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The Impossible Community:

Privative Judgments in Blanchot, Levinas and Nancy

Jewish philosophy, can you speak of such a thing? Is there a kind of philosophy that is specifically Jewish? What would such a characteristic be? Could we define it, for example, in opposition to Greek philosophy? When you think about it this way, it does seem a very strange thing to do. As though Jewish philosophy existed in advance and you could choose between one and the other. If there is such a thing as Jewish philosophy, then it cannot exist like this. There is no specific Jewish essence of philosophy (just as much as there is no Greek essence, or that philosophy is essentially Greek). Philosophy is first of all a practice. If there is anything like a nationality, race, or culture tied to philosophy then it is because they spoke, behaved and wrote philosophically in communication with other nationalities, races, and cultures, and not because a specific essence was given in advance that they had to choose in order to become what they were. Even if we were to argue that something like philosophy began with the Greeks, then that was not because of some essential trait they might have had, but because they philosophised. There might have been historical conditions that made this possible and prevented this activity from emerging elsewhere (democracy and maritime trade, for example), but this underlines the contingency of the occurrence rather than its necessity. A tradition is created retrospectively and thus appears to have been chosen rather than created. To define it the other way is precisely to speak like those who wished to destroy everything that might have been called Jewish philosophy, for they did have a definition of everything they considered essentially Jewish, so they could hunt and root it out and abolish it from this earth.

Because there is no essence to Jewish philosophy, there can be no definitive history

either. Whatever history there is changes as we ask different questions and face other problems. We see alliances and filiations that were not visible before. The past recreates itself in the face of the future. In philosophy, these filiations and alliances are marked by concepts and proper names. What we call Jewish philosophy is the lines traced between them. There will always be other lines and paths; otherwise a practice dies never to be reborn. A dead concept can suddenly relight when it is attached to a new problem. This is why these affinities are not the same as the history of philosophy, though superficially they might appear the same, for what is the history of philosophy except a long list of proper names and concepts? The difference is one of application. In the history of philosophy, I simply describe the concepts and the proper names from the outside, as they are strung together in time extensively, whereas in philosophy, they occupy my thought from within intensively. Thus the most creative thinkers within a tradition appear to the historian as disloyal, whereas in reality they are the ones keeping the embers alight. My intention, therefore, is not to reconstruct a fragment of this history, but to show how it is still alive in a contemporary debate, even if in a subterranean and hidden manner, and in this case, perhaps, even to the author himself.

On the surface, Blanchot's small book *La communauté inavouable* seems merely a polite disagreement with Nancy's more substantial work, *La communauté désœuvrée*, but it is what is hidden beneath that is more significant. It is a Jewish critique of the latter's heideggerianism.¹ Again this should not surprise us knowing Blanchot's friendship with Levinas and his commitment to this work, but what is at stake in this confrontation would remain lifeless and inert, if we do not spread the connection further than just these proper names.² At the heart of this dispute, is the reversal of the relation between the infinite and

¹ Maurice Blanchot *La communauté inavouable*. Paris: Minuit, 1983. *The Unavowable Community*. Trans. P. Joris. Barrytown, New York: Station Hill Press, 1988. [Hereafter CI and UC]. Jean-Luc Nancy. *La communauté désœuvrée*. Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1990. *The Inoperative Community*. Trans. P. Connor L. Garbus. M. Holland and S. Sawhney. Minneapolis & Oxford: U of Minnesota P, 1991.

² A commitment that was both personal and intellectual. See, 'Être Juif' in *L'Entretien infini*. Paris:

the finite. The infinite is not a derivation of the finite, but the other way around. The infinite precedes the finite. Philosophy is not the thought of finitude but the infinite as an original positive insufficiency. The key to understanding this reversal is the status of infinite or privative judgements, which though minor to the mainstream of the history of Western philosophy, is central to a certain Jewish philosophy, whose line of descent we can trace through the proper names of Maimonides, Maimon, Cohen, Rosenzweig and Levinas. It is this lineage that is absent from Nancy's book.³ If we are unaware of it, then what is at stake in their disagreement will be invisible to us.

At the beginning of *La communauté inavouable* Blanchot writes of a 'communist demand' (*l'exigence communiste*) [CI 9, UC 1]. Communism, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, is now surely only a historical curiosity, and if so, still less a future possibility through which we might secure the present. But the communism of which Blanchot speaks is not an ideology and scarcely a politics that we would ordinarily recognise. For its demand is an impossible one. Let us stay with this word 'impossible'. What does Blanchot mean by it? It is a way of speaking common to his work as a whole. One could easily think of the impossible demand of writing as much as that of communism (and indeed later in the essay the two will be linked).⁴ What is important to understand about this word is that it is not negative in any simple way. I could mean by

Gallimard, 1969. 180-91. *The Infinite Conversation*. Trans. S. Hanson. Minneapolis and London: U of Minnesota P, 1993. 123-30.

