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# Nancy, Descartes, and Continuous Creation

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## Abstract

The present article investigates the role of Descartes' doctrine of continuous creation in Jean-Luc Nancy's philosophy. While it is not customary to take Descartes as a thinker of plurality, his doctrine of continuous creation affords Nancy the philosophical resources for thinking the plurality of worlds. In the first section of the article, we present Descartes' argument for continuous creation, in accordance with which creation occurs not just once but is repeated at each instant. Yet, in Descartes, this doctrine remains wedded to a concept of an immutable creator. In the second section of the article, we present the stakes of Nancy's deconstruction of creation *ex nihilo*, which results in the suspension of God as an immutable ground. For Nancy, creation of the world happens at each moment of the world but without a pre-determined end or plan.

## Keywords

Jean-Luc Nancy – René Descartes – continuous creation – *ex nihilo*

## Introduction

In the twelfth book of the *Metaphysics* (*Met.* hereafter), Aristotle describes the world as a teleological whole, ordered towards the highest being, God or Unmoved Mover. It is well known that Aristotle is a teleological thinker as far

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as individual beings are concerned: Being and generation is always in view of some goal or function. In the following remarkable passage, however, one that is worth quoting at length, Aristotle extends this teleological mode of explanation to the universe as a whole:

We must consider also in which of two ways the nature of the universe contains the good or the highest good, whether as something separate and by itself, or as the order of the parts. Probably in both ways, as an army does [ὡσπερ στρατεύμα]. For the good is found both in the order and in the general, and more in the latter; for he does not depend on the order but it depends on him. And all things are ordered together somehow, but not all fishes and fowls and plants; and the world is not such that one thing has nothing to do with another, but they are connected. For all have been ordered together towards one [πρός μέν γάρ ἐν ἅπαντα συντέτακται].

*Met.*, XII, 1075a11-19, translation modified<sup>2</sup>

The passage makes clear that for Aristotle order and organization presupposes (and depends on) a ruling principle, just as the order of an army depends on the general. A world without a ruler (or an army without a general) is a disordered world, a world governed badly, as well as a world without unity, without any sort of connectedness. But the world, as Aristotle puts it, “does not wish to be governed badly [οὐ βούλεται πολιτεύεσθαι κακῶς]” (*Met.*, XII, 1076a3-4, translation modified). Aristotle associates the army general with the good (or better, the highest good) such that, by analogy, the universe contains the good (i.e., is organized) only to the extent that it is ordered towards the highest good. The highest good in Aristotle’s philosophy, the Unmoved Mover, motivates all motion in the cosmos as a *final cause* (and an exemplary object) of all individual beings, “in the manner of something loved [ὡς ἐρώμενον]” (*Met.*, XII, 1072b3, translation modified). Thus, in this remarkable passage of the twelfth book of the *Metaphysics* we see Aristotle practically inaugurate a connection between order and the unicity of a ruler in the history of Western philosophy.<sup>3</sup> The world is *one* and is *good* only insofar as it is ordered towards a single principle of the good, as Aristotle’s concluding quotation of Homer makes clear: “The rule of many is not good; let there be one ruler.” (*Met.*, XII, 1076a4). If there is any project at all that Jean-Luc Nancy’s *singular plural* thinking seeks to accomplish,

2 Cf. *Politics*, I, 5, 1254a28-33. Citations of Aristotle’s work are made in the following form: title, book number, page number, column number, line number.

3 Cf., for example, *Summa Theologica* (*Sum. Theol.* thereafter), Ia, Q. 15, Art. 2. Citations of Aquinas’ work are made in the following form: title, part, question, article.

it is to think the world otherwise than with reference to one ruler, one principle, such that “the totality of beings ... would no longer refer to any other being [*étant*]” outside of the world (Nancy [2002] 2007, 41/44).<sup>4</sup> It is to think the plurality of worlds (and of a world) rather than the oneness of the world. But Nancy chooses an unexpected ally, René Descartes, in this project. It is unexpected because, for all his anti-Aristotelianism and anti-scholasticism, we are not accustomed to taking Descartes as a thinker of plurality. But it is exactly Descartes’ theory of continuous (or continued) creation, i.e., creation *repeated at every instant*, we argue, that affords Nancy the philosophical resources necessary for thinking the world as a plurality (against the Aristotelian-scholastic reduction of the world to a single ruler.)

