

“Something is not”: being, time and nothingness between Severino’s thought and free logics

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In this article I will propose the following thesis: Severino’s demonstration of contradictoriness of the Becoming in an Aristotelian Thomistic sense (ATB) is not an-hypothetically demonstrated, but depends on a linguistic assumption, that is on the use of a specific language; but this assumption is not necessary because it will be demonstrated the existence of another language which is able to speak about the becoming in an Aristotelian Thomistic sense with no contradictions.

The argumentation I am going to propose can thus be synthesized:

- If we use Severino’s language (SL), then (ATB) will result contradictory;
- If we use a different language, which I will call FLL, then ATB will not result contradictory;
- Therefore, if we can demonstrate the second passage, we shall say that Severino’s analysis of the Becoming is not an-hypothetical, because the employ of SL is not necessary, since another different language, FLL, which can alternatively be used in that analysis, actually exists.

Keywords:

Philosophy, formal logic, metaphysics, Aristotle, Aquinas, Severino

Introduction

It was a great honour and a real pleasure for me to attend the Symposium “At the dawn of eternity”, held in Brescia in 2018, which celebrated the thinker I personally consider as not only one of the greatest contemporary philosophers, but also one of the friendliest and most exquisite men I have ever met.

Some years ago, Professor Severino granted me the privilege of a written debate on *Divus Thomas* that unfolded throughout five “thrusts” (Testi 2001, 2002, 2006; Severino 2001, 2004):

Concerning this “skirmish”, we can point out that:

- the first two “thrusts” succeeded in clearing some ambiguities, misunderstandings and incidental issues. I am not embarrassed now to acknowledge that, at that time, I made some mistakes which Professor Severino patiently showed me as great teachers do, thus motivating me to meditate his whole work more deeply;
- the other “thrusts” have instead focused on a theoretical kernel which nowadays, in my humble opinion, is still unanswered, despite the latest Severino’s works (2001b, 2007, 2011, 2019), since it concerns the critique of the Becoming in the Aristotelian-Thomistic sense that Severino elaborated in his first production.

I am now therefore going to re-propose this theoretical question in its essential formulation, in order to better highlight the issue. I will consequently avoid redundant bibliographical references and technical formalizations, already available in the a.m. writings.

The argumentation I am going to propose can thus be synthesized:

- Definition of the terms: the Becoming is considered in its Aristotelian-Thomistic sense (ATB), as the process in which something is first and later it is not, or first is not and later it is. We can analyse this Becoming

by employing two different languages that determine two different results:

- I. If we use Severino's language (SL), then (ATB) will result contradictory;
- II. If we use a different language, which I will call FLL, then ATB will not result contradictory;
- III. Therefore, if we can demonstrate the second passage (II), we shall say that Severino's analysis of the Becoming is not an-hypothetical, because the use of SL is not necessary, as another different language, FLL, exists and can be used in that same analysis.

I. Analysis of the Aristotelian-Thomistic Becoming with Severino's Language

I am now going to demonstrate the first passage (I) by taking into consideration the following text, where Severino asks some questions and gives answers concerning the example of an amphora made in the 20th century of which not all existed in the 19th century, and specifically the "unity" U of the amphora did not exist ("unity" is meant as what keeps all materials composing the amphora together: see Severino E., *Destiny of Necessity*, Adelphi, Milan, 1980, 25):

"But, did *all* that constitutes this amphora existing in the 20th century [SP] already exist in the 19th century [Q1]?

And if all did not already exist [A1] (otherwise, this amphora would have already existed in the 19th century), was what still did not exist [i.e. U] a "*being*" [Q2]?

And if it could not be it [A2], shall not we say [A3] that, *in so far as it did not exist*, this non-being *was nothingness*? [Q3]

And, as a matter of fact, this amphora is not nothingness (my critic admits that too, Testi 2001, 107) [SP];

thus, by claiming the existence of a time when this amphora does not exist, Western thought asserts the existence of a time when what is not nothingness, it is nothingness [C]" (Severino 2001, 90).

