

Opening Note

by Giulio Goggi

In dialogue with Graham Priest on the theme of the primal structure of knowledge – see *Eternity and Contradiction*, vol. 2, 2020 – Severino wrote:

Just as “being” does not mean “tree”, “water”, “moon”, and so forth (even though it is the predicate of “tree”, “water”, “moon”, and so forth), so “being” does not even mean, and, in a certain sense, above all does not mean “nothing”. “Being” is not “nothing”. *And yet “being” is also predicated of “nothing”*. In fact, the “nothing” that “being” (the *determinatio* “being”) denies that it is (i.e., that “being” rules out) is a meaning that, unlike all other meanings, signifies the absence of all signification, and is thus a *contradiction*. As such, the meaning signifies *something*, but the meaning “nothing” signifies the absence of any *thing*. The signification of this meaning contradicts what it signifies. Except that, as we have seen, contradiction (being contradictory) is not nothing, but is in turn a being, a meaning, so that “being” is also predicated of the meaning “nothing”. It is only because the *determinatio* “being” is *negatio* of the meaning “nothing” that this *determinatio* can also be predicated of this meaning. Thus, the meaning “being” does not rule out “nothing”, but this is not in turn a contradiction. [...]

The contradiction in the meaning “nothing” (and the aporia brought about by the fact that Nothing is thought about, and thus exists in some way) are addressed in particular by Chapter IV of *La struttura originaria* [Adelphi, 1981] and by *Intorno al senso del nulla*, Adelphi, 2013. Here, in addition to reiterating the distinction between contradiction (which is a being) and the contradictory content of the contradiction (which is a non-being, nothing, or in other words an impossibility), we can point out that in the statement “being is not nothing” – i.e., in the negation of “being is nothing” – “being is nothing” is a contradiction both because, as in all contradictions, the predicate is the negation of the subject, and because the predicate itself is a contradiction, or in other words, it is a meaning whose con-

tent is the absence of all meaning. And the sense of this two-fold contradiction is addressed determinately in the two works cited above. (pp. 78-79).

Therefore, it was decided to dedicate this issue of *Eternity and Contradiction* to chapter IV of *The primal structure* and to *About the Meaning of Nothingness*, translating almost entirely the first one and significant parts of the second one. This was done to return to discuss the “problem of nothingness” that is the aporia that arises from the consideration of what Severino called *the primal structure of truth*, as emerges from the text above.

[I]

Primal structure means the foundation of knowledge – the appearing of being in the form of identity/non-contradiction – which is realized as the primal structure of truth only insofar as it is able to *absolutely* remove its own negation; otherwise we would not have to deal with the foundation. Severino puts it like this:

In the primal structure of the authentically undeniable, i.e., of the destiny of truth, Being *qua* Being, i.e., every being, appears in being itself and nothing other than itself on the one hand, and a certain set of beings appear on the other hand. In this combination, the negation of this being itself and of this set is self-negation (p. 74).

The primal structure of the incontrovertible includes the negation of the opposition (and the negation of the beings that appear). If this structure were *only* the appearing of the being’s being itself and thus were not the appearing of the negation of the opposition (if it were *determinatio* without being *negatio*), this structure would be affirmation and negation of the opposition: it would be explicitly (*in actu signato*) the affirmation and implicitly (*in actu exercito*) the negation, because if it were the appearing of only the affirmation of the opposition it could not be the negation of the non-opposition. In other words, it would leave the possibility of the non-opposition open (p. 83).

The primal structure of the incontrovertible *includes* the negation of the negation of the opposition: it does not coincide with it. This structure, in fact, is the appearing of being itself and not other than itself (it is the appearing of the opposition) on the part of being *qua* being, and thus on the part of every being and, primarily, *on the part of the beings that appear*, where both the negation of being itself and the negation of *the beings that appear* is self-negation. Thus, the primal structure *also includes* the negation of the negation of the existence of the beings that appear (p. 83).

The appearing of this “self-negation” of the negation of the foundation is the *mediational structure* of the “élenchos”. Severino has elaborated on this extensively in *The Essence of Nihilism*, par. 6 (Verso, 2016) and in *Eternity and Contradiction*, vol. 2, 2020, in dialogue with Graham Priest. We certainly refer to those writings. The contributions in this issue – first of all, that of Priest – are the ideal continuation of that dialogue and focus precisely on the aporia of nothingness that Plato already indicated as the greatest of the aporias.

[II]

This aporia says that “nothing” is thought and therefore “is”. Now this seems to disprove the primal structure which is the undeniable appearing of the being in the form of being identical to itself and not other than itself: that is, the undeniable appearing of the opposition of each being to his own other and therefore also to that absolutely other than being which is nothingness. Still in *Eternity and Contradiction* vol 2, 2020, Severino wrote:

It could be objected that everything that is denied by the incontrovertible – as the negation of the opposition is denied – is nothing, but nevertheless appears and thus is being. Demonstrating this contradiction – which [...] is at the heart of the aporia of Nothing [...] and seems to belong to the primal structure – this objection does not obviate the need for the negation of the opposition to be self-negation, but demonstrates that this necessity, while remaining such, is joined to that contradiction. And not only, but as this contradiction is (like every contradiction) a negation of the opposition, considering this contradiction as something that must be denied is grounded upon the primal structure and thus cannot be its denial. In other words, it is necessary that the denial be only apparent (p. 83).

In dialogue with his critics, Severino himself said that if, absurdly, he failed to show what he showed, that is, if he failed to resolve the aporia, this would not lead to the denial of the primal structure. In fact, the denial that the meaning “nothing” belongs to the primal structure, i.e. to the structure of the opposition between being and nothing, is self-negation:

If [...] it were affirmed that nothing has no meaning (it is the neo-positivist objection) and that therefore the opposition of being to nothing is also meaningless, and therefore also something like “being” is meaningless, this affirmation would deny being meaningful, precisely because being is to mean, to be meaningful, meaning, and this thesis cannot fail to present itself as a being. Or if it were affirmed that being is nothingness, precisely because the nothingness “is”,

this affirmation (if it recognizes that it is something, that is, a being) would claim to be nothing. On the other hand, the thesis that nothing has no meaning is a tautology that does not know it is: it is a tautology because “having no meaning” is a synonym for “nothing”, so to say that nothing is to have no meaning is to say that nothing is nothing (Severino, 2018, p. 226).

The “nothing” – that is the absolute absence of meaning – appears, allows itself to be considered and shows that it does not mean “tree”, “water”, “moon”, or any other being. And it is precisely for this reason that the fundamental aporia of nothingness opens up. In the writings mentioned above, Severino concretely removed it.

Severino E. (2018). *Dispute sulla verità e la morte* [Disputes on Truth and Death]. Milano: Rizzoli.

Severino E. (2020). Discussion with Graham Priest. *Eternity and Contradiction. Journal of Fundamental Ontology*, 2: 67-89.