Although we would like to submit that continuous creation is very important for understanding Nancy’s philosophical project, he only ever mentions it in passing. Hence, the nature of our interpretation is reconstructive. That is, we will try to render explicit what is otherwise implicit in Nancy’s texts. The plausibility of such reading can then be evaluated by seeing whether it may shed helpful light on Nancy’s thinking. While the textual basis of this essay will be limited to *La création du monde* and *Être singulier pluriel*, we shall try to offer a sufficient historical gloss for the doctrine of continuous creation where Nancy himself has been somewhat elliptical. Attention to Descartes’ theory of continuous creation is thus justified by the fact that Nancy himself primarily identifies Descartes as the source of the said doctrine.<sup>5</sup> In addition, we devote secondary attention to the medieval sources of the doctrine of continuous creation (with regard to whom Descartes stands in a complex relationship of inheritance and transformation), in particular, St. Thomas Aquinas, which is again justified by Nancy’s own identification of these sources.<sup>6</sup>

## 1 Descartes and Continuous Creation

The position of Descartes’ doctrine of continuous creation in the history of philosophy (as well as of theology and science) is rather curious: On the one hand, as Descartes himself recognizes, the doctrine can be seen as plainly inherited from Western Christian theology (from St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas,

4 My references to Jean-Luc Nancy’s works indicate, first, the original pagination and, second, the English pagination.

5 Cf. Nancy [1996] 2000, 38/19.

6 Cf. Nancy [1996] 2000, 34/15.

Suarez, etc.);<sup>7</sup> on the other hand, it uniquely reflects Descartes' own philosophical project, as it is associated with the critical transition from scholasticism to early modern science. To use Steven Nadler's words, Descartes's philosophical project responds to the need "to reconcile an emerging scientific view of the natural world—mechanistic physics—with traditional beliefs about the relation between God and his creation" (2011, 29). The new scientific view mentioned by Nadler consists in ridding the world of Aristotelian teleology of forms and dynamism of matter; the behavior of bodies for Descartes ought to be explained in terms of motion alone, whereby matter is conceived as a pure extension which can be sufficiently described with reference to the geometrical properties of figure and shape. Continuous creation (as a doctrine) responds to this new scientific view in two important ways. Firstly, the understanding of time underlying continuous creation conveniently lends itself to mathematical-physical calculation of motion;<sup>8</sup> secondly, as Garber explains, "the view of divine sustenance [i.e., continuous creation] underlies Descartes' derivation of the laws of motion" (1993, 13). To expand on the second point, the idea that God (an immutable and simple substance) continually recreates the world allows Descartes to say that the quantity of motion in the universe always remains the same (i.e., the law of the preservation of motion), as well as that a body in motion will always move in a simple, straight direction unless acted upon (the law of the rectilinearity of motion) (AT VIII 61-66). These two laws, of course, while they do not exhaust Descartes' nomological conception of the world, correspond to Newton's laws of motion. Finally, a considerable number of Descartes' followers, and Malebranche, most significantly, will develop the theory of continuous creation into a full-blown occasionalism, a view "that finite created beings—whether minds or bodies—have no causal efficacy whatever, no power to bring about changes in one another's states" (Nadler 2011, 34).<sup>9</sup> On such a view, "when God sustains a body, he must sustain it somewhere, and in sustaining it where he does he causes it to move or be at rest" (Garber 1993, 16). Occasionalism will thus stand in radical contrast to other causal theories of the epoch, i.e., transient efficient causation or immanent causation.<sup>10</sup> Such is the significance of Descartes' continuous creation that is to be considered in this article: It is at once an unmistakable trace of scholastic theology in Descartes' philosophy *and* a unique reflection of

7 Cf. AT VII 45. Citations of Descartes' works are made in the following form: volume number in the Adam-Tannery edition, page.

8 Cf. Bergson 2007, 22; Wahl 1994, 79.

9 It is not certain, on the other hand, that Descartes himself held such views either in relation to body-body or mind-body interactions: cf. Garber 1993; Nadler 2011.

10 Cf. Nadler 2011, 30-37.

the scientific and philosophical debates of the 17th century Europe to which Descartes contributed in important ways.

