

## HOW EXISTING THINGS ARE INVARIABLY PRESENT AS SENSE?

### COMO AS COISAS EXISTEM COMO SENTIDO?

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**Abstract:** This article aims to explore Jean-Luc Nancy's notion of *sense* as a key ontological concept. This concept, as it appears mainly in his *Sense of the World* (1997b), opens the possibility of a more profound understanding of his thesis. The effort in this article will not be an attempt to draw a map or a line in Nancy's theory placing *sense* either as the starting point or as his central concept. Instead, it is an attempt to show that *sense* plays a significant role in Nancy's understanding of world and finitude, as it becomes evident is his recurrent concern with Wittgenstein's (1994) aphorism 6.41: that the sense of the world must stand outside the world. Nancy defines the world as a rapport of entities or existents to each other. So, the argument advanced here analyzes *sense's* centrality to Nancy's discussion on *touch* and the vital role *touch* has in the articulation between his comprehension of *mitsein/être-avec* and his elaboration of being as singular plural, in order to show that a focus on *sense* could bring forwards a relevant elucidation of Nancy's ontological argument and its implications.

**Keywords:** Sense. Ontology. Deconstruction. Touch. Being-With

**Resumo:** Esse artigo tem como objetivo explorar de que maneira a noção de *sentido* é um conceito ontológico central na filosofia de Jean-Luc Nancy. Esse conceito, como ele aparece em *Sense of the World* (1997b), abre a possibilidade para um entendimento mais profundo de sua tese. Esse artigo não busca percorrer ou desenhar um mapa, ou ainda, uma linha, através da filosofia de Nancy, cujo o *sentido* se colocaria como ponto de partida ou como conceito central. O artigo mostra que *sentido* tem um papel fundamental na compreensão de Nancy sobre os conceitos de mundo e finitude, como

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é exemplificado, pelo autor, em sua análise do aforismo 6.41 de Wittgenstein (1994): o sentido do mundo deve estar fora do mundo. Nancy define mundo como relação entre entidades ou existências entre si. O ponto defendido aqui é que a centralidade do *sentido* para Nancy se apoia em sua discussão acerca do *toque* e em seu papel central na articulação entre *mitsein/etre-avec*. Tais conceitos, se considerados em paralelo a noção de ser singular-plural, podem iluminar a ontologia defendida por Nancy.

**Resumo:** Sentido. Ontologia. Desconstrução. Tocar. Estar com

## Introduction

This central thesis advanced in this article focuses on Nancy's notion of *sense* as key to his ontology in order to detect the way his ontology contributes to a proper understanding of existence. It will demonstrate that with *sense*, we can analyze how things exist without resorting to an organizing principle, a metaphysical anchor that could provide an overarching ground to existence – without a principle which would create a coherent image of everything. According to Nancy (1997b; 2000), there is a problem with how contemporary thought faces existence. Even if one attempts not to assume anything, or to explore the world purely as what apprehensively exists, one nevertheless arrives at an external engulfing element to being. One formulates arguments about the existence (such as 'being is X<sup>2</sup>'), which demand a complement to the notion of existence:

[...] A fundamental ambiguity of all thoughts of signification and return is thus revealed; meaning must be present, available, visible, immovable, and, at the same time, it must be absent, nearly inaccessible, far behind words and/or things, remote in some heaven of Ideas, or projected by the aim of a will. [...] For example, the meaning of appearances lies

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<sup>2</sup> Even in formulations like 'being is nothing', 'being escapes being/knowledge/thought...' or 'being is impossibility' there is an assumption that being itself is not sufficient for being. Even by arguing that we cannot affirm anything about being, we do not escape the demands for the complement, because there is still the implication that there is something beyond what is given.

precisely in the reality they veil, the meaning of becoming lies precisely in the permanence it masks, the meaning of language lies precisely in the meaning that it keeps at a signified's distance. (NANCY, 1997a)<sup>3</sup>

A proposed theory of existence is grounded on the possible relation between the existing thing and its complement. In this scenario, neither one of the elements makes sense by itself. Ontology is reduced to a theory which elaborates on this possible relation demonstrating that there is an inherent connection between both elements, therefore, grounding the existence while, simultaneously, preserving their essential distinction<sup>4</sup>. Such theory is restricted to commenting 'about' existence: it is either an interpretation of existence without ever really capturing it or a form of signifying existence which assumes it is always in the making and, hence, never really present.

These assumptions result in a configuration where existence is never equivalent to existence in itself, in a way one begins the ontological inquiry by assuming there is more to existence than merely existing. In that sense, the existing thing is never sufficient to explain its existence. Following this logic, ontology must surpass the existing entity in order to encounter a sense of existence. Consequently, presence and existence are taken to be distinct and even opposite terms. The present object is at best the existing thing, but its grounding remains elsewhere than its sheer manifestations as an entity. The theory assumes an impossible relation between the examination of existence and existence itself (existing objects)<sup>5</sup>.

Within this scenario, the concrete emerges from an essential force and principle holding it together as a thing: "In the logic of the cause, all

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<sup>3</sup> See also Nancy (1997a, p. 40-41)

<sup>4</sup> The emblematic example here would be materialism. In a superficial way, the idea that everything is pure matter stands on the idea of matter which is not material.

<sup>5</sup> It would be theory about the sense things 'have' or the sense things 'make'. Therefore, a theory would never be a theory of what things are. The examination would be limited to the relation between sense and thing while assuming an unbridgeable separation between them since the essence would be alienated from existing into a form of pure existence.

the properties of the thing caused are attributed to the thing that causes, even the power of effectuation itself” (Nancy, 1993a, p.186)<sup>6</sup>. Essence is both the original composition of existence and the original movement of existence<sup>7</sup>: essence causes existence. In this context, the examination of existence is an examination of its causes (i.e. what it essentially is and how it becomes the existing thing).

