

For a Refutation of the Dialetheist Logic

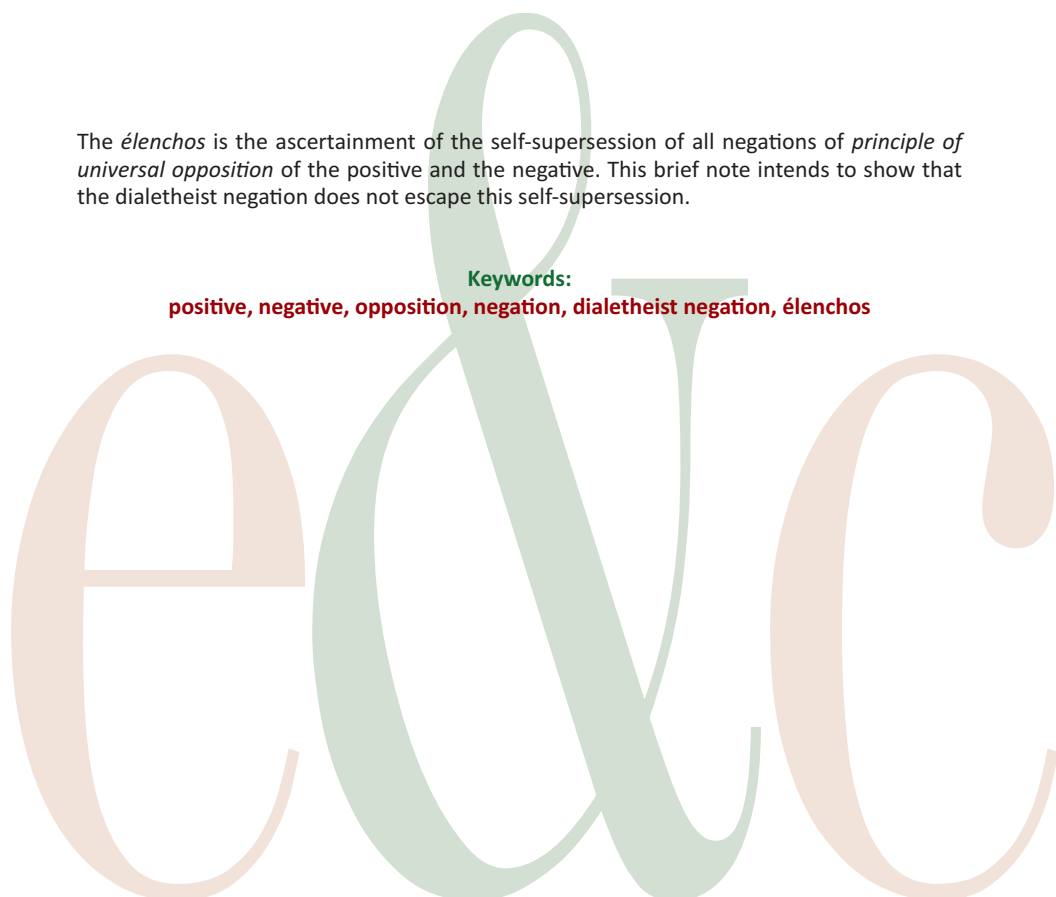
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The *élenchos* is the ascertainment of the self-supersession of all negations of *principle of universal opposition* of the positive and the negative. This brief note intends to show that the dialetheist negation does not escape this self-supersession.