It is in the Third Meditation that Descartes expounds his theory of continuous creation in its most complete form.<sup>11</sup> Having demonstrated the existence of God from the idea of the infinite, Descartes stipulates that the ego (which possesses this idea) could not exist if God did not exist. Descartes attempts to show that generation of its own existence is outside the ego's powers, for the ego lacks a power to accomplish even what is *easier* than coming-to-be. "Yet if I derived my existence from myself, then I should neither doubt nor want, nor lack anything at all; for I should have given myself all the perfections of which I have an idea, and thus I should myself be God" (AT VII 48). Given that to be able to accomplish what is more difficult (such as, producing existence) is to be able to accomplish what is less difficult (such as, giving oneself all the perfections), it is clear that the ego cannot derive its existence from itself. It is a task that is too difficult for the Cartesian ego. To this one might object, however, that the ego *has always been* as it is now, thereby rejecting the idea that the ego ought to have come into being at all. It is to defeat this very objection that Descartes gives his argument for uninterruptedness of creation, which we quote at length:

I do not escape the force of these arguments by supposing that I have always existed as I do now; as if it followed from this that there was no need to look for any author of my existence. For a lifespan can be divided into countless parts, each completely independent of the others, so that it does not follow from the fact that I existed a little while ago that I must exist now [*ex eo quòd paulo ante fuerim, non sequitur me nunc debere esse*], unless there is some cause which as it were creates me afresh [*rursum*] at this moment—that is, which preserves me. (AT VII 48-49)

We can schematically break down Descartes' argument into the following interconnected steps:

1. Time is indefinitely divisible.
2. There is no necessary connection between parts into which time has been divided.
3. Therefore, my future existence does not follow from my present existence.

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<sup>11</sup> In his *Principia philosophiae* 1, 21 Descartes virtually repeats the argument from the *Meditationes*: cf. AT VIII 13. One notable difference, however, is that in the former Descartes describes the argument as by itself sufficient to establish the existence of God.

4. Therefore (given that I nonetheless continue to exist) “some cause” must be conserving my existence.

There is nothing problematic about the first step: We can indeed divide any timespan into any number of constituent parts—into years, months, days, hours, minutes. Descartes’ second step, however, warrants further clarification: What does it mean to say that time-parts are completely independent of one another? It means that it entails no logical contradiction to posit one part of time without the other. By way of a contrast, the idea of a valley cannot be separated from the idea of a mountain, that is, one cannot exist without the other.<sup>12</sup> The third step of Descartes’ argument immediately issues from the second one: If the present moment of my existence is logically disconnected from the future moment, then my present existence *does not* entail my future existence. We see Descartes take existence and duration to be strictly equivalent: “[A] substance cannot cease to endure without also ceasing to be” (AT VIII 30). Appropriately, Descartes writes: “[T]he individual moments can be separated from those immediately preceding and succeeding them, which implies that the thing which endures may cease to be at any given moment” (AT VII 370). In the absence of a necessary connection between my present and future existence, therefore, my existence can and *must* stop at the next moment. “We clearly understand that it is possible for me to exist at this moment, while I am thinking of one thing, and yet not to exist at the very next moment” (AT v 193). But then how can we account for the fact that I nonetheless continue to exist, i.e., that existence has duration? Here we see Descartes reject anything like *ontological inertia* in his philosophy. My existence will cease if it is not continually sustained. Descartes denies that the cause sustaining the ego in existence lies in the ego itself, for then the ego would be aware of it:

I must therefore now ask myself whether I possess some power enabling me to bring about that I who now exist will still exist a little while from now. For since I am nothing but a thinking thing ... if there were such a power in me, I should undoubtedly be aware of it. But I experience no such power, and this very fact makes me recognize most clearly that I depend on some being distinct from myself. (AT VII 49)

In turn, given that to sustain *another* in existence (which is *more* difficult) is to be also capable of sustaining oneself in existence, a being sustaining the ego in existence refers to no other being than God. Such is indeed the fourth step of Descartes’ argument. Ultimately, then, Descartes understands God as

<sup>12</sup> Cf. AT VII 66.

sustaining entities from one moment to another—otherwise, there is nothing. As long as Descartes denies a necessary connection between parts of time, it is indeed not surprising that he has to resort to the idea of continuous creation. We can thus reverse Descartes' argument as follows: It is not duration of existence which demonstrates the existence of God (as it is presented, for instance, in the *Principia* I, 21), but *the latter is introduced to explain the former*.

It is important to distinguish between those effects that need the cause that produced them to be continuously active if they are not to cease (e.g., the light of the sun) and those that continue to be even when their cause is no longer active (e.g., manufacturing). To say that Descartes denies ontological inertia in his philosophy is to say that existence belongs exactly to the former case. Appropriately, as Descartes explains to Gassendi, continuous creation ought to be understood by way of the sun analogy:

[T]he sun is the cause of the light which it emits, and God is the cause of created things, not just in the sense that they are causes of the generation of these things, but also in the sense that they are causes of their being; and hence they must always continue to act on the effect in the same way in order to keep it in existence. (AT VII 369)<sup>13</sup>