Nancy (1993a, 1997b, 2000) opposes both these meanings of the essence. The argument pursued in this article is based on his argument that it is possible to think ‘matter’, that is, answering the question of “what is the matter?/what is there?” [Qu’est ce qu’il y a?]<sup>8</sup>, without reverting to a grounding principle. It is possible to think concreteness without assuming an essence. The main point is that sense is not just a way of thinking about objects; it is a way of actually being.

The central aim is to explore how Nancy’s notion of *sense* allows existence to stand without being grounded on anything else. The question of *sense* here is not the question of ‘signification’<sup>9</sup> (Nancy, 1997a, p.10 and p.22), as in how to provide a ‘fitting’ significance to existence. One may enquire

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<sup>6</sup> Also: “Even if there was order exterior to signification, and even once an if it is still present somewhere among us, or in us, we would not be able to name it or describe it in our discourse; we would not be able to give it meaning within the logic of signification” and “Meaning is there present-at-a-distance, and if metaphysics claims to be a representation of the world (a representation from which are drawn promises, advice, and donations of meaning), everything occurs a priori according to a disjunction of the ‘world’ and its ‘representation’ or ‘view’” (NANCY, 1997a, p.28-40). See also Nancy (1997a, p.77).

<sup>7</sup> To argue that essence is the principle is to affirm that everything can be reduced to one essential component like carbon, water or electrons. To affirm that essence is a force is to affirm that everything is just the expression of an essential movement of existence like gravity. In both cases, essence exists beyond existence itself.

<sup>8</sup> The reference to the ambiguity in the translation of the French phrase is fundamental because Nancy plays with this ambiguity. As the present article will elaborate on, for him, the answer to the question ‘what is the matter?’ (as in ‘what is going on/occurring?’) is the same as the answer to the question ‘what is the matter?’ (as in ‘what is matter?’). Moreover, both can be answered by answering ‘what is there?’. The notion of *there is* is central for Nancy.

<sup>9</sup> They translate “sens” into meaning, which I attempted to avoid because I find it might suggest Nancy is interested in signification (as in providing an absolute sense). I prefer to keep the ambivalence of the term *sense* (which also includes “meaning”), because I believe it includes other factors that are important for the argument. For example, the idea of direction or sensibility.

as to whether things exist once existence no longer carries its metaphysical weight, or, moreover, how one can discriminate between existence and non-existence without any such grounding. These questions have no place for Nancy because things already exist regardless of what we claim about them: “The *there is* makes sense by itself and as such. We no longer have to do with the question, ‘why there is something in general?’ but with the answer, ‘there is something, and that alone makes sense.” (NANCY, 1997b, p. 7-8<sup>10</sup>). *Sense* relates to existence because it is the way things exist: Nancy argues that things exist as *sense* rather than having sense- all things are by definition some-thing and the ‘thing’ they are is sense.

Nancy’s departing point upholds that something necessarily exists even if we cannot state anything regarding this something beyond its sheer existence. For him, this sole necessity suffices to establish a theory of being. Nancy (1991a, 1997b) does not seek to guarantee existence. Any criterion of existence adopted would be not only superfluous but also opposed to the project, since it would give room to a metaphysical principle. The challenge is not proving things exist, but rather properly<sup>11</sup> reflecting on existence:

Not a thinking of the abyss and nothingness, but thinking of the un-grounding of being: of this “being”, the only one, whose existence exhausts all its substance and all its possibility. [...] And the fact, too, that there is no established sense, no establishment, institution or foundation of sense, only a coming, and coming-to-be of sense. (NANCY, 2003, p. 27)

In addition, Nancy demonstrates that given that things exist as *sense* and have no essential or grounding elements for their existence, a consequence is that all aspects of the object necessarily exist and must

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<sup>10</sup> see also Nancy (1993a, p. 173)

<sup>11</sup> For example, García-Düttmann (2004) insight of replacing the question of proof for the question of evidence. Besides the fact that evidence is not a guarantee of anything, it also points at a transgressive aspect of being.

be included/considered: things *are all the things* they are. Contrary to the previously mentioned structure where it is possible to contemplate an ontology from a perspective that distinguishes between essential and contingent qualities of objects, now this separation is no longer relevant. There is no contingent aspect of being since all aspects (*senses*) of it are necessarily part of it even though none of them is essential; none of these aspects grounds it by being the essential condition that causes/permits it to exist. In this way, Nancy does not endeavor to dismantle existence of the contingent existing aspects (to separate what is accidental from what is essential, what is existing from existence...). For him, the ontological demand itself changes. Ontology must not 'zoom in' to the one aspect that permeates all things and holds them together. Nancy allows us to dismiss the separation between what exists and what does not, because such separation necessarily stands on the idea that there is such a thing as a dichotomizing criterion between what *is* and *what could be different* and, therefore, has a distinguished ontological status. Instead, ontology will be the question regarding all existing things without any exception. Rather than purge existence of the existing contingent aspects, existence is totally filled up with all existing things, so there is no difference between the concepts of existence and of existing (Nancy, 2009, p. 79).

The challenge this proposition faces is exploring existence/reality in a satisfactory way – providing an ontological argument that scrutinizes the supposed ontological difference between the world and its sense, subject and object, meaning and reality, nature, and culture [...] without them collapsing one into the other. While such ontology must not affirm that all differences disintegrate into a single nature, it should not preserve an unbridgeable difference between them. The idea is to show that despite their difference (the fundamental alterity of entities), it is possible to think through the *togetherness* (a common spacing) of the world.

