

The Nothing, the Negation, the Undeniable

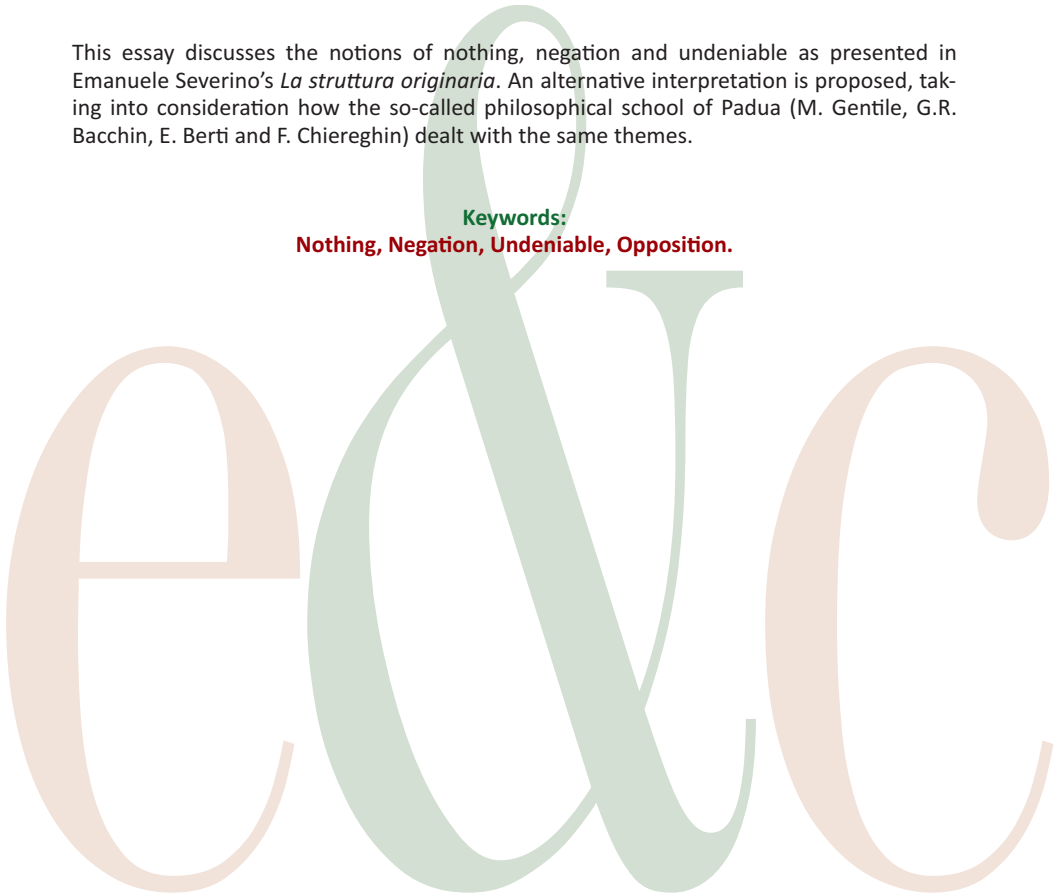
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This essay discusses the notions of nothing, negation and undeniable as presented in Emanuele Severino's *La struttura originaria*. An alternative interpretation is proposed, taking into consideration how the so-called philosophical school of Padua (M. Gentile, G.R. Bacchin, E. Berti and F. Chiereghin) dealt with the same themes.

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Nothing, Negation, Undeniable, Opposition.



The text *La struttura originaria* deals with the nothing, the negation and the undeniable, which seem to have a fundamental function and role: the *nothing* is the key concept through which the notion of being emerges; the *negation* is the essential condition that makes necessity possible; the *undeniable* is the very name of truth.

