (Mitsein) will thus show how his approach is able to inspire a philosophy of mediality.
On ‘Sharing’ and ‘Communication’

There are three texts in particular that should be consulted: Corpus, “The Compearance: From the Existence of “Communism” to the Community of “Existence””, and Being Singular Plural. Nancy’s texts are in no way inferior to the cryptic style of Benjamin’s essay on linguistic magic. These texts are based not on phenomena but rather linguistic expressions and philosophical concepts, and their purpose is to study words themselves. Nancy described his method of treating and considering hardly communicable words as objects as the signum of a poetic process. His philosophy of community could also be characterized as a ‘poetry of the common’. His intention to distinguish the ordinary and banal aspects of being-together as the matrix of the societal is in inverse proportion to his unusual and always artistic/artificial diction, with which he then implements this intention.

I will attempt – as mundanely as possible – to reveal Nancy’s philosophy of sharing in a more or less consistent sequence of thoughts, and I will begin by showing what ‘sharing’ does not mean:

1. Sharing beyond communication and communal substance: Nancy observes that “‘communicational’ ideologies” can profit from the space left behind by the failure of socialism. The ideology of communism has been replaced with the ideology of communication, in which the now-abandoned striving for historical telos, for a target- or goal-oriented notion of human affairs, has devolved into the development of ourselves as communicating members of a communicating community. Only this telos is not one, for ‘communication is not an end, at least not in the way we might first mean’. In the context of this critical attitude towards communication it becomes clear that if Nancy locates sharing at the centre of his idea of community, he is not referring to ‘the manner which we today designate as “communication”’. But what is sharing beyond communication?

To begin with, it is clear where the common condition is not to be found: it is not a substance, but rather – and this is already no longer entirely so clear – it is ‘the lack of a substance which essentially apportions the lack of essence’. Communication thus does not simply produce community, but rather it first registers a lack – the absence of a commonly shared substance: there is for Nancy no communal entity that consists of having or being something in common.

Nancy now maps out – and actually in conflict with Heidegger – three modes of ‘commonality’: first there is ‘common existence’, in which ‘commonality’ is meant in the sense of common or ordinary; then there is ‘the common reduction to a common denomination’; and finally the ‘the condition of being absolutely in common’, which forms a collective. Nancy then
eliminates the last two options, insofar as they involve the recognition of our sociality or the specification of our existence as a ‘We’. For sharing constantly presupposes a separation.

(2) Sharing as separation and splitting, the materiality and corporeality of the separated: ‘This thought of “sharing” (partition, repartition, part, participation, separation, communication, discord, cleavage, devolution, destination) has started to unravel.’ For Nancy, sharing reflects the fact that we originate from a state of dissociation without which association is inconceivable. We are isolated: that is the phenomenon of separation and splitting. And yet we still do not lead our lives as individuals: that is the phenomenon of sharing. Our existence thus takes the form of a co-existence. Nancy consciously plays with the mundane and unpleasant connotations of this word ‘co-existence’, in which he perceives an oscillation ‘between indifference and resignation’ that signifies the form of a with-one-another (Miteinander) that is imposed rather than sought through extraneous circumstances. ‘Co-existence’ signals an extremely weak and perhaps even the smallest possible form of a ‘We’. With-one-another is a material next-to-one-another: ‘partes extra partes’.

The fact that with-one-another first emerges as a next-to-one-another is rooted in the materiality and corporeality of existence: ‘The ontology of being-with can only be “materialist” in the sense that “matter” does not designate a substance or a subject (or an antisubject), but literally designates what is divided of itself, what is only as distinct from itself […] The ontology of being-with is an ontology of bodies, of every body, whether they are inanimate, animate, sentient, speaking, thinking, having weight, and so on.’ With a peculiar indifference that completely undermines Nancy’s initial question concerning the givenness of community, the corporeal is described as separated things that exist next to each other and line up piece by piece, regardless of whether they are ‘made of stone, wood, plastic, or flesh’. Being-with is thus conceived as a ‘being-with-all-things’.