Such argument will mainly use Nancy's notion of *being singular-plural* as its guideline to examine the concept of existence as *sense*. It will first examine existence with regards to 'all things' and later move on to

examining existence with regards to ‘the singular thing’ (i.e. existence as plural and as singular), always exploring the relation between these two ‘sides’ of the singular plural mode of existence and the implications of thinking them together (but not as the same). The division into two ‘sides’ might be artificial within Nancy’s overall project, but it facilitates a rigorous assessment of each of these aspects. Through the elucidation of the implications of ‘being singular-plural’, a portrayal of Nancy’s groundless grounding of ontology becomes clearer.

This analysis crosses the knot Nancy traces between three central concepts: existence, *sense*, and presence. These are the central concepts of Nancy’s project, which suggests the possibility of establishing a relation between them that does not depend on an external principle. This article will establish that from Nancy’s definition of *being-singular plural*, it follows that the togetherness of these concepts is self-sufficient in its lack of essence. They do not form a whole/absolute ontological picture; rather, their togetherness itself is all there is to existence. The purpose is not to conclude with a full notion of being, but rather to sketch the configuration things form by merely being together. An examination of the three concepts demonstrates that *being singular-plural* means that ‘things that exist are present as *sense*’ necessarily but without any reason.

### World-Sense

The first topic of enquiry will be existence in general. In fact, considering Nancy’s previous argument, the first question that should be raised is whether there is such a thing as ‘existence in general’. Can one speak of ‘existence’ once there is no element (principle or essence) common to all existing things? If no metaphysical ground is provided, it seems entities merely exist and there is nothing which might collect them under one overarching concept (a common-ground). So, is there still space to comment on a/the ‘sense of the world’ (universe, totality or any other all-encompassing concept which explains existence)? A

fundamental element of Nancy's answers is the conceptual difference between everything and all things.

Nancy (1993a, 2000) explicitly states that entities are not the realization of a principle of existence. There is no all-encompassing concept that encompasses all existing things together. There is neither a universal principle, in the sense of there being an element that constitutes a common ground (like everything can be reduced to element  $X^{12}$ ), nor in an all-inclusive sense (like everything is just part of the one fabric of  $X^{13}$ ). In both cases, the nature of things does not lie in their existence. All things are merely an existing manifestation of the 'true' nature of existence.

We can usually think of the world (universe, cosmos or any other global concept) as such all-encompassing concept. This perspective implies that the world is exterior to its elements and, consequently, such notion of 'everything' cannot be equivalent to all existing things. This conception of 'world' demands the collection of every-single-thing together with the power/action of joining them under a unified entity. The 'world' is supposed to incorporate all things without being itself included since if it was to be included, i.e., including the power of joining all things, it would thus turn the joining power into an inherent element rather than being the external factor and, hence, it would require a further non-included higher power 'truly' joining all existing things in order to be the 'world'. The concept of everything assumes some larger instance where the surplus unifying power occurs, so, consequently, it always undermines itself since it must be included in a larger configuration: every conceptualization of everything is conditioned on a higher instance that includes it and hence demands that there must always be a larger instance of a 'real' everything.

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<sup>12</sup> As in, for example, the argument that all existing things are essentially electrons or atoms combined into different forms. In this sense, the nature of existence would be essentially one thing: electrons or atoms

<sup>13</sup> As in, for example, the argument for the existence of an all-bonding force like gravity acting on all substances and shaping them into the fabric of reality. Thus, the nature of existence is comprehended as the manifestation of this force.

The *ex nihilo* formulation misleads us into believing there is such a thing as an exterior principle or a creator/agent causing the world and therefore holding it together. This external principle creates the scenario where from ‘nothing’ comes the ‘is’. Put differently, in assuming the invariable separation between the principle/setting forth a world and the existing world itself, we find ourselves in a situation in which there is neither ‘world’ nor ‘sense’ (meaning) and yet the remains of those metaphysical suppositions still ‘disturb’ thought. Even though we no longer live in an age of metaphysical beliefs, the ‘phantasms’ of the metaphysical demand still hunt any attempt to think existence. According to Nancy, this is the demand to think the concept of world (ontology) through a ‘world-picture’, which implies a sense that captures the world while being separate from it.

This configuration presupposes an *ex nihilo* stance, as in a misleading assumption that an external common ground for everything organizes the cosmos. Nancy uses the concept of *cosmotheoros* to describe this assumption. This concept refers to the possibility of a cosmic point of view, which stipulates a theory that would engulf the whole cosmos. Ontology, within this context, would be the perspective that steps ‘outside’ in order to refer to the world in its entirety, hence requiring an essential principle of all things as its ultimate aim:

It is not merely the end of an epoch of the world or the end of an epoch of sense because it is the end of an epoch [...] that entirely determined both “world” and “sense”, and that has extended this determination over the entire *world*. Indeed, we cannot even think what is happening to us as a modulation of the same world or sense (Nancy, 1997b, p. 6)

The bottom-line question here is: where is this outside? Where is this non-present ‘point of view’? Can there be a thing (a perspective/position) beyond all things?

In Nancy's account (2007), such a position does not exist<sup>14</sup>. Nancy proposes that existence is the finite space of an infinite number of existing things. The world is the togetherness of all existing things. This description does not mean that the world started somewhere/sometime or that it is going to end, but rather, it expresses that existing things exist within a common configuration (together). Nancy (2000) proposes, through a reformulation of the *ex nihilo*, altering the mode of reasoning the world. Instead of searching for the original point from which all things originate, one should understand things do not come from somewhere, they simply are; rather than searching for the *causa sui*, it should be philosophically accepted that there is no cause (Nancy, 2009, p. 92). In conclusion, *ex nihilo* does not mean the world comes from nothing into existence. There is no cause or principle grounding existence. Nothing is neither the origin nor the *prima materia* of existence-as in the idea that everything is essentially built on nothing. Nancy (1991a) shows there is no *prima materia*. It is not an empty space as in the sense that all existing things lack an essence; as if at the heart of existence, one found a vacuum (Nancy, 1993a). Essence simply does not exist. In that sense, things are *ex nihilo*. Not because they are built on nothing but because their existence is basically nothing: they simply *are* and there is nothing more to their existence.

