

POSITIVE/NEGATIVE

Denial, Opposition, Contradiction

MAURO VISENTIN

Full Professor, University of Sassari
maurovis@uniss.it

Starting from an examination of the current meaning of “positive” and “negative”, the essay focuses on the impossibility of understanding the semantics of these terms through the concept of “relationship” and shows how their meaning is the same and coincides with that of absolute negation. This allows us to expose the existing conflict between the principle of non-contradiction (the expression of which is simply that of a “sense”) and the principle of the excluded third, which, on the other hand, interprets contradiction in relational terms: as a relationship of mutual exclusion between the judgments one of which is the negation of the other. The point of view expressed by the essay is that between the two principles (and between the two ways of interpreting the “positive” and the “negative”: one in terms of “sense” and the other in relational terms) there is the same distance as between truth and doxa in Parmenides' thought. A similar perspective allows us to recognize, in the ontology of the *Struttura originaria*, the dependence on and the derivation from the second principle rather than from the first principle.

Keywords:

positive, negative, relationship, sense, contradiction, negation, ontology

1. Identity and difference of “positive” and “negative”

It is certainly a widespread opinion, indeed almost unanimous, that affirming and denying are two distinct, independent and opposite acts. This means that – according to those who share this opinion – it is indisputably true that the existence of something can be affirmed (say, the existence of the picture that is placed on the wall in front of me) without having to deny something else. In the same way, one can deny the existence of something (for example, of a mythological animal like the chimera) without this requiring the corresponding affirmation – by those who deny this existence – of a different existence. In other words, according to this general way of understanding affirmation and negation, in order to deny the existence of the chimera I do not have to affirm anything; likewise, in order to affirm the existence of the picture I do not have to deny anything: these two acts are seen and felt as self-sufficient by all subjects endowed with a consciousness and an average self-awareness of what they do and above all of what they think. Such an awareness is reflected in the current way in which the world extracts meaning and sense from any word, which we usually call “common sense”.

But is this “widespread opinion” a genuine opinion or is it rather a prejudice? If we could obtain evidence of its reliability on the basis of its unquestionably broad consensus, we would inevitably take it as a solid and well-grounded opinion. But, however widespread, a prejudice remains a prejudice and if we think that the above opinion might be no more than a mere prejudice, any appeal to its diffusion certainly cannot suffice to dispel any doubt about it. In fact, if we asked someone on what grounds she is certain that she is facing a picture, this picture unquestionably existing right here, right now in front of her, she would most likely answer, “because I can see it”. But if – challenging her irritation – we insist, asking her why she feels so sure she is seeing it in front of her and whether it could not be that her eyes are presently victims of a hallucination, she might answer, for ex-

ample, “I have no reason to believe that to be the case”. In other words, when affirming what we are convinced of, we always seem to implicitly assume, in the last instance, the untruth of something that could disprove our conviction. This mostly implicit assumption soon comes to light if someone – in the urgent and indiscreet manner just suggested by our example – tries to insinuate into us a doubt about the reliability of what we are persuaded of. This only indicates that the idea of a perfect separability of affirmation and denial, however widespread, is superficial and inaccurate. We would realize it even more clearly by carefully considering what denying the existence of the chimera amounts to. How could we deny such an existence if we did not have an idea of what the chimera is or represents, if we did not possess an image of it or if we did not have an entire iconographic repertoire about it? Therefore, when denying the existence of the chimera, we certainly do not deny that the concept of “chimera” corresponds to a meaning, a mental representation, something we can refer to through the word that designates it, even when we deny that it corresponds to an animal in flesh and blood: by denying the existence of a real chimera we implicitly affirm the existence of the ideal chimera.

By pointing out this, we have already done justice to the inconsistent though widely shared idea from which we started: an idea that implies the autonomy and the semantic or positional independence of the two acts we are talking about. On a closer inspection, they now appear to us as inseparably connected. Therefore, even though in affirming or denying something we omit – respectively – to deny or affirm something else (usually, the opposite of what is explicitly stated or denied, but in any case something alternative to it and incompatible with what it represents), this negation or affirmation falls by all accounts into the general meaning of what we explicitly deny or affirm, regardless of whether we are aware of it or not. To affirm *A* implies to deny *not-A*. To deny *not-A* implies to affirm *A*.

However, the issue immediately appears – in light of this summary formula – definitely worthy of other insights. Indeed, we are also able to “affirm *not-A*”, that is, to affirm a negation. And this makes the problem even more troubling, since so far we still have not put into question that the two acts of affirmation and negation – be they separated or connected – are opposite to each other and not overlapping: we are presupposing that an affirmation has something existing, real and positive as its object, while a negation has something non-existent, unreal and negative as its object. If, on the other hand, one can also affirm a negation, then this alternative seems to fail.

However, are we sure that in this way we have added a new piece to our mosaic? Apparently, yes. We have said that we cannot affirm or deny something without (respectively) denying or affirming its opposite. In other words, two opposed things (one the “negative” of the other) can be affirmed or denied, the only caveat being that we cannot either affirm both or deny both *at the same time*. But did we not also say that an affirmation denies the opposite of what it affirms, i.e. that an affirmation is a denial from a different perspective? Yet more can be said about the issue: since every positive meaning is (or should be) also the negation of the corresponding negative meaning, *A* will always (also) negate *not-A*, i.e. it will be *not-not-A*. Consequently, not only is the statement of *A* also a negation of *not-A* but – insofar as *A* is also in itself always *not-not-A* (that is, we repeat, a negation) – an affirmation of *A* will also always be, in itself and this time from the same perspective, an “affirmation of a negation”. In short, not only will each statement have a negation beside itself, but it will also have, whatever the circumstance in which it is expressed, a negation in itself. And the same must be said about any negation concerning the corresponding statement.

