The Pre-History of Nancy's Deconstruction of Christianity

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In *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, Derrida states that his initial ambition was to show that there was a philosophy of touch, and a quite innovative one, at work in Jean-Luc Nancy's writings. Derrida's own book was overtaken by events, however, when Nancy published *Corpus*, a work Derrida praises as being the equivalent of Aristotle's *On the Soul* for our times.[1] After that point, the mandate of *On Touching* became more diffuse—first of all to show, perhaps redundantly, that something like a philosophy of touch had been part of Nancy's project all along, but also to set Nancy's work on touch in the context of the entire Western tradition and, more broadly, to introduce Nancy to a wider audience. The result is that Derrida ends up bringing in essentially the entire sweep of Nancy's body of work, often in surprising ways. Perhaps the biggest surprise is the intimate relationship Derrida sees between Nancy's deconstruction of Christianity—which was at that time only in its early stages—and the philosophy of touch, such that the importance of Nancy's work on touch is that "it reaches beyond the Christian body" that previous French phenomenologists had unwittingly presupposed.[2] That is to say, Nancy's innovative work on touch is in some sense a deconstruction of Christianity, so that one could say that if Nancy has been doing a philosophy of touch all along, then he has necessarily been doing some kind of deconstruction of Christianity all along as well.

What I wish to investigate in this paper is whether Nancy might have been engaged in a deconstruction of Christianity all along, not simply insofar as his philosophy of touch implies a deconstruction of Christianity—on a practical level, that would require dogmatically accepting

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[1] Jacques Derrida, *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, trans. Christine Irizarry (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 65.

[2] Derrida, *On Touching*, 219.

Derrida's attempt to link a certain way of talking about "touch" with Christianity, since a conference paper is far from adequate to the task of assessing Derrida's argument at length—but in a more direct sense.

More specifically, I intend to look for this anticipatory deconstruction of Christianity in the essay entitled "The Inoperative Community."[3] My reason for this is that most of those who have attempted to take up Nancy's thought from a theological perspective—including those at the table with me today—have agreed that his most promising contribution is his notion of "being-with." Many of the themes that have come together in one of the most important points of reference for the nascent theological appropriation of Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*—including the critique of Heidegger's failure to fully reckon with the originarity of *Mitsein* or being-with, the notion of the "singular" as something other than the "individual," and the claim that we need to think of something like "community" or "us" in a way that extends beyond human beings, to take a few more or less at random—found an important early articulation in that essay, making it a good candidate for analysis.

At the same time, "The Inoperative Community" is one-sidedly negative about Christianity, perhaps most clearly in the claim that "fascism… was the convulsion of Christianity, and it ended up fascinating modern Christianity in its entirety."[4] In other words, on a prima facie basis, there does not immediately *seem* to be the same kind of ambivalent valorization of Christianity—acknowledging its problems, while at the same time putting forth the contention that the more interesting thing about Christianity is its auto-deconstructive character, etc.—that we've seen in his more recent work. Thus it seems to me that if there does turn out to be something like a deconstruction of Christianity going on in this particular essay, it

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[3] Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. Peter Connor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991). French text: *La communauté désœuvrée*, 3rd edition (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1999).
[4] Nancy, *Inoperative Community*, 17.

will be particularly strong evidence for the existence of a "pre-history" of his current work in that direction, as well as tying the "deconstruction of Christianity" motif much more directly to the work on "being-with" than Nancy himself has done so far. (By that I mean that he has asserted and gestured toward such a connection, but his actual argumentation on this question seems to be more suggestive than demonstrative so far.)

I begin by pointing out the general argumentative strategy of the essay—and I should clarify that I mean to deal with only the singular essay entitled "The Inoperative Community," rather than any of the collections of essays that have gone under that title, whether in French or English. Nancy's approach to his primary concepts here is clearly deconstructive, but more in the mode of the early Derrida than the late. What all deconstructive analyses of particular concepts share is the mobilization of a certain polyvalence in the concept itself. Furthermore, there is some type of play between the "common" meaning of the word and a counterintuitive yet, for lack of a better term, *originary* sense of that same word. When I claim that Nancy is being more early-Derridean than late-Derridean, however, I mean that we don't get as much of the sense that the more "originary" version of the concept is "impossible," as we do with the hyperbolically pure ethical categories like gift, forgiveness, hospitality, etc. Indeed, the "originary" version is all too real, to the point of being inescapable. To fill this framework in with Nancy's specific content, then, on the one hand you have "community" in the common sense of the term, a lost fullness of human being-together that has been replaced by an impersonal "society." On the other hand, you have "community" in the originary sense of irreducible relatedness among human beings and everything else.