And yet, the primal aporia stems from the nothing, the negation seems to jeopardise the truth, and the undeniable appears to be unreachable. The nothing, the negation and the undeniable come to constitute an essential framework which, however, seems to be flawed, for it contains a constitutive dead end. However, it is undeniable that *La struttura originaria*, from its beginning to the very end, is an unquestionable proof of the struggle with the aforementioned dead end. It is certainly the most substantial work of contemporary Italian thought, and it seems to me, not only Italian. And being it both a great work and thought, it should indeed be seriously analysed. To do so one ought to *listen to it* and *discuss it*. Indeed, listening is an exercise of “discipline” (from *discere*, to learn): study discipline; discussing it, instead, is something altogether different, for it implies watching over it, in order to prove its degree of stability. But who would do this? We would doubtlessly need another Severino!

Being aware of the difficulty of the task at hand and of the limited amount of time that I have, I will take for granted that my audience is well acquainted with the work of Severino: therefore, I won't dwell on the analytical *reading* of the text. Instead, with regard to the critical discussion of the text itself, I will try to present those elements I deem essential by availing myself of the work of the so-called philosophical school of Padua (a school of classical metaphysics), whose main exponents are Chiereghin, Berti and Bacchin, who had all been students of Marino Gentile. At various stages this school had dealt with the themes of *La struttura originaria*, even though its approach rested, as Severino would have said, on a different chessboard.

This is the reason why the chessboard which constitutes its starting point is the milestone of all subsequent analyses. Severino lays claim on the

Greek chessboard, but so does the school of Padua. However, the differences are radical. The problem, of course, is neither historical nor historiographical: what matters is understating that the starting point from which it takes its origins is both essential and crucial.

The “Greek chessboard” of the school of Padua considers philosophy to be “a pure problematicalness”. Marino Gentile coined the expression that philosophy is “everything questioning that is a whole questioning”. Its origin can be traced back to the Socratic knowledge that one does not know. In 1963 Chiereghin published a text, *Storicità e originarietà nell'idea platonica*, which is still to this day the best contribution along this line. In the same year Bacchin published five books which constitutes the theoretical basis of the philosophical school of Padua. Moreover, in the same years Berti too investigated the problematicalness in Aristotle. Therefore, it can be said that the school of Padua bears the Greek mark of Socratism and remains faithful to the knowledge that one does not know. It is no coincidence that this notion implicitly crosses Kant, and in particular the Kantian knowledge of the limit. It is remarkable that both Chiereghin and Bacchin read Hegel in the same way.

Thus, the knowledge that one does not know is the milestone of the philosophical school of Padua. I wonder what this could entail and how it is related to Severino's *La struttura originaria*. I will try to answer. The fundamental idea could be expressed as follows: the school of Padua accepts the *structure*, but it does not consider it to be *primal*, which means that the school of Padua believes that Severino is able to pinpoint with a certain degree of exactitude the form of “saying”, or “language”, the *form* of thinking, but not the structure of the thinking itself, which always transcends the saying and cannot be matched by any form of language. Thus, such a structure can be *known*, can be *meant*, only in negative terms, only as the negation that every form it takes, every expression of it, has to adjust it. And this entails the *knowledge* that one does not know.

According to the school of Padua, Severino's *La struttura originaria* is the structure of the *doxa* or of the *doxai*, *not* the structure of being, of thinking, or of *noein*. Its constitutive principle, i.e. the opposition of positive and negative, is recognised as the necessary principle of every language, expression, form, but not as the primal *aplôs, simpliciter*.

This turning point is worth to be examined with a certain degree of attention: it clearly comes to light while approaching the themes of the nothing and the negation. *Punctum stantis vel cadentis ontologiae* still consists in the relationship between the nothing and the negation. Severino's

thesis is well-known: the IV chapter of *La struttura originaria* displays quite drastically the aporia of the nothing. And here I quote from paragraph 5: «La contraddizione del *non-essere-che-è*, non è *interna* al significato “nulla” (o al significato “essere” che è l’essere del nulla); ma è tra il significato “nulla” e l’essere, o la positività di questo significato. La positività del significare è cioè in contraddizione con lo stesso contenuto del significare, che è appunto *significante* come l’assoluta negatività»¹. Severino closes paragraph 6 as follows: «È chiaro allora che il significato “nulla” è un significato autocontraddittorio»². To sum up, the *omne punctum* is the contradiction between the “positivity” of meaning as such, and the “content” of what is being said, which means the negativity.

