For the Love of this World: Michel Henry and Jean-Luc Nancy on Theology and Affectivity

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Abstract

When read alongside the great command of Deuteronomy, 'love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, and strength,' the Judeo-Christian directive to 'love your neighbour as yourself' is perhaps one of the most theologically and ethically charged phrases in the Bible. In these two mutually reliant commandments lies a meeting point between the divine and the human that has important implications for our understanding of the nexus between theological conceptions of love and philosophical engagement with worldly existence. This point of intersection is explored in a particularly unique way in the thinking of Michel Henry and Jean-Luc Nancy. In this article, I conduct the first sustained comparative analysis of their respective philosophies, using an exploration of the role of love and affectivity in their work to better understand the philosophical opportunity represented by the commandment to love God and neighbour.

Keywords

Henry, Nancy, theology, philosophy, love, affectivity

Introduction

In the confluence between the two Biblical commandments to 'love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, and strength' (Deuteronomy 6:5) and to 'love your neighbour as yourself' (Leviticus 19:9-18; Mark 12:31; Matthew 22:39; Luke 10:27) a meeting point arises between the divine and the human that has important implications for what has been termed the 'theological turn' within philosophical thought: that is, a return to an interest in religion manifested in the work of numerous major thinkers, from Marion and Chrétien to Badiou and Žižek. This point of intersection is explored in a particularly unique way in the thinking of Michel Henry and Jean-Luc Nancy, philosophers who differ markedly in their approach to the religious question, but who also, despite appearances, in fact share many of the same

philosophical preoccupations.[1] In this article, I conduct the first sustained comparative analysis of their respective philosophies, using an exploration of the role of love and affectivity in their work to better understand the philosophical opportunity represented by the commandment to love God and neighbour. The question I aim to address is how these two commandments can be mutually complementary to each other, and taking this further, how it may require a re-thinking of the notion of a transcendent deity and its relationship to worldly existence.

Both Henry and Nancy are philosophers who have sustained an enduring interest in the role of religion within secular modernity, although they are seen as sharply diverging in their approaches. Henry is viewed as forming part of the theological turn within phenomenology in which theological concerns are smuggled into purportedly neutral philosophical ground, and in which, according to Dominique Janicaud, phenomenology finds itself 'manipulated as an ever-elastic apparatus' [*un dispositif élastique*].[2] Nancy, in contrast, is generally seen as being sharply critical of the thinkers of the turn,[3] a reading that is borne out on the first page of the first volume of his deconstruction of Christianity project, *Dis-Enclosure* (*La Déclosion*), which plainly states that he is not in any way interested in encouraging a return to religious belief: 'It is not our concern to save religion, even less to return to it. The much discussed "return of the religious," which denotes a real phenomenon, deserves no more attention than any other "return."'[4] Instead, Nancy proposes that religion and secular modernity are intertwined in ways that cannot be reduced to theological or philosophical thought as traditionally understood. Although Nancy on occasion refers to Henry's philosophy in a not altogether negative tone, Henry is silent when it comes to the work of his younger contemporary. However, a brief footnote Nancy inserts into one of his writings is telling. In a conference presentation that was eventually included in *Dis-Enclosure,* Nancy compares his own discussion with the exploration Henry was undertaking at the time, which would later be published as *I Am the Truth: Toward a Philosophy of Christianity* (*C'est moi la Vérité: pour une philosophie du christianisme*). In a

footnote inserted into the published version, Nancy comments that Henry, after listening to the paper, responded to the project with 'his total disagreement' [*son désaccord entier*].[5] It is clear, then, that these two thinkers diverge in their methods and objectives, yet they do in fact also share a common philosophical heritage. As I will explore in this discussion of their respective conceptions of love, both place importance on the affective dimension of human experience and use it to understand the connection between love of God and love of neighbour, and both position themselves in a particular way towards the phenomenological tradition of which they are the heirs. I will begin by exploring Henry's phenomenological approach to love, before outlining some issues that come to light in his approach to the problem of being in the world, and then finally moving on to consider the way in which Nancy's thought may provide an alternative.

The Repudiation of the World: Michel Henry's Self-Love

Michel Henry's philosophy is characterised by an attempt to rework the phenomenological tradition—the work of Husserl and Heidegger in particular—through the development of a unique understanding of immanent affectivity. Before moving on to explore Henry's philosophical perspective on love, it is necessary to briefly outline the core proposition governing his broader phenomenology. For Henry, subjectivity must be understood outside of the realm of intentionality which always refers to a world of phenomena. Instead, it consists in a self-reflexive feeling of oneself as a subject undergoing the experiences of life. That is to say, it is auto-affective in that it entails an experience of itself that oscillates between suffering and joy, two basic core feelings that define our existence. On one hand, our experience consists of an originary suffering that emerges from the fact that life is chained to itself and can never escape: '[Life] leaves no room to escape where there would be license to get rid of oneself [*se défaire de soi*] and where there would be something else besides oneself.'[6] But on the other hand, such suffering is balanced out by the joy that also comes from living, from one's being

alive despite the anguish of existence, what Henry calls 'the ineffable happiness of the ordeal and of living [*l'indicible bonheur de s'éprouver et de vivre*].'[7] The *pathos* of auto-affection is the most radical origin of all existence: '[Affectivity is] the universal form of all possible experience in general, the ontological and transcendental dimension which constitutes the foundation of the reality of everything which is.'[8] In short, Henry's immanent affectivity is the very condition of possibility of both the world and of consciousness.