As a consequence, starting from the widespread prejudice that affirming and denying are distinct, separate, independent, autonomous and opposing acts, we first had to recognize the necessary connection of a statement with its negation, secondly their obvious complementarity, and finally the presence of the one in the other. Now, even if we wanted to characterize this situation as “dialectic”, the use of this concept will not help us avoid embarrassment. As being both identical and different, the two acts would invite us to rediscover their identity in their difference and *vice versa* their difference in their identity, not simply because they appear to be *together* or one (identity) appears to be *beside* the other (the difference). But this would just mean that, by attempting to conceive such an identity of identity and difference, we would “pass” – unrestrainedly and restlessly – from one (the identity) to the other (the difference) and from the latter (the difference) back to the first (the identity). However, in this unstoppable flow we would never have to deal with the defined concept of one (identity, affirmation) or of the other (difference, denial), for the following reason: if the definition of each of them must include the *other as other*, then by grasping one and the other we would only grasp an abstract and indeterminate (or vaguely determined) representation of each of them; on the other hand, by grasping them *together* we would grasp their self-contradictory identity – because the acts of affirmation and of negation would

be two different acts here, but at the same time they would also constitute a single and identical act – again, nothing definite. All we can do then is grasp them in rapid succession, that is, *over time, pretending* that this sequence is a coincidence. But doing so would not give rise to a *logic reasoning* (and a deduction) – not even a “dialectical” one – rather to a *phenomenology*, from which would not emerge what Hegel claims: that the Being comes to be determined. Even less would we get a conceivable truth concerning the relationship between the two acts; rather, we would get only the consciousness’s rebound from the elusiveness of one pole to that of the other, that is, the (badly) infinite coming and going of an inconclusiveness doomed to endlessly consume itself.

2. Terms contradict each other, judgments do not

The result of the examination carried out above on the concepts of “positive” and “negative”, as well as on their relationship, led us to a ‘conclusion’ that is not really such and does not represent in any way – because it simply *cannot* represent – the expression of the truth of these two meanings and their connection. In other words, the problem of the positive and the negative *set in this way* – that is, the problem concerning the meaning of these two concepts and above all of their mutual determination – resolves into a simple and more or less consistent *opinion*, which is anyway *incompatible with the sense of the truth*. But if we ask ourselves what – properly speaking – it means for our problem to be “set in this way” here, we must answer that it means to be set as a problem about the meaning to be attributed to “positive” and “negative”, insofar as these are seen and interpreted as opposite terms. In fact, this aspect has remained constant through the various steps of the journey we have undertaken in this respect: even when the two concepts appeared to us inseparably connected, we never stopped thinking of them as opposites, and even when they showed themselves as coincident to our eyes, we found them to be such *despite* their opposition, therefore “dialectically”. Thus, this is the point we need to start from: “positive” and “negative” are normally thought of not as independent meanings (this can be, at most, an appearance), but as opposed meanings. About this way of understanding their sense, we have to ask ourselves this: what does such a way really represent? Is it an opinion, a prejudice, an undeniable representative content, or something else? Undoubtedly, it seems difficult – apart from the remarks that we have made

so far with respect to the *positive* and the *negative* – to challenge the idea that the positive is opposed to the negative and *vice versa*, just as the affirmation of a something is opposed to the negation of it and *vice versa*; this difficulty holds regardless of the issue concerning the consistency and the conceivability of the two meanings involved.

Indeed, even if one may agree that affirming *A* is inextricably denying *not-A* and even that affirming *A* is the same as affirming *not-not-A*, no one will ever be so foolish as to hold and declare that affirming *A* is the same as denying *A*. Given a single object, to affirm and to deny its existence are taken to be two different and incompatible acts: they are taken to be such that one rejects the other and both of them are mutually exclusive; in other words, they give rise to that relationship of opposition to which Aristotle assigned – about twenty-five centuries ago – once and for all the name of *contradiction*. Therefore, even if the acts of “affirming” and “denying”, considered in themselves, tend to reciprocally confuse their profiles and give rise to a dialectic of semantic inconclusiveness, we would say that as soon as they are anchored to an object the ambiguity of their profiles vanishes. To affirm *A* implies, whether we like it or not, denying *not-A*, but this is not a contradiction, since we are not affirming and denying under the same respect but under two different respects (not the same thing, but two different things). To affirm *A* is equivalent to affirming *not-not-A*, but also here there is no contradiction: in this case we are not affirming the negation of what is affirmed, but the negation of the negation of what is affirmed. In short, we were perhaps too hasty in declaring that the meanings of these two acts are elusive and uncertain, if not self-contradictory: if we carefully examine their relationship it is easy to see it (a relation of difference but also of intrinsic belonging) as one that does not violate the principle of non-contradiction. On the contrary, such a relation fully respects the principle of non-contradiction, since the affirmation and the negation of *the same thing* – as expressions of opposite judgments – deny each other and are therefore mutually contradictory; moreover, in their mutual contradiction (or, if you prefer, in their opposition by contradiction), they are constitutive of the principle of the excluded middle (“*given two contradictory judgments, one of the two is necessarily false, the other necessarily true*”) to which they provide the basis or the material support (given two contradictory judgments) essential to allow such a corollary or extension of the principle of non-contradiction (such is generally considered the principle of the excluded middle) to take shape.