In spite of the importance of the sun analogy in philosophical theology, however, Descartes clearly uses it in order to highlight the *instantaneous* nature of continuous creation. The latter in its turn follows from Descartes' conception of time, which “can be divided into countless parts, each completely independent of the others.” Indeed, it is this conception of time that pushes Descartes to restrict divine creation to something like an instant, thereby likening it to the instantaneous causality of the sun. Each act of creation is thus enclosed within the present, “owing nothing to the past, entailing nothing for the future” (Gueroult 1968, 196).<sup>14</sup>

The distinction between being and generation introduced in the passage quoted above follows from the *ex nihilo* nature of creation, which Descartes takes for granted from theology.<sup>15</sup> To say that God is the cause of coming-into-being

13 In this Descartes appears to follow Aquinas; cf. *Sum. Theol.*, Ia, Q. 104, A. 1. On Aquinas' use of the analogy, cf. Gilson 1952, 161.

14 Given that for Descartes time is indefinitely divisible, Frankfurt (1999, 62) goes as far as to conclude that “there can be no existing thing whose duration is so short that it does not require continuous creation,” such that “all creation entails continuous creation” and “God cannot create anything without conserving it for some period of time by continuous creative activity.”

15 On this point, cf. Marion 1991, 288.

is to say that he is responsible that a particular material substratum has been transformed into a particular substance. To say that God is the cause of being, on the other hand, is to say that he is responsible for the *existence* of material substratum and substance alike. If the theological concept of creation *ex nihilo* means anything, it is exactly that material substratum does not pre-exist divine creation. If Aristotle, for example, suggests that the crafts-person cannot but rely on some pre-existing material (otherwise, there would be an infinite regress, whereby the craftsperson would have to make the material of his material, etc.) (*Met.*, VII, 1033b1-4), the God of Christian theology is a craftsperson who precisely *makes his own material*. In the words of Etienne Gilson (2012):

On the Greek side stands a god who is doubtless the cause of all being, including its intelligibility, efficiency, and finality—all, save existence itself; on the Christian side a God Who causes the very existence of being. On the Greek side we have a universe eternally informed or eternally moved; on the Christian side a universe which begins to be by creation. (81)<sup>16</sup>

Hence, while the Greek demiurge creates the world out of a pre-existing material, *nothing* pre-exists the Christian act of creation, which produces existence as such. Indeed, if material makes up the existence of a being, it has to be included in creation. Accordingly, in the *Summa Theologica* we see Aquinas stipulate that “also primary matter is created by the universal cause of things” (*Sum. Theol.*, Ia, Q. 44, A. 2).<sup>17</sup> In the absence of the notion of uncreated material, therefore, the thinking of creation operates within the dichotomy between existence and nothingness. Creation, that is, refers not to the making of a world out of something that is not yet a world but to the production of existence itself. As long as theologians understand everything that *is* to be *wholly* a product of creation, then, beings can endure only by means of “[God’s] continually pouring out existence into them” (*Sum. Theol.*, Ia, Q. 104, A. 3). By the same token, Aquinas argues that “the being of every creature depends on God, so that not for a moment could it subsist, but would fall into nothingness were it not kept in being by the operation of the Divine power” (*Sum. Theol.*, Ia, Q. 104, A. 1).<sup>18</sup> This dichotomous mode of understanding creation issues in the

16 Gilson probably borrows this insight from his teacher, Henri Bergson: cf. Bergson 2017, 241.

17 Cf. Gilson 1952, 156-157.

18 Aquinas himself makes reference to Augustine here: “If the ruling power of God were withdrawn from His creatures, their nature would at once cease, and all nature would

following substitution: Divine preservation, which produces existence *rather than* nothingness, is no different from creation, which produces existence *out of* nothingness. When something is conserved by God in existence, therefore, it is created as much out of nothing, recurrently and repeatedly, as if nothing has existed before. It is this very idea that Descartes, following the theologians, summarizes by writing that “it is quite clear to anyone who attentively considers the nature of time that the same power and action are needed to preserve anything at each individual moment of its duration as it would be required to create that thing anew as if it were not yet in existence” (AT VII 49). From this it follows that the distinction between creation and conservation is circumstantial. It implies nothing more than that creation precedes conservation in the order of time. In the *Discourse on Method* Descartes indeed acknowledges that he is by no means the first to deny the distinction between creation and conservation: “[I]t is an opinion commonly received by the theologians, that the action by which he now preserves the world is just the same as that by which he at first created it” (AT VII 45).<sup>19</sup>