It is in the light of radical immanence that Henry elaborates his re-imagining of the Christian tradition, which reaches its apogee in the final years of his life but is nevertheless always built on the foundation laid many years previously in his first great opus, *The Essence of Manifestation* (*L'Essence de la manifestation*). There is a radical passivity at work within the self as it is generated: 'The Self is passive first in regard to the eternal process of the autoaffection of the life that begets it [*qui l'engendre*] and is forever begetting it.'[9] Here, Henry identifies an archi-phenomenality in which God and the human being share the same self-affective generation:

> The mystery of the transcendental birth of Sons in Life stems from the fact that in this birth two passivities collapse into each other [*s'écrasent l'une contre l'autre*]: the radical passivity of life vis-à-vis the Self in its eternal autoaffection (in theological language, the eternal *jouissance* of God) and, on the other hand, the passivity of the singular Self begotten in this autobegetting [*auto-engendrement*] of absolute life.[10]

Such a conception of two passivities in symbiosis with each other allows Henry to move into the realm of theological reflection as he posits 'the quasi-identity of the essence of man and that of God, namely, Life.'[11] According to Henry, if the absolute is life (that is, God), then the self necessarily experiences itself as a transcendental living self always within, and as a product

of, such life's unfolding, which in turn means that in fact a theological understanding of selfhood represents the fulfilment of phenomenology and not its distortion.[12]

Although it is but one single aspect of a complex philosophical picture, Henry's understanding of love perhaps summarises his overall focus when it comes to the philosophy of Christianity he aims to elaborate. For Henry, the commandment to love one's neighbour is irremediably bound up in the love of God himself. Although this insight is theologically unoriginal, the way Henry expounds the details of this intermingling of the divine love and love of neighbour is philosophically unique and worth pausing on. The reason the commandment to love one's neighbour is the first of all commandments is because it in fact captures the essence of life itself: 'The Commandment is only Commandment of love because Life is love. Life is love because it experiences itself infinitely and eternally. Because it is Life, "God is love," as John says.'[13] So the experience of the auto-affective enjoyment and love of self, the act of '*feeling [oneself] in infinite Life's experience of self and its eternal love*' and therefore loving oneself, completely turns on its head the ethical commandment to love one's neighbour. For Henry, nobody is capable of obeying the law of love as a moral injunction, but rather, the only possibility of obedience comes in the form of a model of sonship, 'in which Life eternally loves itself, embracing itself and loving itself within this love, having become an ego in it and taking its power from it.'[14] So the act and the command are joined in the self-generation that is the origin of life, such that when one holds true to this original condition of self-love, one both acts and reveals God at the same time: '*In the practice of the Commandment of love, absolute Life gives the Son to himself by being given to the self who acts, in such a way that in this practice it is God himself who is revealed, who loves himself with his infinite love*.'[15] If we *are* only in function of the self-revelation of absolute immanence, 'then it is impossible to love God and at the same time not love each of the Selves that God generates.'[16] Love for one's neighbour flows naturally from the pathos of self-love.

The love of God and neighbour understood as a function of life's *pathētik* self-affection accords with Henry's broader phenomenological project and his attempt to understand how self-affection can offer a path towards a proper understanding of the experience of otherness that has preoccupied so much of twentieth- and twenty-first-century thought. Rather than resorting to the 'alterity of a "world" as the foundation of all relation to the other,' Henry contends that his conception of the authentic generation of a self through auto-affection allows us to understand how 'the ego and the alter ego have a common birth, a shared essence.'[17] In short, the transcendental affectivity of life operates as what Henry calls a 'pathos-with' [*pathos-avec*], which signifies the fact that our own auto-affection joins us to an intersubjective community of the living, because 'the subjectivity of life constitutes the essence of community.'[18] We cannot truly *be* except in community, and this perhaps finds its fullest expression, for Henry, in the Christian tradition, which articulates most clearly the connection between pure life and an ethical concern for the other.

However, despite Henry's protestations to the contrary, one of the key criticisms of his thought is that it is in fact, paradoxically, incompatible with an authentic understanding of relation and thereby jeopardises both love of God and love of neighbour. According to Peter Hallward, for example, Henry is one of the foremost representatives of a certain trend within twentieth-century philosophy towards a singular and non-relational thought that rejects the world. Expanding on Henry's own phenomenological position, Hallward argues that the auto-affection of life is radically irreconcilable with the world of objects and the mediation it proposes, and thus 'the world is the place of our doom. In the world that we know, the world known by science and mathematics, there is no place for life or self.'[19] In the same way, then, the interactions which dominate this world, all founded on the necessary objective representation of the ego and that of others we encounter in a world of objects, risk being merely the means of our own alienation and cannot themselves engender or impact on the

radical self-love which characterises the generation of the sonship of absolute life. For similar reasons, other critics see in Henry's thought strains of Gnosticism in disguise. Hart, for example, raises concerns with Henry's rejection of the world as the realm of constituted phenomena and contends that it is contrary to the teaching of Jesus in the Gospels which in fact presents a praxis that is deeply engaged with embodied existence. According to Hart, instead of a philosophy of Christianity that hinges on the historical resurrection of Christ in bodily form, Henry presents a vision that pivots on 'the *gnosis* that the discovery of pure subjectivity saves us from the fallen world.'[20] In the final analysis, Henry affirms a form of ontological monism because he claims that all of existence is immanent auto-affection, which in turn is the auto-generation of divine life in which we participate, and consequently the world of phenomena is purely illusory.

There is a fusion of transcendence and immanence which is never properly worked out within Henry's philosophy, despite certain affirmations of a necessary coupling of the two.[21] Henry seems to come into contradiction with himself, as he himself stresses the need for an authentic Christian engagement with the world. A love that does not lead to action is worthless, indeed, is not really love at all: 'To be realized, to act, is to confront the world, not by maintaining an external and formal opposition to it, but *by transforming it*.'[22] So while rejecting the world, Henry nevertheless maintains that one needs to engage with it, and indeed even transform it, without fully participating in it or submitting to its regimes of representation that distort and cloud pure self-generating life.

A further demonstration of the limits inherent to Henry's conception of love can be found in the example of the lovers' embrace. Henry aims to formulate a convincing phenomenological account of inter-subjectivity, an objective which comes to fruition in one of the last works he wrote, *Incarnation: A Philosophy of Flesh* (*Incarnation: une philosophie de la chair*). Here in particular Henry contemplates the embrace of lovers and the possibility of reaching the other.