Affirmation and negation (positive and negative) are therefore contra-

dictory judgments, i.e. judgments that deny each other. But the fact that in this way the affirmation denies as well – that it is itself a negation – no longer appears to us now paradoxical: it rather appears to us as something consistent, as logically associated with the principle of non-contradiction. Therefore, such consistency would now seem to have ceased being incompatible with the idea that affirming and denying are undoubtedly distinct – opposite indeed – but also intimately connected, in such a way to be almost indissoluble from each other. In fact, all the different manifestations of the connection between affirmation and negation – those which we have examined so far – can be now tracked back to a single root: the one which is precisely represented by their contradiction, that is, by their mutual denial. For the affirmation of *A* is a negation of *not-A* (and thus an affirmation of the negation of the negation of *A*) precisely *because* the affirmation and the negation of *A* are contradictorily opposed judgements. Such a circumstance – the simultaneous coincidence of affirmation and negation *on the one hand*, and their opposition *on the other hand* – is inconceivable: indeed, given the principle of the excluded middle (which entails the principle of non-contradiction), the above circumstance ends up being a perfectly legitimate relation between two judgements which does not offend against reason, *provided that* – obviously – the judgements so contradictorily connected are taken to be the one true and the other false. Therefore, not only does their reciprocal contradiction and necessary connection – if in fact there is only one contradictory judgment for any given judgement – cease to belong to a purely phenomenological dialectic (which could be taken as expression of a mere belief that is incompatible with the sense of truth—see above), but it now appears to our eyes the most explicit manifestation of the sense of truth: in other words, it becomes the manifestation exhibited by the principles of non-contradiction and the excluded middle. Such principles have been taken since Aristotle (followed by the whole Aristotelian tradition) as derivable one (the second) from the other (the first) in the most natural and analytical way. As a consequence, if the relation between affirming and denying as well as the relation between the positive and the negative are before all relations of *opposition by contradiction*, then in order to get the deep meaning of such a relation we should directly face up the notion of “contradictory” as directly called into question by the two principles just mentioned. So, it will be necessary to explicitly confront these principles insofar as – in the way we have just noted – they directly call into question the notion of “contradictory” and define its very profile.

The principle of the excluded middle seems to positively refer to the contradictory in a more explicit way than the principle of contradiction, although, given the dependence of the first on the latter – very clear though implicit in Aristotle’s treatment – it will be better to start by considering the way Aristotle states the principle of non-contradiction in the fourth book of his *Metaphysics*:

τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ ἅμα ὑπάρχειν τε καὶ μὴ ὑπάρχειν ἀδύνατον τῷ αὐτῷ καὶ κατὰ
(*Met.* IV 3, 1005b19-20)

a formula translated by Christopher Kirwan (Kirwan 1971) as follows:

For the same thing to hold good and not to hold good simultaneously of the same thing and in the same respect is impossible.

The expression through which Aristotle confers language to the principle of the excluded middle is the following:

ἀλλὰ μὴν οὐδὲ μεταξὺ ἀντιφάσεως ἐνδέχεται εἶναι οὐθέν, ἀλλ’ ἀνάγκη ἢ φάναι ἢ ἀποφάναι ἐν καθ’ ἑνὸς ὁτιοῦν (*Met.* IV 7, 1011b23-24)

which Kirwan translates:

Nor, on the other hand, is it possible that there should be anything in the middle of a contradiction, but it is necessary either to assert or to deny any one thing of one thing.

The close connection between the two principles for Aristotle is so evident as to be analytic. This is proved by the declaration that precedes the expression of the second principle. Aristotle, summarizing what he has said so far about the principle of non-contradiction (which he himself defines as “the strongest notion” just having stated it), asserts:

ὅτι μὲν οὖν βεβαιοτάτη δόξα πασῶν τὸ μὴ εἶναι ἀληθεῖς ἅμα τὰς ἀντικειμένας φάσεις, καὶ τί συμβαίνει τοῖς οὕτω λέγουσι, καὶ διὰ τί οὕτω λέγουσι, τοσαῦτα εἰρήσθω. (*Met.* IV 6, 1011b13-15)

that is, in the translation of the *Metaphysics* used so far (not very literal but substantially faithful):

It is now been fully enough stated that the opinion that opposite assertions are not simultaneously true is the firmest of all, and what are the consequences for those who make this statement, and why they make it.

In this passage, just before concluding the fourth book of *Metaphysics*, Aristotle summarizes the meaning of the theses argued for regarding the principle of non-contradiction (this is what is at stake here, as it is undoubtedly shown by his reference to it as to “the strongest notion of all”) and establishes a clear link between this principle and that of the excluded middle, which he will enunciate a few lines later. In fact, if we interpret the principle of non-contradiction in such a way as to derive from it as a logical consequence that it is impossible for two contradictory judgments both to be true, substantially the principle of the excluded middle would have been already formulated; what remains to be added is nothing more than an explicit formalization or enunciation of it. However, is it not a little strange that Aristotle derives from the principle of non-contradiction (proposed at the beginning of the book) the thesis that two contradictory judgments cannot be true together? In the above reported formulation Aristotle asserts the impossibility for different attributes to be predicated of the same subject under the same regard and at the same time. In fact, attributing different predicates to the same subject under the same respect and at the same time means giving rise to two contradictory judgments. Indeed, two judgments are (reciprocally) contradictory only if, first, they have *the same subject*; and secondly, they are contradictory (only) if incompatible predicates are attributed by them to this subject: that is, such as to be taken as belonging to this subject *at the same time and under the same respect*. For example, judgments such as “the table on which I am currently writing is white” and “the table on which I am currently writing is gray (*i.e.* it is not white)” are contradictory because they refer to the same subject (the table on which I am currently writing) taken at the same time (currently) and under the same respect (the colour of its supporting plane) and attribute to this subject two different and incompatible predicates (two different colours: white and gray). But according to the formulation of the principle of non-contradiction proposed by Aristotle in the third paragraph of the 4th book of *Metaphysics*, which we have reported at the beginning of our comparison between non-contradiction and exclusion of the middle, two judgments that do this (that is, that predicate different attributes to the same subject, at the same time and under the same regard) are inconceivable. However, what the principle of the excluded middle de-

clares is precisely the opposite. According to this principle two judgments which contradict each other (i.e. which attribute to the same subject, at the same time and in the same respect, two incompatible predicates) cannot both be true, although from a logical point of view they can legitimately contradict each other, seeing that it is only by virtue of this mutual contradiction that the principle can assert, with regard to their condition, that they cannot be both true. In other words, the very same contradiction between judgments is an inconceivable contradiction in terms according to the principle of non-contradiction, yet is perfectly conceivable according to the principle of the excluded middle. Indeed, it is so conceivable as to ground the very idea that *two judgments of this sort* cannot both be true, but one is necessarily true and the other is necessarily false. Therefore, when Aristotle passes from one principle to the other, he unjustifiably omits to distinguish the relationship between the contradictory *terms* from the one that characterizes the contradictory *judgments*: the terms are contradictory as they are mutually exclusive (*A is not not-A*, this is not that), the judgements are contradictory not as they deny each other but as each of them denies *itself*. As a matter of fact, two judgements which “contradict each other” insist on a subject that could be the same only under the condition of being predicated by contradictory terms here-and-now, thus resulting for example in “a quadrangular square circle” as well as in a “circular square circle”. Although, if this is the case, it is impossible not to conclude that two such judgements do not “contradict” impersonally (i.e. each other) but they “contradict” reflexively: in other words, they do not mutually contradict, because each of them rather contradicts itself.

