

Feeling-in-Common/ Being-in-Common as a Possibility of Feeling Alive: Kant with Nancy

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“We shall say then that being is not common in the sense of a common property, but that it is in common. Being is in common. What could be simpler to establish? And yet, is there anything of which ontology has been more unaware up to now?,” writes Jean-Luc Nancy at the beginning of the essay “Of Being-in-Common” [*De l’être-en-commun*] (1986) wherein he calls ‘philosophy’ and ‘community’ to in-scribe the ‘in’ into ipseity that he conceives as being-*in*-common—it is indeed a question of “the community of being” rather than “the being of community” that animates his essay (1). Just like in Immanuel Kant’s analysis of the judgment of the beautiful wherein common sense is communal not in that it belongs to community as its common property, being-in-common at the center of Nancy’s discussion too does not designate being as common possession or common given that would therefore be a carrier of common meaning; hence perhaps Nancy’s insistence on the use of this specific term rather than characterizing being for instance as common being. Just as communality in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* [*Kritik der Urteilskraft*] (1790) is constitutive of common sense, the in-common in Nancy’s essay is not a predicate or modifier of being but rather its subject.¹

Nancy’s insights on the ‘in’ constitutive of the in-common as an index of a-telic and non-linear directionality, motion, and orientation *toward* that disrupts the binary logic of the inside/outside, open up, I think, interesting avenues for thinking the self of the aesthetic judgment of the beautiful *vis-à-vis* both itself and other judging subjects as well as *vis-à-vis* common sense as what can be perhaps broached as *feeling of life-in-common*—that is a sense of life not *of* but rather *as* community. Especially pertinent to my interest in this paper is to begin this traversal of the textures of the subject of the judgment of the beautiful in the context of the word *Mittelbarkeit* that Kant repeatedly uses to discuss the communicability of the feeling of pleasure that is integral to the aesthetic judgment alongside Nancy’s recurrent insertion of the verb *partager* to characterize being, or existence. If one is attuned to the meanings of *teilen* that is one of the constituents of *Mittelbarkeit*, it transpires that the building blocks of *Mittelbarkeit* point to not only sharing but also constitutive sectioning, dividing, and intersecting between members of the judging community. Interestingly, just like the German *teilen*, French *partager* also simultaneously denotes ‘sharing’ and ‘dividing’ and in the English translation of Nancy’s essay it is usually rendered as ‘to share and to partition’ and ‘to divide and parcel out’.

In Section 40 of the third *Critique*, Kant writes that it is to a greater degree “taste” [*der Geschmack*] than “common human understanding” [*der gemeine Menschenverstand*], which is a kind [*einer Art*] of *sensus communis*², just like it is the aesthetic rather than intellectual power of judgment [*die Urteilskraft*] that deserves “the name of a communal sense [*den Namen eines gemeinschaftlichen Sinnes*]” (173, 175). Sense is articulated as the feeling of pleasure [*das Gefühl der Lust*] that ensues from the “mere³ [*bloß*] reflection” on the mind

via a free play [*Spiel*] of the faculties of imagination and understanding (that bring each other into play and into life because synthesis of imagination is here not subordinate to the concepts of understanding) (175). Both foundational and specific to this sense as the feeling of pleasure—which, if one is attuned to the nuances that the word *Lust* carries in German, perhaps should not be considered in severance from its other associated yet by no means equivalent meanings, such as passion, wish, and inclination⁴—is that, at its crux, it is a communal feeling. Kant continues his discussion of taste adding that it is indeed “the faculty for judging that which makes our feeling in a given representation **universally communicable** [*allgemein mitteilbar*] without the mediation of a concept” — the judgment of taste as a distinct kind of *sensus communis* is thus from the outset of the order of mutually constitutive singularity and plurality (175). Community is not a predicate of common sense, it is its subject. Since the judgment of taste “by which something is declared to be beautiful” does not rely on conceptual mediation, it rests on the presupposition of capability of the feeling of pleasure that arises from the singular judgment of the beautiful by the subject who in the moment of judgment does not cognize and yet is endowed with capacity for cognition to be directly and immediately transmittable and universally share-able with all other subjects who might possibly consent to it in their shared capacity for the reflective judgment from which ensues the feeling of pleasure (176).⁵