For Henry, incarnation entails the immanence of life in flesh, being a body that can feel itself in the pathos of life, experiencing all of life's modalities. When one body comes up against another, as in a sexual encounter, phenomenologically speaking there is not an authentic knowledge of the other (which can only arise in the illusory phenomenological appearing of the world), but rather the dynamic, intentional movement of an 'I can' [*je peux*] deployed as touch coming up against that which resists it.[23] The other body is thus the practical limit of the 'I can,' and is experienced within radical immanence, but never as said other body actually *is* in itself. When lovers come together, there is a mutual limiting force at work: 'Each drive [*pulsion*] […] only ever knows itself, its own movement together with the sensations felt at the limit of its own invisible, organic body. What the other drive feels remains beyond what the first feels.'[24] Although Henry himself asks rhetorically 'does the Self not raise up the walls of its own prison, is it not in its own immanence condemned to an unbearable solitude [*une solitude insupportable*]?,'[25] it is not clear that he ever convincingly answers this question in the negative. Erotic desire is ever frustrated in its attempt to reach and possess the other, and so the lovers' love cannot lead to authentic mutual transformation.

In short, due to his conception of auto-affection as the generation of absolute (divine) life, and his insufficient response to the problem of transcendence in its nexus with immanence as it operates within embodied love, I would contend that Henry is unable to affirm an authentic love of neighbour. He is thus also left unable to fulfil his own insistence (and indeed, the Biblical insistence) on the need to keep love of God and love of neighbour as inseparably united, thereby also jeopardising divine love: what remains is a self-reflexive egotism that is incapable of accessing the source of absolute life, whose very essence is an embrace of the neighbour.[26] As I will now proceed to argue, the dilemma presented by this aspect of Henry's thought finds a fitting response in the philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy. In elaborating a Nancean response to Henry, a more viable model than the latter's understanding of self-love comes to

light, but at the same time it will become necessary to propose an alternative understanding of the limits of the human and the divine.

Jean-Luc Nancy and the Love of this World

Jean-Luc Nancy's philosophy extends across a wide thematic range, from subjectivity and community to reflections on music and the visual arts. A major element of his work consists in what he terms the deconstruction of Christianity, an attempt to evaluate our indebtedness to the Christian tradition and its consequences without effecting a return to religion *per se*.[27] Nancy's thinking here takes inspiration from both a Heideggerian *Destruktion* and a Derridean deconstruction as he presents a vision of the Christian edifice as irrevocably entangled with our so-called secular Western tradition. For Nancy, Christianity is an entity in perpetual self-deconstruction, as it both affirms a supreme being acting as guarantor of the presence of beings and their hope for eventual salvation, and at the same time sows the seeds of its own overcoming in its understanding of a God who is ceaselessly negating himself, from his self-giving in the act of creation to the emptying of the *kenosis* of incarnation and the self-sacrifice of Christ's death on the cross. The history of Judeo-Christian monotheism is therefore the very same history of atheism that seems to define our modern secular world-view, thereby complicating our claim to have definitively put religion behind us while also troubling the post-secular claim to have colonised contemporary Continental thought.

If, for Henry, life consists in being revealed to oneself [*s'éprouver soi-même, se révéler à soi*],[28] in experiencing oneself in all the affective pathos of life with its suffering and joy, Nancy for his part affirms an understanding of the differing and deferral of being that emerges most especially from a profound and enduring engagement with Derrida. But in a striking passage in *Dis-Enclosure,* Nancy appropriates Henry's terminology to describe revelation: 'The life of the living God is properly auto-affection; it presents the person to itself in the infinite dimension

of itself to itself. That pure proclamation is interlocution as infinite sense [*sens infini*] of the pure person or of pure life.'[29] The living God revealed at the heart of Christianity is neither represented nor representable, but instead pure life. The parallels with Henry's thinking on the radical immanence of pure life here are clear and warrant further unpacking, as they suggest the possibility of a fruitful dialogue between these two seemingly divergent thinkers.

The term that most calls for attention in the above-cited passage is 'sense' [*sens*], which in many ways furnishes the logic undergirding Nancy's entire philosophical œuvre. Explicitly referring to Henry's *The Essence of Manifestation*, Nancy argues that a criticism of the text can be mounted based on the fact that, in light of *différance*, one cannot ever know oneself or sense oneself directly, without mediation, in a way that would lay the ground of a revelation thought in Christian terms. Instead, he contests that 'the task is to defer/differ [*différer*] Parousia. Not to cast it ever further but, on the contrary, to approach it in the most intimate manner: to defer [*différer*] the *para* (the near, proximity, presence) of the *ousia* (or *essentia*).'[30] It is through sense that Nancy undertakes such a deferring of the Parousia. Rather than the surety of *ousia* thought as a metaphysical ground, sense for Nancy is 'coming into presence' [*venue en présence*] and is not in any way *a* meaning in any objectifiable, epistemic way, but rather 'the possibility of significations […] and the limit of their meanings [*sens*].'[31] There are strong resonances with *différance* here of course, but Nancy also takes a step beyond Derrida by inscribing the trace into the material spacing of the world: '*World* is not merely the correlative of *sense*, it is structured as *sense*, and reciprocally, *sense* is structured as *world* […] the world *no longer has* a sense, but it *is* sense [le monde *n'a plus* de sens, mais il *est* le sens].'[32] Sense is not just that which gives rise to meaning in signification, it also designates a sensible meaning which precedes linguistic representation, or in other words 'the sense of the world as its very *concreteness* [*concrétude*], that on which our existence *touches* and by which it is *touched*, in

all possible senses.'[33] It is precisely through the prism of sense understood as the possibility of the world and of meaning in general that Nancy undertakes his reading of Christianity.