3. Does the positive/negative nexus, interpreted as “a relation”, possess any truth or is it the content of a simple opinion?

In light of this result, the solution we glimpsed beforehand is not available any more: that solution appealed to the relation between the mutual negation of positive and negative (affirmation and negation), and the consistency ensured by the principle of the excluded middle (through the continuity between this principle and the principle that denies the possibility of self-contradicting): our ability to consistently understand the polar nexus of the two opposites has come to be lost again in the high seas. Among the opposites, there is neither identity nor difference, or – to be more accurate

– difference and identity are *both and together* there. If positive and negative contradict each other, even the positive is negative (of its negative) and the negative is also positive (insofar as it affirms and defines itself through denying the positive). Now positive and negative are not differentiated and divided by anything but the linguistic (verbal or graphical) form: indeed *A* and *not-A* are distinguished just by their form, but with respect to the rest (the substance to attribute to this form) they are identical, two “somethings” identically positive/negative: *A* is as much positive as it is negative (it is *not-not-A*), in the same way in which *not-A* is not just *not-A* (the “not” of *A*) but also *something in itself*, something that is much less determined than *A* but all the same is not something *totally* or *absolutely undetermined* (as it was if we said “nothing”); *not-A* is not “nothing”, it is rather something – as we have remarked – so it is something determinate (it is negative, and each negation is a determination, as is well-known); indeed its semantic field is delimited by the exclusion of *A*. However, one could reply, even the form is still “something”. And this – made explicit – means that although *A* and non-*A* are identical in being positive/negative, as for their form they remain, as we have already said, irreducibly different. Their polar relationship – necessary and indissoluble as it is – does not just make them equal (as for the substance of their semantic ‘sign’) and thereby nullify them (so nullifying itself at the same time), because it is legitimate to hold that such a relation makes them also different, at the very least with respect to their form. As a consequence, the difference we cannot but recognize between them (at least from a formal point of view) must be possible exclusively in and through their relation of mutual contradiction and opposition. In other terms, *A* and *not-A* do not exist prior to their oppositional link, insofar as it is just and only within such a link that their polarity is (formal) difference and the specific identity of each exhibits its logical credentials, or its *raison d’être*. By means of the form and language (by means of the linguistic form) we would have – well or badly – saved everything: through saving the difference, opposition, and contradiction of the positive and the negative, we would have saved the difference, opposition and contradiction of *all* concepts, meanings and beings.

Thanks to the formal contradiction between the two terms, we are finally able to recover to the horizon of the *truth*, both the difference and the whole field constituted by the *sensible* and the intelligible world, the cognition of which we can *experience*; here, ‘truth’ represents the ground consisting of the mutual exclusion binding together the concepts of *positive* and *negative*, in its turn connected to the principle that establishes the

incontrovertibility of Being by denying the possibility of contradiction. Is that so? Is this conclusion persuasive? For it to be such, we should be able to derive/obtain the formal difference between A and $not-A$ from the reciprocal contradiction between A and $not-A$. Now what *does* formally distinguish A from $not-A$? The “not”. But in the reciprocal contradiction the “not” is one and the same; in fact if it was not the same, then the “not” of $not-A$ and the “not” by which - implicitly - A denies it (i.e. denies $not-A$) would be different so they would not eliminate each other, that is, A would not be $not-not-A$. This means that the mutual and formal contradiction between A and $not-A$ cannot be deduced from any formal difference between them: the contradiction, as well as the difference between A and $not-A$ is *one* and we cannot deduce any difference from the *one* (we cannot deduce the *two*). Therefore, we must say that the different contents are such (if they are) not *due* to their mutual contradiction but *despite* it. Their being and appearing *different* (their ontic multiplicity) is not *deducible* from their relationship of mutual exclusion, that is from the truth of the principle of non-contradiction, because – on the contrary – it is rather this relationship that presupposes them: in other words, it is the concept of “difference” that presupposes *the fact* (and a fact by definition is *not* rationally *deducible*) that there are distinct perceptions, instead of such different perceptions presupposing the concept of difference. Consequently, we can establish as a general principle that the difference, as a relationship between different contents, and these same different contents between which the difference holds, are not conceptually ascribable to the horizon of truth. All of which means that they cannot be conceived in a consistent way, that is to say, in a non-contradictory way.

Yet, *the fact* that they cannot be thought of in this way does not mean that they can be thought of as “nothing” or that they even represent a nothingness, an emptiness, a silence of the consciousness (an absent consciousness). It cannot mean the first thing, because we do not think “nothingness” and even less so can we ever think “something as nothing”: nothingness is not an object of thought and neither would the contradiction be such if it consisted in thinking “something” (therefore an entity) as “nothing”, that is, in thinking that “something that is” is “nothing”. It cannot mean the latter either, because consciousness must be able to detect the inconsistency *of* a concept in order to declare it inconsistent (i.e. to deny it): if consciousness did not perceive the concept and its own inconsistency as being immediately different – that means that it perceives them as being such that in order for the first to be declared “inconsistent” it cannot be *re-*

duced to the second – the consciousness would not be denying *this very* concept, but nothing or the self-contradictory outcome of the identification of being and nothing. And “this” concept, *as a matter of fact* would not be denied, nor could it ever be. As a result, we find ourselves in an absolutely elusive condition, a pure paradox in which we cannot however avoid feeling involved and enmeshed. By adopting a divisive lexicon that goes back to Parmenides, we call such a condition “opinability” and we ‘*opinably*’ tell it apart from the truth which we rather conceive of as necessary and incontrovertible.

