

Primal Structure – Chapter IV

Guide to Reading

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Chapter IV of *The Primal Structure* (henceforth *PSIV*), translated into English for the first time and published here together with some paragraphs of *About the Meaning of Nothingness*, is entirely dedicated to the description and resolution of the aporia of nothingness. In order to facilitate the reading of the Severinian text, I shall review, below, the crucial passages.

I. The Aporia of nothingness

The aporia has ancient origins and finds its first explicit formulation in Plato's *Sophist*, where it appears as «the greatest of the difficulties and the first of all». (238): in fact, «if one begins to refute the non-being, he is forced to contradict himself» (238). Such a man will say that, strictly speaking, the non-being cannot «neither enunciate, nor say, nor conceive»; it was what the «venerable and terrible» Parmenides taught. And yet, by saying that it “is” inenunciabile and inconceivable, he will have acknowledged its being. In Plato's text the aporetic of the *absolute non-being* (of non-being as the *opposite of being*) remains in the background as unresolved. As it is well known, Plato's speech *curves* towards the solution of the problem of the *relative non-being*, by providing the conceptual tools to overcome the Parmenidean prohibition of considering the existence of the

multiple. Severino makes a quick historical and theoretical *excursus* (see *PSIV*, parr. 1, 2, 13) by confronting himself with authors who, after Plato, came across this difficulty (Aristotle, Fredegisus of Tour, Bergson, Frege, Heidegger, Carnap, Russell), who were aware of the extreme caution that one must have towards the concept of “nothingness”. But from the analysis it emerges that (even in the authors cited) the aporia reappears in all its gravity, so much so that every consideration intent on nothingness, as Plato already pointed out, renders the nothingness into something that is.

II. Its formulation in *PSIV*

In *PSIV*, the aporetic arises after Severino already described (in the previous chapters of the same *PS*) the essential features of what he calls the *primal structure* of knowledge (cf. E&C n. 1). That is, the synthesis of logical immediacy and phenomenological immediacy: the phenomenological immediacy is the appearing of the totality of that which appears; the logical immediacy is the appearing of the being in the form of identity-difference, so that we say that *the law of being* is the opposition of the positive and the negative. Given that “x” is any positive (a being), “x” is *primally* posed as what is other than one’s own negative (where the *negative* of “x” means everything that is not “x” and thus the contradictory of “x”) and therefore as other than the totality of the positives that are “other” than the positive considered, but also as other than “nothingness”: “x” is not “y”, it is not “z” and (albeit in a different way from how “x” is other than a positive) “x” is not nothing, it does not mean “nothing” (where the “nothing” is not analogous to the positive elements, but it is a non-x). In the primal opposition, where the opposition of the positive and the negative is thought in its universality, every being (and the totality of being) enters into a plurality of relationships: what is thought is the opposition to every form of the negative, and therefore also the opposition to nothingness. Hence it appears that the meaning of “nothingness” belongs to the semantic field of what we have called *logical immediacy*. This inclusion of the “nothingness” in the primal structure is what defines the aporetic discourse. Severino formulates it this way:

The positing of the principle of non-contradiction requires the positing of *not-being*. Not only that, but “not-being” belongs to the very meaning of “being”. [...] Now, precisely because it is ruled out

that being is nothing, in order for this exclusion to subsist, nothingness is *posited*, *present*, and therefore *is*. There is a discourse on nothingness, and this discourse attests to the *being* of nothingness [...]. Therefore, we must apparently conclude that contradiction is the foundation on which the very principle of non-contradiction can be realised (*PSIV*, par. 1).

The two terms of this *apparent* contradiction are: 1) the primal structure as it excludes *the absolutely other from the being*, that is, nothingness; 2) the assertion of the *existence* of the nothingness, an assertion implied by the very exclusion of the existence of the nothingness. We say that this contradiction is *apparent* because the *primal structure* is essentially joined with the appearing of its *incontrovertibility* (cf. E&C, n. 2). It is therefore impossible that, departing from the incontrovertible foundation of knowledge, one arrives at the negation of the foundation itself.

III. The two possible aporetic directions

That being said, Severino outlines very clearly the two-aporetic directions that open from the consideration of non-being:

The aporia of not-being can [...] be developed in a twofold direction: either by showing that not-being is; or, if we keep the not-being of not-being, by showing how those logical structures that imply the positing of not-being cannot constitute themselves (*PSIV*, par. 4).