According to Nancy (2000), rather than searching for a notion of the world as a theory of everything, we should think of the world as the configuration of all things without the notion of 'everything' (all-inclusive rather than all-encompassing): "In other words, we cannot take 'the sense of the world' (or 'sense of existence' or 'sense of life' and so on) to be a general category and then admit its particular species or modalities, without thereby losing the very *sense* of the expression" (NANCY, 1997b, p. 6); and, also, he points:

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<sup>14</sup> I purposely avoid the term 'impossible' since this would imply that it exists but there is no access to it.

The global world is also the finite world, the world of finitude. Finitude is spacing. Spacing 'executes' itself infinitely. Not that this means endlessly beginning again, but that meaning no longer occurs in a totalization and presentation (of a finite and accomplished infinite). Meaning is in not finishing with meaning (NANCY, 2000, p. 139).

Nancy proposes we examine existence based exclusively on the presence of every single thing and the togetherness they form: "*World* means at least *being-to* or *being-towards* [être-à]; it means rapport, relation, address, sending, donation, presentation *to*- if only of entities or existents *to* each other." (NANCY, 1997b, p. 7-8, author's emphasis). In this sense, there is no background to presence<sup>15</sup>. Existence does not happen in a context: there are no principles that cause existence forming a field where existing things take place.

Nancy (1997b, 2000, 2003) argues that the presence of all things together is what one can call the world. The world does not exist as a separate concept from all existing things, it exists only inasmuch as every-single-thing that exists forms it. The world is the space of things taking place. Under Nancy's conception, the world does not mean the space *where* they take place, rather, the world *is* the places<sup>16</sup> of all things taking place/occurring. The world is the commonality of every single thing without anything in common - to rephrase Hamacher's (1993) phrase "mediation without medium". The world is purely the fact that things are in-common rather than having something in common.

In order to understand Nancy's conception, we must comprehend that this does not mean that we create the/a world by thinking it: the world is not the intellectual movement of joining all things. Stating this would

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<sup>15</sup> "This is not just a way of speaking, because there is no prior substance that would be dissolved. Being does not preexist its singular plural. To be more precise, Being absolutely does not *preexist*; nothing preexists; only what exists exists" (NANCY, 2000, p. 29, author's emphasis).

<sup>16</sup> World is not an individual place so the usage of places (in the plural) refers to the singular-plural natural of being.

be equivalent to arguing we can think/create a concept of ‘everything’ by striving to converge every-single-thing into one togetherness, hence creating a new ground for existence. This attempt would preserve the all-encompassing character previously mentioned. Even if only as an invention, this new notion of ‘world’ would be artificially exterior to all existing things. It would be an external addition to the ‘togetherness’ of all things<sup>17</sup>.

Nancy’s arguments about the world imply, firstly, that every-single-thing exists since if there is such a thing as existence (call it the world) and it is composed of all things, then every-single-thing must exist (and be present since existence is not grounded on an exterior principle). Both the table in front of me and big-foot exist as do my thoughts, dreams, and feelings about them. They are all present in some way because they are all *sense*; they possess a name and an identity so, even in the most limited way, they appear in the world. I will later explore Nancy’s notion of ipseity but for now, it suffices to say that things are all present because they are given in some way.

By ‘given’ I mean they occur even in a most insignificant way – for example, even the most exclusive feeling or idea I might conceive still exists since it is present to me. Nancy argues that if some-thing is present, it is occurring and therefore it exists (even if in the most exclusive way<sup>18</sup>). One might dispute Nancy’s argument by questioning the reality of their appearances (for example by calling them illusions) but to even discuss

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<sup>17</sup> One might criticize my argument by using the notion of the world as everything could be just another thing in the togetherness of all things and therefore not exterior to the world. That is, making the concept of ‘everything’ also part of the world and therefore making the world a hermetically closed set of all things. The argument is unrealistic since if the concept of ‘everything’ is just another thing, one can build a new higher ‘everything’ that includes it. Since this procedure can be repeated infinitely, it becomes clear it is not possible to form a concept of everything that is truly everything without assuming an exterior perspective (world-picture/cosmotheoros). But even a world-picture is now unrealistic, because one might argue it is just another thing and therefore could be included in a ‘bigger’ perspective. One might build a concept that attempts to step outside and look at the whole picture, but in the end, one encounters the limitation that there is always a ‘higher’ perspective. In this sense, the concept of ‘world’ as a world-picture is lost.

<sup>18</sup> Exclusive here does not mean private.

them assumes their appearance in the first place. Hence, ontology must somehow account for their mode of existence.

It is possible to claim that ontology should be concerned with commenting on the nature of objects independently of their mental representation (i.e. on the being of things themselves). Nancy's approach to the world suggests that such a model is absurd since thoughts are also things (Nancy, 1991a). In a way, no ontology is complete without including thoughts and perceptions. Nancy states that there is no world without subjectivity (i.e. human thought) and it is not because the world is a fruit of subjectivity, but because subjectivity is also part of the world: Nancy's *sense*-based ontology is concerned with thoughts not because they are essential to the configuration of the world but rather, because they are always already part of the world as things, so a proper ontology must extend to them too.

