Ignaas Devisch, *Jean-Luc Nancy and the Question of Community*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013. xv + 255 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. $130.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781441165626; $39.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9781472570888.

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This volume offers us a beautifully clear, complex and applied reading of Nancy's developing understanding of community over time but, like that understanding itself, it leaves a number of important questions unanswered.

Jean-Luc Nancy and the Question of Community is, as Devisch hastens to point out, not simply a book about Nancy's philosophy, or even about Nancy's idea of community. To be sure, it contains a fine-grained, diachronic account of Nancy's thinking of community, but the expositions of key Nancean texts are set in the context of an ambition that goes beyond merely making clear the complexities of Nancy's developing ideas. The context in which Devisch situates Nancy's thought, and the set of problems to which he convincingly argues it offers a fresh and compelling response, is the debate in Anglo-Saxon philosophical and political thought between liberalism and communitarianism. I will briefly sketch that debate and how Devisch situates Nancy in relation to it, before raising a series of questions which, in my estimation at least, the book does not fully answer. Given that Devisch is a subtle and faithful expositor of Nancy's work, my questions are directed as much to Nancy himself as to Devisch.

Devisch takes his impetus from a double bind in the contemporary thinking of community. On the one hand, community has become ethically and politically problematic in the wake of the National Socialist ideology of the 1930s and 1940s, and has also become less prominent in the context of the rise of Rawlsian liberalism to the extent that, now, "a collective approach to happiness has become untenable" (p. x). On the other hand, we have witnessed in recent decades a renewed nostalgia for community, "a new call for the restoration of ancient social bonds" (p. 4) that has led to a recovery, in the thought of Alistair McIntyre and others, of an Aristotelian virtue ethics which has given rise to a new communitarianism.[1]

Today, Devisch argues, liberals and communitarians have arrived at an impasse. Nancy, he quite rightly argues, has been chronically under-represented in this debate, and his thought provides us with ways of moving beyond the stalemate of communitarianism and liberalism. The Nancean intervention begins with a denunciation of both positions, not on account of their differences, but because of one crucial feature that unites them. Both liberalism and communitarianism offer "immanentist" conceptions of community, which is to say "that they begin from a conception of identity as an immanent totality that is only subsequently marked by difference" (p. xi). It matters little therefore that, for the liberal, this original identity is to be found in the individual and that, for the communitarian, it is to be found in the common idea of the good. What matters for Nancy is that any such immanent origin of community, any idea of community based on an original substance, wholeness, or totality, will always eventually exclude those who do not share the immanent features that are deemed to found the community, and will do so

frequently with violence. A number of examples of such exclusion are evoked throughout the book, notably Nazi Germany, the Stalinist atrocities and the Balkan crisis of the 1990s.

To the question "liberalism or communitarianism?", then, Nancy answers "no, thank you." But what does he offer in their place? Not one additional concept of community to place alongside them as a third option (p. xi) but rather a new social ontology (or ontological sociality) to replace the ontology of substantial immanentism that characterises liberalism and communitarianism alike. This new social ontology, Devisch helpfully points out, takes the form of a rewriting of Heidegger's *Being and Time* that strips Heideggerian *Mitsein* of any substantial unity and affirms being-with as non-self-present, originary and irreducible. For Nancy, our very being is a being in common, and we are already in relation before we can speak of this or that determinate idea of community. Crucially, this being in common is not a trait that is possessed by members of a community (such as Aryan descent or Serb nationality). Being in common is not something that I possess at all, but rather something that dispossesses me of all claims to exclusive membership. Whereas liberalism and communitarianism haggle over the ontic basis of community (common commitment to individual rights or common vision of the good), Nancy gets behind all ontic determinations of community, behind the question of "the sharing of a specific essence or identity" (p. 31), to the ontological condition of possibility of any community whatsoever.

Devisch convincingly shows that introducing Nancy into the liberalism/communitarianism discussion reveals that communitarians and liberals occupy very similar ontological positions, and the persuasive argument that this ontological condition of possibility of any community whatsoever "has been denied in the thinking of community until very recently" (p. xi) brings something genuinely new to the Anglo-Saxon debate. One of the major advantages of this ontological approach is that, in interrogating the shared ontology at the root of the political debate between liberals and communitarians, Devisch's Nancy is able to uncover affinities that remain hidden at the surface level of the discussion. This is a very valuable contribution to an important debate.

