

# Presentation

by Federico Perelda

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This volume is a special issue dedicated to the theme of nothingness. It originates from the idea, shared with prof. Severino, to translate the cap. IV of his text *La Struttura Originaria [Primal Structure]* (1958), entitled *The aporia of nothingness*. Severino also considered the hypothesis of adding a short piece of writing, a note, which would take into account the orientations of the current debate, but his disappearance made this proposal impossible.

This volume opens offering the English-speaking reader the translations of a large part of the chap. IV of *Primal Structure*, as well as selected passages from the volume, published several decades later, *Intorno al senso del nulla [On the sense of nothingness]* (2012). Then follow the contributions of various scholars who, keeping Severino's text in the background, have dealt with the theme of nothingness.

First of all, a clarification to guide the reader who is not familiar with Severino's work. *Primal Structure* is a text from 1958 to which Severino has constantly referred, over the years, as the foundation of most of the philosophical questions he has dealt with. It is not exaggerated to say that *Primal Structure* plays, with respect to Severino's thought, the role that the *Science of Logic* has in the Hegelian system. Severino is a thinker whom we could define neo-Eleatic (today with other jargon he would be defined as a dynamic eternalist), who centers his thought in the principle of non-contradiction, also called the principle of opposition between being and non-being. It is therefore not surprising that the concept of non-being, of nothing, is taken seriously by him. The nothingness, however, appears as something contradictory, paradoxical.

Severino is a staunch defender of the principle of non-contradiction: for him, contradictions are nothing, that is, there are no contradictory objects or inconsistent states of affairs. And precisely for this reason there is no becoming conceived of as the alleged passage between being and nothing: it would be something contradictory. Yet, there are contradictions of various kinds in his system; and that of nothingness is one of them. That there are contradictions means that there are inconsistent notions; that is, there is the act of *contradicting* oneself, there are *contradicting* sentences, propositions, thoughts, sometimes in an unavoidable, unsolvable way. Nothingness is such an example.

Severino deems the nothingness as an aporetic notion, since it must be said that nothing is nothing but also that nothing is something. Nothing is by definition nothing.

ing; but it is something because of many reasons: because it is what we *refer* to when we say that it is nothing; because it is an object of thought, and, I would say above all, because it is the term of opposition to being. Each of these reasons should be considered separately, also taking into account Severino's proximity to Meinong (a topic that should be adequately investigated). But perhaps it is the last thing that needs to be clarified here. Being is not non-being; this opposition makes not-being the term of a relation and thus hypostatizes it despite its negative nature. Hence the contradiction that, as Russell also said, «in some sense nothing is something» (*The Principles of Mathematics*, § 73).

It is worth noting that the contradiction of nothingness is not resolved in the sense that it is dissolved, canceled. Indeed, some contradictions are resolved in such a way that what first appeared inconsistent, then, thanks to a clarification or a conceptual enrichment, is no longer so. But this is not the case with the nothingness. The contradiction does not derive from an inappropriate conception, from a misunderstanding. Indeed, it is precisely when one has correctly understood what nothingness is, that it appears as something essentially contradictory. However, it is a contradiction to be understood as the act of contradicting oneself, for Severino. That is, it is necessary to contradict oneself in conceiving nothingness; but this does not mean that there is a contradictory object; rather the nothingness consists of two aspects contradicting each other. In this, it is similar to a contradictory notion like 'square circle'. But there is a difference. In the case of a 'square circle' we are dealing with a contradiction due to the logical conjunction between incompatible predicates, such as being circular and being quadrangular; while, in the case of nothing, the contradiction seems to concern a single concept.

But how can a single concept be contradictory? Indeed, it seems that two elements are needed for there to be a contradiction. The fact is that for Severino anything, insofar as it is what it is, has or is a certain meaning; and every meaning, every being has a dual nature, that is, it contains two aspects or moments corresponding to 'positive meaningfulness' and 'determined meaning'. In the case of nothingness, the specific meaning of which it consists is precisely the absence of meaning, the taking away of anything. Hence the contradiction between its positive signifying and the absence it signifies.

This volume collects the contributions of various scholars, who attest to the most varied positions around a theme which, after having been banished from the metaphysical debate for a long time, has returned to being what it has always been: the cross and delight of metaphysicians.

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