For Nancy, *sense* means entities that are currently 'taking place'. *Sense* is not equivalent to conceptualization or understanding: Nancy's *sense*-based ontology does not mean *sense* exists *for* a subject. The subject does not create *sense* as a mode of 'referencing' conditioned on its subjective existence<sup>19</sup>, so *sense* is neither a form of 'pointing at' the world nor of creating it through judgement. Nancy's notion of *sense* engulfs the subject in the configuration of *sense*: the subject (the perceiving agent) has no privilege in Nancy's ontology. There is no longer a distinct configuration of subject and object. As it will later be explored, both are just existing things and therefore *senses*. Nancy's *sense*-oriented ontology demands an alternative understanding of *sense*: *sense* must be relevant for both object and subject; it means that what is taken as the configurations of 'subjectivity' and 'objectivity' must be rethought through the understanding of *sense* (Nancy, 1993a, 2001).

In conclusion, Nancy's argument should not be considered epistemological (which would mean every-single-concept exists because it is an idea

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<sup>19</sup> As seems to be Critchley's reading (1999, p.62).

regardless of the world itself); they are ontological because he is arguing that despite the difference between concepts and physical objects, they *are* all *senses*. Put differently, Nancy does not propose that all things are *essentially* the same thing (i.e., that despite their difference, all things can be reduced to *sense*); rather, he proposes that despite their distinction, they are all things and therefore ontology should concern all of them if it aims at commenting on the truth of existence (Nancy, 2009, p.81-83).

### *Being-Sense*

The second implication of Nancy's approach to existence is that all things have the same ontological status: being-*sense* (thing in equivalent to *sense*). This does not mean that they are the same thing, but that they exist under the same conditions. They exist in the same way and therefore they are all the world (their presence *is* the world) and never exterior to it: Nancy's *sense* is not sense about the world, but sense *as* the world. It is not an argument about existence; rather, it is the way of actually being.

Nancy rejects any absolute/individual 'sense' defending, instead, the existence of singular plural *sense(s)*. If *sense* is equivalent to being and, as mentioned before, there is no individual principle or essence to Being; there could not be a unique *sense* either. Each *sense*, as a specific being, is only one distinctive *sense* among the infinite possibilities given within the finite configuration of their togetherness. Put differently, there is no individual *sense* of existence, but each singular *sense* is just one *sense* in the plurality of senses.

*Sense* is not the principle of existence so one cannot isolate it and 'properly' dissect its implications. There is no perspective outside of *sense*: there is no position or angle not 'compromised' by it. So, it is impossible to talk about the 'pure *sense*' of existence. In order to comment on *sense*, one must explore the configuration of existence establishing the way *sense* is, for Nancy, the mode of existing. Or, in other words, the way *sense* means being singular-plural.

*Singular-plural* refers to the fact that existence is neither a series of individual substances collected into a concept nor a unique substance that subsumes all things. The singular-plural takes existing as the sole ground of existence; it marks the condition of existence where things are at the same time common (plural) and specific (singular). These two 'sides' are not equivalent but also not the opposite of each other. Van Den Abbeele's formulation might be helpful:

All singularities must have something remarkable, some way in which they are marked as different from what surrounds them and so designates them as singular. It is *unique* in the strong sense of the word. And yet nothing is more common, or more "universal" in its dispersion. Indeed, one could hazard that the universe is nothing but singularities, if what we call universe is not in and of itself a singularity (among others). The singular thus necessarily inscribes and is inscribed in the plural (there is never a question of there being a singularity but there being singularities) (VAN DEN ABBEELE, 1993, 182, author's emphasis)

Being singular plural refers to the fact that even though existence is the most common aspect of things, since all things exist, each thing is a specific existing entity.

Being is *sense* because the action of being is sensing. The act of being (i.e., what things do when they *are*), according to Nancy, is sensing in all meanings of the term (touching, direction, signification, etc.). Existence is the act of existing, so each existing entity is the acting sense (direction) of being, and therefore the sense (meaning) of being is being 'as such as' [en tant que] the actual sensing (acting) of the sense (meaning), i.e., the realization of sense in the sensing itself:

[...] 3. The actuality of existence is not a property that can be conferred or not on a thing. It is that there is a thing. The sense of (the) "being" is the transmission of the act that *there*

is. 4. The act cannot be transmitted by anything other than itself (it is not a passage from potential to actual): [...] 5. But “to make [faire] exist” makes no sense [n’a pas de sens]: that which is neither a property nor a substance – the act or as-act of being-as-act – cannot be produced. [...] It “is produced” in the remarkable sense of “taking place”, “happening”. (NANCY, 1997b, p. 27-28, author’s emphasis)

Being is *sense* because it is always an action towards something. It is never complete, and there is no completion; being is nothing but the act of acting-sense/direction/towards. Nancy uses the term ‘être à’ to indicate this configuration. *Être à* means that being is both towards itself and at itself. It is invariably moving towards itself while, simultaneously, it is always already at itself. Being never escapes itself and it never gets into itself (even though it is always moving), because it is invariably at-itself<sup>20</sup>. These two aspects are not contradictory since the movement of being is basically the action of being; in being-towards itself the existing thing is to the utmost at-itself. Put differently, in moving towards itself, the existing thing is at-itself because it is doing what it is: being.

A linguistic exploration might be helpful here. In both Portuguese and Spanish, the verb ‘to be’ can be split into two verbs: *ser* and *estar*. This is not possible in some other languages (like English or French). The first verb refers to an essential condition of being, while the second is a transitory/momentary condition of it. One can state about oneself ‘I am (ser) Brazilian’ which means the speaker was born in Brazil or has Brazilian citizenship, or ‘I am (estar) going’ which means the speaker in the process of realizing the activity described. I believe Nancy (2000) aims at canceling the former meaning in the name of the latter: ‘to be’ [etre] is (ser) nothing because it is always being [etant] (estar). All there is to being is being (estar). There is no essential truth of being, ‘all there

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<sup>20</sup> Nancy also uses the term “Abandoned Being”. See Nancy (1993a, p. 46-47).

is' is what is currently happening/taking place. In that sense, Nancy can argue that being has no essence at the same time that being is all there is: "Existence is not; rather, it is the existing of being, to which all ontology finally boils down" (NANCY, 1993a, p. 4, author's emphasis).