To be more precise, since we find ourselves in this condition and we move within its limits, we can affirm that this condition (reflexively) distinguishes *itself* from the truth; although, we cannot affirm that the truth distinguishes *itself* from this condition. Only by being self-aware as well as aware of its difference from ‘opinability’ could the truth distinguish itself from that condition. But if truth was aware of the difference between itself and something else, it would welcome this difference within its perimeter and so make it into something true and not opinable: in so doing, the truth would frustrate any effort the difference could make in order to show itself as *difference from the truth*. On the other side, if the truth could not embed any difference within itself it could not even be self-aware: indeed, in order to be self-aware, the truth should be reflexive and – reflecting itself in itself – duplicate, i.e. distinguish itself from itself. Therefore, since the truth can be aware neither of itself nor of anything different from itself, we should conclude that the truth is not aware at all: no awareness belongs to it, and consciousness, and so awareness, exclusively belong to the realm of opinion and the opinable. We should also conclude that only opinion can be awareness *of* the truth (objective rather than subjective genitive) and of its own difference from the latter: thus, only in the *impersonal* sense can we say that the truth can be distinguished from opinion.

In discussing the concepts of “positive” and “negative” we have thus come to attribute to the realm of the *opinionable* first their semantic autonomy, then their difference and finally their opposition. We have then conferred to the realm of the opinable a full power over all differences (including that between truth and opinion).

Finally, we have had to attribute to this realm – exclusively – the possession of consciousness, with everything which follows from it. In comparing such a complex and paradoxical scenario to the ordinary way of seeing, someone who has always taken for granted that positive and negative are determinate concepts only insofar as they semantically different or

“mutually negative” – hence opposed by virtue of the relation of mutual contradiction – should be puzzled and feel greater doubts about her assumptions. An idea that has traditionally taken root in those who shared such a belief is that the ontic difference and the semantic opposition between positive and negative are no more than different faces of the truth itself and (at least for a part of them) that the only way in which such an idea could be called into question would be by challenging the mutual negation between “Being” and “Nothingness”. In fact, considering “Being” and “Nothingness” as opposite or mutually negative means making Nothingness into Being (or “ontologizing it”; cf. Sasso 1987: 52ff.). After all, those who consider this opposition problematic presuppose as unavoidable the idea that Nothingness is *a negative* (as its linguistic form obliges us to consider it), so that it is *opposite* to Being *as an object* of the negation which it (=Nothingness) is necessarily subjected by *its* opposite (=Being).

Ultimately, then, the dogmatic assumption on which the *opposition* through mutual contradiction of “positive” and “negative” is based is the idea that the negation must necessarily have an object, in order to be what it is and must be (a negation). What is implicit in this assumption and is considered obvious and indisputable, is the universally shared conviction that if the negation did not have an object it would not deny anything and therefore would not be a denial at all. But are “not denying anything” and “denying (the) Nothingness” the same thing? If we want to call into question a persuasion so widespread and accepted – by trying to show how it actually resolves into a simple prejudice – we should proceed from the question above in order to take the final step in our journey of exploration.

4. Absolute negation and double negation: the truth of the meanings attributed to the terms “positive” and “negative” is that their negation is not a relationship but a ‘sense’

If we wish to endorse Spinoza’s thesis and accept the saying he made famous, according to which *negatio determinatio est*, we must recognize that *A* is determined only through the negation of *not-A*. And, reciprocally, *not-A* is determined only through *A* (as *not-not-A*). This elementary exemplification of the Spinozian saying tells us two things. Let us start from the first. If, in order to determine something, it is necessary to include it with-

in the context of a negation, then *A* taken by itself cannot be determined. To express the same concept with different (and perhaps more precise) words, the simple identity (without the non-contradiction) does not possess any determinacy. In fact, even if we think that *A* already possesses a specific meaning (as for Aristotle, cf. *De Int.* 3, 16b9-21), in order to say what it means without limiting ourselves to crudely and tautologically repeating the name (“*A* is *A*” or “*A* means *A*”), we must declare, first of all, what *A* is not (“*A* is not *not-A*”), since simply listing all of *A*’s positive characteristics cannot provide anything but a reiteration of the problem. Suppose that *A* is “man”. By saying that “man is an animal endowed with reason”, will we really have defined man?

Yes, but only subject to the condition that the terms making up the predicate of this judgment are in turn *already* determined. Consequently, the real *punctum saliens* of the question is: “how is a meaning primarily determined”? Now, if “determined” is the same as “circumscribed”, “delimited”, “defined” etc., it seems that we can define the determinacy of a meaning – not unlike that of a territory – only by tracing a borderline between its semantic scope and all that is “outside” of this area: therefore, only by “excluding” and then by “distinguishing”; so, ultimately, once again by *denying*, precisely by denying *the other* than what you want to define, or rather by denying that this *is* that. Yet there is something faltering in the analogy between “determining” and “delimiting”. The analogy is unsatisfactory, at least, if we go in search of an *primal* determination. What is unsatisfactory is that if we determine *A* through the negation of *not-A* we are *presupposing* the very determinacy of *A*: how, otherwise, could we give a definite meaning to the expression “*not-A*”? In fact, all we find that is determinate or determinable in this expression is simply *A*. Could we perhaps “translate” the *nomen infinitum not-A* into some of its almost infinite semantic contents, for example into B, in order to escape from the *petitio*? Well, does saying that “A is not B” serve to determine (albeit still very approximately) *A*? Only if B is known (that is, already determined). But what if it is not? Clearly, this question can be repeated as many times as the infinite semantic contents of *not-A*. As a consequence, it is necessary to identify, speculatively, a meaning or at least an primal semantic kernel that is *primally determined*. However, if the newly established law is valid for *all* meanings, the search for an “primal meaning” would seem to consist of an unnecessarily Sisyphean task. We are ultimately supposed to individuate a meaning which gets semantically determined through negation – a negation through which our meaning gets its own content – but where such a

determination does not require a further reference to some new content in need of an analogously process of determination. Nevertheless, here is the difficulty, since, as we have seen, *any* meaning is by definition in need of being determined through the process referred to above. However, a requirement like the one just expressed can be satisfied in two different ways: either a) according to its literal provision, by referring to something already determined and whose determination does not further depend on a process like the one just described, or b) by not referring to anything else at all. On a closer inspection, however, these two modalities boil down to one, insofar as the first, i.e. the reference to something already determined without need to refer to anything else, is equivalent to the second, which therefore remains the only possibility.

