

# Form and matter of the semantic whole.

## Notes to *The Primal Structure*

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In considering the concept of “Being”, and the related concept of the “semantic whole”, Severino probes the Hegelian criticism of the semantic autonomy of significances in depth. On the basis of this premise, in *The Primal Structure* the whole, that is the “totality of being”, takes on the role of an organic structure in which every significance (every Being) is necessarily implied in the whole and implies every other significance. This contribution intends to show to what contradictions such a view of the totality of being may lead.

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**Being, Whole, Part, Form, Matter, Constant**



## 1. Introduction: the parts as constants of the whole in The Primal Structure

In chapter XII, para. 17 of *The Primal Structure*, the author presents the theorem according to which “every significance is a constant of the infinite semanteme”; or also: “no significance can be a variant of the infinite semanteme”. In a very general sense, by “constants” in *The Primal Structure* are meant those significances that are not simply included in a specific significance, but that establish the meaning of that significance, and are therefore necessarily posited or implied by their position. Here, what is actually being considered is the circumstance whereby *every* significance determines, to the extent of its concrete significance, the whole. That is, it determines the whole with respect to its total content, or absolute *semantic matter* (even if not with respect to its *formal* significance or, that is, its determination *as* “a semantic whole”).

Severino affirms that the meaning “to be” (as a semantic whole) «includes the totality of meanings (= of the beings); in other words, every one of these belongs, in its own way, to the essence of Being (or of the whole)» (Severino, 2012, p. 292). Of every significance, he posits its being a constant of the infinite semanteme insofar as «every significance is L-immediately recognized as belonging to the essence of the significance “to be”. Or also: by “to be” is meant the concrete totality of beings; thus every Being is L-immediately recognized as belonging to the essence of Being [the whole or the totality of being, N.d.A.]: just because every significance declares L-immediately that it is a Being» (Severino, 2012, pp. 292-293). Where L-immediacy acts precisely as an analytic connection – the negation of which contradicts itself – between every significance and its belonging to in the whole. It is interesting to observe how Severino accepts this conclusion – in a passage which has been removed from the new edition of the text (Severino, 1981) – as a consequence of the emphasis laid by scholastic philosophy on its consideration of the non-generic nature of Being: «Scholastic philosophy has particularly insisted on this all-inclu-

siveness of the infinite semanteme. (The concept of “Being” is not an “abstraction”!). We have to draw the consequences» (Severino, 2012, p. 293).

## 2. Principle of non-contradiction and analytical propositions

When he states that Being, viewed as the totality of being, is the horizon of all that which is not non-Being, he intends to recognize the primal synthesis of being and determination (or rather of existence and essence) which neither the part as distinctive (or separate) from the totality, nor the totality as distinctive (or separate) from the parts can guarantee. In the important paragraph 19 of chapter IX of *The Primal Structure*, he discusses the relationship between that *unique* analytic proposition (that affirms the identity with itself of the whole) and its various individuations (that affirm the identity with itself or the existence of determinations). If we affirm the identity of a certain determination with itself (of the type: “*A* is *A*”), we emphasize the fact that the identity does not belong to this determination as such (*A*), but because it is a certain determination of Being, or individuation of the universal one that is *Being* (the whole). Otherwise, the identity could not belong to any other determination (either: *x*, which would prevent the predication of its identity with itself, or: “*x* is *x*”). Likewise, the identity that is predicated on being *qua* being, considered in that universal abstraction or formality for which it can predicate itself on any determinacy, regardless of the concrete determination of this latter (or universal abstract), is the identity of the concrete content of this form, or rather it establishes itself insofar as the formal element is seen in relation to the determinate content (or universal concrete). Therefore, if determination *A* is itself (or, according to a different concept, is a Being determined in a certain way) insofar as *Being* is Being, on the other hand *Being* is Being insofar as every determination is itself (Severino, 2012, pp. 195-197).