Kant’s repeated use of German *mitteilen* and *Mittelbarkeit* when referring to communicability of this feeling of pleasure deserves zooming in on as it evinces something fundamental about his understanding of the aesthetic power of judgment of taste as communal sense that will play a pivotal role in my discussion. As I mentioned above, while the German verb *mitteilen* certainly translates as ‘to communicate’, when broken into constituent parts, *mit + teilen* denotes ‘to share with’ but also ‘to divide’, ‘to partition’, and ‘to intersect’. Interestingly, *Urteilkraft* [the power of judgment] in the German title of Kant’s book (*Kritik der Urteilkraft*) also has *teilen* as one of its constituents and can literally be translated as the ‘power’ [*Kraft*] of ‘original, primal’ [*Ur-*] ‘splitting, partitioning, sharing’ [*Teil*]. To simultaneously share with and be divided from the community of subjects capable of cognition is what makes the feeling of pleasure only—or *merely* as Kant recurrently characterizes the universality of aesthetic judgment—shareable and communicable rather than strictly shared and communicated, as the latter would presuppose the facticity of communication that in order to hold on to its teleological premise would require repudiation of this constitutive division implied in *teilen*. Although Kant’s understanding of *sensus communis* as an idea, as a horizon of possibility not driven by a linear, progressive orientation towards the actuality of universal communication and consent (that I will turn to in more detail further in my discussion) pertains to the terrain of reflection, it holds a broader radical promise in its invitation to consider common sense to be in essence infinitely communal.

If non-conceptual predisposition to cognition that comes forth in the reflective judgment of the beautiful produces the feeling of pleasure which is possibly in-common in its universal communicability, the judgment itself is too in-common. Although it is singular in not being mediated by the concept and therefore subjects the object to individual judgment—as Kant writes in Section 8, in the absence of the concept “I must hold the object up to my feeling of pleasure and displeasure”—the judgment of taste is in-common because it revolves around the expectation of the feeling of pleasure’s shareability that might possibly produce consent in others (100). What does this in-common of the feeling

that ensues in the subject from the judgment of the beautiful and that, from its inception, is driven by the expectation of universal shareability and assent of others, suggest however for thinking the subject of the aesthetic judgment themselves? More specifically, doesn't this infinitely outward orientation that such an aesthetic judgment is predicated on necessarily open the subject themselves, partitioning them within and without, so that they can no longer be conceived of as a complete, bounded, and self-contained being but rather as the infinite porosity and opening not only toward *other* subjects predisposed to cognition but—in a necessary constitutive outwardness and openness of the judging subject—also toward *alterity* that becomes, is, generative of their own self? If sense, as a shareable and universally communicable feeling of pleasure that arises from the aesthetic judgment of taste, is a communal sense, then perhaps the self of this aesthetic judgment is, from the outset, a communal self.