The outcome of the development of the first aporetic direction is the assertion that the primal structure, implying the existence of non-being, is based on its own negation, therefore the foundation would be contradiction. The second aporetic direction, on the other hand, results in the assertion that the primal form of knowledge cannot be that of the *structure* itself: if, in fact, the non-being is not in any way, and in no way is conceivable, then the opposition of the positive and the negative (and therefore of being and non-being) that we have said to be *the primal structure of knowledge* cannot be established.

IV. The solution of the aporia

a) Preliminary clarifications

The aporetic discourse does not erase the difference between “being” and “not being”. If it were so (i.e. if no difference between “being” and “not being” were to appear) there would be no contradiction in saying that being is not being:

The presenting it-self of nothing does not attest to the fact that “nothing” means “being”; but that “nothing”, meaningful as nothing, is. And, on the other hand, this “being” of nothing is not meaningful as “not-being”; but, being meaningful as being, is the being of nothing (which is meaningful as nothing) (*PSIV*, par. 5).

As Severino says, this is the “fundamental observation” because it allows us to properly calibrate the sense of the *contradiction* we are dealing with:

The contradiction of not-being-that-is, therefore, is not internal to the meaning “nothing” (or to the meaning “being”, which is the being of nothing); but lies between the meaning “nothing” and being, or the positivity of this meaning. The positivity of meaningfulness, in other words, is in contradiction with the very content of the meaningfulness, which is precisely meaningful as absolute negativity (*PSIV*, par. 5).

Every meaning (every thinkable content, which is to say every entity, however it may constitute itself) is a semantic synthesis between the positivity of meaningfulness and the determinate content of positive meaningfulness [...]. Thus, it is clear that the meaning “nothingness” is self-contradictory, which is to say a contradiction, it is being meaningful as a contradiction: the very contradiction whereby the positivity of this meaningfulness is contradicted by the absolute negativity of the meaningful content (*PSIV*, par. 6).

For the understanding of these paragraphs, consider, first of all, the following. In Severino’s theory, the term “meaning” does not have the narrow meaning that we find in Frege, for example, who distinguishes between sense and meaning; nor does it have the (albeit narrow) meaning of which Wittgenstein speaks in *Tractatus*, where it is said that the “name” is the

simple sign that stands for a simple object which is precisely its meaning. For Severino, the “meaning” is the name, the abstract essence, and the concrete thing to which the name refers. The “meaning” we are talking about here is the determinately meaningful being, and all that “is” is determinately meaningful. In this context it is not a question of wondering if, given a certain meaning (for example “tree”), something corresponds to it, but of understanding that there is the “meaningfulness itself” on the part of the meaningfulness:

Everything is a meaningfulness [...]. The being is the meaningfulness. A certain being is a certain meaningfulness. In its transcendental form the meaningfulness does not mean something other than itself, it is not the “signifier”, nor is it something “signified” by something else [...]. The tree is a meaningfulness which is meaningful itself, that is, it is the meaning of its own meaningfulness (Severino, 2007, p. 366).

The transcendental value of the meaningfulness also includes the meaningfulness of “nothing”. In this case, however, we have a very unusual meaning, because the content means *the absolute not being, the absolute non meaningful*: the meaningful content *contradicts* its very meaningfulness. We are dealing here with a contradictory meaning, where the two sides (or moments) of this contradiction are, on the one hand the meaning “nothing” which is meaningful as nothing (therefore, in this sense, the contradiction is not internal to the meaning “nothing”: in fact, “nothing” means “nothing” and nothing else: it does not mean “tree”, “water”, “moon”...) and, on the other hand, the meaning which is *the positivity of the meaning “nothing”*, its being a meaning, the positivity of its meaningfulness:

It is clear, therefore, that “nothing”, understood as a self-contradictory meaning, includes as a semantic moment “nothing”, which [...] is meaningful as nothing. (To put it differently, “nothing”, as a non-contradictory meaning, is the moment of “nothing”, as a self-contradictory meaning) (PSIV, par. 6).