We are now going to analyse the text by explicitly splitting it into:

- a starting point (SP),

- three questions-answers (Q1, Q2, Q3; A1, A2, A3)
 - and a conclusion (C),
- which I have already put in square brackets in the a.m. passage as follows:
- Starting point (SP): it is stated that this amphora made in the 20th century and all its constituents, its unity U included, is an *ens* (‘being’ in the text) and therefore it is not nothingness.
 - Question 1 (Q1): *Did all constituents of this amphora existing in the 20th century already exist in the 19th century?*
 - Answer 1: Severino’s answer to this question is “no” (A1), because at least the unity U of this existing amphora was not supposed to exist.
 - Question 2 (Q2): Was U, which did not yet exist in the 19th century, a “being”?
 - Answer 2 (A2): the answer to this question is negative again.
 - Question 3 (Q3): *In so far as it did not exist, was U nothingness?*
 - Answer 3 (A3): here the answer is “yes”, hence U was nothingness.
 - Conclusion (C): since we had said (SP) that this amphora and everything that constitutes it (its unity U included) is not nothingness, it is claimed a time where *U, which is not nothingness (SP) is nothingness (A3)* and this is contradictory.

Therefore, if we analyse ATB with SL, we are bound to conclude that the Becoming in the Aristotelian-Thomistic sense is contradictory.

II. Analysis of the Aristotelian-Thomistic Becoming with a Language based on Free Logics

FLL Language

We are now going to analyse the Becoming by using FLL language based on Lesniewski’s ontology, which allows to speak also about something which does not exist (and in this sense it is a *free logic*).

As previously mentioned, I wish to avoid heavy formalizations, preferring to illustrate in a semi-formal way the “philosophical” structure of such language, which is based on four fundamental distinctions: the copula and the three names: “*ens*”, “in t-time” and “nothingness”.

- Def 1: “... is ...” (see Testi 2001, 96, Axiom 1 for a complete formalization): it is the copula, that is a propositional functor which, when saturated by two nouns (the ‘subject’ on its left, the ‘predicate’ on its

right) constitutes an enunciation (a linguistic sequence that can be true or false), which will be true if and only if (\Leftrightarrow) the subject is an existing being (e.g. “Socrates”) included in the predicate (e.g. “man”), otherwise that is false. In semi-formal terms:

$$S \text{ is } P \Leftrightarrow (S \text{ is an existing being } \textit{and} S \text{ is included in } P)$$

It is worth noting that this definition of ‘... is ...’ does not imply that what we are talking about actually exists. In fact, Def 1 will be true not only if the subject is an existing being included in the predicate (e.g.: ‘S’ = ‘Socrates’; ‘P’ = ‘Man’), but also if the subject does not actually exist (e.g. ‘S’ = ‘Cheshire Cat’; ‘P’ = ‘Cat’). As a matter of fact, the Cheshire Cat does not exist (consequently it is false that ‘Cheshire Cat is an existing being’), hence the proposition on the right of \Leftrightarrow is false (since one of its constituents is false) and the sentence ‘Cheshire Cat is a cat’ will be false as well; however, the whole Def 1 remains true because, being a bi-implication, it is true also when both its ‘sides’ are false.

- Def 2: “*ens*” or “being” (see Testi 2001, 98, Definition 1) is a name that can be said of any subject you can speak about through the copula (either you can say something about it or you can refer it to something)

$$S \text{ is an } \textit{ens} \Leftrightarrow \text{for some } P, S \text{ is } P$$

- Def 3: “in-t-time” (see Testi 2002, 168) is a name (in a logical sense) that can be said of a subject having a certain temporal determination t, utterly similar to the name “in-the-place-l”. Hence, the following sentences (composed of a subject-name, the copula and a predicate-name) are true:

‘this book is in-this-room’
‘this book is in-2019-time’