According to Nancy, despite a certain (dominant) theological tradition that would claim otherwise, Christianity itself demands a repositioning of the transcendent first cause known as 'God' inside the very structure of the world, which changes the way we see the divine generation of pure life. From a Nancean perspective, monotheism has never claimed anything but a meaning here and now and not in the beyond: we need to make '*that which is designated as the "beyond"* [*« dehors »*] *of the world pass back into the world*. Not in immanentizing transcendence, but in inscribing the latter […] *along the edge of* immanence [à même *l'immanence*] (which signifies, ultimately, the insufficiency of these concepts themselves).'[34] The living God for Nancy is therefore a radical unworking of the logic of immanence that drives Henry's phenomenology: the self presenting itself to itself must be thought as the very sense of the world, its opening and *transimmanence*.[35] Behind the word 'presentation' in Nancy's oeuvre lies a complex philosophical lineage which stretches back to Kant and Hegel and cannot be fully explicated here, but essentially Nancy uses the term to indicate an excess over representation, which again can be seen as the eruption of sense as the possibility and limit of signification: 'Before all representational grasp, before a consciousness and its subject, before science, and theology, and philosophy, there is that: the *that* of, precisely, *there is*.'[36] The fact of existence, the 'there is' [*l'il y a*] cannot be represented in signification (that is to say, it is not reducible to Henry's understanding of the phenomenal world), nor is it a form of substantial being. Rather, it is pure life thought as birth, or more precisely, a mode of being born: 'Birth is [the] slipping away of presence through which everything comes to presence.'[37] Life 'presents the person to itself' in the dimension of coming to presence: the subject of sense (or the sense of the subject) is to transcend itself, to be born outside itself. Indeed, it *is* this outside itself.

The natal subjectivity understood through sense that Nancy advances also proposes a solution to Henry's sceptical outlook on the phenomenological tradition's turn towards being-in-the-world to solve the problem of the ethical relation with the other.[38] Whereas Henry's tone is cynical when he says that '*Dasein* is itself a *Mitsein*'[39]—implying that, in his view, such a claim proposes a woefully inadequate solution—Nancy in fact makes the very same assertion, but in a more positive tonality. Instead of seeing the 'Mit-' in *Mitsein*, or *Mitdasein*, as subordinate to *Dasein*, Nancy sees it as co-extensive with it, since it is already implied in the *being-there* of *Da*-sein. In other words, Nancy identifies a latent tendency towards thinking an originary ontology of *being-with* that is left underdeveloped in Heidegger's work.[40] Rather than an impenetrable immanent interiority which refuses the mediation of the phenomenal world, Nancy thinks this world itself as the only possibility of a self. As he writes: 'That which exists, whatever this might be, coexists because it exists. The co-implication of existing is the sharing of the world [*le partage d'un monde*].'[41] The world is shared, and this sharing takes place as the spacing and tactile contact of singular existences which only have their being by virtue of the separation or distinction between them and other existents: 'The singular is an *ego* that is not a "subject" in the sense of the relation of a self to itself. It is an "ipseity" that is not the relation of a "me" to "itself." It is neither "me" nor "you"; it is what is distinguished in the distinction, what is discreet in the discretion [*le distingué de la distinction, le discret de la discrétion*].'[42] This innapropriable sharing is precisely what sense is: 'Sense does not take place for one alone [*Du sens n'a pas lieu pour un seul*] […]. Sense is the fact that sense begins or begins again with each singularity and completes itself neither in any singularity nor in the totality, which is itself nothing but the enchaining of renewed beginnings [*l'enchaînement des recommencements*].'[43] In place of Henry's auto-affective generation of life, there is sense, which consists of an infinite multiplicity of generated/generative subjectivities.

The relationality of being-in-the-world allows Nancy to propose his own understanding of love, one which, building on the understanding of being-with I have just elaborated, both serves as an important challenge to Henry's thinking and also calls for a new understanding of the place of the divine in relation to worldly existence. As for Henry, for Nancy love is the most important of the theological virtues, because it 'definitively assures the true stakes [*le véritable enjeu*] of […] the relation to "God."'[44] Love marks the breaking of the self as it is fragmented in its very coming to presence, representing a limit-point at which the line between the divine and the human is always indistinct. Love is a transcendence, but not one that would pass 'into—and through—an exteriority or an alterity in order to reflect itself in it and to reconstitute in it the interior and the identical.'[45] In other words, it is not as though the subject is an essence that would put itself outside itself in order to love, to give itself. Rather, the act of love constitutes its very ex-istence *as already* the outside: '[Love] does not remain outside; it *is* this outside itself, the other, each time singular.'[46] In the act of love, the exposure to otherness is the very possibility of subjectivity itself, as 'the singular being is traversed by the alterity of the other, which does not stop or fix itself anywhere, neither in "him," nor in "me," because it is nothing other than the coming-and-going [*le venir-et-partir*].'[47] In a reworking of the ethics of Levinasian alterity, Nancy suggests that the outside of love 'is borne by, or bears, *autrui*.'[48] Just as the self presents itself to itself in the singular plurality of existence, to say 'I love you' for Nancy is to say 'I am addressing myself to you,'[49] the address being precisely an articulation—or presentation—of the sharing of sense. In short, love is a break in the finite subject that is already its own originary transcendence, the outside which Nancy sees as the relation among all existents that make up the world.

The living God as read by Nancy operates through an affective ontology, which again is the point of articulation of strong similarities with, and differences from, Henry's position. This point of intersection is particularly well delineated when Henry and Nancy are opened up to a

dialogue with Spinoza, who influences them both.[50] Nancy elaborates on the Spinozist resonance of the verb *jouir,* which in French means to enjoy, obtain pleasure or to profit from an object that one possesses. Nancy refers to Spinoza's proposition in the *Ethics*, that love is 'pleasure [*laetitia*] accompanied by the idea of an external cause' in order to elaborate an affective understanding of love.[51] It is pertinent to note Nancy's own reference to Henry here, as he complements his reading of Spinoza with a citation from *The Essence of Manifestation*: 'Far from coming after the arrival of being [*la venue de l'être*] and marveling before it, joy is consubstantial with it, founds it and constitutes it.'[52] The self-sacrifice of the subject who gives him or herself in love for the neighbour enacts the same love as the absent divinity that empties itself in the mutual sharing and exposure of being. The Spinozan experience of an originary relationality is something, Nancy emphasises, 'from which we can receive joy but which we cannot know [*dont nous pouvons avoir joie mais non savoir*].'[53] Joy, or *laetitia*—which Spinoza calls 'the passive transition of the mind to a state of greater perfection'[54]—cannot be understood as an act of enjoyment in the same way that one would enjoy an object. Rather, it must be understood as an emotion, whose etymology Nancy reminds us means 'set in movement, in motion, shaken, affected, breached [*mis en branle, ébranlé, affecté, entamé*]' in an affective dimension.[55] This echoes Henry's emphasis on the passivity of auto-affective life, but also provides a response to the problem of two passivities affecting one another (or failing to in Henry's case, as I have argued). When we love, we passively experience joy as the opening of the immanent subject to the very alterity which makes its being possible in the first place, and which opens up the possibility of all activity. Nancy stresses the word 'sharing' [*partage*], which indicates the mutual reciprocity of his entire thinking on singular plural ontology:

> Joy is not even to contain joy itself, nor the pain that consequently accompanies it. The joy of joying does not come back to anyone, neither to me nor to you, for in each it opens

> the other. In the one and the other, and in the one by the other, joy offers being itself, it makes being felt, shared.[56]

We are never able to fully embrace activity in the Spinozist sense (that is, an awareness of the cause of feeling) because we are always already affected by the relation in which we dwell inherently and unavoidably, in a radical sense. For Nancy, then, joy is an active passivity that *is* the exposure of existence as being-in-relation. To love is to be affected and to in turn affect others in a very real and direct way that in many respects echoes and extends Henry's insistence on the radicality of immanent life—that is, on a divine life we are always participating in as our authentic subjective nature.

But in its affective resonances, joy is also embodied, and this bodily aspect is important for properly understanding Nancy's response to Henry. Rejecting the discourse surrounding 'flesh' [*la chair*] that dominates the work of the thinkers of the turn (including Henry), Nancy instead reads the incarnation in terms of *kenosis*, or emptying, which is another instance of God's withdrawal, his becoming-atheism [*le devenir-vide de Dieu*].[57] The body itself is the place of this withdrawal, the very space of tension between the *hoc est enim corpus meum*, in which the real bodily presence of Christ is made manifest in the Eucharist, and the words of Christ to Mary Magdalene after the resurrection prohibiting the touching of his risen body, *noli me tangere*:

> But the man into whom God "descends" and "empties himself" (Paul's *kenosis*) is not rendered divine by this. On the contrary. God effaces himself in that man: he is this effacement, he is therefore a trace, he is an impalpable, imperceptible vestige of the

> emptied and abandoned divine. Mankind is the abandonment of God: the trace upon him, the trace that he is, constitutes him as a sign of this abandonment.[58]

For this reason, Nancy calls the body—everyone's body, not simply the body of Christ—'*absence-here*' [*l'absence-ici*], being the marker of an absent divinity.[59] Thus the being-present of the body is its very emptying, or putting-outside-itself [*la mise-hors-de-soi*].[60] Nancy once again designates the outside of bodily existence through an inscription of the trace of *différance* into materiality: '"Ontology of the body" = exscription of being [*excription de l'être*]. Existence addressed to an out-side [*au-dehors*] (*there*, where there's no address, no destination; and yet (but how?) someone does the receiving: myself, you, us, bodies, finally).'[61] Exscription is the address of a singular existent towards the multiplicity of other singularities that make up its outside, that form the possibility of its singularity. Here, Nancy one again underlines the connection between sense and touch. To be together, to be in-common, is to touch, or rather, touch *is* the relation between us, and it is this touch which forms a writing of sense, an exscription: '"Writing" means not the monstration, the demonstration, of a signification but a gesture towards *touching* upon *sense* [*un geste pour* toucher *au* sens].'[62] The passivity of the 'joying' self is simultaneously its activity, as touching is the pivot upon which being-in-the-world turns: 'The delighted body delights in itself [*le corps joui jouit de soi*] insofar as this *self* is enjoyed (as delighting/being delighted, touching/being touched).'[63] To be a body is to experience joy as a touching-of-oneself and a being-touched by others, but this touching in itself is also always a bodily address—or exscription—to an outside which is the taking place of sense, in the in-between of the world. Far from there being no access to the other, as in Henry, there is in Nancean touch an access which at the same time confounds the subject/object opposition and the very logic of signification.

The comparative reading of Henry's and Nancy's respective readings of the body finds a fitting moment of apogee in the lovers' embrace. The verb *jouir* in French also of course holds sexual connotations, denoting in contemporary usage the act of reaching orgasm. Nancy sees erotics as an inevitable corollary to the incarnation, because what we are speaking about are bodies that necessarily desire.[64] This erotic logic is framed by a reading of embodiment in terms of what he calls the syncope: 'The syncope that the body *is* […] is, as in music, a beat; it adjoins (syn-) in cutting (-cope) [*elle ajointe (syn-) en coupant (-cope)*]. It adjoins the body to itself and bodies among one another.'[65] The touch of the body is inappropriable as such, being a rhythm that simultaneously conjoins and separates the body from itself, and one body from another. This syncope is also one of desire, which cannot in fact be understood as a pining after an object one wishes to possess, but in fact is structured according to a different logic: '[Desire is] tension toward what is not an object: namely, the syncope itself, in that it takes place in the other, and that it is "one's own" only in being in the other and of the other [*elle n'est « propre » qu'en étant dans l'autre et de l'autre*].'[66] The reconfiguration of desire Nancy undertakes here is intimately connected to his reading of Lacan's famous remark that 'there is no sexual relation' [*il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel*]. For Nancy, the coming together of two bodies, or two moments of syncope, cannot be reduced to the coupling of two fleshly entities: 'When we say that there is no sexual relation we could mean that there is no revenue, no account [*compte-rendu*] to be given, no conformity or fixed proportion for what happens when a couple couples [*lorsqu'un couple s'accouple*].'[67] In short, it is not possible to think of sexual relation as a 'thing' at all, because it *is* the relation of the body as it touches on the outside: 'The sexual is not a variety of the genre known as relation, but in the sexual we see the extent of relation and see it fully exposed [*son exposition intégrale*].'[68] Whereas in Henry's model, each intentional drive only knows itself, through a Nancean lens the other is known, but in the modality of 'joying' (*jouir*), according to which things are conceived 'without a concept' and we come,

paradoxically, to knowledge of 'what is not an object of knowledge.'[69] The lovers in their embrace 'expose, at the limit, the exposition of singular beings to one another and the pulse of this exposition [*le battement de cette exposition*]' being a writing, or exscription, in which 'joy *touches* its limit.'[70] If, for Henry, each lover can only ever experience 'the practical limit of the "I can" experienced within radical immanence,'[71] for Nancy the limit in question is *already* sharing, is *already* the active passivity of joy in the touch of bodies.