## 3. Severino’s Hegelian inheritance

But the totality (or *Being*), in this latter statement, is interpreted in two different ways: in the first case it means the semantic whole, in relation to whose identity (*Being* is Being) only, we can posit the identity of a certain content (*A* is *A*); in the second case, the totality stands for Being – as a universal abstract – whose identity is such only if placed in relation to the con-

crete content of universality. It is, however, only by jeopardizing the relationship between the concrete totality of being and finite determinations in a bi-univocal sense that we can posit every significance as a constant of the whole. It is one thing, indeed, to say that of every determination, as positive, one must necessarily say that it belongs to Being (or whole). It is another to establish also *how* this belonging is to be achieved: and, that is, to say that every significance is a constant of the whole. If it is «*precisely insofar as every significance is L-immediately affirmed to be a Being*» (Severino, 2012, p. 293, italics added), that every significance belongs to *Being* (or the whole) *as its constant*, however, with regard to the predication of the universal concrete identity, it is not possible, *per se*, to consider the inclusion of every significance in the whole (i.e. to consider every significance as a moment of the whole), likewise its belonging to the whole as a constant. If the “moment” of the whole is “that which the whole cannot lack”, we then have to understand how it is possible to introduce this belonging without referring to the concept of the whole as a “totality of the parts that are its constants” (see below, para. 5).

Severino considers it impossible to think of the “totality” without thinking of the “part” as that which the totality exceeds, *in the sense in which* he considers it impossible to think of the totality without considering it inclusive of the part: something like a “totality” can only be posited insofar as we posit the significance “part”, so that this significance belongs to the semantic field established by the “totality”, without having the value of predicate of that same field – and, indeed, being contradictory it has the value of predicate (Severino, 2012, p. 166). Now, if  $x$  is any meaning that is not the totality of the meaning (the totality of being), then in the proposition: “The totality includes  $x$ ”, the significance of “including  $x$ ” would be a predicate that is necessarily appropriate to the significance of “totality”; on the other hand, since the significance of “including  $x$ ” exists only insofar as it implies the significance  $x$ , then this latter significance, and thus every significance that is not the totality of the significance, determines the significance “totality” (Severino, 1984, p. 191). With that, precisely, what he is saying is that the parts are constants of the whole, since he reiterates that the need of inclusion of the part, which is predicated of the totality, can be conceived only in reference to every part that is included.

#### 4. The negation of the whole through the distinction of form and semantic matter

If we affirm, as Severino does, that «the concrete totality is *the* not Nothing, insofar as it includes all that is not a Nothing, and that is, insofar as it is in relation to the parts; and is *a* not Nothing, insofar as *also* the parts that it includes are a not Nothing» (Severino, 2000, p. 97, note), we are not stating – *simpliciter* – contradictory predications of the same thing, for which the concrete totality would be, together and in the same respect, “totality” and “part”. Indeed, to be *a* not Nothing which is a predicate of the totality, does not imply the existence of a *set* that is itself the totality, and that therefore includes, on the one hand, the determinations that are parts of the totality and, on the other, that determination that is the whole. In this way the parts would be not included in the totality and the totality would not include the parts. Rather, the totality «is in relation not only to the parts but also to itself, *and to itself in its being inclusive of the parts*» (Severino, 2015, p. 219). The totality of the being is therefore the totality of that which is not a Nothing (*the* not Nothing), and is *a* not Nothing, although it does not include itself *as part* of itself.

At a closer look, we can see that the second part of the first sentence abstractly ignores what was stated in the first part, since it actually repeats that the parts are *also* not Nothing, regardless of their inclusion in the totality, for which they – as concrete content of the totality – are not Nothing. And this therefore affirms, with an act of logic distinct from that of which such a statement is a repetition, their not being Nothing (also) as distinct from the totality. Otherwise, in the second sentence, what is said of the totality affirms its being in relation to itself insofar as including the parts, but not only, because the totality is *also* in relation to itself (in its being inclusive of the parts), as well as being in relation to the parts. Thus it too is newly established as the logical moment subsequent to that in which the totality is put in relation to the parts – and that is after having pre-scinded from its being inclusive of the parts –, in its being inclusive of the parts as distinguished from its own content.