If sharing preserves separation into co-existing parts and if this separation is only possible at all because these parts that exist next to and apart from one another are material bodies, then a conceivable prosaic perspective has been obtained for the ‘essence’ of sharing. Sharing under conditions of separation means connecting, colliding, and making contact while being-together. This includes the transfer ‘from one to another’, which is not understood as meaning-carrying translation but rather as literal ‘trans-lation’. A distant closeness is thus maintained in the act of sharing. Dialogue loses its emphatic, meaning-saturated orientation towards consensus and gives way to ‘phantic, insignificant remarks (“hello,”
“hi,” “good”...) in everyday existence. ‘Idle talk’ is thus not opposed to the authentic word; meaningless and meaningful words are both forms of maintenance that keep the circulation of sharing flowing.

(3) **Community as the common in its exteriority:** In light of Nancy’s reflections, therefore, what kind of communality is being outlined? It is a radically purified form of communitas. It is no coincidence that the concept of ‘nudity’, which appears in many of Nancy’s phrases, becomes a main feature of his idea of sociality. Nudity does not refer to particular individuals, but rather to the community itself: our history is ‘that of stripping the community bare’. What becomes apparent about the community in this exposure is ‘not the revelation of its essence but a stripping down of the “common” in all of its forms (the “in-common” and the “banal”), reduced to itself, despoiled of transcendence or assumption, despoiled as well of immanence’. We discover it in ‘the exteriority and its common division’. And: ‘what is left for us to hold onto is the moment of “exteriority” as being of almost essential value, so essential that it would no longer be a matter of relating this exteriority to any individual or collective “me” without also unfailingly attaining [maintenir] to exteriority itself and as such [l’extériorité elle-même et en tant que telle]’. This alignment of the common with the external challenges the emphasis on community as something communally internalized. Instead, commonality emerges in a purely external sense through various forms of numbers, such as masses, crowds, groups, distances, statistics, and enumerations of all kinds. Common causes and shared concerns do not (any longer) bind people together. Rather, the simple fact of co-existence, the next-to-one-another of different – animate and inanimate – bodies, and the vast multitude, which is the only place where individuals can appear. Nancy outlines – here citing Kant (‘unsocial sociability’) – a vision of an ‘asocial society’. But Nancy does not diagnose or lament this narrow definition of communality as the basis of the social following the failure of communist visions with the intention of being critical of society. On the contrary: it is precisely this basal and banal appearance as the many that necessitates our worldliness, for this co-existing multiplicity is the basic structure of the world in its materiality and corporeality. The ‘ego sum’ can thus be conceived as an ‘ego cum’. Moreover, the ‘ego sum’ becomes a ‘nos sumus’, insofar as we are only individuals as a multitude. However, this means that there is not an ego and an alter ego, there is not the subject and the intersubjective, there is not an individual and a society composed of individuals; rather, there is only co-existence, ‘co-ipseity’, out of whose dissociation and fragmentation the individual as such can be conceived. The individual emerges through separation, co-existence is a precondition of
existence, being-with necessitates the possibility of Dasein. ‘With’ becomes a basic constituent of everything that exists. Being is with-one-another. Simultaneity thus becomes the defining tense.

I will now draw a preliminary conclusion: my assumption is that the ‘with’ in Nancy’s philosophy bears a signature that sheds new light on the concept of ‘sharing’. Sharing is not oriented towards understanding or dialogically shared communication. Rather, sharing can be conceived as the soundboard of a primordial separation that precedes everything and – in a quasi-transcendental sense – makes it possible that anything exists at all. All sharing originates from this prior separation and at the same time bears witness to it. But how is this related to the other concept whose revisionary light was already anticipated in Nancy’s ‘philosophy of with’: ‘mediation’?

