

The primal judgement and the unity-multiplicity of the categories

MATTIA CARDENAS

Post-Doctoral Research Fellow, Ca' Foscari University of Venice
mattia.cardenas@unive.it

The paper intends to examine the meaning that the concept of “history of philosophy” assumes within the philosophy of Emanuele Severino. If the idealistic identity of philosophy and history of philosophy – that is, the unity-multiplicity of categories – has already progressively undergone a process of de-legitimization up to the total negation of the theoretical nature of philosophical historiography in the extrinsic historical-philological purpose, this is now to understand if, and in what ways, it is possible to rediscover, in light of the ‘primal structure’ indicated by the Severinian writings, the development of philosophy as *actuality*.

Keywords:

primal judgement, unity-multiplicity, categories, becoming, history of philosophy, actualism

1. Introduction

The issue that we intend to examine does not concern the interpretation that Severino provides of the entire Western philosophy – whose structure, as the *history of nihilism*, is articulated in terms of *epistème* and *anti-epistème* (the latter corresponding to the philosophy of the last two centuries) – but it regards the problem if, in light of the opening of the primal meaning witnessed by the Severinian writings, the concept of “history of philosophy” must be considered a self-contradictory content or if, by virtue of it, it can be re-semantized to such an extent to subtract the historical process of philosophy from the accidentality of pure empirical reconstruction, in order to elevate it to an *actuality* that, far from being interpreted as a series of *in tempore* segments, has rather to do, as Hegelian idealism did not fail to emphasize, with “what is eternally present” (*mit ewig Gegenwärtigem*) (Hegel, 1973, p. 205)

2. The primal meaning and philosophies as contradictions

It has been opportunely pointed out, especially within the Italian neoidealistic school, that every philosophy not only produces its history of philosophy but it *is* a peculiar history of philosophy. Given the multiplicity of conceptions that have been historically appointed to philosophy and consequently to its development, and above all, given the complexity (aporetic at times) of reconciling the individuality inherent in the historical-empirical dynamic with the universality of the philosophical discourse, the idea of ‘history of philosophy’ has been mostly neglected and variously regarded as *problem*, when thematized.

This intrinsic problematic seems to be sharpened in reference to the unheard-of sense that emerges in the Severinian writings, where the absolute *standing* of it (of what is indicated in his writings as *Destiny*) consists

of the immediate self-denial of (personal) negative, since it involves what it intends to deny. With this wording we are already beyond the “residual nihilism” still present in *The Primal Structure* (henceforth *PS*), since, in this work, truth foresees its own development.

Already, in a text prior to this fundamental work, Severino argues that for the very position of the system (philosophy) it is necessary to understand the deduction of the entire-historical philosophy, so that the dialectical circle for which it is only constituted the system can produce the *overcoming* of historical actuality (of philosophies) as well as is it possible to conceive the system only through the history of philosophy as the development of the dialectic series.

Regardless of this circularity, Severino states, there would be nothing but an unrelated multiplicity of *probably* philosophical positions (Severino, 1952, p. 292). In *PS* (chap. I, § 4) it is pointed out that the *eternal* foundation, that is of the primal structure, coincides with its *historicizing* (Severino, 1981², p.113). It means that the *value* of the foundation – its standing, its firmness as a foundation – cannot fail to imply the concrete of its negation. It is by virtue of the *development of the negation* that the foundation is like this: in this sense it is essential to affirm the unity of phenomenology (the history of philosophy) and science (the philosophical system).

The matter is reaffirmed and enriched by Severino also in his book, *Studies in philosophy of praxis* (henceforth *SFP*), where the truth is recognized facing a precarious situation, a *state of grace*, given its alternation with the non-truth. In order for truth to be *actual*, it is necessary to reiterate indefinitely the path that leads to it, which is to say that truth can only be in the *dialogue* that truth constitutes with its negation (Severino, 1984, pp. 69-70). To make it clear: in this framework of primal structure, dialogue does not refer to any reciprocity, because if the truth can understand the error it is certainly not the error which can understand the truth. The dialogic nature of truth exclusively consists in this: that for its affirmation over negation it must be perpetually recreated (*immer wieder*).