³ From the historian's perspective, we might say that this line in Jewish philosophy begins with the problem of negative attributes in Maimonides and the impossibility of speaking about God. Here we primarily focus on Cohen, for he is the major influence on Rosenzweig, and then he on Levinas, who equally inspires Blanchot. The infinite here is not a hazy mystical or religious term, but at least in Cohen (and thereby Rosenzweig) I would argue is rigorously mathematical. It loses this mathematical meaning in Levinas, who essentially thinks of it through the work of Descartes. For this reason, Levinas has to exert more effort, at least in *Totality and Infinity*, to resist the trap of irrationality and pathos.

⁴ Whenever Blanchot speaks of an impossibility one should always keep in mind the reversal of Heidegger's definition of being-towards-death as the possibility of impossibility. The impossibility of possibility is not merely a negation of possibility but completely other than possibility.

‘the impossible community’ that no possible community I know of, including a communist one, is possible. The idea of an impossible community would therefore be nostalgia for something lost and which belonged to a past no longer retrievable. But ‘impossible community’ could also mean the ‘not-possible’ as that which precedes every possibility, whether past or present. In the first, I begin with a possibility and negate it, whereas in the second, I begin with the very impossibility of any possibility. I think this is why, to make this distinction, Blanchot says that the indecency of the concept of communism today ‘is not a simple negation’ (*n’est pas une simple négation*) [CI 10, UC 2].

Such a subtle difference between two kinds negativity is not unknown in the history of philosophy, though we tend to think that the only important difference is between affirmation and negation, but is central to a certain thread of Jewish thought. The ancient Greeks, Hermann Cohen, informs us, had two words for the negative, *οὐ* and *μη*.⁵ In grammar, the difference is between a definite and indefinite negativity, ‘not’ and ‘maybe not’. But, as is always the case in Greek thought, what was merely a way of speaking became a precise conceptual differentiation between negation, on the one hand, and privation, on the other. Privation, as Aristotle explains in *On Interpretation*, is the statement of a negative attribute rather than a negation of a positive one [19b-20b].⁶ Thus

⁵ As Cohen argues in *Logik der Reinen Erkenntnis* (and elsewhere in his work), the distinction between these two forms of negation is essential to Democritus and Plato but its full subtlety is lost by the time of Aristotle, even though the latter will still speak of the difference between negation and privation. *Logik der Reinen Erkenntnis*. Werke. New York: Georg Olms, 2005. 84–9. Cohen will use this distinction to rethink the origin of thought (both as thought’s origin and the thought of the origin) and it will reappear in Rosenzweig’s ‘metalogic’ [*Metalogik*] in *The Star of Redemption. Der Stern der Erlösung*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988. 44–63. *The Star of Redemption*. Trans. B. E. Galli. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005. 49-70. There is no evidence Blanchot read Cohen. Or at least there is only a passing reference to him (via Rosenzweig) in a footnote in *The Infinite Conversation* concerning the State of Israel. *L’Entretien infini*. 191. *The Infinite Conversation*. 130. I have to thank David Hansel for this reference.

⁶ See, Wolfson, H. A. ‘Infinite and Privative Judgments in Aristotle, Averroes, and Kant.’ *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 8.2 (Dec 1947): 173–87, for an excellent guide to the history of privative judgments both in Western and Islamic philosophy.

an affirmative judgment would take the form ‘A is B’, and a negative judgment, ‘A is not B’, but the latter should not be confused with ‘A is not-B’, as for example when I say ‘The man is blind’, which is a special case of an affirmative judgment. Furthermore belonging to privative judgments are another class of judgment where the predicate is ‘indefinite’ (*ἀόριστον*), such as the judgment, ‘the man is unjust’. In medieval logic, through Boethius’s commentary on Aristotle’s text, indefinite judgments were classed as infinite ones, since *ἀόριστον* quite literally means ‘without limits’.

