

NANCY, VIOLENCE AND THE WORLD

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We tend to think of violence as something that happens *within* the world, as something done by a thing, a being or an existent, to another thing, being or existent. But what would it mean to speak of the violence done *to* the world or, inversely, of the violence done *by* the world? Are there ways in which an existent, a being, can do violence, not to another existent, but to the world within which all such existents come to presence? Reciprocally, is there a sense in which the world itself presents itself as sort of primordial or originary violence? Of course, answering these questions, or gesturing towards the possible link between violence and world, requires that we clarify what is meant here by “world.”

I want take up the question of the link between violence and world from a very specific angle: the thought of the world developed by Jean-Luc Nancy in the wake of Heidegger. This choice might at first seem somewhat arbitrary but I think that the question of violence and its relation to the world imposes itself within the economy of Nancy’s ontology in two quite striking ways. First, there is something about Nancy’s thinking of Being-with, exposition and world that seems to exclude all connections with violence. After all, for Nancy, finitude is linked not to limitation but to a generosity or liberality of Being, and the experience of freedom offers itself not in the confrontation or conflict between a plurality of existents exercising their absolute freedom but rather in an experience of the spaciousness of world.¹ Such claims might lead one to attribute a certain optimism, if not even a certain naivety, to Nancy’s thought: the world, as the free space in which existents come to presence and expose themselves—or “space themselves out”—is a generous and spacious opening that can be affirmed immediately and without reserve.² At the same time, the first impression left by Nancy’s “generosity” and “spaciousness” only makes the question of violence more urgent: Is violence to be understood merely as a purely empirical event that would leave the generosity of being or the spaciousness of the world unaffected? Part of what I want to show in this article is that such a first impression is mistaken: there is at the bottom of Nancy’s ontology a certain originary violence.

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Whether or not we think that the opening of the world contains a moment of originary, ontological or transcendental, violence, a second question arises with regards to the relation between violence and the world: can a thinking of the world in Nancy's sense of the term, where "world" refers, following Heidegger, neither to a thing nor to a collection of things but instead to an ontological event of worlding, to the opening of a space of sense-making,³ can such a conception of world provide us with any determinate criteria to judge empirical events, that is, to distinguish between violent and non-violent expositions, between different ways in which existents come to presence and expose themselves. Essentially, we are faced here with the classic problem of how the ontological is articulated with the domain of the ethical and the political. Is ontology ethically neutral in such a way that it merely describes "existence as such," without being able to take a stand on good and evil, on violence and non-violence? Or is the being or existence described by ontology already an imperative, a task that guides in advance our ontic engagement in the world? If the former were the case, then Nancy's retreat back to the ontological level would indeed be a retreat into a transcendental or ontological "safehouse," away from the "messy" terrains of political actions, and hence of violence and counter-violence, a withdrawal that always runs the risk of being complicit with the worse political violence, since it has robbed itself of the means of intervening in the empirical domain. This is indeed how Nancy Fraser and Simon Critchley assess the work carried out by Nancy, in collaboration with Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, at the *Centre d'études philosophiques sur le politique* in the early 1980s.⁴ However, Nancy is clear that his ontology is at the same time an ethos and a praxis, even though he is less than explicit as to what exactly this means.⁵ It seems on the surface at least plausible to argue that "worlding" is not a neutral ontological event but one in which the question of ethical and political violence is already inscribed.

In what follows, I want to develop the double question of the violence of the world (violence done by and to the world) in light of the questions I have just raised. I will start with a discussion of existence, world and sense in Nancy in order to then move on to a discussion of violence. Throughout, I will deliberately seek to operate with as broad and flexible a definition of violence as is permissible. At the most general level, violence is a force: a blow to the head, a punch in the stomach. Violence is a force that irrupts without regard for the system of forces. To throw a punch is to refuse to enter into relation or dialogue with the other existent, to refuse the order of reasons. Of course, while violence can have its telos within itself, it can also aim at transforming or replacing the system of forces in place with a different one. In this sense, the irruptive character of violence, its disregard for given and requested reasons, does not need to have a purely negative aspect. It is the irruptive, destructive (keeping in mind that "destruction" is not necessarily to be understood in a purely negative way) character of ontic, intraworldly violence that will serve as guiding thread in my discussion of violence at an ontological or worldly level. At the same time, it is worth pointing out at the outset that violence can also be an attribute of the system of forces in place, which weighs down on the existent and stifles the existent's very existence, that is, its very possibility of entering into relations or of making sense.

EXISTENCE, WORLD, SENSE

For Nancy, to exist is to be unto or toward the limit, to be "turned" inside out or to be exposed. Essence is nothing unless it is exposed to (presented to) itself. Something unexposed would be pure meaningless immanence that could not even be said to be anything whatsoever. Nancy explains, "To exist does not mean simply 'to be.' On the contrary: to exist means *not* to be in the immediate presence or in the immanency of a 'being-thing.' To exist is not to be immanent, or not to be present to oneself, and not to be sent forth *by* oneself. To exist, therefore, is to hold one's 'selfness' as an 'otherness,' and in such a way that no essence, no subject, no place can present *this otherness in itself*—either as the proper selfness of an other, or an 'Other,' or a common being."⁶ The 'otherness' of the self that is not present as another self is the unappropriable limit or edge to which I am exposed and which properly belongs neither to an inside nor to an outside. This edge is "where" existence happens or is felt. There must be a necessary spacing or distance at the heart of the "thing" that allows it to be, to exist. Although properly speaking this "spacing" cannot be said "to be," at least not in the form of anything which could be made present, it is nevertheless constitutes the process whereby all beings emerge into determinate existence.