Keywords:

positive, negative, opposition, negation, dialetheist negation, élenchos



1. Introduction

The point on which it is necessary to focus the attention when we are discussing about the principle of non-contradiction is the following: why can't we assert the identity of being and not-being? The denier of the first principle, Aristotle notes, affirming, for example, that x «is a man and a not-man», cannot exclude the corresponding negations: he will say that x «is neither a man nor a not-man» (*Metaph.* IV, 4, 1008 a 4-7). If we then consider the expression x «is a man and a not-man» as if it was a single statement, then the opposite assertion too will be a single one, so that the denier of the first principle will also have to claim that x «is not a man and a not-man». Aristotle says that «our discussion with him is evidently about nothing at all; for he says nothing. For he says neither 'yes' nor 'no', but 'yes and no'; and again he denies both of these and says 'neither yes nor no'; for otherwise there would already be something definite» (*Metaph.* IV, 4, 1008 a 30-34). However, the denier of the first principle could respond that, in this way, we are assuming what we should demonstrate, namely that reality is determined, that it is consistent with the classical logic and its implications. The argument would therefore be flawed by a *petition principii*. Concerning the dialetheist negation things become complicated since it claims there are cases in which *the positive is and is not the negative*, that there are true and false statements, but not statements that are neither true nor false. Except that, as we shall see now, the winning move against the negation of the *principium firmissimum*, including the specific position proposed by the dialetheist logic, is not the one that contests the fact that it does not say anything (the contradiction is not, in fact, lack of meaning), but rather the observation that the negation of the first principle is a negation of itself. It happens therefore that, in the words of Aristotle, «for while disowning reason», that is, the transcendental value of non-contradiction, the denier too «listens to reason» (*Metaph.* IV, 4, 1006 a 26), declaring his non-existence. The

process that shows the incontrovertibility of that “logos” «which every one must have who understands anything that is» (*Metaph.* IV, 3, 1005b, 16-17), is the *élenchos*. One who has examined its structure, more than anyone else, is Emanuele Severino in the very famous VI paragraph of *Returning to Parmenides* (see Severino, 2016, pp. 59-80).

2. The *élenchos* and its figures

Severino identifies two fundamental figures of the *élenchos*: the first one evokes the Aristotelian formulation of the argument, but with the warning that the sense of identity and of non-contradiction, as it shows itself in the *primal structure of the truth*, which implies the eternity of being (see Goggi, 2019), is in its essence different from the one that appears in the nihilistic context marked by the *temporal understanding of being*, inside which the very inquiry of the Stagirite moves; the second one answers to solicitations which are not present in the Aristotelian text, but crucial in order to finalise the structure of the *élenchos*, permanently.

2.1. The first figure

The first figure of the *élenchos* is made of two assertions: [a] «the negation of the determinate is a determinate» and [b] «the negation of the determinate is negation of the determinate which is the negation itself» (see Severino, 2016, pp. 72-73). The “determinate” is the same identity-opposition of being, where being is the positive, that is, every non-nothing, and the determinateness of being is its not being other than itself, where the other than the considered being, its negative, is an anything else, that is, everything that, in different ways, is not the positive considered. It should be noted that the elenctic strategy does not consist of saying, simply, that that positive that is the negation of the opposition is contradictory, thereby assuming what we intend to show; what is crucial is the observation that, «if the opposition is, in *any* way, denied and the negation is to *be* negation [...] then the negation *is opposed to* its negative; that is, it holds firm in that meaning for the sake of which it is negation, and differentiates this meaning from all other meanings» (Severino, 2016, p. 61). The negation of the opposition is removed since it is shown that

«such negation fails to live as negation, because in the act in which it constitutes itself as negation it is at once also affirmation. And so it is, most definitely, contradictory: but the negation is not superseded insofar as it is formally ascertained to be contradictory – the negation is superseded insofar as it is ascertained that it fails to posit itself as negation, unless it grounds itself upon that which it denies, and so only if it denies itself. The negation, failing to free itself from that which it denies, becomes its very bearer; not only does it fail to tear what it denies off its back, so that it can then hold it at arm's length and condemn it, but what it thinks it has before it and has condemned, actually stands behind it and directs all its thoughts, including the thought that announces the condemnation. The law of Being is the destiny of thought, and thought is always witness to this law; always affirming it, even when ignorant of it or when denying it» (Severino, 2016, pp. 64-65). Holding firmly in itself, the negation of the opposition opposes its negative: denying the principle of the opposition of the negative and the positive, the negation denies therefore what without which it would not exist, that is to say, it denies itself.