"Existence is only in being partitioned and shared [*l'existence n'est qu'à être partagée*]," writes Nancy in his essay not to suggest a partition that dissects existence to distribute "a substance or a common meaning" that is appropriable and shared by all, but rather to highlight that partition is what parcels out [*partage*] being, understood as exposure or exposition [*l'exposition*]—"the declension of self, the faceless trembling of exposed identity: *we* are what it divides and parcels out [*il nous partage*]" (5). The declension of exposed self dwells on a limit where "'soi' is 'on its own,' *other* before any assignment of same and other" (4). Thus, the sense of being as the sense that *is* being-in-common cannot be located in a conformity between being with itself as a self-identical presence (as in Hegelian conceptualization of sense as something that came come-to-itself through the movement of re-absorption and re-appropriation of being and its sense as the sense of being in the self), since that would involve concealment of its *exposed* orientation, of its way of being *toward* that Nancy insists on in his use of the 'in-common'—a foundation of being founded on partitions, fissures, and alterity that make us "*in common, with one another*" (6). 'In' is not an index of motion toward inside-ness with the result of spatial containment and enclosure within some interior that would be hermetically sealed off from the exteriority of its contours and thus available for common meaning and appropriable by representation; it is rather what shapes the sense of being (who is sensing and embodied) as opening and exposure. 'In' is a "breach" that in spacing and cleaving 'being' and 'common' marks the lack of common being or common identity and instead points toward the self that is generated by partitions that it shares with others (11). It shapes sense by propelling it out- and to-ward. After Nancy writes "*we are in common, with one another*," he immediately adds that "*with*," "*together*," and "*in common*" stand for neither "*in one another*" nor "*in each other's place*," which would suggest the relationship of beings to one another predicated on fusion (6). This relationship, however, cannot either be characterized as the position of being(s) "*juxtaposed*" (whose etymology already points to the relation of separation as exteriority: *juxta* 'next' + *poser* 'to place') or "*next to*" one another [*non plus simplement dire « à côté », ni « juxtaposés »*] as that would imply that there indeed exists a possibility of the "*pure outside*," which however if that were the case, by virtue of being purely outside, could not possibly distinguish "*itself as 'itself'*" and therefore inevitably, in Nancy's words, it "*merges*," with the inside that is likewise never the "*pure inside*" (6). Being as being-in common *is* precisely this: "*the in [le en]*" that at once "*divides and joins*," that "*partitions and shares*" [*qui divise et qui ajointe à la fois, qui partage*], the limit where partitioning and sharing are exposed (...) being is in the '*in*,' inside of what has no inside" (8).

Thus, the logic of singularity proposed by Nancy is founded on what cannot be contained within the purity of the inside or the outside—singularity is rather situated on the limit that “pertains to what is between two or several, belonging to all and to none—not belonging to itself either” (6). Singularity is not to be conflated with identity but it is rather “exposure itself, its punctual actuality” that “traces an intersection of limits on which there is exposure” (7). Exposure that dwells on and exposes itself to the limit also precedes identification; in evading the logic of “face to face” it is thus the mode of relationality “anterior to entrapment by the stare that captures its prey or takes its hostage” (7).⁶ Limit, Nancy seems to be suggesting, is not equivalent to limitation that would point to the dialectical overcoming and the existence of beyond of the limitation; to be exposed, to be-in-common, is rather to be on the irreducible limit where there is simultaneously “both inside and outside, and neither inside nor outside” (7).⁷ The logic of being-in-common *with* one another that is at once shared and partitioned can be well encapsulated by “the banal phenomenology of unorganized groups of people” that Nancy illustrates in the following passage (7):

Passengers in the same train compartment are simply seated next to each other in an accidental, arbitrary, and completely exterior manner. They are not linked. But they are also quite together inasmuch as they are travelers on this train, in this same space and for this same period of time (...) between the disintegration [*la désagrégation*] of the “crowd” and the aggregation [*l’agrégation*] of the group, both extremes remaining possible, virtual, and near at every moment. This suspension is what makes “being-with”: a relation without relation, or rather, being exposed simultaneously to relationship and to the absence of relationship. (7)

To be with one another is to be suspended in a spatial-temporal realm of the in-between aggregation and disaggregation wherein both possibilities coexist. Togetherness is woven where being is exposed to both presence and absence of relation of the self toward itself and toward other singular beings—being and community divide and share one another, denying each other “its-self-evidence” (8). What does it suggest for thinking communication *vis-à-vis* being-in-common?: that communication too must necessarily be exposed to the absence of “commonality” understood as actuality of common measurement that would underlie communication (8). Importantly, being-in-common as exposure is not simply a matter of enunciation since its urgency is not “of a physical law, and whoever wants to expose it must also expose himself” to, in, and as “thought” and “writing” (9).