Everything that *is*, or in Nancy's terms every singularity, is posed or positioned, thrown down, given over, abandoned, offered up somewhere with and amongst other things. 1) Position (existence) can never be the position of a single instance of existence, independent and cut off from everything else (including itself). That there is something means that some "ones" (more than one) are exposed, disposed. This "ex-" or "dis-" is the originary meaning of the with: me with you, you with your cat, a cat with a stone, singularities with singularities and worlds with worlds. 2) The logic of exposition knows no hierarchy and no individuality: it is not restricted to what we take to be individuals—atoms or un-divisible beings, but applies equally to supra-individual entities and infra-individual ones. Hence singularities are not just humans, and not just things, they are everything that exists: stones, cats, communities, books, thoughts, cities, etc. The "logic" of the limit or of exposition applies in each and every case (to any "thing", any "I", any "we").

It is here that Nancy departs markedly from Heidegger's ontology. For Heidegger, to exist means to be exposed to limits that are not at one's own disposal or under one's control: birth, death, world. Distended in this way, the existent (Dasein) is, without reason or ground, claimed by being, thrown into the clearing of being. We know that Heidegger limits existence, in that specific sense, to the human Dasein and therefore also limits "worlding", or the opening of the world, to humans, because "world" is defined as the space of intelligibility or significance that allows Dasein or the human being to encounter entities (including itself) meaningfully. If Nancy rethinks existence as exposition, then he also departs from the Heideggerian concept of world and its essential link to sense or intelligibility.

For Nancy, the world is the "totality" of our (of all) expositions. The world is formed of limits or edges between singularities, of their articulations, of the play of their junctures "where different pieces touch each other without fusing together, where they slide, pivot, or tumble over one another, one at the limit of the other without the mutual *play*—which always remains, at the same time, a play *between* them—ever forming into the substance or the higher power of a Whole."⁷ The world is not the totalization of what is, an overarching horizon or a big container that would bring everything together. Yet, the world has a stance; it holds together the multiplicity of expositions between singularities, between worlds. "The unity of a world is not one: it is made of a diversity, including disparity and opposition. It is made of it, which is to say that it is not added to it and does not reduce it. The unity of a world is nothing other than its diversity, and its diversity is, in turn, a diversity of worlds. A world is a multiplicity of worlds, the world is a multiplicity of worlds, and its unity is the sharing out [*partage*] and the mutual exposure in this world of all its worlds."⁸

This is what *mondialisation* or world-forming means for Nancy: we singularities (me, you, a caterpillar, the river Ganges, etc.), form a world at our outer edges, we articulate ourselves with and among each other. Hence *mondialisation* is not a human activity, as if the human arranged what pre-exists into a coherent whole, but an ontological activity: it worlds or there is sense, sense circulates. Sense or meaning [*sens*], for Nancy, names what happens on the edge between two singularities.⁹ Meaning is normally thought of as signifying event, as the relation of a signifier (a word) to a signified (a concept) or a referent (a thing), or as the relation between a thing and its "what-for". For example the word "table" signifies something by virtue of pointing to the concept "table." Its signification lies in its ability to point away from itself to something of a different order, to a concept or a thing. In the same way that, if I say that the smoke signifies fire, I mean that it points away from itself to its origin or cause. Or if I say that the knife is for cutting, I am gesturing away from the knife, towards its meaning in a telos or purpose. We can think of the meaning of Being or the meaning of existence or of the world according to the same model. On this model, the meaning of existence lies in some other thing outside of existence, which existence has to appropriate in order to make sense. Humanism is the school of thought that attempts to fix the sense of human existence, its signification, which humanity would then have to accomplish historically. But for Nancy (following Heidegger), to exist is precisely not to have such a signification. This non-givenness of signification can be experienced as a loss of sense, yet it is only if there are no given significations that existence and sense are possible. Hence, Nancy will differentiate sense from truth. "Truth is being-such [*l'être-tel*], or more exactly it is the quality of the presentation of being such as such. Sense, for its part, is the movement of being-toward [*l'être-à*]...."¹⁰ Sense as the movement of being-toward is

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what makes it possible that a truth be exposed or communicated.¹¹

Sense is the encounter with an exteriority or an alterity that resists assimilation. This alterity is not a big Other, which would either remain inaccessible as such or which I would have to appropriate (either in making it my own or in making myself other). It is an always singular and finite other that does not let itself be identified as other but infinitely alters itself and announces itself.¹² It is the alterity of another origin or another “stroke” of existence, another “one” to which I gain access (this is the event of sense) precisely in the mode of not gaining access.¹³ This paradoxical “gaining access” is not an appropriating,¹⁴ but a touching.