When these logical classifications re-appear in Kant’s typology of judgments in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the difference between the two kinds of privative judgments disappears. Privative judgments are indefinite or infinite judgments. Moreover, the difference between infinite judgments and affirmative judgments is merely grammatical. Infinite judgments are just affirmative judgments stated in another form. Thus in Kant’s example the judgment ‘the soul is non-mortal’ (*die Seele ist nichtsterblich*) is the same as ‘the soul is immortal’, since, in his words, ‘I locate the soul in the unlimited sphere of non-mortal beings.’⁷ Yet this example does not seem to work as Kant might have intended, because the judgment ‘the soul is immortal’ is itself privative and not simply affirmative, if of a different form than ‘non-mortal’. Here we have to make a distinction between two kinds of privative judgments: those that are privative in form and meaning, and those that are only privative in meaning. The judgment ‘the man is blind’ is privative in meaning but not in form, since blind is a positively attributed even though negative in meaning. Whereas, the judgment ‘the soul is immortal’ is privative in form and meaning,

⁷ See, Martin Kavka. *Jewish Messianism and the History of Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004. 102–6 for an explanation of infinite judgments in Kant and the importance of them in Hermann Cohen. Immanuel Kant. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Revised second ed. Trans. Norman Kemp Smith, Introd. by Howard Caygill. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. A71–2/B97–8. *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*. Werkausgabe. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974. 113. The Academy edition has the correct version. *Nichtsterblich* and not *nicht sterblich*, which destroys the whole distinction between privative and negative judgements.

as is shown by the inseparable negative prefix. In the case of the first kind of judgment, the opposite habit has to be present in the subject for the judgement to make sense. Thus it is not possible for a wall to be blind because it cannot see. In the case of the second kind of judgment, no such opposite habit is necessarily required. The judgment ‘the soul is immortal’ is not, as Kant implies, a simple affirmative judgment that translates a privative one. It is in fact itself a privative one both in form and meaning. It is because Kant collapses the difference between different kinds of privative judgments that the difference between simple judgments (affirmation and negation), on the one hand, and privative and infinite judgments, on the other, is no longer visible to him. In his eyes, at least in terms of meaning, there are only affirmative and negative judgments, a language of ‘yes’ and ‘no’, since all privative or infinite judgements are merely disguised affirmative judgements.

It is though the text itself still retains a memory of Aristotle’s distinctions (which in turn are only a faint recollection of an older Greek tradition), though the author himself has forgotten. In other words, the judgment ‘the soul is immortal’ is quite a peculiar affirmation, as is ‘the community is impossible’. What you have to pay especially attention to here is the privative meaning of the inseparable prefix ‘im’ in words like ‘immortal’ and ‘impossible’, which have the same meaning as the ‘in’ of the word ‘infinite’. They are not the negation of an affirmation, but an original positivity which precedes the opposition between affirmation and negation. To repeat again, when Blanchot says that the community is impossible, or it is an impossible demand, he does not begin with the negation of a possibility. It is, if you like, though one has to be careful with this word, a *positive* statement of impossibility, an original privation prior to negation and affirmation.

We must not understand this positivity as just another kind of affirmation. It is prior to both affirmation and negation in the simple sense and, as Cohen would say, is their

condition.⁸ At this point we are implying a difference between infinite and privative judgments such as ‘the man is blind’ that is not there in Aristotle or in the commentaries on Aristotle. The way to understand the special case of infinite judgment is as a superlative, which is more Platonic than Aristotelian, but one that is given a particular Jewish reinterpretation. We can see how this works in a section of Levinas’s *Totality and Infinity* called ‘Transcendence is not negativity’ and reading this might help us to understand these distinctions more clearly and why they are so important to Blanchot.⁹

Negation and affirmation presuppose one another. The statement of identity and the principle of contradiction are two sides of the same coin, for A is A only because it is not B and visa versa. Thus, as Levinas writes, the man who rejects the very life he leads is still tied to this life because only its denial now makes sense of his existence. A negation is not the destruction of an attribute but its transformation, or better, transformation is only possible through this destruction. Work and negation are inseparable just as identity and contradiction, but again one has to begin with the positive attribute, for negation has to negate what is and is thereby determined, shaped and formed by it. What I wish not to be is just as much part of me as what I am. Like a mold, negation is not other than what it negates but merely its reversed image. This is why Levinas writes ‘the negator and the negated are posited together, form a system, that is to say, a totality’ [TI 41].¹⁰ What then

⁸ As Cohen writes about the privative particle in the *Religion of Reason*, ‘we are of the opinion that Democritus and especially Plato intended for this particle and for this concept a meaning which is *entirely different from negation* [emphasis in the original], which even reaches beyond the meaning of position, insofar as it intends to bestow a foundation to affirmation.’ [translation modified]. Hermann Cohen. *Religion of Reason: Out of the Sources of Judaism*. Trans & introd by S. Kaplan. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995. 62. *Religion der Vernunft Aus dem Quellen Des Judentums*. 2nd ed. Wiesbaden: Fourier, 1988. 71.