The self-contradiction of the meaning “nothing” refers to the *concrete* meaning “nothing”, i.e. this meaning as a synthesis of its two sides or constitutive moments: the meaning “nothing” and the *positivity* of this meaning. On this “self-contradiction” – on which the analysis of PSIV focuses – an important clarification must be made:

Every time the text [i.e. *PSIV*] affirms the existence of that “self-contradictory meaning” – “*which is to say*” that *self-contradicting* meaning – it is not stating that the impossible, the contradictory in itself, is, but rather that the contradiction *is* [...]. Each time I speak of nothing as a “contradictory” or “self-contradictory meaning” in that book, it is thus necessary to understand such expressions as indicating the fact that the meaning *nothing contradicts itself*, which is to say as indicating precisely the *self-contradicting* meaning of nothing (Severino, 2013, Part 2, chap. I par. 5).

It should be noted that, in the same *PSIV* (par. 15), Severino had distinguished two types of “self-contradictions”: “type 1” self-contradictions are those «in which the self-contradiction is constituted within the meaning». For example, the meaning «triangle not triangle» is a self-contradiction of “type 1”, and all self-contradictions of “type 1” are nothingness itself; self-contradictions of “type 2” are those in which the contradictory terms are the meaning “nothing” and its positive meaningfulness, or a self-contradiction of “type 1” (as “triangle not triangle”) and its positive meaningfulness. Well, unlike the self-contradictions of “type 1”, the self-contradictions of “type 2” are not the “nothing”: they are not because the being, that is the *positive meaningfulness* of nothing, is not nothing. The clarification of terminology contained in *On the Sense of Nothingness* therefore makes explicit what is already present in *PSIV*, distinguishing between the “contradiction” understood as the positivity of contradicting oneself and the non-existent (impossible) content of the contradiction.

b) General solution of the aporia

The solution draws on the precious distinction between the two distinct moments of the meaning nothing, distinct yet not separated:

The aporia of the being of nothingness is resolved by noting that the principle of non-contradiction *does not affirm the non-existence* of the self-contradictory meaning [...]; rather, it affirms that “nothing” does not mean “being” [...]; in other words, it requires the non-existence of the contradiction intrinsic to the meaning “nothing”, which ranks as the moment of the self-contradictory meaning. Not-being, which in the formulation of the principle of non-contradiction appears as the negation of being, is precisely the not-being which ranks as the moment of not-being, understood as a self-contradictory meaning (*PSIV*, par. 7).

Acknowledging that “self-contradictory meaning” denotes the self-contradiction of “type 2”, Severino explains that the not-being whose identity with the being is denied is the meaning “nothing” as distinct from its own positive meaningfulness. In other words: the principle of non-contradiction does *not* deny the being of the positive meaningfulness of nothing, but denies the being of nothing.

c) On the dual aporetic direction

A distinction is made between the *concrete* and *abstract* consideration of the “moments” of the meaning “nothing”: in the first case, the “moments” are distinct but not separate; in the second case, the “moments” are presumed to be unrelated. On the need not to keep isolated the two “moments” of the contradiction which the meaning “nothing” consists of, Severino himself, addressing some of his critics, writes:

The solution [of the aporia of nothingness] consists in pointing out that the meaning “nothing” is a self-contradictory meaning, that is a *contradiction*, where that “nothing” which means “nothing” and not anything else *is distinct yet not separate* from its meaningfulness, and the two *inseparable* sides of the contradiction are, in fact, “nothing” – as something *distinct* [from its positive meaningfulness] – and its meaningfulness, from which it is distinct (Severino, 2018, p. 242).

To determine the dual aporetic situation outlined above (see point III) is, as we shall now see, an insulating logic (we might even say: separating) whereby the positivity of the meaning of nothingness and the absolute negativity or absence of meaning of its content (the two “moments” of the concrete meaning of nothingness) are considered abstractly.

c.1) The solution of the first aporetic direction

The first aspect along which aporia can be developed is that whereby it is said that the nothingness is present in the theorization that we make out of it, so that the nothingness “is”, and the primal structure is based on the contradiction. Here is Severino’s reply:

We thus state that nothingness is, in the sense that a positive meaningfulness – a being – is meaningful as the absolutely negative, i.e. as “nothing”; in other words, it is meaningful as that “nothing”

which is absolutely not meaningful as “being”. Therefore, nothingness is, in the sense that the absolutely negative is positively meaningful; or, nothingness is, in the sense that the meaning “nothing” is self-contradictory (*PSIV*, par. 8).