The logic of inside-outside that underlies being-in-common as in-between the several that at once belongs to all and to none (not even to any *ipse*) in its suspension between aggregation of the group and disintegration of the crowd might help to think the situatedness of the subject of the judgment of taste⁸ *vis-à-vis* themselves and other (judging) subjects. *Sensus communis* as the mere possibility of *feeling-in-common*, i.e., the essential possibility of universal communicability of the subjective feeling of pleasure that ensues in the subject not from cognition and from the object *per se* but rather from the representation of the object⁹ (that relates wholly to the subject), rests on the outward orientation of this subject. This outwardness exposes the subject toward the alterity of other subjects of the judgment of the beautiful but, in this very opening, also perhaps toward its own embeddedness in alterity that founds the judging self as an already communal self rather than a self-identical and self-closing identity (closure which as we had seen in Nancy’s discussion of sense cannot be found in a coincidence between being

and itself because that would require the evisceration of being's constitutive exposure). Just as Nancy argues that being-*in-common* with one another involves being as a radical opening and sharing of its constitutive partitions, thus implying neither being 'next to' [*à côté*] one another (which in my reading would suggest the relation founded on a clearly-demarcated boundedness of being) nor fusion (which would suggest the relation predicated on the empathetic possibility of being 'in one another' or 'in each other's place'), the mode of relation between the subjects of the judgment of taste too cannot be characterized in terms of either juxtaposition or empathy. Already the etymology of empathy, *em* 'in' + *pathos* 'feeling,' points to a possibility of the mode of relation based on identification and actuality of sharing the feeling of another. In Section 40 of the third *Critique*, before a brief digression on the maxims of the common human understanding¹⁰ the second of which, i.e., "to think in the position of everyone else," is the maxim of "a broad-minded [*erweiterter*] way of thinking [*Denkungsart*]" that might pertain to the power of judgment, Kant makes it clear that *sensus communis* as the "idea of a **communal** sense" is not founded on empathy but rather on "one holding his judgment up not so much to the actual as to the merely possible judgments of others" (173,174). This idea as "a faculty of judging (...) takes account (*a priori*) of everyone else's way of representing in thought" and taste, as a specific kind of *sensus communis*, is "the faculty for judging *a priori* the communicability of the feelings that are combined with a given representation" that does not involve conceptual mediation (173,176). In *Imagination and Interpretation in Kant* (1990), Rudolf Makkreel interestingly points out that the *erweiterter Denkungsart* (of the second maxim mentioned above), which is "the one most relevant to the communal sense", also translates into English as "enlarged thought" (159). Enlargement that might be at stake in *sensus communis* does not however involve an empathetic operation of projection of oneself onto another, which might us help think the self and the other in a moment of the judgment of taste. Makkreel notes:

Enlargement does not call for us to transpose ourselves into the actual standpoint of someone else. The understanding of the other is dependent on a prior enlargement of one's own thought based on imagining possibilities that are not merely variations of the self. (...) we are to project a possible intermediary position held neither by the self nor by the other. This provides the perspective, based on the *sensus communis*, that makes possible a better understanding of both the self and the other. (160)

Just as Nancy invites us to think singularity of/as being-in-common not in terms of identity but rather as exposure and dwelling on the irreducible limit pertaining to the in-between "two or several, (...) all and (...) none," the self and the other(s) of the judgment of the beautiful are held together in a possibility of the intermediary position that is not proper to either of them, where the other cannot be conceived as the product of projection of one's *ipse* (6). Comparing one's judgment with the judgment of others that rests on a common predisposition to cognition as the *feeling-in-common* of pleasure to be universally communicable is not in the realm of a concept and actuality but of a mere possibility (and this possibility as an idea perhaps too constitutes a certain limit that is at once generative of it). The mere possibility of *Mittelbarkeit* thus constitutes a point of intersection, sharing, and division of subjects of the judgment of taste with and from one another. After all, as Kant writes in Section 22 of the third *Critique*, "common sense (...) does not say that everyone **will** concur with our judgment but that everyone **should** agree with it" (123). Although as I had mentioned before, by virtue of not being rooted in a concept, the reflective judgment of taste is always singular, one cannot be persuaded to judge