This occurs in spite of the fact that in *The Primal Structure* Severino explicitly makes reference to the warning that the absolute semantic matter (of the whole) cannot apply as something *distinct* from the form: in which case the semanteme “semantic whole” (or the totality *qua* totality), which is precisely, in this context, what is meant by the formal value of the infi-

nite semanteme, would not be included in absolute matter, so that this would not be that. In the proposition that expresses the identity with itself of the whole, the subject is absolute matter as the synthesis of matter and form, and the predicate is form, as the synthesis in turn of form and matter. In this sense, form and matter (in absolute terms) are, concretely, the same thing (Severino, 2012, p. 291).

## 5. Conclusion: what it means that whole includes the parts

*That* every positive, insofar as it is identical to itself (or a Being determined in a certain way), is included in the whole, and that the whole, as universal concrete, necessarily confirms its inclusion of every positive, pertains to the concrete structure of logical immediacy. On the other hand, with regard to the claim – explored in all its expressions in the last chapter of *The Primal Structure* – that of every semantic content the Being, or the non-Being of its non-Being, is L-immediately predicated, to the extent that it is immediately contradictory to state that Being is not (Severino, 2012, p. 375), it should be noted that it is only the proposition: “Being is” (where by “Being” is meant the semantic whole), which is the same concrete L-immediacy. Of existential propositions in which, however, the subject has a finite determination, we have to say that, though L-immediate, they are only individuations of L-immediacy (Severino, 2012, p. 377). Of a particular determination (we’ll call it: *d*) we state that it is not becoming because, if it were, *d* – or this certain Being – would not be. In other words, the predicate belongs – as denied – to the subject *ratione suae partis*, since becoming implies as such the non Being of the Being. But the proposition: “*d* is not non-Being”, is not mediated in its turn, and thus its denial immediately contradicts itself in the measure in which it stands as individuation of concrete logical immediacy (Severino, 2012, p. 388, note 1).

Now, if experience – that in this text is indicated as the “totality of the F-immediate”, or as the totality of that which is immediately present – illustrates *which* determinations belong to the whole (or are included in it), this latter, *as* absolute immutability, surpasses the totality of the F-immediate, that appears as the horizon in which Becoming shows itself – where we observe the arrival of Being out of non Being and the annihilation of Being (the primal structure is the primal opening of metaphysical knowledge); although, then, it is precisely for the L-immediate statement that the immutable whole is *other*, or lies *beyond* the totality of the F-immedi-

ate, that F-immediate Being is seen *as a moment* of the whole of the positive, or rather as that which is not the whole but that is included in it (because positive) (Severino, 2012, pp. 401-402). And since all L-immediate propositions that have as their subject the semantic whole are each the concrete realization of logical immediacy, the proposition: “The immutable whole surpasses the totality of the F-immediate”, is itself a statement of the principle of non-contradiction (Severino, 2012, p. 402). Therefore, that the totality of the F-immediate is a positive that cannot contain any quantity or any mode of positivity that is not contained in the immutable whole, i.e. vice versa, that any F-immediate determination cannot not be included in it, is something that depends on the identity whereby the immutable whole is itself (the whole of the positive) (Severino, 2012, p. 403). “Otherwise”, if, that is, the immutable whole did not contain all the positivity of the F-immediate, “it would not be the whole of positivity” (Severino, 2012, p. 403).

In this sense, the necessary claim of the inclusion of every positive – *qua* positive – in the whole, does not refer to a prior determination of the whole as the totality of parts which are its constants, but rather to the position of the semantic whole as such (*qua* whole), which implies L-immediately the exclusion of any surpassing of it. This also applies to exclude its not being inclusive of a certain positive, since its non-inclusion with respect to any positive at all would lead to that surpassing, and thus to the negation of the whole (Severino, 2012, pp. 291-292). Severino’s further addition – “because immutability does not pertain to this or that Being but to *every* Being” (Severino, 2012, pp. 403-404) – appears pleonastic, and in any case subordinate to the preceding, unlike what seems to be suggested by that conjunction placed at the beginning of the sentence. It is not true, as a matter of fact, that the immutable whole is the whole of positivity because immutability belongs to every Being, but rather, on the contrary, that every determination is immutable because the whole is immutable or – but it is the same thing – because it is identical to itself, as in the proposition: “The whole is the whole”, the content expressed is the same as in the proposition: “The whole is” (Severino, 2012, pp. 375-377), and consequently the same as in that proposition which affirms the immutability of the whole.

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