Sense for Nancy, unlike for Heidegger, is not something that comes about only when there is human understanding. Sense, or communication, is what happens at the limit, in-between the stone and the river, you and me, you and the tree, etc. For Heidegger, the stone does not touch the earth because the stone is not *opened to or affected by* the ground; it cannot make sense of the ground and of itself as being-on-the-ground, as not-being-the-ground, etc. Dasein can say that the stone is on the ground because it meaningfully relates to being-a-stone and being-ground and can let one be open to the other. For Nancy, sense or touch is what happens at the limit, in-between singularities, that is, in-between the stone and the river, you and me, you and the tree, etc. The stone is not exposed *by* the human or *for* the human but instead exposes itself *to* itself and *to* others. The stone is not for a Dasein that would let it be what it is in relating meaningfully to it. I can relate to the stone because it is there, exposed in its hardness, resisting my grasp (in both senses of the word).¹⁵ The stone remains outside of the thought that thinks it (or the writing that writes of it) in the same way that it remains outside of the hand that grasps it and touches its hardness.

If there is sense for and with the stone, if the “sense-making” of the stone is not its “intelligibility” for Dasein but its being-exposed to the ground and the rain, the hand and the thought, then “world” itself also needs to be rethought. As I have just said, for Heidegger, world is the space or clearing of intelligibility that allows entities to be encountered meaningfully. Hence, world is sense (or significance) and there is no significance outside of the world—i.e., there is no sense, no intelligibility or significance, unless a Dasein exists. Heidegger is right to say that the stone is worldless. Pointing out that the stone also has world because it is on the ground and affected by the rain changes nothing about it: Dasein’s world is the intelligibility of the “environment” of the stone, its “illumination.” Speaking of world and worlding (or world-forming) independently of the human being, without equivocating on the term “world,” is only possible on the basis of a transformed notion of sense. For Nancy, the world is not merely the wherein of factual human existence; it is not a coherent milieu of significance already laid out in advance, but the space of sense, the sharing of singularities exposed to one another (stone, ground, dog, grass, star, and you, and I). That the world makes sense means that bursts of sense happen in the spacings and articulations of singularities. If sense is in the spacing, then the sense of the world is not found in any instance beyond the world, nor can it be assumed or accomplished by any one singularity within the world. “But thought in terms of a world, sense refers to nothing other than to the possibility of the sense of this world, to the proper mode of its stance [*tenué*] insofar as it circulates between all those who stand in it [*s’y tiennent*], each time singular and singularly sharing a same possibility that none of them, any place or any God outside of this world, accomplishes.”¹⁶

It is in order to think “world” as such that Nancy reappropriates and displaces the motif of creation *ex nihilo*. That the world is created out of nothing implies that it is without pre-supposition or pre-condition: without ground, reason, origin or end. The nothing of creation *ex nihilo* does not propose a ground but undoes any premises or principles. That the world is without principle means that neither an all powerful and benevolent God-Artisan, nor prime matter, nor the Nothing can justify it. *Creatio ex nihilo* is, for Nancy, another way of saying that beings are only what they are, that there is nothing outside of the world. “The idea of creation *ex nihilo*, inasmuch as it is clearly distinguished from any form of production or fabrication, essentially covers the dual motif of an absence of necessity and the existence of a given without reason, having neither foundation nor principle ... *Ex nihilo*, which is to say: ... nothing but that which is [*rien que cela qui est*], nothing but that which grows [*rien que cela qui croît*] (*creo, cresco*), lacking any growth principle. ... *ex nihilo* means: undoing

any premise, including that of nothing. That means: to empty *nothing* [*rien*] (cf. *rem*, the thing) of any quality as principle.”¹⁷

The *ex nihilo* of creation essentially signifies the groundlessness of the world, the ever-renewed coming-to-presence of the world: singularities, each time other, each time with others. To speak of the creation of the world is therefore to see the world as the “explosion of presence in the originary multiplicity of its partition.”¹⁸ Nancy also calls this partition a free dissemination of being: “The free dissemination [of existence] (whose formula might well be only a tautology) is not a diffraction of a principle, nor the multiple effect of a cause, but is the an-archy—the origin removed from every logic of origin, from every archaeology—of a singular and thus in essence plural arising whose being as being is neither ground, nor element, nor reason.”¹⁹ There is nothing but the world, nothing but the coming to presence, the *surgissement*, of the world²⁰—a world without ‘God’ but not without opening, even if this opening opens unto—nothing.

WORLD AND VIOLENCE

Nancy’s ontology gives the sense of a positive fullness of being and of sense: everywhere beings, everywhere sense-making. But, in a way, the opposite is the case. Plenitude, full presence, is the loss of the possibility of the circulation of sense, the filling up of the spacing. Sense is not for Nancy reducible to signification, that is, not the reference to another instance in which the sense of existence or of the world would be found. Instead sense is equiprimordial with the singularities themselves, which are in each instance exposed to themselves and to all others thanks to a necessary edge, cut or opening between them. Sense is “an outside that is open right at the world, right in the middle of us and between us as our common sharing out. This sense is not the conclusion of our existences; it does not subsume them under a signification but simply opens them to themselves, which is also to say, to one another.”²¹ What this means for Nancy is that the undoing of all transcendent principles in which the world was supposed to find its meaning does not leave us with a purely immanent world in which all cows are black. As we said above, sense is incompatible with equivalence because the event of sense is not reducible to an exchange of information or the transmission of a message. Sense requires incommensurability or absolute value. Hence, what Nancy’s mondialisation points toward is a third way between transcendence (the metaphysical paradigm) and immanence (capitalism), which Nancy called, at some point, transimmanence.²²

What would it mean then to put an end to sense, to do violence to the world—which, again, is not the collection of entities that stands opposed to or alongside humans themselves, but rather the condition of possibility of sense—so that the world becomes an unworld, an unworld that in turns does violence to the worldly existents? We already have a hint from what has just been said about immanence and transcendence, but before we can fully develop the answer this question, it is necessary to explain how it is at all possible, given that sense is the ontological constitution of the world, to destroy that world.