But how could a meaning ever draw its own determination without referring to something else, that is, without *denying* something different and further? Determining without denying (explicitly or at least implicitly) is, we have seen, impossible (*contra*, Tarca 2016: 48-54). But is denying without denying *something* equally impossible? It is, but only if we pretend that the concept of negation to which we have been tenaciously faithful for centuries, is beyond question: according to such a conception, negation is a *relationship* between the subject and the denied *object*. We should then ask: what if this concept was not undoubted? What if we could challenge the conviction that in order to deny we necessarily need to deny an *object*, or *something*, namely, a '*being*'? But there is a most evident example about which our conviction can be challenged: it is the most primal and radical among all negations we could appeal to, which is the negation of Nothingness by (the) Being. It is precisely for this negation that the most convinced advocates of the traditional (and up to now almost exclusive) concept of "denial" search for a treatment and for a way out of the puzzle it poses: but there simply cannot be a solution to the puzzle, insofar as they are stuck with the meaning which is usually attributed to the concept of negation. According to the latter, denial is a relationship, this relationship is translated into a judgment, in this judgment something figures as a subject and *something* figures as an *object* of negation. All this appears to be established. But what if (the) Nothingness itself is denied? How can Nothingness be one part of a relationship, the object of a refusal? In this case it would mean that *Nothingness* is, in fact, *something*, since it would be the *object* of the negation. As a consequence, nothingness cannot be denied, because if we try to deny it we end up denying *something that is* rather than Nothingness, and (the) Being cannot certainly deny itself. Therefore, Nothingness itself

cannot be denied because what we would deny – if we tried – would be the Being rather than Nothingness, and Being cannot deny itself. Therefore, if Being cannot deny Nothingness insofar as in so doing it would deny itself, then within Being no negation can be expressed; as a result, Being cannot even determine itself. But in this way the entire edifice of Western thought, having been constructed on the basis of this sort of negation (or on the basis of the principle of consistency and determinacy), would thereby crumble. Moreover, in order to hold all this, it is necessary to admit that the ideas a) of the impossibility that Being denies Being (the “something”, namely, itself) and b) of nothingness as being *something* have already gained full citizenship within the logical horizon to which the set of these topics refers.

Perhaps our examination of the question concerning the relationship between “positive” and “negative” has now lead us to a point where we can hazard a hypothesis: the denial of Nothingness by Being cannot be associated with those ordinary negatives that seem to consist of a relationship in which something ‘turns against’ something else. Such ordinary negations are negations of “something” with respect to “something” and therefore are furnished with an “object”. How then must this new negation be conceived? As a negation without an object. But how can an objectless denial continue to be a negation? To address this question, let us try to overturn it, so that we get the following question: how can a denial directed to an object be a (true) negation? And the answer to this question must be that it cannot. The reason why it cannot already emerged when, right at the beginning of this contribution, we examined the relationship of reciprocity between “positive” and “negative” interpreted according to the traditionally accepted semantics of the respective concepts as *two connected* but *distinct* meanings. In this case, we would have a single relationship (and therefore only one difference, since the difference is precisely the relationship that connects the two meanings) but we would believe, however, that we have two negatives rather than one. In fact, we believe that we get the negation of the negative by the positive, and then also the negation of the positive by the negative. Therefore, we believe we have *one* difference and *one* relationship but *two* negations. Now, since in this perspective each negation is a relationship and a difference, following to its end the logic that governs this traditional interpretation of the link between positive and negative we would find ourselves oscillating between the hypothesis that the difference between them is *one* and the hypothesis that they are *two*, without being able to explain how *one* difference can differentiate rather

than identify the different *contents*, and how two differences can make the case that the differing contents involved are two and not four. We then understand – on the basis of this reasoning – that if the negation must be thought according to its own truth it cannot be a relationship. We also come to realize that even what holds between “positive” and “negative” cannot be a relation. In other words, in order for the denial to be (and to be thought of as) a genuine negation, it must not have an object to which it relates. At the end, not only can the absolute negation – the negation of Nothingness by the Being – not have an object, and in fact does not have one (indeed Nothingness is not an object), but by not having it and so by not being a relationship at all, it reveals itself as the only true and possible negation.

Let us now consider all the consequences of such a result. In the first place, if Nothingness is not the object of absolute negation, Nothingness cannot be a negative: if it is not an object, or something, or an entity, it cannot deny or exclude something from itself, which is to say that it cannot deny Being. Since it is absolutely indeterminate and indeterminable, the Nothingness that figures in the absolute negation *cannot* deny anything, nor *should* it deny anything. It is therefore merely *denied* rather than being a negative. Secondly, we must say that positive and negative, far from being autonomous and independent meanings, are not even distinct but connected meanings: they are, to be precise, one and only one meaning: what (‘of’ it) we call positivity and what we call negativity do not represent anything other than its internal articulation, namely, the expression of a “vector sense”: this is a “vector sense” which belongs to the negation as such and makes negation what it really is and must be, that is to say: an irreversible and non-reflective act.