In the touch of sense, Nancy's understanding of embodied love offers a means of fulfilling Henry's emphasis on the orientation of Christianity towards a transformation of the world. Nancy argues that Christian love is indissociable from equality, a contestation he puts forward by turning to the word *caritas* in Latin which emerges from the word *carus* meaning 'dear' or 'valued.'[72] Rather than conceiving the world in terms of a transactional economy of exchange over and above which one must assert the moral imperatives of respect and love for the other, Nancy sees it in terms of an absolute and incontrovertible value which is already present within existence itself: 'What does the word *caritas* say? It states the fact of attaching a price, of treating something as dear (*carus*) […]. Contrary to riches as an end in themselves [*la richesse autofinalisée*], charity affirms a unique, exclusive, and incommensurable price, which must be the price of everyone.'[73] Here Nancy, like Henry, recognises the insufficiency of a legal requirement to love applied in an abstract ethical sense, and at the same time wishes to avoid a sentimental understanding of love devoid of all force. Rather, love itself is essentially the position of equality, a feeling or affective stance in which one stands before 'the incommensurable that is designated by the "dignity," the "worth," and the singular "value" of each existence.'[74] Despite the absence of a moral law, we are always caught up in this stance of equality, always provoked by it, because without the plurality of existents surrounding us

we could not *be* in the first place—to authentically love ourselves is to love our neighbour, and vice versa.

At this juncture, it is important to address Peter Hallward's criticism of Nancy, namely that he in fact, like Henry, essentially rejects real-world existence. As Hallward contends: 'All of Nancy's philosophy relies on this basic ontological rule: every presenting, or presencing, whatever it presents, itself withdraws from every possible presentation. It withdraws, to begin with, from any presentation of itself.'[75] As a consequence, Nancy's presencing will neither be influenced by nor have any bearing on anything occurring within the world: '[Nancy's] is a world that withdraws from all actual history, the world of an absolute gravity free of any relational weight. However it comes, whatever is coming will come without relation to what has already come as much as to what will have come.'[76] Hallward therefore suggests that Nancy's thought offers no real incentive or means for effective change in the world, because it can never be known anywhere except in withdrawal. However, Nancy would likely retort that attempting to think a world that would somehow exist outside of presencing, in a state of completion—in other words, where else but within an absolute presence thought of as a stable ground?—is not only impossible but also dangerous. There is never any presentation that is not in the process of presenting itself, and this, and only this, is what makes the world (or more properly, is *making* the world which itself is only a making, and nothing else). In Nancean terms, everything is process, movement towards, even the seemingly most rigid of institutions, and it is precisely such a coming *to* presence that leaves open the most real possibility for transformation. Nancy's recipe for effective change is to first and foremost recognise that things are already constantly changing and transforming themselves; it is only resistance to this change that causes a problem, leaving us with institutions and social conventions that become staid and corrupt. Thus, Nancy's relational ontology is very much a worldly thinking of

transformation because in its very logic as thinking (of change) it enacts change, or more correctly, it works with the way things already are *as* change, honours and facilitates the change that is *already taking place*, despite our delusions to the contrary. So perhaps the real question here is how 'change' is to be measured and defined. Could it not be that the 'thinking of relating without relation to whatever can be related,'[77] as Hallward puts it, is itself a form of change? Could it be an actively passive thinking which, by its very nature, changes who we are, and by extension the way we relate to, and value, the things of this world? Love would seem to be the example *par excellence* of such a thinking, because it cannot by nature ever be measured or known purely via its outward expression, given that it 'diffuses itself through all things.'[78] One can never offer to someone absolute proof of one's love for them, no matter what actions are undertaken or which words are uttered. In other words, love is in a perpetual state of withdrawal away from presence. And yet, no one would deny the power love holds in our psyche: 'Nothing leads us more surely back to ourselves (to the Occident, to philosophy, to the dialectic, to literature) than love.'[79] Actions do not make love, but neither can love be thought of as an absence of action. Love is a *presencing* that Nancy would call the passive/active 'touching the limit,' which is in fact not a limit between self and other but a limit of shared exposure without which there could be no existents in the first place.[80]

In light of the Nancean reading of love, it is also possible to draw some conclusions about the position that 'God' occupies in relation to the world. *Being-with* in a certain way summarises Nancy's entire reading of the monotheistic God, who, in the absence of a foundational principle or first cause outside of the world, is simply what he calls 'the *among*' or 'the *between* of us' [*l'*avec *ou l'*entre *de nous*].[81] The name 'God,' Nancy claims, has no referent except this immanent plurality of relation: '"God" was a name for the relation [*rapport*] among all beings—therefore, for the *world* in the strongest sense of the word.'[82] Taking inspiration from

John's famous phrase, 'God is love,' Nancy's understanding of love adds further nuance to his broader phrasing of God as relation. It is love that makes a demand on us, just as the God of the Bible makes his call to the people of Israel: '[Love] cannot be presented or realized, but it is what naked existence calls for, existence without a world-beyond [*sans outre-monde*] and without essence.'[83] Rather than being the call of a transcendent divine being, Nancy's call of love is an affective communication of all existents, living and non-living: 'Beings affect one another […] and the world […] is nothing other than the general communication of this emotion: the shaking of creation [*l'ébranlement de la création*].'[84] Nancy's understanding of affectivity affirms that it is only in the material relations we maintain within the world that love takes shape. Transcendence is not sacrificed but rather re-positioned on the edge of immanent auto-affective life in its intersection with a plurality of other singular subjects. There is an important connection to be drawn between love and faithfulness, because both are that which '*entrusts itself to* the beyond-itself [*l'au-delà de soi*] in order to be what it needs to be.'[85] Nancy speaks about faith in 'God' being progressively replaced by a 'faithfulness to nothing, faithfulness to no one, *faithfulness to faithfulness* itself [*fidélité à la fidélité* même].'[86] In short, Christianity is the religion of the exit from religion [*la religion de la sortie de la religion*] because it calls on its adherents to have faith in the sense that *already* exists between all the existents of the world in their singular value. If Henry's insistence on the immanence of life precludes the possibility of ever authentically loving the other, Nancy's transimmanence instead facilitates an opening to alterity, but in the process it is necessary to adjust the conception of divinity that is in play.[87] In short, instead of rejecting the world, we embrace it, but at the same time we need to do away with notions of transcendence that posit a God removed from being-in-the-world.