In light of the foregoing, we might conclude that in Descartes’ philosophy there is not one creation but many; creation happens not once but all the time, at each moment. This is what it means to say that Descartes’ theory of continuous creation is a thinking of plurality (of worlds, of creations). Indeed, if God creates *a new world* at each moment of existence, then there are as many worlds as there are creations.<sup>20</sup> *A world that is renewed at each moment is but a plurality of worlds.* Descartes’ theory of continuous creation appears locked, however, between two incompatible conceptions: On the one hand, Descartes affirms the logical discontinuity of time; on the other hand, he affirms the immutability of God’s activity. “For we understand that God’s perfection,” explains Descartes, “involves not only his being immutable in himself, but also his operating in a manner that is always utterly constant and immutable”

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collapse” (*Genesis ad Literam*, IV, 12). Citations of Augustine’s works are made in the following form: title, book, section.

19 Descartes’ formulation here seems to repeat the thesis of Suarez: *Disputationes Metaphysicae* (*Disp. Met.* thereafter), 21.2.3. Although much of Scholasticism is called into question by Descartes, the doctrine of continuous creation appears to be an exception in this regard. Therefore, it affords a unique point of continuity between Descartes (and early modern philosophy and science) and scholasticism, thereby also bearing upon Nancy’s project of the deconstruction of Christianity in an exceptional fashion. Citations of Suarez’s work are made in the following form: title, book, section, paragraph.

20 In this connection, Frankfurt (1999) writes: “Continuity and duration are no more inherent in any of these successive worlds than motion is inherent in the still photographs whose succession provides the illusion of movement in a motion picture” (65). Cf. also Garber 1993, 14.

(AT VIII 61). If the latter dictates that there is *one* world, *one* creation, the former issues in the plurality of worlds. Yet, Descartes is able to reduce the former conception to the latter: Creation of the world takes place at each moment but “*in a manner that is always utterly constant and immutable.*” From this it follows that the Cartesian plurality of worlds is merely numerical; in essence, there is but one world, constant and immutable, and ordered towards one creator. The plurality of worlds is thus reduced to and covered over by the constancy of God’s manner of operation. This is nowhere more evident than in Descartes’ conception of natural laws. For, as we have already suggested in the beginning of this article, Descartes derives the constancy of natural laws (e.g., the principle of kinetic inertia) from the immutability of God’s activity.<sup>21</sup> The existence of natural laws then allows Descartes to conclude that “[t]he very fact that creation is in a continual state of change is thus evidence of the immutability of God” (AT VIII 66). Thus, at the same time as Descartes’ thinking of continuous creation opens into something like the plurality of worlds; it closes this plurality off in favor of unity and constancy. Appropriately, Jean Wahl ([1920] 1994) concludes: “[T]he doctrine of *continued* [*continuée*] creation is presented here under a new aspect; and the word ‘continued’ attains its full meaning. It is a solution to the problem of diversity and unity, as well as of change and immutability” (84).<sup>22</sup>

## 2 Nancy’s Deconstruction of *ex nihilo*

As we have seen, the fundamental difference between ancient Greek cosmogonies and the motif of creation *ex nihilo* comes down to the simple idea that *God is not a sculptor shaping some pre-existent material.* Or, alternatively, God is the only craftsperson who creates the very matter with which he works. This is exactly what Nancy ([1996] 2000) means, when he writes in *Être singulier pluriel* that “[i]n *mythological cosmogonies*, a god or demiurge makes a world starting from a situation that is already there, whatever this situation may be. In creation, however, it is the being-already-there of the already-there that is of concern” (34-35/16). As far as mythological cosmogonies are concerned, Nancy has in mind the Greek demiurge who indeed works like a sculptor shaping some material, which refers to “a situation that is already there.” However, it is exactly this pre-existing situation that theology refuses to take for granted in the concept of creation. Nothing is easier than to say that God has created

21 Cf. Chapter VII of Descartes’ *Le Monde* (AT XI 36-37).

22 This and all other quotations are my translations.

the universe out of nothing, but the danger lies in conceiving the nothing as a material cause from which creation draws its effects. Thus, in the *Summa Theologica* Aquinas explains that “[w]hen anything is said to be made from nothing, this preposition ‘from’ [*ex*] does not signify the material cause, but only order; as when we say, ‘from morning comes midday’—i.e., after morning is midday” (*Sum. Theol.*, Ia, Q. 45, A. 1). Aquinas therefore attempts to (partially) divorce the notion of divine creation from the Greek model of production, which always presupposes a material cause.