An apparently easy objection could almost immediately be made to the consequences we have just drawn from our complex exploration of the semantics of this pair of meanings (positive/negative): perhaps these statements come to defeat themselves as soon as they are made, insofar as by stating them we have to say that Nothingness “cannot deny”, “cannot exclude anything” and there “is not a negative”? Such an objection would be pertinent and irresistible if the Nothingness was (or could be) the subject of these negations. But as Nothingness is not the object of the absolute negation, so ‘it’ cannot be the subject of any negation (and, in general, of any action): the *term* we use to evoke its role as ‘what is merely denied’ in the absolute negation, can be at most the *grammatical subject* of all the negations that we have right enunciated, but the *logical subject* of

these negations is Being. It is Being, in truth, that denies that Nothingness can deny, exclude, be negative, etc. How many negatives intervene in this statement? Once again, we must make a distinction: from the point of view of language we have three negatives: Being negates (first negation) that *Not-Being* (second negation) can *deny* (third negation); but from the point of view of the truth, we just have one negation. In other words, linguistically (grammatically, formally) Nothingness is a negation, or a negative, or something that denies. But semantically, Nothingness is only what is negated, that is, it is a linguistic component of the means by which Being makes explicit its meaning (a strictly semantic analysis of Being) as an absolute negation – it is a vector of meaning, an oriented space of truth to be understood as determination of determinacy, as incontrovertibility.

Now, we have pointed out that the negations are two-fold or three-fold under the linguistic profile while there is only one negation under the semantic profile: this fact indicates that from a semantic point of view the negation of Nothingness survives, as a negation, to the mutual annihilation of the negation that denies another negation (the one morphologically represented by Nothingness itself or by its linguistic negating role) and that double negation does not result in a simple and pure affirmation. In other words, Nothingness is not, except morphologically, a negation. The affirmation of Being and the negation of not-Being are connected but not the same thing. Affirming Being and denying Nothingness are not two acts but one: although, insofar as this act is oriented and so is meaningful, it is not reducible to simple affirmation: affirming and denying are like the concave and the convex of a curved space in which concavity and convexity are only the expression of the vector orientation represented by its curvature (cf. Visentin 2015, 452-463). We can therefore summarize the meaning that we attribute to the positive/negative nexus in the following terms: positive and negative are nothing but the vector expression of the sense in which truth as the negation of Nothingness by Being consists of; this is the semantic equivalent of what the convexity and concavity represent – in figurative terms – with respect to the curvature of a curved space.

5. The mutual opposition of “positive” and “negative” as the ultimate root of the ontology expressed in *La struttura originaria*

Among philosophers (and philosophical currents of thought) Emanuele Severino bases the entire complex of his ontological reflection on the principle of non-contradiction with the greatest insistence, radicalism and speculative penetration: he interprets such a principle as expressive of the absolute opposition between Being and not-Being, between positivity and negativity. The opposing character conferred by Severino to the relationship of negation between Being and not-Being stands out in the complex, articulated and sophisticated analysis that he performs in the fourth chapter of *La struttura originaria* (Severino 1958, 1981²) about the aporia – primarily exposed by Plato in the *Sophist* – concerning the concept of Nothingness: here he aims at showing that there is a way out to the aporia, through a correct deepening of the real semantic value of the concept at stake. This treatment would make it possible to eliminate the obstacle thus interposed to any attempt to consistently think of the negation of not-Being by Being (that is, precisely the negation in which the very principle of coherence consists).

First of all, we need to draw attention to the preliminary recognition of the aporetic nature of this negation (the basis for the possibility of facing the issue from the perspective of overcoming the logical/semantic difficulty: a difficulty which otherwise would inhibit the ability to understand and even conceive this principle in incontrovertible terms).

Severino states the aporia in a form that effectively sums up the reason underlying it: “precisely because we exclude that Being is not-Being, in order for this exclusion to subsist, Nothingness is *posited*, is *present*, and therefore *is*”; then he points out that someone tried to solve the difficulty through the distinction between “sense” and “meaning” introduced by Frege in his essay of the same title (Frege 1892). In this regard, Severino notes that even if we want to apply this distinction to Nothingness (by assigning to the term that designates it a *sense* but not a *meaning*), the aporia would come up again «about the absence of meaning of the term “Nothingness”» (Severino 1958: 86ff.; 1981²: 210ff.) With this observation, Severino means to point out that even to deny that the term “Nothingness” has a meaning it is necessary to attribute a meaning to it. The remark is correct, both because the application of the difference between sense and meaning introduced by Frege does not concern Nothingness (nor does it

concern non-contradiction: Frege only deals with identity) and because the problem cannot be solved by attributing to Nothingness a sense: anything that is attributed to Nothingness makes it into the (positive) subject of the very attribution and, therefore, into a not-nothingness. But Frege's distinction is philosophically (and not only logically) of fundamental importance: correctly adopted, it can illuminate the problem of absolute negation with a new and disconcerting light. However, Severino is not aware of this because his attention is entirely captured by the idea of the impossibility of evading the issue of Nothingness.

The thesis by which Severino sets up his solution of the Platonic aporia is the following: «the presentation of nothingness does not attest that “Nothingness” means “to be”, but that “Nothingness”, as signifying as Nothingness, is». To support and explain this thesis, Severino adds: «The positivity of signifying is in contradiction with the very content of this signifying, which, precisely, signifies as absolute negativity» (Severino 1958: 88; 1982²: 213 [my translation]). In other words, Severino does not put into question at all the fact that the term “Nothingness” should have a meaning (i.e. that it must mean something for itself) and that its meaning must be a consistent meaning (whose inconsistency lies only in *the fact of being a meaning*, not in *the meaning it represents*, i.e. in *what is meant by it*, we could say it lies in its formal Being, not in its objective Being). And what the term “nothingness” designates as a meaning is “absolute negativity”, therefore something absolutely opposite to Being (which is absolute positivity). Here this is not about examining the proposed “solution” of the difficulty which Severino develops in this chapter of his major work, but rather about understanding the consequences – in relation to the system of his thought – of attributing to Nothingness a meaning and even a consistent meaning. Now, it is not hazardous to suppose that the whole philosophy of Severino, starting from its most paradoxical aspects (the eternity and immutability of the Being, of every being) depends on the following conviction: that Nothingness is negative and that it opposes itself, as a consistent meaning, to the consistent meaning “Being” (in the same way in which the latter is opposed to the first). In fact it is such a conviction that allows him to imagine Being as a totality of entities, each of which *implies all* of the others – the present, past and future ones – because, in order to be determined in an absolute sense (*omnimode*) and therefore to show itself as true (or to show its truth) it must oppose itself to all other entities (to each of them). But once such a premise is posited, it becomes inevitable to derive the admission that if the entities were not