Against this we can object – and this objection finds full expression in the historical-explanatory story of Italian neo-idealism and in the lucid pages of Benedetto Croce – that the error, the negative, assumed in a dialectical value would involve a vision of the history of philosophy as a *phenomenology of error*, where the error would be as a function of the organic system of truth: as initial moments, philosophies would be destined to reveal themselves in the only development of truth; but that truth can be re-

alized, materialized, through error it would be nothing but an abuse of the logical element (*panlogism*). If the truth cannot be in any way affected by the error, then the error is not to be considered the opposite of truth, but a distinction with respect to it. History, Croce observes, must be considered contemporary or actual only in the sense of its absolute positivity, absolute value. Instead, moving from the teaching of Giovanni Gentile, Severino claims that truth (the foundation) foresees a development, in the peculiar sense that, through denial, the truth becomes concrete, is 'strengthened', held firm: where A – the truth – always remains the same (as that it could not be otherwise) but through the overcoming of the error is confirmed, strengthened (A^2). The originary is therefore such in the measure in which it includes all its individuations, that is, if it includes as negatively transcended all its negations, if it includes as one that has already removed all its negation *elenctice*. The negative, the error, is then *placed as removed*; and "it is in this firmness – reaffirms Severino – that the foundation is always the same" (Severino, 1981², p.113; Severino, 1984, p. 78). Concretely speaking, therefore, there is no plurality of philosophies (or categories), but the only *primal philosophy*, "mine". The negations are placed in the originary, conceived as the removal of every negation and if it is permissible to talk about a multiplicity of philosophies it is only so far as they are a content, already removed, of "my" philosophy, of that the only actual or primal philosophizing that is *mine*; if, therefore, the primal structure is the very authenticity of philosophizing that has always *exceeded* ("taken away", "won") every philosophy that has historically appeared or will have to happen (Severino, 1984, p. 79) it cannot fail to place itself as primal opening of truth and also as development of the same truth as a condition of that *hypothesis* of philosophizing others with respect to the imposition of *my* philosophy (or primal philosophy):

There are other philosophers which think differently from me: it can be an absolute truth only because my philosophy is the primal openness and the development of absolute truth. That is, I can get to know that others think differently from me, only by exercising the absolute truth of my thinking; so that the act that lets me know of the existence of different and opposite convictions of mine is the very act that places the disvalue of these different convictions (Severino, 1984, p. 79).

Starting from the essays contained in *The Essence of Nihilism* (henceforth *EN*), aimed at emancipating themselves from the 'residual nihilism'

still belonging to the previous reflection, the truth, precisely as a everlasting background to appearing, is no longer understood in dialogue with the untruth, but it appears eternally, it does not come or go, since it is understood as distinct from the language that bears witness to it. It can be said that truth alternates with untruth as a truth *witnessed* by language, which is precisely other from the truth (*Destiny*). As Severino himself pointed out, by redirecting the pages of *SFP*, it is the relationship between *truth* and *language that testifies* to keep it precariously. It is therefore in no way possible to support a convergence between truth and the various forms of Western thought, to be understood now as concrete identifications of nihilism. Thus the history of philosophy becomes the history of nihilism. Opened up the authentic meaning of the originary, every philosophy - every category - is and must be recognized as a *contradiction*, insofar as it is inevitably the bearer of an alienated sense of truth as an expression of that *faith of becoming* of which the truth (*Destiny*) it is the preemptory negation. In this framework, philosophies are contradictions because they are substantially *epistème*, or a knowledge that is based on a self-contradictory meaning such as that of becoming nihilistically understood. The *Destiny* of necessity, as a negation of every possibility to *become something else*, and therefore as a negation of all historicity, cannot be considered as the synthesis of the philosophies that have progressively followed one another; it cannot even be understood as the 'concrete' synthesis of the philosophies that have been posed abstractly along the historical course, as the current idealism of Giovanni Gentile believes and, as has also been seen, supported by Severino in *PS* and *SFP*. With *The Essence of Nihilism* and with the developments consequent to it, the *Destiny* of necessity is not the last word of philosophy, it is not the *logos* that gathers all the *logoi* of the history of philosophy. It is rather the primal word that establishes and allows contradiction – it is what allows philosophies to be realized as such, to be realized as contradictions. There is no longer the idea present in *PS*, for which the 'history of philosophy' is 'history of the foundation', where the primal structure would become the first and last word in the history of philosophy, of that word that would come at the end after the *series* of denials that allow the truth to emerge concretely. For Severino the idea that one category – let us think, for example, of Platonic thought – has said 'abstractly' the truth, that is *Destiny*, is to be rejected. In light of this it is essential to make the distinction between the *form* and *content* of each philosophy: it is one thing the "saying" in what the philosophy of Plato consists – it is another that its positive means; its contradictory content, on the other hand.