It is exactly this ordinal sense of “*ex*” that Nancy ([2002] 2007) deploys in his deconstruction of creation *ex nihilo*: “The unique God, whose unicity is the correlate of the creating act cannot precede its creation any more that it can subsist above it or apart from it in some way” (93/70). First, Nancy insists upon the correlation between God and his creative act, such that the former cannot be conceived without the latter. We can thus speak of God only insofar as he creates but not before his creative act. Second, if God is correlated with the act of creation, then it follows quite naturally that God can neither precede creation nor, in Nancy’s words, “subsists above it or apart from it.” We thus see Nancy affirm the primacy of creation over creator in some way: Creation occurs before it is submitted, assigned to an agent. Indeed, this is what it means to say that God is the correlate of creation: First, creation happens; then, it is assigned to an agent, i.e., creator. If God does not subsist apart from the act of creation, however, then to say that creation happens out of nothing is to say that God himself arises out of nothing. Or, better, the nothing of *ex nihilo* precedes the existence of God *as much as* it precedes creation (ordinally speaking). This is how the conception of creation *ex nihilo* (turned on its head by Nancy) issues in the affirmation of the primacy (or precedence) of the *nihil* over God. The notion of *ex nihilo*, which renders creation indistinguishable from conservation, thus also renders the concept of God as producer, as an agent in excess or apart from creation, untenable. Such is indeed the conclusion drawn by Nancy ([1996] 2000): “[T]he motif of creation is one of those that leads directly to the death of God understood as author, first cause, and supreme being” (34/15). Or, at best, Nancy’s deconstruction of creation *ex nihilo* entails that God merges with the act of creation, “merging with it, it withdraws in it, and withdrawing there it empties itself there” ([2002] 2007, 93/70). Nancy refuses to attribute creation to an antecedent cause—creation occurs *ex nihilo* in the full sense of the term. Now, in production as the Greeks conceive of it the sculptor who sets out to make a statue begins first of all by imagining what that statue would look like. Creation *ex nihilo*, however, is the exact opposite of the Greek model: If the world is coming out of nothing, then it is impossible to imagine what it is to be. In Nancy’s words ([2002] 2007), “[i]f ‘creation’ means anything, it is

the exact opposite of any form of production in the sense of fabrication that supposes a given, a project, and a producer" (55/51).<sup>23</sup> Indeed, if by denying that the *nihil* of creation is anything like material (as Aquinas does), the monotheistic conception of creation departs radically from the Greek paradigm of τέχνη (art) and production, then all that Nancy's deconstruction accomplishes is a *further* radicalization of this departure. By insisting that creation *ex nihilo* presupposes no project or producer, Nancy wants to make it as *dissimilar* to artistic fabrication as possible. Then, although someone like Aquinas would probably not agree with anything that Nancy says about creation *ex nihilo*,<sup>24</sup> there is still a certain fidelity to Thomistic theology on Nancy's part. For, following Aquinas, Nancy attempts to divorce creation *ex nihilo* from the Aristotelian model of τέχνη as much as possible. Indeed, Nancy insists that *God is not a sculptor* more forcefully than Aquinas himself.

As we have seen, Descartes' thinking of continuous creation at once makes possible something like the plurality of worlds and prohibits this plurality in favor of divine immutability. The relationship between the plurality of creation and creator is thus akin to that between an army and a general. The latter gives the former order and organization, assigns it with a project. Nancy's deconstruction of creation, on the other hand, is akin to getting rid of the general, thereby releasing the plurality of worlds. Nancy makes first reference to the theory of continuous creation in *Être singulier pluriel* in the section entitled "The Creation of the World and Curiosity": "Is it not surprising that for Descartes the reality of this world, about which God could not deceive me, is maintained in Being by the *continuous creation* (*création continuée*) on the part of this very God" ([1996] 2000, 38/19). Yet, a world maintained in existence by continuous creation is a world that "is always in each instant, from place to place, each time in turn" ([1996] 2000, 38/19). It is only with the deconstruction of the origin of the world, however, that Descartes' idea of continuous creation comes into full bloom. Indeed, Nancy explicitly connects the theme of continuous creation (*création continuée*) with the deconstruction of origin: "If the world does not 'have an origin 'outside of itself, then the origin of the

23 Nancy's interpretation of creation here directly contradicts Heidegger's (1986, *GA* 15, 360/ 56-57): "what does creation [*Schöpfung*] mean? Creation is the production of the world.... Beings are created. Who does the production of beings require? One must think here of the Aristotelian example of the architect. The architect creates, in that he sets out from the εἶδος. Before the creation, God thinks the εἶδος of the world." My references to Heidegger's works indicate, first, the original pagination in *Gesamtausgabe* and, second, the English pagination.