At this point, though, there seems to be a divergence from Derrida, insofar as Derrida always privileges the derelict, subordinate item in a given pair (writing over speech, most

famously), while Nancy seems to be favoring the more "authentic" item. Writing in the Western world in 1983, however, Nancy is in an environment where authentic "community," in the form of international communism, has long since turned out to be a nightmare and "society," for all its faults, seems to be the only live option remaining: "all ventures adopting a communitarian opposition to 'real communism' have by now run their course or been abandoned, but everything continues along its way as though, beyond these ventures, it were no longer even a question of thinking about community."[5] Nancy's next step is to argue that liberal democracy and the totalitarian danger of communism are two sides of the same coin. First, both of them share in the same overarching "metaphysics of the absolute," which centers on some principle supposedly exempt from all relationality, making both dangerous and destructive. Second, the absolute principle of both, what makes them both so destructive, is, paradoxically, *humanity*.

That is to say, the problem with communism was that it was *too humanistic*, meaning in this case too centered around the concept of species-being, which for Marx was a matter of "human beings defined as producers (one might even add: human beings *defined* at all), and fundamentally as the producers of their own essence in the form of their labor or their *work*."[6] This emphasis on the *human* as the ultimate authority, no longer reliant on any form of transcendence for meaning, leads to the quest for an "absolute immanence of man to man—a humanism—and of community to community—a communism."[7] Again, within the modern Western frame, this insistence on immanence seems to be a good thing, but Nancy complicates this valuation by claiming that in fact "what we have called 'totalitarianism' … might be better named 'immanentism.'" What distinguishes "immanentism" is its continual production of the human essence, setting humanity to work in order to produce humanity as a work. Where

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[5] Nancy, *Inoperative Community*, 2-3.
[6] Nancy, *Inoperative Community*, 2. Nancy italicizes "defined"; I italicize "work."
[7] Nancy, *Inoperative Community*, 2.

communism sought to produce this human essence on a collective level, liberal democracy turns

to the individual—but both take the human essence to be "the absolutely detached for-itself,

taken as origin and as certainty." Modern experience show us, however, that "the individual can

be the origin and the certainty of nothing but its own death." The individual attempts to achieve

immortality through its "works," but this "*operative* immortality remains its own alienation and

renders its death still more strange than the irremediable strangeness that it already 'is.'"[8]

The implication here—brought out perhaps more clearly in the liberal version—is that

"immanentism" involves some kind of working, necessarily unsuccessful, in order to avoid

death. At best, this produces alienation, but at its worst it can produce a furious working-out of

death, as in fascism. What we need to think instead, therefore, is a community not centered on

the absoluteness of some essence, human or otherwise. Acknowledging the necessary link

between "essence" and "working" or "producing" within the immanent frame that he believes we

cannot go back behind, Nancy proposes that we attempt to think a community that would be

désœuvré, which literally means "unworked," or as the translator has it "inoperative."

Additionally, in everyday usage, *désœuvré* has reference to unemployment or idleness; a "lazy

rascal" is a *voyou désœuvré*. (Whatever might happen to the value of work or humanism, then, it

seems that this new form of community would share with communism at least its anti-

capitalism.)

Communism is the privileged example of what one might call the "bad" form of

community, one focused on the working-out of the human essence, but Nancy seems to think

that Christianity has a certain privileged status when it comes to the link between community and

the avoidance of death. Fully teasing out Nancy's largely implicit view of Christianity here is

probably not necessary for the present purposes, but it is clear that Nancy sees the divinization of

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[8] Nancy, *Inoperative Community*, 3.

humanity in Christ as Christianity's key strategy for avoiding death. And it is in fact this question of death that comes to preoccupy Nancy for most of the essay, as he attempts to work out another relationship between death and community, in critical dialogue with Georges Bataille. The alternative that emerges is the abandonment of any attempt to give "meaning" to death—making of death a kind of work—and instead acknowledging it as the limit to which the finite community is constitutively exposed.

With the basic argument of "The Inoperative Community" established—albeit too hastily—I now turn to one of the key essays in *Dis-Enclosure*, "The Judeo-Christian," in which Nancy undertakes a reading of the Epistle of James.[9] The frame of the essay is the question of how we are to think of the compound origin of our Western, Judeo-Christian tradition, in order to get at "a reflection on composition in general—the composition of our tradition and in our tradition, that is to say, in the final account, the possibility of the *cum* [with] considered for itself."[10] It is a question, then, of being-with, and James, as the original "Judeo-Christian," is to give us a particularly fruitful way into that question. The majority of the essay, however, is simply a close analysis of James's argument, without much reference to such broad and general concerns. What emerges in the course of Nancy's reading is a remarkably secular faith. This is most clear in his discussion of the epistle's final chapter, which includes both an anticipation of the coming of the Lord and the *locus classicus* for the sacrament of extreme unction or anointing of the sick. Pointing out that James downplays the possibility of physical healing, Nancy says that "unction or anointing signals, not what one will later call an eternal life beyond death, but the way into death as into the finite parousia that is infinitely deferred. The way into incommensurable inadequation. In this sense, each dying person is a messiah, and each messiah