all simultaneously present, none of them would have the slightest chance of being true. Each of them is the negative of all the others, each of them is together positive and negative (but under different respects: A is affirmative of itself and negative of B, B is affirmative of itself and negative of A). What would happen if the respects under which positivity and negativity are ascribed to the same meaning were the same? This would immediately produce a contradiction, since from this perspective the “positive” and the “negative” are semantically distinct and incompatible concepts. Thus, Being is affirmative of itself and negative of not-Being. The principle of identity and that of non-contradiction, therefore, are presented as the abstract sides “of the concreteness of the principle”, as two aspects of it that are distinct but inextricably linked. In all this, however, the negative ends up playing two roles that are not perfectly coincident: in one respect, it is the opposite of the positive, in another respect it is complementary to it. The relation of opposition and that of complementarity are, however, different relationships: the terms that compose the first are conceivable even outside their relational nexus (we can very well represent white without black), while each of those that constitute the second cannot be thought of one without the other on pain of giving rise to a contradiction. Severino’s ontology is based on a universal relationship of complementarity: each entity is complementary to the totality of the others. Nonetheless, Severino believes that the “positive” and the “negative” are semantically opposite concepts: indeed, if this was not the case, the aporia would emerge from their separation rather than from their synthesis. In thinking that they are *both* complementary and opposite, Severino is certainly in line with a long-lasting philosophical tradition. In fact, if – even in the light of the considerations made in the first four paragraphs of this contribution – we wanted to bring back the complementarity of “positive” and “negative” (on the one hand) and their opposition (on the other hand) to two distinct principles, we would have to say that the “positive” and the “negative” are complementary in light of the principle of non-contradiction and that they are opposed on the basis of that of the excluded third or middle. Therefore, admitting that – as Aristotle himself suggests (see above) – these principles are the corollary of each other, there should be no conflict between the complementarity and the opposition of “positive” and “negative” either. In this regard, Severino is clear: «In general, we can say that the abstract concept of the principles of identity, non-contradiction, excluded third allows a dialectical interpretation of these principles of the type proposed by Hegel in his *Logic*, being clear that the criticism of Hegel to these princi-

ples refers only to their abstract concept» (Severino 1958: 58; 1981²: 178 [my translation]). Consequently, as he considers the “positive” and the “negative” as complementary and opposite at the same time (but not in the same respect), Severino shows that he is, in reality, much more Aristotelian than Parmenidean.

Let us now conclude, at least provisionally, our considerations. It is possible to portray *La struttura originaria* as the last (at least chronologically) and more radical defence of Aristotelian metaphysics against the metaphysics of Hegel, a defence which led Severino to the point of correcting Aristotle himself for not having recognized that the complementarity of positive and negative had to embrace the totality of the entities together with their coexistence and infinite permanence). Such a defence is all the more effective as much as it aims at showing how Hegel’s dialectic does not intend to turn against Aristotle’s logic but only against its intellectualistic (i.e. abstract) interpretation, since for Severino the Hegelian dialectical unity of the opposites is nothing but the Aristotelian complementarity of positive and negative. From this perspective, the philosophy expressed by Severino’s thought, starting from *La struttura originaria*, is perhaps the most complete and articulated synthesis of all the possibilities to which the development of Western metaphysics has given rise or is able to give place. When pushed to its extreme coherence, this perspective comes to be reversed into its opposite, that is, into the most complete and total reabsorption of the manifold entities into the one Being, until the absolute extinction of their multiplicity and differences. It is this ultimate consequence, usually not even glimpsed, that makes paradoxically appropriate the subsumption of Severino’s ultra-metaphysical and hyper-Aristotelian thought into the ambit of neo-Eleaticism. From the perspective of the latter, however – to the eyes of an ontic consciousness able to draw from its own disillusion the strength to renounce the truth of itself in order to protect the truth of being – all the things that metaphysics had united come to be divided again: Being and entities, the complementarity and opposition of positive and negative, the principle of non-contradiction and the principle of the exclusion of the medium, truth and opinion.

References

Ackrill (1963). Aristotle, *Categories* and *De Interpretatione*. Translated with Notes and Glossary by J.L. Ackrill, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1963 (critical

- edition: Aristotelis, *recognovit brevique adnotatione critica instruxit L. Minio Paluello*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1949).
- Frege G. (1892). Über Sinn und Bedeutung. *Zeitschrift für Philosophie und philosophische Kritik*, 100, 25-50 (eng. tr.: *On Sense and Reference*, by M. Black in *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*, P. Geach and M. Black, eds. and trans.). Oxford: Blackwell, 1980³: 56-78.
- Kirwan (1971). Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, books Γ, Δ and E, translated with Notes by Christopher Kirwan. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Sasso G. (1987). *Essere e negazione [Being and Negation]*. Napoli: Morano.
- Severino E. 1958 (1981²) *La struttura originaria [The Primal Structure]*, Brescia, La Scuola, 1958, 2nd. ed. Milano, Adelphi, 1981.
- Tarca L.V. (2016). *Verità e negazione. Variazioni di pensiero [Truth and Negation. Thought's Variations]*. Venezia: Cafoscarina.
- Visentin M. (2015). *Onto-logica. Scritti sull'essere e il senso della verità [Onto-Logic. Writings about Being and the Sense of Truth]*. Napoli: Bibliopolis.