2.2. The second figure

The second figure of the *élenchos* answers to a solicitation that is not present in the Aristotelian text: what happens if the negation recognizes to be something determinate – and therefore not to be other than itself – and it limits itself to affirm the existence of a contradictory reality (in which the being is other than itself) outside the semantic area of which the negation itself consists? The diriment investigation is operated by the second figure of the *élenchos* that is composed, too, of two assertions: [a] «the negation of the opposition is (affirmation of the) opposition» and [b] «the negation of the opposition is negation of the opposition that is part of the negation of the opposition» and therefore it is the negation of itself (see Severino, 2016, pp. 75-76). In this way, the *élenchos* receives the maximum extension that belongs to it. Severino writes: «The *élenchos* is the ascertainment of the *determinateness* of the negation of the opposition (where “determinateness” means nothing other than the positive’s property of being opposed to its negative). This determinateness is proper *both* to the negation, considered as a semantic unity with respect to everything that is other than the negation, *and* to the single terms that make up the negation. If the negation does not remain distinct from its

other, there is no longer negation; if each term of the negation is not distinct from every other term (as occurs when no difference is posited between red and green, i.e. when red is affirmed to be green) again there is no negation (for if the terms are not seen to be different, positing a difference between them would be a negation of the opposition). In order for there to be negation, the negation must be determinate, both with respect to its other, and in the term that constitutes it; and therefore it presupposes and is grounded upon that which it denies» (Severino, 2016, pp. 67-68). In other words, in order for there to be negation of the opposition, and therefore the difference of the differing is denied, such a difference needs to appear and therefore to be affirmed, so that the negation is, contradictorily, a denying and an affirming the same, in which the checkmate operated by the *élenchos* does not actually reside in showing that the negation of the difference is contradictory (notwithstanding that it is, since it denies and affirms the same), but instead in detecting that the negation of the difference of the differing cannot constitute itself unless it assumes what it denies. If in the first figure of the *élenchos* the negation of the determinate presents itself as the affirmation of a part of the totality of the determinate that is denied, that is, the one the negation itself consists of, in the second figure the negation of the determinate presents itself as the affirmation of the totality of the determinate that is denied. It shall be said then that the principle of the opposition of the positive and the negative *is at the foundation of every thought*: it also founds its own negation, not in the sense that it validates it, but in the sense that, if the negation of the opposition – whatever the form in which it presents itself is – would not pose at its foundation the opposition, it could not even exist: it is founded on what it denies, and therefore it denies itself.

3. The *élenchos* of the dialetheist negation

But how does all of this apply to the dialetheist denier? It seems indeed that he manages to avoid the elenctic “trap”, inviting to consider the possibility that some contradictions are true (we are then in the situation considered by the second figure of the *élenchos*), where however the opposition is not simply denied, but it is *both affirmed and denied*, therefore there can be a case of a positive (any being) that *is and is not its negative*