In its general structure, the solution of the aporia is displayed as follows in paragraph 7: «L’aporia dell’essere del nulla è risolta col rilevare che il principio di non contraddizione *non afferma la non esistenza* del significato autocontraddittorio [...], ma afferma che “nulla” non significa “essere” [...]; ossia esige l’inesistenza della contraddizione interna al significato “nulla” che vale come momento del significato autocontraddittorio»³.

The school of Padua raises a radical objection to Severino’s description and the solution he proposed to solve the aporia of the nothing, which could be stated briefly as follows: *the nothing which is mentioned by Severino is not the nothing!* Indeed, the contradiction *does not lie inside* the nothing.

Let us consider this passage attentively. Either thinking “of nothing” turns the nothing to something (one gives voice to the nothing), or such thought is denied (it is the impossibility of *thinking* the nothing).

Labelling the nothing as the opposite of being, of the denied being, does not mean considering it nothing: it means thinking about it as some-

- 1 «The contradiction of not-being-that-is, therefore, is not internal to the meaning “nothing” (or to the meaning “being”, which is the being of nothing); but lies between the meaning “nothing” and being, or the positivity of this meaning. The positivity of meaningfulness, in other words, is in contradiction with the very content of the meaningfulness, which is precisely meaningful as absolute negativity». (Translated into English by S. Kneipe, edited by G. Goggi and F. Perelda, in «Eternity and Contradiction» n. 4. Forthcoming publication).
- 2 «Thus, it is clear that the meaning “nothingness” is self-contradictory». (*Ibid.*).
- 3 «The aporia of the being of nothingness is resolved by noting that the principle of non-contradiction does not affirm the non-existence of the self-contradictory meaning [...]; rather, it affirms that “nothing” does not mean “being” [...]; in other words, it requires the non-existence of the contradiction intrinsic to the meaning “nothing”, which ranks as the moment of the self-contradictory meaning». (*Ibid.*).

thing through which the being takes shape, as a function of saying. But the nothing, because it is nothing, cannot even *be* such a function, cannot even be the opposite of being and the denied being. It can take on none of the “thinkable” forms of the nothing, because the thinking always belongs to the being. Thus, thinking of nothing means not thinking, which is the annihilation of thinking itself. Claiming to be able to think the nothing is stating the impossible, it is a contradiction, that is, an act of self-contradiction in which the act itself of positing is at the same time an act of removing. After all, this is the impossible, the unthinkable.

For the contradiction *to be stated* – and it can be stated – it is necessary that the act of positing differs from the act of removing: if it were the same act, the saying would never be, would not come to being. The actual contradiction – the contradiction *simpliciter* – cannot be and cannot appear: it is the nothing. The contradictions which are given, which appear, are *consistent* contradictions: they present opposite theses, which are in conflict and cannot coexist one with the other; they are given and surface only as far as they are not actual contradictions for, if they were, they would not be and would not be able to emerge. In other words, they would be nothing.

This is precisely the point of the school of Padua: from the moment that thinking the nothing (that is, the actual contradiction) is unthinkable, it is impossible to imagine the being as opposed to the nothing. Since the nothing is unthinkable, it is impossible to think of the being as a semanteme which is opposed to nothing: since the nothing is not, opposing it would simply mean not opposing it. As for the saying, that is, the sheer executive *form* of thinking (which is language), the being becomes the opposite of the nothing; however, with respect to the thinking (to the *intelligibility* of saying), such an opposition implies that the being cannot be opposed, since the nothing is not. The philosophical school of Padua states that the being does not have an opposite even if, in order to express it, language must be used, and language works through the opposition. However, language (the *saying*) is not the intelligible form of thinking, but thinking (*the intending*) is the intelligible form of language.