- Def 4: “Nothingness” (see Testi 2001, 100, Definition 3): it is a name that can be said of a subject if and only if this is itself and (meanwhile) it is not itself:

$$S \text{ is Nothingness} \Leftrightarrow (S \text{ is } S \textit{ and } S \text{ is not } S)$$

This way we can define Nothingness, but we shall never say that “something *is* Nothing”, because it would immediately imply the contradiction

on the left of the definition Def 4 (see Testi 2001, 100, Theorem 4). It is to be noted that, in that regard, Severino comments that thus “Nothingness is defined using exactly a trait of my [his] analysis” (Severino 2001, 88: see Severino 1981 ch. 4 for the distinction between 'Nothingness', here signified by the definiendum in Def 4, and the 'positive meaning of Nothingness' here outlined through all Def 4).

The Becoming and the FLL language

We shall now see what is going to happen if we carry out the analysis of the amphora's Becoming (*supra*) by using FLL language.

- Starting Point (SP): it is obviously the same, that is: it is stated that this amphora made in the 20th century and all it is constituted of, is an *ens*, therefore it is not nothingness. If it is so, both following sentences prove to be true:
 - “this amphora is in-the-20th-century”: in fact, we have the single name “this amphora” for which the temporal determination “in – the- 20th-century” (Def 3) is true, hence their connection through the copula (Def 1) will be true;
 - “this amphora is an *ens*”: in fact, there is a predicate (the name “in-the-20th-century”) which can be said of “this amphora” (Def 2).

Consequently, and for the same logical reasons, since U is a part of the amphora which actually exists, namely “the unity of this amphora”, the propositions:

- “U is in the 20th century”,
 - “U is an *ens*”
- will be true.
- Question 1 (Q1): *Did all component parts of this amphora existing in the 20th century already exist in the 19th century?*
 - Answer 1: FLL (as LS) will give a negative answer to this question, in fact the sentence “U is in-the-19th-century” is false (the noun ‘in-the-19th-century’ *does not* include ‘U’, hence the proposition formulated with the copula will be false: Def 1). Consequently, the negation:
 - “U is not in-the-19th-century”
 will be true.

- Question 2 (Q2): *Was U, which did not exist in the 19th century, a being?*
- Answer 2: this is the crucial point because, while SL gave a negative answer, if we use FLL we have to answer *positively*, or better, we shall have to reaffirm that “U is an *ens*” (because something about U can be said, i.e. that it is in-the-20th-century: SP, Def 2), and that “U is not in-the-19th-century” (Q1). This because in FLL ‘*ens*’ (or ‘being’) does not have any temporal meaning, because in FLL the positivity of an *ens* X (“X is an *ens*”: Def 2) can be clearly distinguished by its being in a certain time or not (Def 3).
- Question 3 (Q3): *In so far as it did not exist, was U nothingness?*
- Answer 3: here again, since in FLL we distinguish between being, in-time and nothingness, we shall have to answer negatively (unlike SL), hence we shall say that “U is not Nothingness” (in fact, it is a being: SP, Def 4), despite “U is not in-the-19th-century”.
- Conclusion: by using FLL we can speak about the Becoming in Aristotelian-Thomistic sense (something is first and later it is not, or first is not and later it is) without contradictions. In fact, all the following sentences prove to be true:
 - “U is not in-the 19th-century” (A2, that is: U first is not);
 - “U is in-the-20th-century” (SP, that is: U later is);
 - “U exists” (SP);
 - “U is not Nothingness” (A3, Q3).

And consequently the following propositions are also true:

- “this amphora is not in-the-19th-century” (follows from A2, that is: this amphora first is not);
- “this amphora is in-the-20th-century” (SP, that is: this amphora later is);
- “this amphora exists” (SP);
- “this amphora is not Nothingness” (follows from SP, A3, Q3).