Even though humans have no privilege in world-forming, Nancy does assume that the human has a “special” relation to exposition (exposure) and to world. We are not the world’s composer and if we are its overseer it is not in the sense that we have primacy over or stewardship of the singularities that compose the world but rather in the sense that we humans are the exponent of the world, the exposer of the exposing. Humans are “those who expose as such sharing and circulation.”²³ This exponential character of human existence means that the human is also potentially the non-exposer of the exposing. If existing for us takes on the active connotation of deciding to exist, it is because it is always possible for the existents that we are to close off, to exterminate existence, exposition. “To exterminate means to finish with ... and here that means to abolish the very access to the end, to liquidate sense. ... It seems—and this is a new thought—that existence can grasp its own being as the essence and hence as the destruction of existence and, moreover, as the senseless insanity that closes off the aspect of existence that opens onto the need for sense. Extermination ... is the negation of the ‘eachness’ of sense, of being-toward-self.”²⁴

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The decision of existence is the decision to keep the spacing that allows for self-relation open, the decision not to close the gap that would close the entity upon itself. This decision should not be understood as a sovereign decision. I do not decide out of myself to exist. I do not give myself existence. Nor do I decide to enter into relation with an exteriority as if I myself in my interiority pre-existed that relation. But I exist and this existence is a praxis and not a brute given. As long as I exist, I am never done with having to exist. Existing puts into play existence; existence is at play in existing. Human existence, for Nancy, is at once an ontological fact, an *ethos* (a way of dwelling in the world, a conduct) and a praxis (a way of acting or engaging the world that does not produce anything but transforms the agent itself). To exist is to be exposed; hence it is to be engaged in, to be responsive *to* and responsible *for* existence as sense. Sense is not given, nor is it made. Rather I engage sense by being engaged in existence. The praxis of sense is not an attempt at grounding or justifying existence (justifying that there is something rather than nothing) but an opening, exposing, spacing. We ultimately are faced with a tension between two movements: existence resists the closing off of sense, but since existence is not a given but an “act” or a “decision,” sense must be reopened each time, at each place, at every turn, for fear that sense may close itself off. The (re)-opening of the spacing, this (re)-engagement of sense is a struggle for the world, so that the world can form a world [*faire monde*], so that it can be a world, that is, “that in which there is room for everyone: but a genuine place, one in which things can genuinely *take place* (in this world).”²⁵

There are two opposing ways in which violence can be done to the world, in which an end can be put to the sense that the world is. The first way is by imposing a transcendent truth, an absolute ground or value, on existence, by defining or fixing the “meaning” of existence and hence not letting each existent make sense of its own existence by articulating itself with other existences. When such an imposition happens, the singular existent can only make sense by appropriating the transcendent truth, and this means, inevitably, by sacrificing its existence to it, by sacrificing the “here and now” of existence to an “elsewhere and afterwards.”

The absence of transcendent value seems however to leave the door open for the universal equivalence or exchange of all with all, in short for capitalism. Yet, this would be to misunderstand the “absolute value” of each and every singularity (human being, animals, cultures, words, languages, works of arts, communities, etc.), for if a general value or a general currency is imposed on all singularities, then the circulation is exactly as meaningless as if a transcendent value were given from the start. “For nihilism is nothing other than the nullification of distinctions, that is, the nullification of senses or values. Sense or value comes about only through difference: one sense is distinguished from the other like right from left, or sight from hearing, and one value is essentially nonequivalent to any other.”²⁶ In the case of the equivalence of each and all, nothing meaningful can happen between one and the other, that is, at their limits. Any difference can be fixed and measured through comparison: “ends, means, values, senses, actions, works, persons ... all of them exchangeable because none of them is related to anything that might distinguish it, because all of them are related to an exchange that ... is but a substitution of roles or permutation or places.”²⁷

For Nancy the absence of an absolute value or of a final sense as such does not lead to equivalence but happens in favour of the sharing of existences, in favour of the world. What has absolute value is not something transcendent (something else than existence) but the infinite exposition of each and all. We have to think a plurality of absolutes, the sharing of incommensurables, which is sharing and not exchange, for only in this way is there sense.²⁸ The strength of Nancy’s position as I see it is that it deconstructs “the logic of the principle,” which he calls “monotheistic,” i.e. the search for a grounding principle for what is—be it God, Man, Nature, The Nothing—without, on the other hand, falling into the senselessness of sheer circulation, capitalism, or what he calls the unworld. The world is for nothing, yet it is sense. Sense happens.