Such, in all-too-brief summary, is the major thrust of Devisch's argument as I understand it. I now come to a series of questions and queries that, in my estimation, ought to be posed to Devisch's reconstruction of Nancy's position, some of which he addresses and others of which he does not. The first question interrogates the very idea of making an ontological intervention into a political debate. The reader with a background in social science or politics may well feel a gear crunch in the move from a set of problems posed in terms of individuals and communities, National Socialism and the Balkans, to a response framed as a rewriting of Heideggerian *Mitsein*. Those suspicious of "Continental philosophy" risk thinking that their worst fears have been confirmed. Devisch is writing no Nancean hagiography and he readily acknowledges that there is a socio-economic questioning that exceeds Nancy's ontological perspective that Nancy has consistently struggled over time to bring his ontology to bear on a rethinking of economics in general and capitalism in particular and, indeed, that his philosophical-ontological point of entry prevents him from thinking politically.

Despite these concerns, however, he also provides a two-pronged answer to the question of whether it is apposite to provide an ontological response to a political problem. First, he argues that Nancy is practical and concrete in significant ways, foremost among which is the insistence that metaphysical immanentism has led to some of the most barbarous and deadly political regimes of the twentieth century. To expose and impugn immanentism is to strike at the ideological root of practices and politics that are of immediate, existential, and practical concern. Secondly, Devisch argues that it is not the job of social ontology to be immediately practical. For a philosophy to give in to the demand to be immediately useful to ethics and politics, Devisch quite rightly argues, is to "refrain from philosophizing truly and give itself over to the political fashions of the day" (p. 186). It is to make philosophy the handmaid of political whim, defanged and unable to challenge the status quo.

My second question, parallel to the first, explores the strategy of providing a French response to an Anglo-Saxon problem. There is much, of course, to be applauded in bringing Nancy into the conversation between Rawls, McIntyre, Sandel and Nussbaum. Nancy's intervention offers a fresh perspective and is free of the groupthink that inevitably colours philosophical conversation (Nancy, to be sure, has his own groupthink, but the important point here is that it is not the same as that which inflects the liberalism/communitarianism debate). However, Devisch insists that Nancy's work has been overlooked in "*the* contemporary debate over community" (p. xi, my emphasis), but this is not the only debate about community happening at the moment and, in the French debate, the battle lines are not drawn between liberals and communitarians but between Republican universalism and *laïcité* on the one hand and Anglo-Saxon "democracy" (encompassing much of both liberalism and communitarianism) on the other.[2] In other words, there could well be a French political response to this Anglo-Saxon political problem without having to resort to the ontological register.

I want to stress that this is not a critique of Devisch's argument--for he establishes well the importance of the ontological in undermining the idea of a shared substance common to both liberalism and communitarianism--but it certainly opens the conversation started by Devisch to a still wider array of participants. Continuing in this spirit of widening the debate, we could reflect on whether it need necessarily be Nancy's idea of community that undercuts the shared essence common to liberalism and communitarianism. Does not Badiou's insistence on universalism and an ontology of pure multiplicity in *Being and Event*, to take one example, equally secure the ontic-to-ontological shift that Devisch uses Nancy to accomplish? And, if it does, is it because both Nancy and Badiou present us with philosophies that take their inspiration from French Republican universalism (in which case the detour via ontology would itself always already be an appeal to politics)?

The third question with which the book left me, and an answer to which I was unable to find in its pages, concerns the assumption that Nancy's singular plural being is free from the immanentism of communities founded on a particular determinate substance. On a theoretical level, it is quite clearly free of such substantialism for the reason that being in common is not a quality that a given individual or community can either possess or not possess, but is rather the condition of possibility of any determinate possession or lack. Nevertheless, it is not hard to see how the very refusal of a determinate ground for community could itself easily be transformed into a shibboleth designating in-groups and out-groups in just the same way as the immanent substantialism it is intended to undercut. My question at this point runs parallel to the concern raised by Derrida in relation to Nancy's deconstruction of Christianity when, in *On Touching*, he expresses an uneasiness that "even if there were any sense to or a necessity for it, the 'deconstruction of Christianity' that Nancy has announced seems such a difficult, paradoxical, almost impossible task, always in danger of being exposed as mere Christian hyperbole."[3]