Being-*sense* means that there is no separation between being (the act of existing) and its direction (sense). Existence is not a potency that gains actuality when directed towards a sense- the act inherently 'has' a direction. There is no background where existence occurs, so this movement is not taking place within a mapped out neutral space; rather, sensing occurs within the configuration of all things: touching (sensing) all thing. This is what 'taking place' (i.e. being present/happening) means when the existing thing is not taken in isolation. If things exist among other things (in togetherness), the 'pure' act of being is already within a common space and therefore being is always oriented<sup>21</sup> as *être à*.

In this way, there is no essence to the activity of being. It is never a completed action; it does not come from somewhere or goes anywhere. It is just the action *per se*, each one and every-single one together as existing things/*senses*. The act of being is similar to moving a chair from one point to the other. It is possible to fail to move a chair and still be half-way done with it; you can even stop the activity and return to it later. This logic obviously does not apply to existing: existing is not given within a limited time and space as the act of moving an object, rather, it comprises the spatiality and temporality themselves - the act itself of occurrence. This relates to the lack of origin mentioned earlier: being has no essence because being is 'a priori' to itself, since it is not conditioned by an external factor. Its configuration is given exclusively by its occurrence. So, in this sense, being never stops as it never begins. Existence is the mere fact existing. This means that it is impossible to find a point

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<sup>21</sup> To avoid misunderstanding, one should keep in mind that there is no neutral space where existence emerges. So, 'orientation' here does not mean that it is possible to map all things and establish a relation between them. This map would be another world-picture. "Orientation" means that within the togetherness there is movement, but this movement is not in the vacuum.

of origin outside existence itself. The existing object is always already given/present despite barely being [*sans pourtant*]<sup>22</sup>.

An attentive reader might have noticed that there is an apparent problem with Nancy's formulation explored in this article: is the formulation that being is equivalent to *sense*, not a reproduction of the original problematic formulation 'being is X'? To respond to these questions, one must further illustrate the meaning of *sense* elucidating that this is not the case. In order to do so, one must demonstrate that *sense* is not a form of *prima materia* so it is not the 'stuff' that makes up all things: the argument 'being is *sense*' does not mean that *sense* is the essential component of all beings; rather, *sense* merely describes the act of being. It describes what it is that things do when they *are*<sup>23</sup>. 'Being is *sense*' means that 'to be' is equivalent to 'doing *sense*', where *sense* is not an essential aspect of being, but instead, just an elucidation of the fact of its occurrence. That is, *sense* marks precisely the impossibility of any essential ground to being.

Frege's (1978) regarding the difference between the morning star, the evening star and the actual star ('the thing') might be helpful here since it presents a possible alternative to Nancy. Without elaborating on Frege's treatment of the question, suffice it to state that he is concerned with the relation between senses of the star (appearances) and the actual star. Fundamentally, Frege is concerned with the relation between sense and reference/object. In his view, there is an ontological privilege to the references/world, and philosophy is concerned with understanding the way sense connects to it. In this way, sense and world are not equivalent and the task of philosophy is to bridge the gap between them.

Nancy denies the separation between world and sense. Still, he does not argue that senses and references/objects are essentially the essen-

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<sup>22</sup> A formulation Nancy uses to illustrate the fact that being invariably occurs (already) but is never a definite position (barely) (Nancy, 1997b, p. 75). The *sans pourtant* ("yet without", in Watkin's translation) formulation serves the same purpose (Nancy, 1997b, p. 38; and Nancy, 2003, p. 18).

<sup>23</sup> They are touching, they are towards, they are meaning (i.e., they are sensing).

tially equal, but rather, that they all exist in the same way despite their differences. The 'actual star' (i.e. the reference) does not have a privileged ontological status. It is just another *sense* (occurrence) of the star.

Nancy dismisses the possibility of such a criterion in the name of a non-definitive and non-relativistic ontology. In fact, Nancy's theory could not be either of the two since there is no condition, and so existence does not depend on anything. Nancy's philosophy is not concerned with the conditions of existence: as in what allows a thing to occur or the reason behind its taking place. For Nancy, philosophy should not provide meaning for existence as any signification of existence by providing a principle that organizes reality is ontologically absurd. So, Nancy does not separate existence into reality and illusion. Instead, Nancy's philosophy is concerned with describing the sheer configuration of existence as a whole: it should concern itself with all *there is*, i.e., all that is currently present.

Since the terms, existence for Nancy concerns the whole of reality, one cannot exhaust sense and hence signify existence, so this presence is not definite, that is, in not responding to any essence, it does form an ultimate definition. In this way, there is no final ontology (Nancy, 1997a, p. 52). This is Hamacher's argument concerning undecidability in Nancy. He explores Nancy's usage of the 'ou' in order to show that it is neither definitive nor suspended. The use of 'ou' (both 'where' and 'or' in French<sup>24</sup>) means Nancy's philosophy takes a position but this position is never an established stance. For Hamacher, the 'ou' marks the fact that Nancy is invariably within a decision of being and undecided about being. With the 'ou', he is simultaneously refusing to position/ground his philosophy and formulating a new ontological configuration/stance (Hamacher, 1993, p. 230; Hamacher, 1994, p. 104 and 115; Hamacher, 1997, p.59).