If each existent must be allowed to make sense of its own existence by articulating itself with other existences and if such a sense-making is only possible when existence is delivered from fixed Sense and abandoned to existence, this does not entail, for Nancy, that we can forgo the critique of, and the struggle for, the material conditions of existence. For Marx, the revolutionary struggle opposes the current relations of production, in order to effect a reversal of these relations, which, according to Nancy, would also be a reversal of the meaning

or value of production. But the struggle to which Nancy alludes is not a (dialectical) opposition to the capitalist mode of production in view of a reversal of its relation of production. Rather, that struggle is the affirmation of an absolute value (provided that we understand absolute not in the sense of transcendent, absolved from any contact with an outside, but rather as the value of that whose existence is “without principle” and therefore consists in measuring itself this nothing of principle. The creation of the world is for Nancy a struggle that is determined neither by what it seeks to negate (the capitalist model of production) nor by what it seeks to achieve (the self-production of “man”) but only by “the fact that this *world* is coming out of nothing, that there is nothing before it and that it is without models, without principle and without given end.”²⁹ What would it mean for such a struggle to be guided not by “the regulative idea of the (original and final) self-production of man and, at the same time, by a general and generic concept of this ‘man,’”³⁰ but instead by the thought of finite, singular existences? This would imply not deciding in advance what an existence is worth, what a meaningful life is, yet at the same time would provide the material condition for such an existence to expose itself “meaningfully.” Can the material conditions for each existence’s exposition be provided without first having to fix what constitutes a meaningful exposition and what does not? How can we know what is required for a meaningful exposition without first deciding what the latter is? For Nancy, the material condition of existence should not be seen as a means to achieve a pre-determined end (happiness, for example defined as the free self-production of man). “Nor, moreover is it a question of regarding the material, economic, and social condition of men as a negligible happenstance, external to the domain in which a thought of finite sense would operate. The ‘material’ condition of existence is, on the contrary, each time what makes up the ‘each time.’ A place, a body, flesh, a gesture, a job, a line of force, an ache, ease or misery, having time or into time: These define the finite *each time* of any access to finite sense. They don’t ‘determine’ it in the sense of a causal instance; rather, they *are* it.”³¹ If the sense of existence cannot be separated from the existent’s material condition, from its material “here and now,” then the existent, each one each time, must be allowed to be “here and now,” and not chase after an elsewhere and a later, be it that of “hunger, fear, and survival, or of wages, savings, and accumulation.”³²

The creation of the world as struggle for the world is also what Nancy calls the task of justice.³³ In *The Experience of Freedom*, Nancy defines justice as the measuring of the incommensurable, that is, not as measuring definite differences on a common scale, but measuring “differences” that are incomparable, incommensurable.³⁴ In “*Cosmos basileus*,” Nancy defines justice further as that which “must be restituted, returned, given in return to each singular existent.”³⁵ But since each singularity is not definable purely on its own but is always caught up in a plurality of relations [*rappports*] or expositions, the “proper” measure of what one is owed cannot be separated from the “improper.” Justice “rendered to the singular plural is not simply a demultiplied or diffracted justice. It is not a unique justice interpreted according to perspectives or subjectivities – and nonetheless it remains the same justice, equal for all although irreducible and insubstitutable from one to the other.”³⁶ There is one measure of justice equal for all, yet this measure is both immeasurable (how to measure the gift that each existent is?) and improper (how to decide where one singularity ends and another begins?). This relates directly to what was said above about the material conditions of existence. If no “proper” measure of justice is to be found, then the demand for justice cannot be met with a distribution of goods, places, or freedoms, as if one could first properly identify and measure each singularity (individual or collective) and then give them their proper share.³⁷ This is why justice consists, first and foremost, not in the laying out a given measure but in deconstructing all *given* measures: “*justice* can only reside in the renewed decision to challenge the validity of an established or prevailing ‘just measure’ *in the name of the incommensurable*.”³⁸ Existence has a common measure, but this measure, according to Nancy, is “freedom,” which is not to be understood as a given attribute or characteristics, but as absence of ground or reason, as a “releasing into existence.”

We are now in a position to answer some of the questions we started with. A world yields sense by letting everything be, by opening a space for everything to expose itself, to make sense. This space is not the space upon which a truth is imposed, nor is it the space without relief, without absolute value, of capitalism. “A world is precisely that in which there is room for every-one: but a genuine place, one in which things can genuinely take place (in this world).”³⁹ The two ways of putting an end to sense we discussed above are radically,

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primordially, and ontologically violent in that they deny “the opening of the world” that allows entities to articulate themselves; they deny what it means to be for an existent and destroy the world as spacing. This violence is not directed at the existent itself but at the world “within” which anyone can meaningfully exist. It seeks to shut down in advance any possibility for Being, any space for meaningful encounter.

At the same time we have, at the ontological level, the level where we describe what it means to exist, a criterion to distinguish between different kinds of existence and identify “violent” singularities. We saw that existence in as much as it is the “decision of existence” is a task (an ethos and a praxis) and not a brute given. Hence, a “violent” singularity is one that seeks to deny existence, either its own (by closing itself off from any exposure) or that of others (by imposing a fixed meaning on them or treating them as exchangeable units). And since *to be* is *to be-with*, these two denials are intertwined: denying the existence of other singularities means closing off my own exposure. The solution to the denials of existence is, as we saw, the decision of existence: to decide to re-open the space of the exposition and re-engage sense in each instance. At the same time, we saw that this “letting be” of each, each time, has nothing to do with the *laissez-faire* of liberalism, but demands a struggle for the world, for existences in their concrete material conditions.