In the context of community, the uneasiness can be framed in the following way: what is there to prevent the insistence that community lacks any determinate foundation becoming itself an identitarian hyperbole, a shibboleth on the basis of which individuals or groups are excluded from, or devalued within, the community? In other words, the excluded "other" of the community of those who have nothing in common is the community of those who insist upon having something in common. No one is more dangerous nor more of a threat to such a community than the one who thinks it ought to have a determinate base, and an insistence on the universal and the indeterminate are always a hair's breadth away from tipping over into a second degree immanentism that excludes not one determinate group, but any group that insists on any determinacy whatsoever as the basis of community. I insist, along with Derrida, that this is not a certainty but a risk, and an ineliminable risk, to which Nancy cannot immunise himself.

This leads to a fourth question, related to the third: why should ontological being in common be normative for political practice? Or, put differently, what warrants the slippage from "being is being in

common" to "being in common should provide the model for our understanding of community"? Devisch does briefly address this question, insisting quite rightly that, for Nancy, ontology is always already a praxis and that therefore there is no slippage at all from ontology to ethics or from ontology to politics because they are not separate in the first place. He also quite rightly points out that Nancy speaks of being in common as a task and a responsibility (p. 168). I remain unconvinced, however, that this fully answers the question or rather it seems only to re-locate the question and not tackle it. Why is the task of ontology one that we are obliged to accept rather than, say, obliged to resist? Would any ontology whatsoever be equally a task and responsibility, including logically possible ontologies that would lead to what most people would consider abhorrent ethical and political consequences? Why should the particular praxis that arises out of ontological sociality be normative, and by implication other possible praxes be invalid, inferior or undesirable? I find it hard not to conclude that the argument at this point authorises the principle that "being is good qua being," and, despite Devisch's helpful clarifications, I still find that principle problematic.

The focus of my fifth and final question is ecological. Who or what is included and excluded from the community based on the ontological sociality of being in common? Given Devisch's stated intention of intervening into the debate between liberals and communitarians, it is quite understandable that he does not discuss this question directly. Nevertheless, it is inevitably raised by Nancy's singular plural being and it is an important consideration for his notion of community. Being in common is not restricted to humans for Nancy but is the common mode of existence of all entities: of other humans, of animals, of plants, of stars, for example.[4] One important implication of this is that, if community is inextricable from ontology, then community can never be an exclusively human affair, but must always the community of all beings in common. In Nancy's own terms, there are no grades of community but universal being-with "of every body, whether they be inanimate, animate, sentient, speaking, thinking, having weight, and so on."[5] This poses a challenge to the liberal/communitarian debate just as radical as those highlighted by Devisch, showing the debate to be anti-ecological, abstracting human individuals and human communities, *per impossibile*, from all the other entities with which they share being in common. An idea of community that takes being seriously must necessarily be ecological, a stricture which remains unthought in the liberal/communitarian debate.

Devisch has provided us with an indispensable and authoritative resource for understanding the nature, the importance and the implications of Nancy's notion of community, as well as its development over time. The questions I raise are just as much (if not more) questions to Nancy as to Devisch and pointers towards further discussion that needs to take place on this subject. They in no way undermine the conclusion that this book accomplishes with precision and rigour its task of convincing us that Nancy provides a crucial and as yet unheard intervention into one of the most important debates in contemporary political philosophy.

NOTES

[1] Devisch lists Michael Sandel, Charles Taylor, Amitai Etzioni, Robert Bellah, Michael Walzer, and Daniel Bell (p. 7).

[2] For a brief and incisive explanation of the stakes of the French debate, see Régis Debray, "Êtes-vous démocrate ou républicain?", *Le Nouvel Observateur* 1308(30 November-6 December 1989):115-121.

[3] Jacques Derrida, *On Touching, Jean-Luc Nancy*, trans. Christine Irizarry (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 220.

[4] Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O'Byrne (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 20.

[5] Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, p. 84.

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