One may criticize Nancy's ontology by point out that it is misleading since it appears to present an unprecedented ontology but is, in fact, re-

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<sup>24</sup> Hamacher (1994) ignores the grammatical distinction between 'ou' and 'où' in French

asonably trivial: to affirm that all conceivable things (whether as thought, concept, or feeling) exist does not advance the elucidation of existence. It is undeniable that all conceivable things exist somehow (even as an illusion or as a mistake). Nancy is at best stating the obvious. In fact, in its triviality, it might even disrupt the elucidation, since by assuming that every object automatically exists, Nancy dismisses the question without even considering it since he does not comment on the 'nature' of things/being.

Following this line of reasoning, one might argue that in Nancy's ontology there is no difference between illusion and reality, as for Nancy, existence as a whole could just be an illusion. One can argue that Nancy's philosophy is grounded on belief rather than on actual existence.

A more thorough inspection of Nancy's arguments shows that there are satisfactory responses to those points. This possible counterargument to Nancy's ideas would require an ontology that defines a grounding criterion for existence. The possible opposition to Nancy hence returns to the metaphysical phantasm where existence is conditioned, and ontology concerns an elucidation of such a condition. In this line, a clear distinction between existence and existing is demanded; the criterion for existence would unalterably be connected to the nature of existing and yet remains distinct from it. Namely, it separates the nature of existence, i.e., the condition for existence, from actually existing entities. Or in simply words, what could possibly from what actually exists. Within such logic, there is always something more to existence than sheer existence. It begins by already assuming it cannot answer the question since the principle/essence of Being is beyond being.

Another possibly problematic point in Nancy's ontology is the status of the nothing. It seems that if all things must exist, Nancy's theory contradicts itself by arguing there is no such thing as non-existence. This is not problematic because Nancy is not arguing there is something that does not exist. He is arguing that it is a fact that no-thing does not exist: there is such thing as the fact that 'there is no non-existence' and, so, 'all things exist'. The fact/*sense* of non-existence exists even if a non-existing thing does not.

Nancy regards fact as the matter<sup>25</sup> of presence (Nancy, 2000, p.2). In other words, the thing's factuality concerns its existence and presence instead of being a judgment on the states of being: facts are not *about* things, they are things in themselves. In this way, factuality does not exceed presence into a realm of pure epistemological conception. A fact is not a representation of something external in form of information or knowledge, but exclusively the presentation (the appearing/giveness/presence) of something. Representation demands an original/pure object to which a fact stands in relation. Within the representative scenario, ontology comments on what it is possible to know of the object rather than what it actually is<sup>26</sup>. It assumes the object remains untouched in its 'objective' position beyond thought (Nancy, 2000, p. 40)<sup>27</sup>. According to Nancy (2000, p. 19 and 167), such a configuration of representation, is in the end, contradictory: any representation is a form of presentation/appearance of the world. In simple words, information and knowledge are presentations since they are taking place somehow and therefore, are a fact of the world as any other, i.e., ways in which the world appears.

Presentation needs no such grounding since it is just the fact's presence. Garcia-Duttman's definition of evidence this issue further (Garcia-Duttman, 1994, p. 145). He argues that evidence is a thing in itself since it does not depend on a supplement (i.e., is self-sufficient). It concerns the question of appearance/presence/occurrence and it is not proof of anything, since it does not provide any ontological ground for a definite presence. The evidence is not an anchor of sense, as in there being something external that 'guarantees' existence; it simply indicates the mere presentation/appearance/presence of something. Evidence marks the presence in the world as it presents the thing's existence among other things. In this sense, one can argue that the fact of X is equivalent to the

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<sup>25</sup> I purposely use the word 'matter' here in reference to materiality.

<sup>26</sup> Facts *about* X rather than the fact of X, i.e., information about X rather than the presence of X

<sup>27</sup> See also Nancy (2000, p. 68, 72-73).

evidence of X's presence (to the non-definite mark of its occurrence). The notion of evidence emphasizes that facts are self-contained/self-evident without standing for anything apart from their sheer occurrence. Returning to Hamarcher (1993, 1994, 1997), the notion of evidence marks the (in)decision of being's factuality in Nancy's philosophy. Put simply, Nancy shows that the fact of existence is evident, but it is not conclusive.

Moreover, reflecting on the factuality of the thing as equivalent to the fact of its existing, i.e., to its presence, means that the 'fact of X' can be understood as X because it is the evidence of its presence/occurrence (Nancy, 1991a, p.92). Or in other words, that its existence is evident. Facts are not relations between things as, for instance, in 'it is a fact X is Y', therefore revealing the essential configuration as if there was a fundamental nature of the world to be unveiled. Ontology, according to Nancy, is occupied with facts not because it must go unveil the world in order to determine its nature but because it occupies itself exclusively with the existing, i.e., with the evident. In this way, one can establish that facts are just things, as any other part of the togetherness of all things. The fact of non-existence does not actually require that one postulates there is a non-existing object. By affirming no-thing does not exist, Nancy does not uphold that there is a thing which corresponds to the description proposed<sup>28</sup>. Rather, he is affirming there is a mere fact: there is no such thing as a non-existing thing and there cannot be.

Moreover, facts can exist as mistakes or as misleading ideas such as the example of the all-encompassing concept 'everything'. The notion of 'everything' obviously exists it will largely be discussed here, but the no such thing that can be 'everything' as previously demonstrated. In the same way that 'non-existence' exists while it is impossible, a mistake or a misleading fact can also exist. In a simple example, people may believe that the Earth is flat, and the fact 'the earth is flat' exists, and it exists as a mistake in specific contexts (and in others perhaps not). The point

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<sup>28</sup> A good illustration of this is the concept of "the largest number". There is no such thing as the largest number, but the concept undoubtedly exists. In other words, the largest number is a fact.

previously put forwards that people usually think existence through an all-encompassing concept and therefore believe in an *ex nihilo* essence of existence proves facts can exist even if they are not exact<sup>29</sup> about existence.