III. Quod erat demonstrandum

Since using FLL it is possible to speak about ATB without contradiction (II), it follows that Severino’s demonstration of contradictoriness of ATB (I) it is not an-hypothetically demonstrated, but depends on a linguistic

assumption that is the use of SL; but this assumption is not necessary because it has been demonstrated the existence of another language FLL (II) which is able to speak about ATB with no contradictions.

Clarification

In order to better clarify the sense of the a.m. argumentation, I would like to point out that, when I use the expression “Severino’s language” I do keep in mind the following remark Severino made about the negative answer A2:

“it is [not Severino’s thought, but] the Western thought, to which Thomas belongs too and whom my critic considers himself to be a disciple of, that replies with a “No” (Severino 2004, 159)

But the point is that in his works Emanuele Severino *de facto* employs a language with a certain logical structure (SL, which does not properly specify ‘ens’ and ‘being-in-t-time’) and it is through this language that he infers the contradiction in ATB. Moreover, this indistinctness between “ens” and “being-in-t-time” also appears when Severino, in the same text, expresses his famous theorem on the eternity of everything:

“the answer to that question, according to the argumentation developed in my works, would be instead that, since it is impossible that what *is not nothingness* is nothingness, it is thus impossible that any *being is not* – since any being is therefore eternal – and also this amphora, in each of its aspects [including U], *is in every time*, even though it *does not* manifest itself *in every time*” (Severino 2004, 159, emphasis added).

To my view, this passage shows very clearly how Severino infers from the concepts of ‘nothingness’, ‘being’ and from the impossibility that ‘any being is not’, that any being is eternal, and therefore it exists “in every time”.

But, strictly speaking, from “it is impossible that x is not” we can only infer that “x is” and not also that “x is in every time”, i.e. that “x is eternal”! Indeed, if we employ FLL, that is, if we keep the theoretical distinction between the positivity of the *ens* and temporality as fixed, Severino’s inferences do not follow [*supra*]. These ones have the same theoretical value of

an inference that from “it is impossible that x is not”, infers that “x is in every place”, i.e. that “x is omnipresent”. So, if in the above passage we replace ‘eternal’ with ‘omnipresent’ and ‘time’ with ‘place’, it is easier to understand that ‘ens’ and ‘being-in-a-place’ are disconnected being the following proposition obviously false: “Since it is impossible that *what is not nothingness* is nothingness, it is therefore impossible that any *being is not* – since any being is thus *omnipresent* – and also this amphora, in each of its aspects [including U], *is in every place*, even though it does not manifest itself *in every place*”.

Conclusion and future developments

At the end of this article, and in order to highlight my deep and sincere admiration towards Severino and his speculation, I wish to add some final remarks.

Severino represents an unavoidable theoretical peak in philosophy, especially within classic and Thomistic philosophy, therefore we have to speak about a *pre* and *post* Severino. His analyses are both solid and rigorous, as much as such a hard subject can allow, and some sarcastic criticism towards his theories are only due to a misunderstanding (and often even to utter ignorance) of his works.

In the light of my argumentation, the “relativization” of Severino’s theories implies meanwhile an absolute appreciation of their value. In fact, by demonstrating the exactness and deductive correctness of these inferences, it is also proved that *each* language that does not adequately distinguish between ‘ens’, ‘time’ and ‘nothingness’, it necessarily implies the contradictoriness of the Becoming in the Aristotelian Thomistic sense, and therefore the nihilism (thinking the *ens* as nothing).

In fact, the traits of the a.m. SL language are also shared by many philosophers who would like to “get out” from Severino’s criticism by calling upon the traditional formulations of *actus-potentia* and being-essence distinctions, as if Severino did not know about them!

But *post* Severino, in order to propose nowadays these distinctions without running the risk of falling into contradictions, we have to reformulate them starting from a language endowed with an accurate formal structure. This seems the only way that will enable us to keep off the contradictory cliffs that can be found in some of the formulations of the Becoming in the Aristotelian Thomistic sense.

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