something as beautiful in the absence of an objective ground — the judgment's claim to universality, as Kant notes in Section 8, “extends it over the whole sphere of those who judge” and has “**common validity**” not with regard to “the relation of a representation to the faculty of cognition but rather to the feeling of pleasure and displeasure” (100). On the following page, Kant goes on to add something about universal assent as an idea that stitches together community between all judging subjects that I consider a crucial encapsulation of what is at stake in the moment of the judgment of the beautiful: “The judgment of taste does not itself **postulate** the accord of everyone (...); it only **ascribes** this agreement to everyone, as a case of the rule with regard to which it expects confirmation not from concepts but only from the consent of others” (101). Postulation of the accord would suggest the assumption of its actuality; universal agreement however is rather of the order of ascription since the judgment of taste finds its confirmation in consent to always arrive from others in the infinite process — “the universal voice is thus only an idea” (101). As such, this communal sense as an idea is founded on the mere possibility of return, exchange, and reciprocity that cannot be conceptually validated and actualized and yet it is precisely this infinite horizon of shareability that acts as the motor that puts in motion the judgment of taste.

The promise inscribed in aesthetic reflective judgment is the feeling-in-common of pleasure, that is the feeling of life. Already in Section 1 of the “Analytic of the Beautiful,” Kant remarks that grasping “a regular, purposive structure” that is at stake in a cognitive judgment is very different from consciousness of “representation with the sensation of satisfaction. Here the representation is related entirely to the subject, indeed to its feeling of life [*das Lebensgefühl*] under the name of the feeling of pleasure or displeasure” (89-90).¹¹ The possibility of the *feeling of pleasure-in-common* is the possibility of *feeling of life-in-common*. Common sense is not communal in its distribution among individual members of community as their property or substance; it is communal in that it hinges on the communicability of the feeling of *Lust* [pleasure] as a communal sense of life and as what makes community alive. Sense is a *feeling-in-common* (inscribed in the possibility of and *inclination* to cognition) not of but rather *as* what founds community and it is always in circulation as an infinite process with no appropriable, objective, and conceptual ground — it binds in its infinite shareability while also irreducibly dividing the (judging) subject from the community of (judging) subjects in that it is not “apodictic” and “a merely ideal norm,” its presence therefore not subject to conceptual, objective verification and evidence (120, 123). That pleasure is closely intertwined with *inclination* is already hinted at in the German *Lust*, which translates as pleasure, inclination, wish, passion, longing etc. Perhaps it can be argued that subjects of the judgment of the beautiful indeed are bound together in this possibility of feeling-in-common by a kind of *pleasure principle* understood as *inclination* to cognition that *wishes* to be a-conceptually communicable. This inclination to make a judgement of the beautiful, which is to feel pleasure and to feel, and therefore perhaps be, alive, is already inscribed in *Lust*, along with the essential wish for this feeling to be in-common. *Lust* as feeling and inclination moves and propels (judging) subjects towards the horizon of *sensus communis* as an idea of communal sense which is not common, but rather in-common. And this is perhaps what makes (the judgment of) taste a special *kind of sensus communis*.