24 In Aquinas' philosophy God, insofar as he is an exemplary cause of the world, certainly has a certain project for it: cf. *Sum. Theol.*, Ia, Q. 15.

world occurs *at each moment of the world*" ([1996] 2000, 106/83, my emphasis). With the deconstruction of theological foundation, therefore, the creation of the world is no longer reducible to some *unitary* ground; instead, creation is pluralized. "Creation is the site of plurality precisely inasmuch as it is the constant repetition of the singular event of creation in its singularity" (Brogan 2010, 300). Singularity of creation refers to the capacity of an event to subtract itself from dependence on the past. A singular event is an event that cannot be re-inscribed in a project subsisting above or apart from it. It is thanks to exactly this capacity that the theory of continuous creation issues for Nancy into an ontology of surprise and interruption. To say that creation surprises, that is, is to say that it opens into something unforeseeable. Thus, in Nancy's thought creation is never closed off, i.e., it never issues into *mere* conservation, into merely *continued* (rather than continuous) creation. In the wake of the deconstruction of the origin of the world, all creation is therefore always *ordinally first*. At each moment of the world creation *ex nihilo* begins the existence of the world *anew*. Once again, here we see Nancy radicalize the theological thesis about the merely circumstantial difference between creation and preservation. Although Descartes admits that creation and preservation are not really distinct, he still cannot get rid of the notion of preservation. For the circumstantial, ordinal sense of conservation guarantees for Descartes that God is "utterly constant and immutable." Indeed, there is no way to tell constancy from inconstancy in the absence of an ordinal series (of creations). But if divine constancy is lifted off, then the idea of preservation simply becomes redundant. There is but creation, each time afresh. Singularity, however, cannot *be* in the absence of plurality (for then creation would not be continuous). Singularity of creation thus entails (for the first time) a plurality of worlds, each time arising out of a singular event. Nancy's eventual ontology is thus a *singular plural* ontology. From a world as a result of an accomplished act, as subjected to a closed off destiny, we shift to a world as unceasing activity and creative repetition. Nancy writes incisively: "The world springs forth everywhere and in each instant, simultaneously. This is how it comes to appear out of nothing and 'is created'" ([1996] 2000, 107/83).

Now, in Descartes' philosophy God has to continually keep the world in existence, because the nature of time excludes necessary logical connection. In Nancy, on the other hand, the creation of the world has to occur at each moment, precisely because the figure of God as producer is suspended. By the same token, if Descartes' objective can be seen to consist in explaining the endurance of the world, Nancy is concerned with the opposite, i.e., with surprise and singularity. Yet, while he is able to release the thought of plurality from Descartes' doctrine of continuous creation, Nancy at the same time

performer undoes Descartes' solution to the problem of the endurance of the world. The problem of endurance appears to be unsolvable in Descartes, unless he introduces an "utterly constant and immutable" creator. But Descartes' theological solution is not available to Nancy. Therefore, Nancy's solution has to be different, and it will consist in showing that the Cartesian problem of endurance is a *false* problem. And the problem of endurance is a false problem, for it only arises because Descartes takes a span of time to be a succession of logically disconnected parts. And, of course, there is no other remedy to this logical independence than divine preservation. Having rejected the option of divine preservation, on the other hand, Nancy takes time to be originally relational, such that the world endures on its own, *immanently*.<sup>25</sup> Nancy arrives at this conclusion by means of a sort of *reductio ad absurdum* argument, which is a continually repeated mode of argument in his work. Descartes' temporal logic, when "[t]aken to its limit and 'without reserve,'" in María Acosta's (2017) words, "is not only destructive and self-destructive but also self-contradictory" (117). At its limit, then, what Descartes understands by time as "divided into countless parts, each completely independent of the others" is no time at all but something monstrous, incessantly self-splintering and falling toward "absolute" absolutism, *ad infinitum*. Acosta (2017) continues: "However, the result of the self-contradiction is not simply the invalidation of the system and its operation. What is brought about is precisely what has made possible such a thorough deconstruction in the first place, namely, *the very fact and ineradicability of relation*" (117-118, my emphasis). That is, what is brought about by the deconstruction of ground is the ineradicability of relation, which is the basis of Nancy's understanding of time. Descartes' conception of time thus undergoes a radical transformation, and relationism enters the picture. If the concept of creation *ex nihilo* results in the deconstruction of God, then this deconstruction leads in turn to the displacement of Descartes' "no necessary connection" conception of time with a relational one. That is to say: If continuous creation means anything for Nancy, it is the exact opposite of a logically disconnected series. Nancy ([1996] 2000) understands continuous creation in terms of "the *being-with* [*l'être-avec*] of each time with every [other] time" (106/83, my emphasis).<sup>26</sup> Singular events of creation are always outside themselves, beyond themselves, exposed to each other, never absolute in their structure. This is how a world of relation and sharing can be possible, i.e., a

25 Here Nancy might be indebted to Bergson's criticism of Descartes' conception of time: Cf. Bergson [1896] 2008, 165-166.

