ONTOLOGY

Ontology, according to the influential definition proposed by Johannes Clauberg in his *Metaphysica de ente*, is the science that deals not 'with this or that being… but with being in general' (Clauberg, 1691: 281). 'Being', in the sense developed by the early modern ontologists who followed Clauberg, refers not merely to existing things, but to any possible object at all. An ontological account is one that describes the properties that necessarily belong to any possible object. In his *Prima philosophia, sive ontologia*, for example, Christian Wolff argued that every possible object must have a sufficient reason for why it exists rather than not and that no possible object can have contradictory determinations. At the end of the early modern period, Immanuel Kant proposed an important modification in the ontological project, restricting its scope to objects that could be given in experience. With his doctrine of the categories, which he developed in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant attempted to isolate the pure concepts of the understanding that necessarily apply to all objects of empirical knowledge.

In *Being and Time*, Martin Heidegger revitalized and reformed the discipline of ontology. Heidegger's aim was not to discover the determinations of any possible being, but rather to articulate the conditions of the possibility for undertaking such a project in the first place. Ontology in Clauberg's sense, Heidegger argued, is only possible for a being that has, albeit pre-theoretically, an understanding of the meaning of being. The being that has this understanding is Dasein, which Heidegger defined as the being that is constitutively concerned with its own being. The project of what Heidegger called fundamental ontology is to clarify Dasein's pre-ontological understanding of the meaning of being with a view towards explicating the meaning of being itself. Instead of categories describing the characteristics of any possible being, Heidegger investigated the fundamental ways of being, or existentials, of Dasein. Most basically, Dasein has the character of being-in-the-world. World must not be understood here as a kind of container; Dasein is not in the world in the way that matches are in a matchbox. World refers rather to a web of practical, referential meanings within which Dasein finds itself oriented always already. To take Heidegger's most famous example, a hammer is not given most originarily as a mass of wood and metal present to a cognizing subject, but rather as referring to the act of hammering, which refers to fastening, which refers to protecting oneself from bad weather, etc. To be in the world is to understand and to be open to the possibilities for existence that manifest themselves within such referential networks.

Nancy's ontology builds on the analytic of Dasein that Heidegger carried out in *Being and Time*. Indeed, in *Being Singular Plural*, Nancy insists on the necessity of rewriting *Being and Time* in a way that would articulate Heidegger's central insights more faithfully than Heidegger himself had. Nancy lays special emphasis on the existential of being-with, which Heidegger described as equiprimordial with being-in-the-world. As part of the network of references that is constitutive of being-in-the-world, Heidegger thought, we encounter other beings with the character of Dasein. In the tailor's workshop, for example, the shears that refer to the cutting of garments refer just as originarily to the people to whose measure the garments will be cut. Being-in-the-world, then, is

necessarily being with others. But what, precisely, is the sense of 'with' here? Nancy believes that Heidegger failed to address this question with sufficient rigor. Heidegger tended to understand 'with' either on the basis of the related terms—in which case it is presented as an external relation of juxtaposition—or on the basis of a 'We' understood as a common subject. Both of these conceptions obscure the sense of 'with' by thinking it in terms of something else. According to Nancy, 'with' must be understood on its own terms simply as our unpresentable presence to each other. In this more originary sense, 'with' is 'a preposition that has no position of its own and is available for every position' (*BSP*, 62). In other words, 'with' is neither a kind of bridge extended between isolated individuals nor a milieu in which a community shares its common being, but rather the co-presence of a multiplicity of singular beings.

For Nancy, then, 'Being is being-with, absolutely'. It is 'the "with" that constitutes Being; the with is not simply an addition' (*BSP*, 61; 30). This is the case not only for beings with the character of Dasein, but for being in general. To be is to come to presence, and there can be no presence that is not presence-to. There can be no being, in other words, whose being would be wholly self-contained. Such a being, Nancy argues, would constitute a kind of black hole of sense: 'Pure unshared presence—presence to nothing, of nothing, for nothing—is neither present nor absent. It is the simple implosion of a being that could never have *been*—an implosion without any trace' (*BSP*, 2). Being, in sum, *is* not; it happens rather as an event, each time unique, at the limits where beings are exposed in their presence to each other.

Clauberg, Johannes (1691) *Opera Omnia philosophica*. Amsterdam: Blaeu.