It is now possible to move forward. After having analysed the nothing, I’ll move on to the second point of my theme: the *negation*. If the opposition is not primal, for the being has no opposite, the negation cannot be solved through the opposition between propositions – and, with respect to language, the negation is undoubtedly such an opposition. From the very beginning of *La struttura originaria* Severino writes (II chapter, par. 6): «Né l’affermazione, né la negazione sono in grado di escludersi o di tenersi

ferme di contro all'altra»⁴; then he adds: «L'oltrepasamento non è l'emergere di un *medio* tra l'affermazione e la negazione [...], ma è l'emergere del fondamento di uno dei due termini contrapposti»⁵. Wonderful! Perfect! The philosophical school of Padua fully agrees, but it clarifies that such a resolution of the negation through the opposition (which is the unavoidable *form* of thinking, and the form of thinking is language) cannot claim to be the intelligibile form of the language itself: with regard to intelligibility, the negation cannot be the opposition between propositions, but it must be the non-position of the opposite.

The school of Padua states that if the opposition is considered as primal, the negation becomes unintelligible, for an opposition which is considered to be primal makes the "it is" and the "it is not" absolute; therefore, the affirmation and the negation become the same, as long as each one of them is the negation of the other: thus, with respect to the negation, they are not "other" at all. *Ergo*, they are unintelligible.

This point is fundamental, and it is worth being repeated in a more detailed way, which is less concise and even less cryptic. The negation appears in the propositional form. However, it does not appear as a single proposition, but rather as two propositions: "x is" and "x is not". Each of them is the negation of the other. The fact that the "not" appears only in one proposition is irrelevant, because each proposition excludes the other: each one of them is the "not" of the other. Both propositions are at the same time an affirmation and a negation: by stating one, the other is removed; every proposition affirms and denies, denies and is in turn denied. With regard to this I can state that, in its form – that is to say, the language – the negation is the opposition between propositions. This is accepted both by Severino and by the metaphysical school of Padua.

The difference between Severino and the metaphysical school of Padua emerges in the way in which the reduction of the negation to the opposition is solved: Severino claims that the opposition is *primal* and, therefore, the reduction of the negation to the opposition cannot be but the very intelligibile form of the negation; the school of Padua completely disagrees, for such an primal opposition would entail that the negation is unintelli-

4 «Neither affirmation nor negation can exclude each other or stand firm against the other».

5 «The overcoming of the opposition is not the emergence of a middle term between affirmation and negation [...], but rather the emergence of the foundation of one of the two opposite terms».

gible. I have already anticipated the reason why this happens: if the opposition is primal, the *it is* and the *it is not* (affirmation and negation) become absolutes; however, if they become absolutes, that is to say «primal structure», the *it is* and the *it is not*, the affirmation and the negation, end up being the same, for one is the negation of the other. Thus, with regard to the negation, they are not “other” at all. But if the *it is* and the *it is not* are the same, they are not intelligible.

How does the school of Padua proceed from here? Simply as follows: it lets the propositional *form* be what it is, a mere form which requires an intelligible form and it is not itself the intelligibility. Thus, if the being has no opposite and the opposition is not primal, but it is only the form of thinking – that is, the form consisting of saying and language – the negation reveals itself as what it always is in the *intention* of thinking: *non-position of the opposite*. According to the school of Padua, this is the intelligible form of the negation: it aims at the primal identity of the being and the thinking, beyond the reduction of the negation to the opposition which is necessary to the form.

I will just briefly mention that the issue of the negation is quite essential, because the possibility to think the contradiction and the nothing depends on it.

I will now proceed with the third topic of my theme: the *undeniable*. I will touch upon it quickly to pinpoint the closeness and the distance between Severino and the philosophical school of Padua, with regard to the undeniable.

First of all, the proximity. They both agree on the *necessity*, to the fact that it cannot not be. What is undeniable is the thing, whose negation is in itself self-negating, something which the negation itself removes. This is the system of knowledge and of the linguistic form; on this level, Severino and the school of Padua fully agree. However, on another level there is a difference, which seems to constitute an interesting challenge to Severino's *La struttura originaria*. In short: if the truth cannot be denied, it is the impossibility of the opposite and not simply the negation of the opposite. However, if it is the impossibility of the opposite, the truth cannot be presented in any proposition, for every proposition is always the possibility of the opposite and it can always be denied. Thus, if it cannot be stated in any proposition, the truth, the undeniable, can only be in the *intention* of thinking (in its “aiming at”) and never in a “thought”. The truth, therefore, is the *knowledge that one does not know*.