In opposition to Nancy's *sense* ontology, one could assume that once all things exist, the question of existence becomes irrelevant or trivial. If there are no criteria for existence, how can one still talk about existence? Once again, one would assume ontology is the search for a condition of existence (in all senses of the word and especially in the sense of differentiating between what really exists and what does not). In that sense, Nancy's importance is not limited to formulating ontology itself but should be understood as a reexamination of the ontological question and, with it, a qualitatively distinct answer. The importance of demonstrating that being as *sense* does not negate the ontological question arises from a preoccupation with ontology as a whole. In showing how the implications of being-*sense* form a concrete notion of existence capable of including all things, one illustrates the way Nancy's ontology is still able to comment on the truth of being even though there is no essence or nature to being.

## **Conclusion**

Despite commenting extensively on Nancy's ontology, there is an impression that one has hardly said anything. If Nancy's ontology seems trivial and banal, it seems to be the way he intended it:

[...] Common: banal, trivial. We appear before our banality, before the exceptional absence of a 'condition' which one has always too quickly baptized 'human'. Common: not made

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<sup>29</sup> I used the notion of exactitude rather than accuracy firstly because this is the term used by Nancy, and secondly because accuracy implies precision in the relation of correspondence between ontology and world, whereas Nancy argues that ontology *is* the world, since thoughts are part of the material composition of the world. I will explore this subject in the last section of this part.

from a single substance, but to the contrary from the lack of a substance which essentially apportions the lack of essence (NANCY, 1992, p. 374)

Opposing the notion that ontology must reveal the hidden nature of the world, Nancy argues that ontology must be evident. Or, to put it simply, there is nothing more to existence than the fact that 'it is'. The ontology must be trivial because existence is common: there is no inner secret which one could hope to reveal.

Nevertheless, Nancy gives us solace in his commentary on the title of *The Sense of the World*:

[...] What is at stake here is enormous – indeed, it is incommensurable. But one must view it neither as a problem to be solved nor as a discovery to be made. If viewed in this way, it would be pitifully laughable or dangerously paranoid to propose a book titled *The Sense of the World*, in a gesture that was supposed to mean “here is the solution”. Neither a problem nor a solution, it is a matter simply of accompanying a clarification that already precedes us in our obscurity, much younger and much older than that obscurity: how our world makes sense. (NANCY, 1997b, p. 8)

According to Nancy, things do not *have* something in common, instead, they *are* in-common. 'Common' for Nancy does not refer back to an essential aspect shared by all beings, rather it means that there is no intact being: every existing thing must invariably occur within the togetherness of all existing things. The world is merely this fact: all things take place together without any essence joining them. Nancy argues that being is invariably in touch (sensing) with other beings. All existing things touch the world: this is the centrality of *sense* in Nancy's philosophy. Consequently, being is ordinary: it is specific but not extraordinary since there is no

individualizing essence. Again, being is invariably common. *Sense* marks the fact that being is substantially nothing more than an act of existing as occurring among other things and hence it is touching/orientating/meaning, i.e., being *is* sensing: “The thing co-incides: it falls with itself on itself, in itself. It falls on its *here*, coming *there*, but only its fall and its coming make the *here*.” (NANCY, 1993a, p.181, author’s emphasis).

Again, it seems Nancy is not revealing anything new. This configuration seems almost intuitive. Things are (ser) essentially nothing because they merely *are* (estar) occurring. For Nancy, there is a world, but it is nothing because all things are nothing beyond the mere fact of their taking place. In this way, his ontology cannot reveal anything beyond what is already occurring.

To a certain extent, Nancy shows what we already “know”, only that he argues that it is not a question of knowing<sup>30</sup> (Nancy, 1993a, p. 199). Just like in Freud’s phrase about the psyche, it is a question of taking place (being extended). Nancy’s ontology is not concerned with knowing bodies/things, it is concerned with their occurrence, so it does not aim at grounding a new principle that reveals the ‘hidden’ nature of things. It is concerned with being *exact* – nothing more and nothing less than commenting on all things, an ontology that is exactly the way things occur (i.e., take place as *sense*). Nancy’s ontology is *exact* because it describes existing as the undeniable fact that ‘there are’ things, and the unfolding of such configuration. Things *are sense* because the act of existing is not an essential state of things. Consequently, existing is not grounded, it simply occurs without any cause. *Sense* is existing because it indicates the ‘whatness’ of the action of existing (i.e., the ‘nature’ of this ‘is’), as merely its occurrence.

There is no final point that illuminates the whole theory: Nancy does not take us to a vantage point from where the whole resolution of being becomes clear. At the same time, it is undeniable that a new configuration

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<sup>30</sup> Which does not mean a negation of knowledge, but rather, the absence of a relation to knowledge. In other words, there is no definite body of existence, i.e., no ultimate object that could ground it.

is opened for us. Nancy's *sense*-based ontology overcomes the challenges of reflecting on a non-essential existence. It formulates ontology of the 'things-themselves' from their actual occurrence, without assuming a foundation. Nancy does not describe what things are (i.e., their nature) or why there are things, he describes how they *are*. In this way, Nancy answers the basic ontological question of "what is the matter?/what is there?" [Qu'est ce qu'il y a?]. Put simply, Nancy shows that all there *is* is the fact that there *are* things. It is the *ens* (entity) without *esse* (essence):

[...] But existence is nothing other than Being exposed: beginning from its simple identity in itself and from its pure position, exposed in appearing, in creation, and, as such, exposed to the outside, exteriority, multiplicity, alterity, and change. (And in one sense, to be sure, this is not anything other than Being exposed to Being itself, in its own "being," and, as a consequence, Being exposed as Being: exposition as the essence of Being.) (NANCY, 2000, p.187)

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