26 Here Nancy seems to be glossing Heidegger's critique of the vulgar concept of time: cf. Heidegger (1977, GA 2, §81, 555-565/472-480).

world that has a past and a future, a world that *grows*. The term “growth,” which Nancy often uses in describing the concept of the world, indeed presupposes that the past *endures* into the future.<sup>27</sup>

However, such relational understanding of creation takes nothing from its singularity. The occurrences of creation *touch* but do not meld into one another: The singularity of each time is at once irreducible and indissociable from every other time. Therefore, Nancy conceives of the duration of the world as at once relational *and* susceptible to interruption, to pluralization. On the one hand, then, Nancy is able to offer a relational (i.e., what Nancy calls “being-with”) ontology of time. On the other hand, this relationism, i.e., this intertwinement of present, past, and future, does not proscribe the possibility of an interruptive break in the continuity of time, for there is no longer an immutable unitary ground to the world. The world unfolds without models or principles; it is not determined beforehand—this is what makes interruption possible. According to Nancy, then, constant renewal of the world has to be though side by side with the being-with of everything past and future. Thus, Nancy’s thought stands in radical contrast to Descartes who conceives of creation as a series of discrete occurrences, each time cutting themselves from what had been before. If the singularity of creation is what allows for the plurality of worlds, then the *being-with* of each time with every other time is what makes a relational world.

### 3 Concluding Remarks: Descartes’ Ghosts

But has not Descartes accomplished a critique of the paradigm of production himself by way of his critique of scholastic-Aristotelian finalism? Indeed, one of the philosophical innovations of Descartes’ philosophy (perhaps, *the* philosophical innovation) is his insistence on the incomprehensibility of God as an infinite being. As Descartes explains in the Third Meditation, “[i]t does not matter that I do not grasp the infinite, or that there are countless additional attributes of God which I cannot in any way grasp, and perhaps cannot even reach in my thought; for it is in the nature of the infinite not to be grasped by a finite being like myself” (AT VII 46). But if the infinite being of God is incomprehensible to me, then neither are the ends of creation (or anything like providence). Indeed, in the Fourth Meditation Descartes writes that “there is considerable rashness in thinking myself capable of investigating the

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Nancy (2002, 56/51).

impenetrable purposes of God [*finis Dei*]” (AT VII 55).<sup>28</sup> By the same token, in the *Principia* I, 41 Descartes writes that “our mind is finite, while the power of God is infinite—the power by which he not only knew from eternity whatever is or can be, but also willed it and preordained it” (AT VIII 20). Given that the infinite power of God surpasses human understanding, therefore, the nature of preordination is beyond human grasp. While it is impious to deny providence, it is rash to think oneself capable of comprehending divine preordination. We thus see Descartes deny the human capacity to investigate *where this world is going or where it is coming from*. Then, although Descartes (like Aquinas) would probably not agree with Nancy’s deconstruction of *ex nihilo*, there is nonetheless something “Nancean” about Descartes’ conception. Creation in Descartes can be said to be *ex nihilo* (*pace* Nancy) precisely in the sense that the world is coming out of *nothing* and going toward *nothing*, where “nothing” means “*nothing comprehensible to us*.” Thus, Descartes’ critique of finalism is an overturning of the teleological conception of the world (on the model of τέχνη) *as much as* Nancy’s deconstruction of Western Christianity. In the Sixth Meditation Descartes writes that one can tell a ghost by the fact that one cannot see “where it had come from [*nec unde venisset*] or where it had gone to [*nec quo abiret*]” (AT VII 89-90). Indeed, ghosts appear from nowhere and disappear into nothingness. And there is something ghostlike about the world as it is thought by both Nancy and Descartes—we understand *neither where the world is coming from nor where it is going*. In Nancy’s words ([2002] 2007), “this world is coming out of nothing, ... there is nothing before it and ... it is without models, without principle and without given end” (63/55).

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<sup>28</sup> On Descartes’ criticism of finalism, cf. Gilson 1913, 79-96.

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