(4) Mediation without mediator: I will refer here to a passage from Being Singular Plural, in which the word ‘mediation’ (médiation) is used several times, albeit in an extremely cryptic way:

(i) At one point being itself is identified as mediation: ‘Being is directly and immediately mediated by itself; it is itself mediation; it is mediation without any instrument, and it is nondialectic [...] negativity without use.’ What does this mean? A preliminary answer is that the concept of ‘with’, which is the basic constituent of being as being-with, must be understood in a way that precisely does not assume any significant difference between the separated elements or those existing apart. This sounds like a philosophy of identity. Nancy also discusses the ‘principle of identity, which instantly multiplies’. There is therefore not the One as distinguished from the Other and between them both the abyss of inequality. Simply because everyone is divided and split and separated does not mean that everyone repels, negates, and remains mutually inaccessible to one another due to differences. Nancy’s thinking here is very different from Levinas’s notion of the elusiveness of the other. Must we therefore conceive of being-with-one-another not as heterogeneity but rather as homogeneity? Is plurality only one modality of unity? Does Nancy’s ‘with’ simply refer to synchronicity in multiplicity? Can ‘with’ itself be understood as mediation?

(ii) It is precisely these questions that Nancy poses and also affirms: ‘Is mediation itself the “with”? Certainly, it is.’ If an instrument of mediation is not necessary, this is because the being-together of many people with-one-another itself already constitutes a – no, the – communality. Sociality takes place in and as a mere ‘with’. It is therefore a mistake to imagine that mediators, media, and instruments are required in order to overcome the primordial separation that dissociates us. The situation is
actually the reverse: it is the separation that makes communality itself possible; community is being separated into many.

(iii) What this reveals is a ‘mediation without a mediator’. Nancy distinguishes this form of mediation from the Christian prototype of the messenger, or the notion of Christ as a mediator who performs and fulfils his function precisely through the fact that he is different from those between whom he mediates. For Nancy, there is no room whatsoever for a concept of otherness in the plurality of singulars connected by the ‘with’. Here we encounter once again the lack of heterogeneity and difference, which consequently leads us to the conclusion that in Nancy’s concept of mediation there is nothing at all to mediate in the traditional sense.

(iv) This kind of mediation thus turns out to be a milieu: ‘Mediation without a mediator mediates nothing: it is the mid-point [mi-lieu], the place of sharing and crossing through [passage]; that is, it is place tout court and absolutely. Not Christ, but only such a mid-point; and this itself would no longer even be the cross, but only the coming across [croisement] and the passing through, the intersection and the dispersal [écartement]. Nancy’s mediation emerges without a medium, and it is precisely for this reason a milieu. This is how Nancy’s ontology of ‘with’ offers a new perspective on the concept of mediation.

**Mediation as Circulation**

I will now attempt a concluding image. Like Benjamin, Nancy locates separation at the centre of sharing. Being separate from one another is thus part of the human condition, which raises the question of how mediation is conceivable under such conditions. Nancy’s surprising and rather original answer is that this being-split does not represent a problem at all. It does not denote a lack that needs to be overcome, but rather it constitutes our very essence as communal beings. We are only individuals as a collective. We should therefore not see this state of separation as dissonance, dissent, or difference, but rather we should interpret it within the context of a quasi-homogenizing and mass dedifferentiating ‘with’. Nancy’s use of the term ‘with’ thus reveals his philosophically unique way of working on and with poetically reified concepts.

In the context of the messenger idea mediation should be seen as something that connects heterogeneous worlds, but for Nancy the word ‘mediation’ bears the stamp of homogeneity, alignment, and indifference. As a result, his thoughts can be inspiring for the question of how mediation between difference people takes place. This homogeneity is easier to conceive, not to mention banal, because it consists of nothing but its own
actual materiality, corporeality, and exteriority. It is therefore something that is separable – meaning separable from something that is dissected, that is divided with-one-another and that can also be shared.

Nancy thus transforms the question ‘What is a medium?’ into the question ‘Where is a milieu?’ And such a ‘milieu’ can be found wherever a being is constituted as being-with or wherever individuals exist as a plurality yet do not need a mediator, because the milieu of ‘with’ represents a primordial connection or similarity between the singularities existing with-one-another, which consists of the materiality of their corporeality: ‘the juxtaposition of pure exteriorities’. The concept of mediation without mediator can thus be conceived as a thoroughly bodily process, for Nancy treats the intellect as the punctum, which is extended and therefore not separable. ‘Mediation’ must be understood as radically extrinsic, as the back-and-forth of circulation itself.