We have up until this point avoided a central question: if the world is generosity, spaciousness, liberality, spacing, exposition, would this world be one of pure peace? Or is this spacing/opening of the world itself violent? In order to discuss this question, it is helpful to first make a detour through a short text titled “Image and Violence.” In this text, Nancy proposes a short discussion of violence and truth that I think can help us complicate the question of the relation between violence and world, even though the text does not take up the question of the world. Nancy begins by defining violence as “the application of a force that remains foreign to the dynamic or energetic system into which it intervenes.”⁴⁰ The example given by Nancy is that of an unskilled or impatient carpenter trying to extract a recalcitrant screw and ripping it out with pliers, hence no longer following the logic of the screw’s thread or of the wood. Violence, Nancy explains further, “does not participate in any order of reasons, nor any sets of forces oriented toward results”⁴¹ It refuses to “play the game of forces.”⁴² It is a force that is no longer a force: “pure, dense, stupid, impenetrable intensity.”⁴³ Violence is the pure monstration of itself, without any sense beyond this monstration itself; the act of violence does not effect a transformation of that which falls under its sway (like the potter who transforms the clay), but rather annihilates all of its meaning, thereby reducing it to a mere imprint of the assault inflicted upon it. What it assaults but deprives it of its own meaning and turns it into the mere imprint of violence. Such violence could be defined as pure or absolute violence. It does not serve as a means to an end, nor can it be instrumentalized in the service of a truth that would somehow redeem it or give it meaning. Absolute violence destroys absolutely.⁴⁴

Yet, given this definition, Nancy remarks that there seems to be an essential complicity between violence and truth. In its irruption, truth refuses negotiation with the existing order; it tears apart the established order. It does not offer arguments, reasons, proofs but rather imposes itself directly. When it does negotiate, it assumes the order of systemic knowledge, following Badiou’s distinction between knowledge and truth. What Nancy discusses as the violence of truth can in turn be linked to a sort of ontological violence, the violence of being as *phusis*—that which irrupts and comes to presence from out of itself and in doing so disrupts the order of knowledge. Nancy explains, “The truth imposes itself—and one can neither avoid it nor prefer something else to it. But still, one must not confuse verifiable truth with unverifiable truth, the truth that imposes itself prior to, or over and above, any verification.”⁴⁵ And he adds, “It is not a matter of an unverifiable that imposes itself by force (whether by terror or stupidity), it’s a matter of an ‘imposition’ that frees the person upon whom it’s imposed.”⁴⁶ This truth that imposes itself can be the coming to the world of a work of art, an idea, a gesture, etc. “True” means: that to which one cannot deny consent. It is what precedes all meaning, all signification, by opening up the signifying realm: “but what is this opening like and how does it act? Like a hole that terrifies and swallows up? Like a blow in the face? Like an explosion? Like love at first sight? In any case, truth *acts*, it doesn’t (or not only) ‘inform.’ ... It transforms its subject (its agent or its patient...). Verifiable truth doesn’t do anything: it is itself made, constructed.”⁴⁷ The kinship between brute violence and the violence of truth rests on the fact that both are intractable. Both exercise themselves “without guarantor and without being accountable”

to any superior instance. But this intractability has two faces; it can be the mark of “truth’s closing or of truth’s opening.”⁴⁸ It can be the mark of a truth that is violent because it opens a space for the manifestation of the true or it can be the mark of a violence that is true because it refuses to engage any established order and merely imposes its blows.

The first thing that should be pointed out is the fact that worlding (the withdrawal of Being that shares out existents and exposes them to themselves and each other) shares the characteristics of the violence of truth: the world exists without reason, without *archē* or *telos*. What we have here is an “originary” pre-ontological violence of the kind described by Derrida in “Violence and Metaphysics”: the originary withdrawal of Being, which is the first defeat of nihilistic violence, of pure nothingness, which as such cannot be said to be violent and, which is the first epiphany of Being,⁴⁹ or in Nancy’s words: “the explosion of presence in the originary multiplicity of its partition.” This violence is the originary violence that tears being, glued to itself, out of its pure immanence. It is irruptive and destructive, even though what it “destroys” is “pure nothingness” that cannot even be said to be. It is the originary irruption that opens up existents to themselves and to each other, and hence also to being assaulted, violated, exterminated.

The second thing I would like to suggest regarding the ambiguity between the act of brute violence and the irruption of truth is that violence is constitutive of the world itself. A world is not the self-enclosed system that metaphysics describes. Metaphysics, Nancy writes,

denotes the representation of being [*être*] as beings [*étant*] and as beings present [*étant présent*]. In so doing, metaphysics sets a founding, warranting presence beyond the world (viz., the Idea, *Summum Ens*, the Subject, the Will). This setup stabilizes beings, enclosing them in their own beingness [*étantité*]. Everything—properly and precisely *everything*—is played out in the mutual referral of these two regimes of beings or presence: the “immanent” and the “transcendent”; the “here-below” and the “beyond”; the “sensuous” and the “intelligible”; “appearance” and “reality.” Closure is the completion of this totality that conceives itself to be fulfilled in its self-referentiality.⁵⁰

Such a self-enclosed system is the reverse side of the unworld of capitalism; like the unworld of capitalism, it is a world that does not world at all since, like the unworld of capitalism, it does not include any spacings. If we want to say that “this unworld” is violent, then it would have to be of a violence prior to the difference between peace and violence, a pure violence, which as Derrida shows again in *Violence and Metaphysics*, is indistinguishable from pure peace.⁵¹ In a finite enclosed totality where everything has its place and is accounted for, in a totality without opening—which is what the violence directed at the world that we discussed above sought to achieve—, it makes no sense to speak either of peace or violence. For peace to be meaningful, violence—brute violence, the violence that imposes its truth and closes off sense—has to be possible. This means that the totality must be opened, dis-enclosed, exposed to an alterity right at the world itself. This alterity is not another transcendent world, since reference to that Other would only reproduce the enclosure at a higher level. Rather this alterity consists in the movement of excess of what is. This movement does not accede to any superior realm, it exposes what is up to its edges.