Conclusion

The analysis of Henry's and Nancy's respective philosophies reveals that the commandment to 'love God and one's neighbour' has particularly important implications for thinking the point of intersection between theological and philosophical accounts of the world. In Henry's phenomenology, God as the truth of life generates all other life in himself through the Arch-Son, Christ. But if radical immanence is to experience the auto-affection of pure life, this pure life must necessarily take place in withdrawal from the world, as the love of God remains, ironically, at a transcendent remove from embodied reality. In preserving the pure life of 'God,' existence is sacrificed. In contrast, for Nancy, to love is to be affected and to in turn affect others in a real and embodied way, because love is the singular value of each existent in the world. Consequently, to have faith is to entrust oneself to the sharing which divides and partitions out the plurality of singularities, to address oneself (exscribe oneself) to the outside which makes us who we are. In the greatest of all commandments, then, there lies a challenge to religion, and at the same time an opportunity to reach a different understanding of the place of an absent God in the world: if to love God is the same as to love one's neighbour, then we reach a limit-point at which one can choose to affirm either that divine transcendence simply dissipates into immanentism, or alternatively, that 'divine' transcendence is accessible within finitude in a radically new way. What is thus needed is to re-examine how the distinction between love of God and neighbour is framed, and to re-negotiate our attitudes towards religious life. For example, how is love for what religious tradition has called 'God' best expressed? Even if, following in Nancy's footsteps, we no longer see a place for institutionalised religion, our existence as beings of love needs to be recognised, affirmed and responded to appropriately. Is it possible to separate ethical care for the other from worship of a deity, or are these two expressions of love still mutually dependent? Perhaps the word 'God' is still somehow necessary as the designator and facilitator of a particular stance towards the

transimmanence of the world.[88] Taking this further, does a Nancean reading of love allow us to conceive of a radically transformed Christianity in a modern secular world built more and more on notions of individualism and personal fulfilment outside the scope of traditional theologies, or do we in the end simply return full circle to orthodoxy?[89] With this comparative analysis of Nancy and Henry, I suggest, we find a phrasing of the command to love God and neighbour that begins to forge an alternative pathway of reconciliation between the thinkers of the turn and their critics, but at the same time perhaps such a critical manoeuvre simply raises more questions than it answers. However, what is certain is that Nancy's thought reminds us that love and joy are co-extensive with our very existence as human beings, whether we are nominally religious or not. It is perhaps fitting to conclude with the famous words of Augustine, who in one of his homilies on the First Epistle of John sums up the centrality of love: 'Love, and do what you will. Whether you keep silence, keep silence in love; whether you exclaim, exclaim in love; whether you correct, correct in love; whether you forbear, forbear in love. Let love's root be within you, and from that root nothing but good can spring.'[90]

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Endnotes

[1] Mullarkey differentiates between Henry and Nancy based on their differing levels of commitment to immanence, Nancy being seen as adhering to the transcendence of a 'residual Heideggerianism' (Mullarkey, *Post-Continental Philosophy*, 195). For his part, following a slightly different but related line of argument, Hallward sees the two (along with various other twentieth-century philosophers) as both failing to adequately think absolute immanence due to what he sees as their shared rejection of a relational thinking on worldly existence (Hallward, "The One or the Other"). I will have more to say on Hallward's critique a little later.
[2] Janicaud, "The Theological Turn," 65.
[3] Alexandrova et al., *Re-treating Religion*, 34–36.
[4] Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 1.
[5] Ibid., 188.
[6] Henry, *Material Phenomenology*, 120.
[7] Henry, "Speech and Religion," 237.
[8] Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, 511.
[9] Henry, "Speech and Religion," 225.
[10] Ibid., 223–224.
[11] Ibid., 225. The identification of God with the essence of the human through the auto-begetting of absolute Life also allows Henry to posit faith as a radically different form of self-knowledge: 'Faith is not some sort of lesser knowledge deprived of its own position and thus of all possible justification. It is simply a name for the unshakeable certainty that life has of living and for its hyperknowing. Faith does not come from the fact that we believe, it comes from the fact that we are the living in life. It is our condition as Sons that makes us believe what we believe, namely that we are Sons; and it is for this reason alone that Faith can befall us' (Ibid., 227).
[12] See Henry, *Entretiens*, 154.
[13] Henry, *I am the Truth*, 186.
[14] Ibid., 187.
[15] Ibid., 188.
[16] Ibid., 252.
[17] Henry, *Material Phenomenology*, 4.
[18] Ibid., 121.
[19] Hallward, "The One or the Other," 5, 9.
[20] Hart, "Inward Life," 106.
[21] For example, when Henry claims that 'it is only on the basis of […] radical immanence that something like transcendence is possible' (Henry, *Material Phenomenology*, 81), or when he writes in a seemingly rather self-contradictory fashion that 'transcendence denotes the immanence of Life in each living being [*l'immanence de la Vie en chaque vivant*]' (Henry, *Incarnation*, 123).