Notes

- ¹ Nancy's discussion of the in-common of existence orbits around and draws from Heideggerian *Dasein* as essentially constituted, rather than modified or qualified, by the *mit* [with] of *Mitsein*, but it will not be the focus of this paper.
- ² In order to differentiate between *sensus communis* that characterizes the common human understanding which is "vulgar" [Latin *vulgare*], i.e., "the least that can be expected from anyone who lays claim to the name of a human being (...) encountered everywhere, to possess which is certainly not an advantage or an honor" and *sensus communis* as taste, Kant notes that: "One could designate taste as *sensus communis aestheticus*, common human understanding as *sensus communis logicus*" (173, 175).
- ³ *Bloß* is frequently used by Kant to refer to the judgment of the beautiful and if I had more time, I would discuss its nuanced meanings and possible implications for Kant's project, especially for thinking the self of this aesthetic judgment *vis-à-vis* both itself as well as other subjects of a pure judgment of taste. In *The Idea of Form* (2003), Rodolphe Gasché notes that the power of mere reflective judgment lies in shedding "light on an affective dimension of cognition in a broad sense (...) it illuminates what thinking feels when it thinks" (26). In his exploration of complex etymologies and meanings carried by *bloß*, Gasché writes that merely reflective judgment, unlike determining judgment which "subsumes the particular under given concepts", is more autonomous in its search for "laws for the particular" in the absence of concepts—"the merely reflective nature of reflection (...) can shine forth in all its nakedness only when the latter [determining judgment] reached its limits" (23,22).
- ⁴ At the end of my discussion I will briefly consider what avenues of thinking about *sensus communis* these meanings might open up.
- ⁵ In Section 22 on the universal assent that is an index of objectivity "under the presupposition of a common sense," Kant writes: "In all judgments by which we declare something to be beautiful, we allow no one to be of a different opinion, without, however, grounding our judgment on concepts, but only on our feeling, which we therefore make our ground not as a private feeling, but as a common one" (123).
- ⁶ It is possible that here Nancy is alluding to Emmanuel Levinas to whom he refers to earlier in the essay in his discussion of *soi* as neither Hegelian "'soi' of self-consciousness needing to be recognized in order to recognize *itself*" nor as Levinasian *soi* that is merely "hostage to others" (4).
- ⁷ In "Finite Thinking," Nancy writes: "Not a thinking of limitation, which implies the unlimitedness of a beyond, but a thinking of the limit as that on which, infinitely finite, existence arises, and to which it is exposed" (27). For more, see: Nancy, Jean-Luc. "A Finite Thinking." In *A Finite Thinking*. Translated by Edward Bullard, Jonathan Derbyshire, and Simon Sparks, 3-30. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003.
- ⁸ It would be interesting to further think the subject of the beautiful alongside psychoanalysis, especially in the context of beauty as constitutive of the subject's singularity that is in excess of biology as well as social and cultural norms, ideals, and values. For more, please see the work of Willy Apollon, Lucie Cantin, and Danielle Bergeron from the Freudian School of Quebec (GIFRIC).
- ⁹ At the beginning of the Section 1 of the "Analytic of the Beautiful," Kant writes: "To grasp a regular, purposive structure with one's faculty of cognition (whether the manner of representation be distinct or confused) is something entirely different from being conscious of this representation with the sensation of satisfaction. Here the representation is related entirely to the subject" (89-90). In Section 2, he goes on to say that unlike in the case of the good and the agreeable that are combined with interest, the judgment of taste is marked by "the pure disinterested satisfaction" (91): "One only wants to know whether the mere representation of the object is accompanied with satisfaction in me, however indifferent I might be with regard to the existence of the object

of this representation. It is readily seen that to say that it is **beautiful** and to prove that I have taste what matters is what I make of this representation in myself, not how I depend on the existence of the object. (...) One must not be in the least biased in favor of the existence of the thing, but must be entirely indifferent in this respect in order to play the judge in matters of taste" (90-91).

- ¹⁰ The maxims of the common human understanding that are the subject of Kant's digression cannot be considered "parts of the critique of taste," but he notes that they can nonetheless illuminate "its fundamental principles" (174).
- ¹¹ Also in other places, for example at the beginning of the "Analytic of the Sublime," where Kant transitions in his discussion from the judgment of the beautiful to the judgment of the sublime, he notes that pleasure of the judgment of the beautiful "directly brings with it a feeling of the promotion of life [*Die Beförderung des Lebens*]" (128). Makkreel remarks that *Lebensgefühl*, "like aesthetic feeling in general, is not reducible to a private state with a particular psychological content; it is formal in nature and in principle universally communicable. Nor is the term 'life' limited to its biological meaning; it is used more broadly to convey a sense of vitality that also encompasses our mental life" (88). Pleasure, he adds, "is defined by Kant as the feeling of the furtherance of our life and displeasure as the feeling of the restriction of our life" and "aesthetic pleasure heightens life: heightens the sense of my existence, furthers my feeling of being alive (...). While the disinterestedness of aesthetic pleasure involves an indifference to the existence of the object judged, it does not require me, the judging subject, to be indifferent to my own existence" (91, 92).

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