The self-dis-enclosing of the world is the condition of possibility of the couplet “violence/truth,” of the irruptive coming to presence of singularity or the brute violence that crushes the exposition of the existent to the world. To put an end to the possibility of brute violence would mean putting an end to the opening of the world, out of which something (some truth) can irrupt. Paraphrasing Derrida we could say: world (sense) is doubtless the first defeat of violence, but paradoxically, violence did not exist before the possibility of sense.⁵² The war between worlding and (brute) violence, spacing and closure, is inescapable, except by denying sense, denying world, denying existence. Truth, sense, existence, world comes at this price: brute violence must always remain possible.

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We can summarize the various relations between violence and world we have encountered in the following way: 1) The opening of the world is the withdrawal of Being that shares and divides beings and lets them be exposed to themselves and to one another. This irruption destroys “pure immanence,” which is pure nothingness. Hence we can speak of an originary or a pre-ontological violence, though violence is used here in a metaphorical sense since there is neither agent nor patient—nothing that commits violence or nothing to which, strictly speaking, violence is done. 2) This opening, as the condition of possibility of sense, exposes singular existences to each other and hence to acts of ontic violence, or brute violence. An existent can be violated because its existence is of necessity an exposition to an outside. Detour through an exteriority, which is the condition of possibility of any event of sense, is at the same time the medium of brute violence: a blow in the face, a derogatory comment, etc. 3) The opening of the world is also the condition of possibility of “truth,” of the coming to presence of an existent. This coming to presence can be seen as violent since through it something happens and imposes itself. Violence and truth are intertwined: we cannot distinguish in advance between an existent’s presentation (“here I am, make room for me”), which is the precondition for relations [*rappports*] of sense, and brute violence (“here I am, you cannot be”), where the existent denies the other so as to put an end to relations. This affinity between truth and violence is a necessary feature of the world, so that it only makes sense to speak of either violence or peace within a world, a dis-enclosed totality. Paraphrasing Derrida again: for peace to be meaningful, war has to be possible. 3) Closing off the opening or attempting to do so—be it with the aim of rendering acts of ontic violence impossible—is doing violence to the world and can be seen, following Derrida, as the worst violence. This closing off of the world’s opening, and hence of the possibilities of both violence and truth, can be attempted in two opposed ways: imposing a transcendent value (deciding in advance what the Meaning of each and every existent is) or reducing value to equivalence and submitting each and every existent to a general valuation. In both cases there can be no world.⁵³

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NOTES

* When this issue of the journal was first published, it included the incorrect version of this piece. The error has now been rectified, and the editors of *Parrhesia* would like to apologise for the confusion.

1. These themes are developed most explicitly in *The Experience of Freedom*. Trans. Bridget McDonald. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993. On generosity and liberality, see 10, 52–53, 147; on spaciousity, see 74–75, 144–45. In *On Touching*, Derrida expresses reserve toward the motif of generosity because according to him generous offering remains bound to congeniality and power (one gives because one can give and because one is congenitally or ontologically generous). Such generosity is still caught up in the economy of the gift. See Jacques Derrida, *On Touching – Jean-Luc Nancy*. Trans. Christine Irizarry. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005, 21–23.
2. See for example Howard Caygill’s “The shared world—philosophy, violence, freedom” *On Jean-Luc Nancy: The Sense of Philosophy*. Ed. D. Sheppard, S. Sparks and C. Thomas. London: Routledge, 1997, 19–31. Caygill argues that while Arendt admits of the incursion of violence and injustice at the heart of *Mitsein*, so that sharing is ineluctably comprised by it, Nancy advocates the immediate affirmation, *hic et nunc*, of the shared world or of “free, equal, fraternal, and just existence” (*The Experience*, 169–70).
3. Of course, I do not mean to underplay the differences between Nancy’s and Heidegger’s conception of world. The differences between the two will be discussed in more detail below.
4. See *Retreating the Political*. Ed. Simon Sparks. New York: Routledge, 1997. For Critchley’s criticism, see his “Re-tracing the Political: Politics and Community in the Work of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe” *The Political Subject of Violence*. Ed. David Campbell and Michael Dillon. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999, 73–93; for Fraser’s criticism, see her “The French Derrideans: Politicizing Deconstruction or Deconstructing the Political?” *New German Critique* 33 (Fall 1984): 127–54.
5. See *Being Singular Plural*. Trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O’Byrne. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000) 65, 71, 99. I refer here to two essays in *Jean-Luc Nancy: Justice, Legality and World*. Ed. Benjamin Hutchens. London: Continuum, 2012, “Being Just? Ontology and Incommensurability in Nancy’s Notion of Justice,” by Christopher Watkin, and “Abandonment and the Categorical Imperative of Being,” by François Raffoul.
6. Jean-Luc Nancy, “Of Being-in-Common” *Community at Loose Ends*. Ed. The Miami Theory Collective. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1992, 2.
7. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*. Ed. Peter Connor. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1991, 76.
8. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Creation of the World or Globalization*. Trans. François Raffoul and David Pettigrew. Albany: SUNY Press, 2007, 109.
9. Across the translations of Nancy’s works, *sens* is sometimes translated as sense and sometimes as meaning. We will use sense here since it captures more of the connotation of the French word *sens* (meaning, direction, sensation, hunch, etc.) The rationale for using meaning in some translation probably comes from the fact that even though the Heideggerian *Sinn des Seins* is translated into French as *sens de l’être*, in English it is rendered as the meaning of Being.
10. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World*. Trans. Jeffrey Librett. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, 12.
11. At the same time, truth punctuates sense so that it does not become undifferentiated being-toward. On sense and truth, see Nancy, *The Sense*, 14; 88–89.
12. On the capitalized Other, see Jean-Luc Nancy, “Sharing Voices” *Transforming the Hermeneutic Context: From Nietzsche to Nancy*. Ed. G.L. Ormiston and A.D. Schrift. Albany: SUNY Press, 1990, 246 and *Being Singular*, 11–13.
13. See Nancy, *Being Singular*, 13.
14. See Nancy, *Being Singular*, 20.
15. Nancy engages with Heidegger’s affirmation that “the stone is without world” most thoroughly in *The Sense*, 59–63.
16. Nancy, *The Creation*, 43.
17. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity*. Trans. Bettina Bergo, Gabriel Malenfant, and Michael B. Smith. New York: Fordham University Press, 2008, 24.
18. Nancy, *Being Singular*, 21; trans. mod.
19. *The Experience*, 13.
20. Nancy, *Being Singular*, 2–3; 16.