[22] Henry, *I am the Truth*, 236.
[23] Henry, *Incarnation*, 208–209.
[24] Ibid., 211.
[25] Ibid., 213.
[26] Such a charge can be levelled at certain other thinkers of the theological turn within phenomenology. For example, one could argue that Jean-Luc Marion's insistence on a non-ontological conception of God leads to a similar impasse (see Collins, "Being Exposed to Love").
[27] The two main works within this project are *Dis-Enclosure* (*La Déclosion*) and *Adoration* (*L'Adoration*), although the project in fact spans over a much broader time period and cannot be so easily separated out from Nancy's other philosophical works.
[28] Henry, *Words of Christ*, 73.
[29] Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 156.
[30] Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, note 29, 178.
[31] Nancy, *The Gravity of Thought*, 59.
[32] Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 8.
[33] Ibid., 10. The motif of touch is one of the key features of Nancy's thought, as it draws together his re-working of the notions of presence and embodiment. Indeed, it is also Nancy's deployment of touch that serves as the basis of Derrida's robust critique in *On Touching* (*Le toucher*).
[34] Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, note 48, 183.
[35] Ibid., 55.
[36] Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*, 4.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Henry claims that a certain insufficiency in thinking has obliged phenomenology to reject interiority, which means the only way it is able to resolve the problem of the other is to understand 'the human being […] as a being-in-the-world and thus as being among things and with others [*un être-dans-le-monde et ainsi auprès des choses et ainsi auprès des autres*]' (Henry, *Material Phenomenology*, 124).
[39] Ibid.
[40] See Nancy, "The Being-with of Being-there," 5.
[41] Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 29.
[42] Ibid., 32–33.
[43] Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 88.
[44] Nancy, *Adoration*, 54.
[45] Nancy, "Shattered Love," 97.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid., 98.
[48] Nancy, *Adoration*, 59.
[49] Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 58.
[50] Part of Nancy's broader philosophical project entails what he explicitly calls 'a "Spinozan" reading, or rewriting, of *Being and Time*' (Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*, note 56, 407), and indeed Spinoza in fact represents an important philosophical reference point for Nancy in his attempt to understand worldly existence in light of the Christian tradition (see Collins, "The Virtue of Joy"). For Henry's part, despite his turning away from a Spinozist vision of the world after his Masters thesis (*Le Bonheur de Spinoza*), as Longneaux ("Étude sur le spinozisme de MH") notes, the indirect influence of Spinoza continues to be felt throughout the rest of his career in the form of his commitment to immanence. Although one should be careful of over-stressing this lineage, particularly due to the conspicuous lack of substantive references to Spinoza in Henry's later work, certainly a side-by-side reading of Spinoza, Nancy and Henry can be mutually illuminating, although I do not purport to have done that in any exhaustive fashion in this article.
[51] Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part III, Prop. 13, Schol., 286.
[52] Nancy, "Shattered Love," 107; Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, 661.
[53] Nancy, *Adoration*, 94.
[54] Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part III, Prop. 11, Schol., 285.
[55] Nancy, "On the Soul," 135.
[56] Nancy, "Shattered Love," 107.
[57] Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 83.
[58] Nancy, *Adoration*, 30.
[59] Nancy, "Corpus," 119.
[60] Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 82.
[61] Nancy, "Corpus," 19.
[62] Ibid., 17.
[63] Ibid., 119.

[64] As he says, 'a (Socratic) erotics passes through the (Christic) incarnation as if by means of a fold internal to the *logos*' (Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 83).
[65] Ibid. The figure of the syncope also occupies a prominent place in his early reading of Kant (see Nancy, *The Discourse of the Syncope*).
[66] Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 83.
[67] Nancy, "The 'There is' of Sexual Relation," 5.
[68] Ibid., 9.
[69] Ibid., 13.
[70] Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 38.
[71] Henry, *Incarnation*, 211.
[72] Nancy, *Adoration*, 57–60.
[73] Ibid., 57–58.
[74] Ibid., 59.
[75] Hallward, "J-LN and the Implosion of Thought," 161.
[76] Ibid., 177.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Nancy, "Shattered Love," 92. Nancy affirms that 'thinking—which is nothing other than the *weighing* or testing of the limits, the ends, of presence, of life, of consciousness—thinking itself is love' (Ibid., 99).
[79] Ibid., 92.
[80] My analysis here follows the same general pattern laid out by Watkin in his defence of Nancy's relational ontology against the charge laid by other critics such as Simon Critchley, who suggest that the abandonment of a Levinasian self/Other model compromises ethical action (Critchley, *Ethics, Politics, Subjectivity*). Watkin contends that, far from being a passive ontology which risks falling into ethical indifference, Nancy's 'ethics of mutuality is a potent solidarity, where the suffering of any one, of each one, is a suffering which I share and, concretely, for which I have responsibility […]. Because I am not *in* relation; I *am* singular plural relation' (Watkin, "A Different Alterity," 61).
[81] Nancy, *Adoration*, 30.
[82] Ibid.
[83] Ibid., 58.
[84] Ibid., 85.
[85] Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 153.
[86] Ibid., 154.
[87] Mercer criticises Henry for affirming 'a faith in oneself as much as it might be a faith in God, such that every move toward transcendence brings one back to immanence' (Mercer, "Radical Phenomenology," 164), indicating that this could be grounds for finding him guilty of Gnosticism, or at least of perpetuating a philosophy that bears little resemblance to Christianity. Mercer resorts to Levinas to point out a way forward, whereas here I have argued that another conception of relation is possible. The corollary is, however, that the very schema of transcendence-immanence needs to be adjusted: the Nancean subject does not pre-exist the other, and this itself is the operation of a transcendence that some may choose to call 'God.'
[88] Nancy himself in fact poses this very question in his discussion of what he calls the 'existential ordeal of thought' [*épreuve existentielle de la pensée*], or in other words, the need for reason to discover its own unconditionality: '[This] ordeal or trial cannot be avoided. Subsequently, the question may arise of knowing whether this ordeal does or does not require recurrence to a special nomination distinct from any nomination of concepts, and whether "god" or "divine" can or cannot serve as an index or benchmark [*servir d'indice ou de repère*]' (Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 11).
[89] Derrida contends, for example, that Nancy's attempt to carry out a deconstruction of Christianity is, although admirable, in the end simply another form of 'Christian hyperbole' (Derrida, *On Touching*, 220).
[90] Augustine, "Seventh Homily," 316.

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