(what is other than the considered being). In this case we would be dealing with a negation that does *not* mean the simple “exclusion” (that is, the exclusion that is not also non-exclusion), but with a negation that is *exclusionary but also not exclusionary*, for this is precisely what is peculiar to the dialetheist position. In response to this, we shall consider again the ultimate meaning of the *élenchos*. We have seen that the negation of the opposition of positive and negative presupposes and is founded on what it denies, and therefore it denies itself; and this happens also in the case of that specific negation of the opposition that is the so called “true contradiction”, where the positive is thought as what is and is-not the negative. Severino writes: «In thinking that the positive is and is-not the negative, one denies that the positive is not negative [...] not simply in the sense that “the positive is and is-not the negative” includes “the positive is not the negative” – for, in this sense, the opposition is indeed denied, but is also affirmed – but in the sense that, in affirming-denying the opposition, one denies it insofar as it is an object *simpliciter* of affirmation, insofar, that is, as it refuses to become, at the same time, an object of negation. If the thought that the positive is and is-not the negative is a denial, in the sense we have indicated, of the positive’s not being negative, i.e., is an identification of the positive and the negative, then we find again, at the root of this thought, that negation of the opposition which the *élenchos* supersedes by ascertaining (as in the case of the affirmation “red is green”) that it grounded upon the affirmation of that which it denies» (Severino, 2016, p. 68). The dialetheist denier responds that «if we have [...] to deal with a true contradiction, as believe those who affirm and deny the opposition, the truth of the claim that the positive categorically and in every way refuses to enter into a synthesis with its negative is unable to exclude the truth of the contradictory proposition» (Costantini, 2018, p. 866). This being the case, we are dealing with a positive that is not *only* other than its negative. Therefore, Severino says well: «in affirming-denying the opposition, one denies it insofar as it is an object *simpliciter* of affirmation». In fact, the dialetheist “true contradiction” is such only because the affirmation enters into synthesis with the negation, that is, denying the opposition insofar as it refuses to place itself in such a synthesis. Now, it should be noted that *if it did not deny the opposition like this, we would not be dealing with a “true contradiction”*. And it is useless to repeat that such a negation is not able to be *exclusionary*: we would only repeat the same structure of the “true contradiction” that is in itself – «at the root of this thought» – identification of the positive and the

negative. However, the *élenchos* is able to remove (in the meaning that has been described) the negation of the opposition, and therefore also that kind of limited negation that is the dialetheist negation, highlighting that it is founded too on what it denies. The dialetheism is caught in its being negation of the opposition: in its being this “at the root”, in the indicated sense. By removing the root, that is, observing that it is self-removal, the *élenchos* removes what is rooted in it.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, every negation of the principle of the opposition of positive and negative – which is then the principle of the difference of the differing – is founded on the appearing of the difference, so that such a negation, of which the dialetheist negation is a particular kind, denies itself; *and it is precisely for this reason, that is, because that negation is self-negation, that it is necessary that being appears just as indicated by the language that testifies the primal structure.* To this should be added that the thought that contradicts itself «*is not a thinking nothing, but is a thinking the Nothing.* The identity of the positive and the negative [...] is that which is-not [...]. And insofar as Nothing lets thought look at it, it dons the mantle of the positive» (Severino, 2016, p. 79). So, we must distinguish between the contradiction and the content which is affirmed by the contradiction. This content is what is impossible, the absolute Nothing, while the contradiction, that affirms the nothing, is not a nothing. «Any contradiction – like, for that matter, the very meaning “nothing” – constitutes the positive meaning of Nothing» (*ivi*) and any contradiction must be denied *because of its meaning.*

Footnote

The dialetheist frequently refers to self-referential statements in order to justify the existence of contradictory dimensions. And the most popular of those statements is the paradox of the liar: “What I affirm is false”. If that statement is true, then it is false; if it is false, then it is true. In closing this brief note, I would like to point out the solution Severino himself gave to this paradox: «Even if we admitted temporarily the validity of

these two inferences [if it is true then it is false; if it is false then it is true], however, we should conclude that the self-referential statement is a *contradiction*, and that therefore what exists is the contradiction, the contradicting oneself, *not* the content of the contradiction, that is, the *contradictory* content, which is invalid, the impossible [...]. However, the validity [...] of the two inferences related to the self-referential statements such as “What I affirm is false” (we shall indicate with q this statement) does not exist. The premises of the two inferences – *if q is true* (then it is false), *if q is false* (then it is true) – are actually negations of the primal structure of the destiny of truth. As a matter of fact it is impossible that q (that is, the affirmation of being false) belongs to the destiny of truth, that is, it is impossible to suppose [...] that it is true (on the basis of the authentic meaning of the truth); and it is impossible to *suppose* that q is false, since the supposition coexists with the opposite supposition, while q is necessarily and originally false: q denies itself [...]. The impossibility of the two premises makes therefore impossible the two conclusions that would have to show the opposite of the premises» (Severino, 2019, pp. 280-283).

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