

Being-with: Inspired by a collective sensory walk

For the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, being-with is the primary ontological condition:

Being cannot *be* anything but being-with-one-another, circulating in the with and as the *with* of this singular-plural existence (Nancy 2000:3)

Being-with – being as singular-plural – questions the possibility of thinking the body or the subject in isolation. Despite its singularity, the being can only be thought through the being-with. Being-with for Nancy implies no sense of similarity, or connection: rather it is an ontological state of *opening out* onto the world, of the production of time and space through this movement that Nancy sees as the spacing of the world. Moreover it is only through the being-with that we are capable of thinking about individuals and groups.

We can never simply be “the we”, understood as a unique subject, or understood as an indistinct “we” that is like a diffuse generality. “We” always expresses a plurality, expresses “our” being divided and entangled: “one” is not “with” in some general sort of way, but each time according to determined modes that are themselves multiple and simultaneous (people, culture, language, lineage, network, group, couple, band, and so on). What is presented in this way, each time, is a stage [scène] on which several [people] can say “I”, each on his own account, each in turn. But the “we is not the adding together or the juxtaposition of these “I”s. A “we”, even one that is not articulated, is the condition for the possibility of each I (Nancy 2000:65)

Nancy, as a philosopher of the continental tradition, engages with phenomenology and ontology, and also with images and texts, through a critique of Heidegger, following on from deconstructionist thinkers such as Derrida. Nancy incorporates the aporias and indeterminacies of poststructuralism into a phenomenology that critiques the very ground of phenomenological thought.

Being-with occurs prior to space and time, prior to the individual. It operates as divisions and entanglements – intertwining and dispersions. It is what makes space and time possible, and also the possibility of thinking about individuals and societies as hypostatizations of the primary being-with. The being-with, the “*co-*”, the “*mit-*”, is a spacing, an opening out of the world. Being-with can apply to one who is alone. Indeed, to be alone, for Nancy, is to be *alone-with* (Nancy 2005). The being-with is a condition for the being-alone. The walk undertaken that July day can be considered in terms of the being-with, more of an illustration to help us understand what it means than an example of the being-with in practice. The walk encourages a *way of thinking* about the being-with and about the production of collective experience.

All the participants set off on their walk alone, at roughly 2 minute intervals. We aimed to keep within sight of each other, while allowing for the walk to be experienced as an individual journey. The individual/collective nature of the walk dictated a tacit sense that during the walk we should not speak to each other, despite that for most of the time we were in visual contact. Awareness of other group members, however, was unavoidable, and recognition of this from time to time took the form of a smile, a wave or a nod:

signs of the mutual agreement not to speak. There was awareness of other bodies, not always conscious, and of the way in which this awareness placed limits on the movement of our own bodies. We could not go too fast or too slow, or we would meet up/ coincide with other members of the group. We had to keep up to a certain extent or we would keep everyone waiting in the café. The keeping in sight enabled a less than diligent studying of the map and directions. The walk, as a common performance, became a dance of proximity and distance, respect for and awareness of others’ sense of personal space. At times bodies congregated in certain spaces: the rose garden acted as a lure for affective bodies, its rose bushes offering small privacies. It offered colour and scent (this was a sensory walk, after all), and the banter of some young gardeners, providing verbal records for those of us who respond more strongly to the verbal than the non-verbal. Another area for congregation of sorts was the complex system of underpasses and bridges that seemed to connect two sections of the walk together – an urban intermediary in the experience of parkland that formed the beginning and the end of the walk. The underpasses, while familiar to some, were threatening to others, revelatory of the different micro and macropolitical histories inscribed in bodies that produced their sense of familiarity/unfamiliarity, ease/unease in the lived experience of these places.

Despite these differences in the production of experience from a subjective point of view, the collective field of experience emerged as such because of the sharing of space and time, the sharing of encounters with other bodies and with the materialities of the space, and also through the institutional and interpersonal construction of the walk as a collective practice. This took place retrospectively as well as at the time through the conversations that followed, and the thinking through of the experience together. It also emerged from the institutional contexts that our bodies were all engaged with, a context that encourages certain

types of thinking and engagement, certain approaches and forms of reflexivity and sensibility that hone and produce bodies and make possible such an event to take place.

The collective walk is the being-with converted to an ethics of collaboration: a call and response, an acknowledgement and a knowledge of shared worldings. Bodies moving together and apart, aware of the necessary space between them but reassured by the others’ presences. Connected through the structure of the walk, but able to go off track to take a photo, write or explore a corner of a field. Some bodies were more involved in the choreographing of the walk – standing by a stile, directing people and stopping them from veering off, rounding up or waving us away from turning onto a busy road. Various different practices and modes of engagement were involved in the placemaking that we all participated in. Some bodies were more focused on particular aspects of the experience, for example on memories, or on history, or on things on the ground, since all of these bodies were of course imbricated within institutional rationalities and regimes that focus attention on the concerns of their research interests, which are both produced by and productive of those regimes. All of these practices were involved in the making of the walk as a whole.

We all walked through parkland on a summer’s afternoon. We all breathed the warm, muggy air, travelled on foot, felt the grass underneath us, thought about our research. The field of experience was produced through these materialities, and through the tying of them together in the production of the walk. A walk links places and moreover *produces* places through its performance, in a similar way to how Heidegger describes the bridge as gathering streams and bank and land together (Heidegger 1993). The walk gathered together aspects of place, memory, bodies and thought: a field of experience could emerge from its performance. Bodies moving together-but apart,

playing with proximity and distance: the nature of the collective experience produces the possibility for the collectivity of the experience to be recognised as such. Returning to the university, working through the resonances of memory, different histories create disjuncture, a sense of the absolute otherness of the other. The experience does not have to be *felt as connection to others* to be collective.

This is where Jean-Luc Nancy is important. He posits a prepersonal sense of the collective which occurs before the subject. This then situates the collective as existential – as a condition of existence. In a recent lecture, Nancy discussed how our common condition of thinking is that the individual is first and everything else is second. Instead, he suggests that the “co” comes first. The being-with that is a condition of existence. This primary being-with, however, is not restricted to the human. In Nancy, it is without limits. While an ethics can emerge from this primary being-with, and indeed Nancy suggests that a new politics of community can emerge from this, an ethical sensibility is not implicit in this ontological formulation. Being-with does not necessarily involve a sharing of something, a feeling of being connected. Being-with occurs before the personal, before the individual. The primary being-with enables something different from an ethics: it enables a sense of what Nancy considers as the spacing of the world – the primary spacing from which space, time and individualisations emerge.

References

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