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[9] Jean-Luc Nancy, "Le judéo-chrétien (De la foi)" in *La Déclosion : Déconstruction du christianisme, 1* (Paris: Galilée, 2005). Translations are mine.
[10] Nancy, "Le judéo-chrétien," 68.

is a dying person."[11] Already he had established that the name of Jesus signifies only that the messiah has in fact come, with no weight of divinity—now Jesus' very messiah-hood is dispersed among the community of those facing death. The parousia that is "becoming near" is therefore not some supernatural event, but represents the immanence of death within life itself. For this reason, faith "gives precisely death… in its incommensurability: a gift that it is not a question of receiving in order to keep…."[12]

The Judeo-Christianity Nancy finds in the Epistle of James, then, would seem to have little to do with the death-avoiding, humanity-absolutizing Christianity he critiques in "The Inoperative Community." Indeed, at least on the question of death, it would seem to overlap substantially with the "inoperative community" that Nancy ends up proposing. There is one problem, however, and that is James's famous emphasis precisely on *works*. As we have seen, Nancy rejects works and links up works with death, in a way that may well remind one of Paul. In "The Judeo-Christian," Nancy shows that he is well aware of the supposed conflict of Paul and James and takes the side of those who see James as correcting certain sloganeering interpretations of Paul rather than contradicting Paul, so perhaps we might look to his essay on James for a clarification of his earlier, more Pauline essay.

The key contrast seems to be between "works of the law," which Paul rejects, and the works of faith. For Nancy, what distinguishes works of faith from works of the law is that works of faith do not adhere to any external principle, nor do they manifest anything. One does not "show" faith through works as some kind of detachable sign of an interior essence—rather, faith *just is* its works. Everything takes place at the surface; everything is simply *there*. In Nancy's reading, these works of faith correspond not to a logic of law, but of grace, and grace understood

[11] Nancy, "Le judéo-chrétien," 86.
[12] Nancy, "Le judéo-chrétien," 86.

as a gift. God's gift of grace is understood according to this same coincidence of giving and retaining. When James rails against covetousness, he is critiquing a model of desire and pleasure centered on lack. What God's gift offers in its place, however, is not simply fullness: "There is thus a logic of lack and of jealous appropriation, and a logic of the request in order to receive what can be received only from the gift or as a gift, that is, the favor of grace. This *kharis* is not the opposite of either desire or pleasure: it is desire and pleasure as receptivity of the gift."[13]

It would seem that the works of faith, characterized by receptivity rather than appropriation, are a strange kind of "unworked works," "inoperative works." If we understand the "logic of lack and of jealous appropriation" as akin to the working-out of human essence seen in capitalism—a connection that is not far-fetched given James's harsh critique of wealth—then perhaps there is no real contradiction between the work-friendly reading of James and the anti-work "Inoperative Community." In fact, the specific features of "works of faith" as Nancy finds them in James seem to correspond closely to the "unworked work" that Nancy points toward in "The Inoperative Community"—namely, writing, thought as pure surface-play, communicating no anterior message, never constituting a completed work.

Thus far, it would seem that I have only shown that Nancy reads James in a way that accords with one of his most important essays, a result that is hardly surprising. However, the correspondence between what one might call the positive program of "The Inoperative Community" and the Judeo-Christianity that Nancy finds in James allows us to read "The Inoperative Community" retrospectively as a kind of deconstruction of Christianity. Though Christianity is far from polyvalent in the essay, it is nonetheless that case that Christianity (thought as a representative of the "bad" form of community) is critiqued from the point of view of something that Nancy will come to see in at least a certain form of Christianity. This move

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[13] Nancy, "Le judéo-chrétien," 75.

also opens up the way to see that Nancy's critique of (among other things) Christianity is itself Christian in character. What is more Christian than the rejection of works, for instance? Perhaps nothing, aside from the insistence on works—which shows that Nancy is here repeating a move that comes from the very same Luther who originated the notion of "deconstruction," a move that appears in the texts of the same Paul who was so crucial for Luther's own "deconstruction of Christianity."

In fact, I am almost be tempted to write another paper reading "The Inoperative Community" alongside the Epistle to the Galatians—not quite as a commentary or even as a rewriting, but more like an overlay.[14] For instance, what is Paul responding to if not "the dissolution, the dislocation, or the conflagration of community"?[15] (A particularly tantalizing, but perhaps crackpot connection: a quotation, near the end of the essay, from Bataille's *Ma Mère* about "this hand that writes"—is one not tempted to see here a coy reference to the famous "look how large I write with my own hand"?) Whatever may be the case with this specific comparison, it is clear that in "The Inoperative Community," Nancy is opposing salvation—precisely *salvation*—by works. He does not quite propose a salvation by grace, however, unless we are to think a salvation from salvation itself.

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[14] One might think here of the supposed correspondence between *The Wizard of Oz* and Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon*.

[15] Nancy, *Inoperative Community*, 1.