⁹ Of course it should not surprise us that we should find this explanation here, because the writing of *Totality and Infinity* was inspired by Rosenzweig’s *The Star of Redemption* (‘a work too often present in his book,’ Levinas writes in the preface, ‘to be cited’), and thereby indirectly Cohen. Emmanuel Levinas. *Totality and Infinity*. Trans. A. Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1969. 28. *Totalité et infini*. The Hague: Martinus Nihoff, 1961. xvi. [Hereafter, TI and TeI].

¹⁰ ‘Le négateur et le nié se posent ensemble, forment système, c’est-à-dire totalité.’ [TeI 11]

is the difference between alterity and negation? Why is the other not just ‘not me’? The difference between the other and the same cannot simply be the negation of a negation for this in no way breaks out of the same logic of identity, but nor can it just be the affirmation of the other as a positive term. I cannot say the other is A, for A is only A because it is not B. If negation and affirmation were the only possible forms of judgment then it would not be possible to think alterity.

Transcendence, rather than affirmation and negation, is an infinite judgment. We can see why if we go back to the original meaning of transcendence in Plato’s famous phrase *ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας*, which literally means ‘beyond being’ and which is the source for Levinas’s own idea of metaphysics.¹¹ What is beyond *οὐσία* is not just not a being, in the sense of some thing or other, but better than or more than any being. In other words, *ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας* is not the same as *οὐκ οὐσία*. It has the same meaning as the judgment ‘the soul is immortal’. Transcendence is not a negation, but an expression of the indefinite or infinite and this is why it cannot be deduced by the negation of positive attributes or by analogy, which both begin with a definite being. Transcendence is not a difference between beings, but a difference of level. For Levinas, this difference is the extra-ontological meaning of the ethical relation. The other is not the negation of the self, but more than or higher than the self (all words that Plato uses to describe the idea of the Good). It is, as he writes, ‘before negative and affirmative propositions’ and ‘only establishes the language where neither “no” nor “yes” are the first word’ [TI 42].¹² This language is the language of infinite judgements.

¹¹ My own interpretation of Plato would be that this is actually a statement of ontological difference rather than ethics, but this does not invalidate their similar form. William Large, ‘Impersonal Existence: A Conceptual Genealogy of the There Is from Heidegger to Blanchot and Levinas.’ *Angelaki* 7.3 (Dec 2002): 131–41.

¹² ‘Elle est avant la proposition négative ou affirmative, elle instaure seulement le langage où ni le non, ni le oui ne sont le premier mot.’ [TeI 12]

An impossible community, understood as an infinite judgment, is, therefore, a transcendent community, a community ‘beyond being’. This is very clear in Blanchot’s description and it is this which makes his approach very different from Nancy’s in *La communauté désœuvrée*, whose inspiration is Heidegger rather than Levinas (I will return to this difference at the end of this chapter). At the beginning of his essay, Blanchot says that we could interpret communism in two ways [CI 9-11, UC 2-3]. We could define it in terms of equality (*l’égalité*), where each individual’s needs in a society would be satisfied. But such a society of equals would be purely immanent, because each would be the same as the other, and equally replaceable, and if the individual were defined solely in terms of needs it would be entirely closed and self-sufficient. Even if it did recognise the other, it would do so only as another individual entirely the same as its self. Such a communist society would be inseparable from totalitarianism. We could, however, interpret communism in a different way. Not as the relation between self-same individuals, but as the asymmetrical relation to the other. It is this community Blanchot calls ‘the absence of community’ (*l’absence de communauté*), which is absent in two ways, both as a negation, the absence of the community which is the objective unity of individuals, and as an infinite judgment, the impossibility of community, community’s absence, rather than the absence of *a* community.