Which *content* each category, every philosophy, is contradiction, because, according to the Severinian language, it is isolation of the *Earth* from *Destiny*; but as a *form*, as a ‘saying’, it is a positive meaning and as such refers to the primal (to the *Destiny* of necessity) and cannot fail to postpone it, otherwise it would not be a saying but a nothing and as no-nothing is necessarily part of the primal structure of truth, understood as a concrete totality that includes the totality of meanings, of every non-nothing. In the light of the primal opening of meaning, not only did the history of nihilism necessarily appear, but it also had to appear in a specific *order*. An order that is witnessed by the *coherence* of the error, that is to say by the coherence of the incoherence (of nihilism), as an event that, beginning with the *epistème*, could not but reach, for Severino, its inevitable sunset. On par with any meaning, even the error, not being exposed to *epamphoterizein* (to becoming something else) is eternal, so that the history of philosophy as the history of nihilism is in inevitably contradiction (every certain philosophy is contradiction) but as a contradiction it necessarily refers back to *Destiny* as its foundation.

3. The unity-multiplicity of the categories

With respect to what has been said about the distinction between *form* and *content* of every philosophy that can be inferred from the Severinian discourse, we must ask ourselves, as a last resort, if the concept of the history of philosophy (and thus of *tout court* history) can be subtracted to his nihilistic interpretation, if it is traced back, in the wake of the Gentile teaching, to the *actuality* of his production. By virtue of the actuality of thinking, that is, of appearing, the whole historical-philosophical intertwining can be understood as the one of categories that have *always* been retained in the present. We are referring to a circle where the ‘primal saying’ is a perennial repeating, and taking up the categories that we historically say they belong to Plato, Aristotle and so on. In this regard, that category which is, for example, Plato’s philosophy is one of the ways of the appearance of the everlasting, since there can be no content that has not already been surrounded by the conscience or by the primal philosophy (from “my” philosophy). Recalling the language of *PS*, philosophies can be understood as modalities of the *hyposyntax* allowed by the *persyntax*, that is they can be understood as *variants* of the *constant*. Thereby, to make it clear, we do not mean that the history of philosophy has abstractly said

what *Destiny* says, since – of course – if we assume, as Severino indicates, the concept of philosophy (as of *epistème*) as a stance in the regards of being, then philosophy has always revealed itself as a denial of *Destiny* in that it has thought, lived and expressed the being in a contradictory way, that is, moving from a wrong interpretation of the phenomenological protocol. We can therefore agree *with* Severino in distinguishing the *form* and *content* of philosophies; but if one assumes philosophy as a content that is *immediately* related to appearing – so that *everything* is philosophy, as Gentile’s actualism rightly argues – if, in other words, we mean philosophy as the same being that it appears, then it seems legitimate to affirm, proceeding *beyond* Severino, that with regard to the concept of the history of philosophy we have rather to do with a series of categories that are no longer negations of the primal, but *modalities* of the everlasting, modality of the actuality of history. It may be added that the actuality of philosophy – its being *contemporary* – coincides not only with the *indefiniteness* of philosophy, but also with what is defined in the Severinian writings as the *infinite appearance*. Everything is part of the primal knowledge, everything is contained in the primal judgment, so that within the intrascendible horizon of the actuality of thought, the multiplicity of philosophies is inevitably organized *in unitatem* (Gentile, 2003³, p. 263). If, from what has been said, it is true that every meaning – every non-nothing – cannot be isolated from the *act* of meaning, the *eternal* meaning enriches itself perpetually, determining itself, that is to say, manifesting itself historically. Where – let it be noted – by saying *history* we do not allude to any ontological difference, but to a purely phenomenological *difference*, such as to allow the perennial enrichment of the primal judgment. From this it is possible to consider the actual indefinitiveness of philosophy, that is the unfolding of the primal saying as a unity-multiplicity of the categories. Only within the transcendental horizon of actuality it is therefore possible to propose a concept of the history of philosophy that is not a negation of philosophy, but an expression of the inseparable unity of *theorein* and *historein*.

References

- Hegel G.W.F. (1973). *Lezioni sulla filosofia della storia* [*Lectures on the Philosophy of History*]. Firenze: La Nuova Italia.
- Severino E. (1981). *La struttura originaria* [*The Primal Structure*] (1958), 2nd ed. Milano: Adelphi.

- Severino E. (1952). *Il problema della storia* [*The problem of history*], in AA.VV. (1953), *Il problema della storia* [*The problem of history*], Proceedings of the VIII Conference of christian philosophical studies, Gallarate, 1952. Brescia: Morcelliana (is now in E. Severino, *Heidegger e la metafisica* (1994) [*Heidegger and Metaphysics*] Milano: Adelphi, pp. 524-539).
- Severino E. (1984). *Studi di filosofia della prassi* [*Studies on Philosophy of Praxis*] (1962), 2nd ed. Milano: Adelphi.
- Severino E. (1982). *Essenza del nichilismo* [*The Essence of Nihilism*, London-New York, Verso, 2016] (1971), new edition, Milano: Adelphi.
- Gentile G. (2003³). *Sistema di logica come teoria del conoscere* [*System of Logic as a theory of knowing*], vol. II. Firenze: Le Lettere.