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21. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Truth of Democracy*. Trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. New York: Fordham University Press, 2010, 18.
22. See, *The Sense*, 55–56, 183 n. 48.
23. Nancy, *Being Singular*, 3; trans. mod. See also *Being Singular*, 18: “Humanity is the exposé [l’*exposant*, the exponent] of the world, it is neither its end nor its ground—the world [i.e. the exposing of singularities to themselves and each other] is what is exposed by and to humanity [l’*exposé de l’homme*], it is neither its environment, nor its representation” (trans. mod.) and also *Being Singular*, 83–88.
24. Jean-Luc Nancy, *A Finite Thinking*. Ed. Simon Sparks. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003, 17.
25. Nancy, *The Creation*, 42.
26. Nancy, *The Truth*, 22.
27. Nancy, *The Truth*, 24.
28. On the measuring of market value by opposition to absolute value, see *Being Singular*, 73–75 and also “Vaille que vaille” *La Pensée dérobée*. Paris: Galilée, 2001, 149–54.
29. *The Creation*, 55.
30. Nancy, *A Finite*, 20. This is true also of Marx, insofar as the critique of existing relations of production takes place in the name of the self-production of man. What we need, Nancy points out, is Marx with Pascal since for the latter, “man” is not given but is that which “infinitely transcends man.” See *The Truth*, 15 (Nancy is alluding to Pascal’s *Pensées*, §434).
31. Nancy, *A Finite*, 18.
32. Nancy, *A Finite*, 19.
33. *The Creation*, 112.
34. *The Experience*, 75.
35. *The Creation*, 110.
36. Nancy, *The Creation*, 61.
37. Nancy, *The Creation*, 111.
38. Nancy, *The Experience*, 75.
39. Nancy, *The Creation*, 42.
40. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Ground of the Image*. Trans. Jeff Fort. New York: Fordham University Press, 2005, 16.
41. Nancy, *The Ground*, 16.
42. Nancy, *The Ground*, 17.
43. Nancy, *The Ground*, 17.
44. Here we seem to have something similar to Benjamin’s divine violence—though divine violence as sheer, bloodless destruction that puts an end to time and history has a goal outside of itself, or outside of its pure manifestation, its pure blow: expiation, the renewal of history. The similitude does not work if one interprets the relation between violence, expiation and the possibility of a fresh start in divine violence as that of means to an end, but this need not be the case. See Walter Benjamin, “Critique of Violence” *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913-1926*. Ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004.
45. Jean-Luc Nancy, “‘Derridas Spuren: Über das Risiko des Denkens und Die Schrift im Herzen der Stimme’ Jean-Luc Nancy im Gespräch mit Sergio Benvenuto.” *Lettre Internationale* 70 (Fall 2005), 101.
46. Nancy, “Derridas Spuren,” 102.
47. Nancy, “Derridas Spuren,” 102.
48. Nancy, *The Ground*, 18.
49. Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978, 149.
50. Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 6.
51. Derrida, *Writing*, 146–47.
52. Derrida, *Writing*, 117: “Speech is doubtless the first defeat of violence, but paradoxically, violence did not exist before the possibility of speech.”
53. An earlier and much shorter version of this essay was presented at the 9th Biennial Radical Philosophy Association Conference in Eugene, Oregon. I wish to thank my co-panelists, Stuart Elden and Peter Gratton, as well as the participants, for their insightful questions and comments. I also wish to thank Jason E. Smith and an anonymous reviewer for their valuable comments and suggestions. Some of the explanations found in this essay are taken from my *Jean-Luc Nancy*. Cambridge: Polity, 2012.