Even when Blanchot re-reads Bataille, from which this phrase ‘the absence of the community’ is borrowed, he does so through Levinas. What was at the heart of all of Bataille’s ideas of alternative societies or groups (surrealism, *Contre-Attaque*, *Acéphale*, for example), according to Blanchot, was ‘the principle of incompleteness’ (*le principe d’incomplétude*) [CI 15, UC 5]. Again such a principle is an infinite judgment and not a negativity. Incompleteness is not a lack imposed upon a being after the fact. It is not the negation of a positive attribute; rather it is an original insufficiency which precedes my being. Because insufficiency is not to be thought in opposition to a sufficiency, my

relation to the other is not one of integration or union. I do not look for the other, as in Aristophanes' story of the separate lovers in the *Symposium*, to make up what I do not have; rather I am insufficient because of the other. Insufficiency is the principle of my being, and it is this privation that is the origin of my consciousness. 'It only commences being,' he writes, 'in that privation which renders it conscious (that's the origin of its consciousness) of the impossibility of being itself.' (*il ne commence d'être que dans cette privation qui le rend conscient (c'est là l'origine de sa conscience) de l'impossibilité d'être lui-même*) [CI 16, UC 6]. Insufficiency (which in Levinas's vocabulary would be substitution) is not a negation, but a privation (Blanchot even uses this word), which is originary. In other words, it is an infinite judgement as we have described it. It is not preceded by a positive attribute and therefore cannot be interpreted as a lack. It is this originary privation which is the source for any possible positivity. It is not that the self is insufficient because it lacks something, rather it is a self because of this insufficiency; *Je est un autre*, (I is an other), as Levinas is fond of quoting Rimbaud, whose 'interiority is not rigorously interior' (*l'intériorité ne serait pas rigoureusement intérieure*).¹³

So the impossible community is not a relation between others through which the recognition of common project is lacking, but one in which I am already, so to speak, 'othered' from the beginning. Not 'not myself' as the negation of a positive attribute, but 'not-myself' as the self, already for the other before being oneself. This is the subtle difference between Nancy and Blanchot. For Nancy's inspiration for a transcendent community is not Levinas but Heidegger, not the 'Other-in-the-Same' of *Otherwise than Being and Beyond Essence*, but Being-with-others of *Being and Time*. For this reason, the transcendence which breaks up the immanence of a community closed in upon itself is thought through ontological difference rather than an ethical superlative. Transcendence

¹³ Emmanuel Levinas. *Humanisme de l'autre homme*. Paris: Fata Morgana, 1972. 88. *Humanism of the Other*. Trans. N. Poller. Urbana and Chicago: U of Illinois P, 2003. 60.

here has nothing at all to do with a ‘beyond’. It is not infinite, but ecstatic. This also explains why the relation to others for Nancy is mutual rather than asymmetrical. We (though this exposure breaks up the ‘we’ as a unity) are mutually exposed to one another as singular beings. This is what is meant by his phrase ‘being-in-common’, which is his reformulation of Heidegger’s being-with. Does not this exposure still begin from my side and not the other? I am exposed to the other, and the other is exposed to me, but again only as another I, even if this ‘I’ is not to be thought as an egoism shut up into itself. If this were so, the other would be part of my being and not above or beyond it. This seems to be the case so if one follows Nancy’s inspiration back to Heidegger’s ‘being-with’, which is part of Dasein’s being. I am myself *my* being with others. Being with others is what it means to be me. Rather than a recognition of alterity, being-with is a reconfiguration of subjectivity through a concrete lived inter-subjectivity. What it means to be a self is already to be with others. ‘So far as Dasein *is* at all,’ Heidegger writes, ‘it has being-with one-another as its kind of being’ [emphasis in the original].¹⁴ In other words, ‘being-with’ is something that belongs to me or to the other as a singular being, the *moi* and *toi* of Nancy’s definition of community, *toi (e(s)t) (tout autre que) moi*, ‘you are/and/is (entirely other than) me.’¹⁵ Singularity and community are interdependent for Nancy. They are, to use, Heidegger’s expression, equiprimordial. For that reason, the community of which he speaks is not impossible. It is very possible. It belongs to the meaning of being. It *is* the meaning of being. It is what it is for us to be finite beings. For Blanchot and Levinas, on the contrary, the community is impossible. Not as a negative judgment, but as an infinite one. It is what is ‘not-possible’, the infinite before the finite, beyond being. As Cohen writes numerous times in his little book on Leibniz, ‘*aus dem*

¹⁴ ‘Sofern Dasein überhaupt *ist*, hat es die Seinsart des Miteinanderseins.’ Martin Heidegger. *Sein und Zeit*. 7th ed. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1986. 125. *Being and Time*. Trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson. Oxford: Blackwell, 1962. 163.

¹⁵ Jean-Luc Nancy. *La communauté désœuvrée*. 74. *The Inoperative Community*. 29.

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¹⁶ 'Out of the infinite, the finite is constituted.' Hermann Cohen. *Das Prinzip der Infinitesimal-Methode und seine Geschichte*. Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 1968. 93.

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