To be, to appear is that being which is the positive meaningfulness of nothingness, that contradiction which is the contradictory meaning of nothingness. And it is precisely because the nothingness is constituted as such a contradiction that it is possible to posit the principle of non-contradiction:

In order to exclude that being is not [...] it is thus necessary for not-being to be; that it to say, it is necessary for the self-contradictory meaning in which that being of not-being consists to subsist. If the meaning “nothingness” did not rank as this self-contradictoriness [...] and if, therefore, nothingness were only that absolute negativity whereby it ranks as a non-contradictory meaning (“nothingness” as the moment of self-contradictoriness), to exclude that being is nothingness would be not to exclude anything, since the exclusion would not have anything to which it could apply: nothingness would not appear at all. [...]. But it is also clear that the very assumption that nothingness is only that absolute negativity [...] is self-contradictory: for we can say that nothingness is really nothing, insofar as nothingness is *manifest*, and therefore *is* this being nothing at all (*PSIV*, par. 8).

If the meaning of nothingness did not exist, the nothingness would not even appear and it would not be possible to exclude its existence. In this sense: 1) the presence of the contradiction of the meaning “nothing” is a condition for the establishment of the principle of non-contradiction; 2) the meaning of nothingness belongs to the primal structure of knowledge because the “nothingness” is this contradiction. However, it is not legitimate to conclude from this, as the aporetic discourse does, that therefore the negation of the first principle is the condition of its establishment. In fact:

The establishment of the principle of non-contradiction does not require [...] that the self-contradictory nature of the meaning “nothing” not be removed, but requires the semantic field constituted by this self-contradictory meaning (*PSIV*, par. 8).

The passage is crucial: the contradiction of the nothingness, like any contradiction, can only appear as *negated*. Or even: the contradiction can appear only within the authentically ultimate form of thinking that is the negation of the contradiction. And what the principle of non-contradiction asserts is, precisely, the nullity of nothingness. Of that nothingness the meaning of which is distinct but not separated from its positive meaningfulness. Instead, what does the aporetic discourse do? What the aporetic discord does, instead, is abstractly understand the two inseparable sides of contradiction:

Once the moments of the concrete are abstractly assumed as unrelated, nothingness-as-moment is detected as that self-contradictoriness which belongs to the concrete – that is, the abstract is assumed as the concrete; but at the same time the abstract is assumed as abstract, because the self-contradictoriness that is seen to pertain to it is not allowed to resolve itself into “nothingness” as a non-contradictory meaning, and this not letting the self-contradictoriness resolve itself amounts precisely to assuming as abstract what had been assumed as concrete, notwithstanding the fact that what does not allow itself to be further analysed is the abstract moment (*PSIV*, par. 9).

It follows that the “nothingness-moment”, which means the absolute negativity of nothingness, is detected by the aporetic discourse as something which lets itself be considered, that is as something-that-is, and that onto nothingness as such that positivity is transferred, that being that is instead the side of the positive meaningfulness of nothingness. The inevitable being then is the assertion that nothingness is a being, but it is the result of the abstract consideration of the two moments of the concrete meaning of nothingness.

c.2) The solution of the second aporetic direction

The second side along which aporia can be developed is the one that holds firm that absolute negativity of nothing cannot in any way manifest itself, thus excluding the possibility that logical structures can be formed which, like the principle of non-contradiction, entails the position of not being. It happens, also in this case, that the abstract “moments” of the concrete meaning of nothingness are considered abstractly:

It is clear that, here too, the aporia can constitute itself, since, at the same time, we both completely lose sight (*in actu signato*) of the moment of the positive meaningfulness of “nothingness” and do not lose sight of it (*in actu exercito*). If this moment were completely absent – i.e. not posited – the aporetic argument would not subsist either: the “nothingness” would continue to be ignored, because talking about it would constitute precisely the presence of the moment from which one absolutely prescind (PSIV, par. 10).

It will then be said that the being can exclude nothingness in the opposition relationship because (as we already know) what is excluded is the nothingness that means nothing, that is the nothingness that is distinct from its positive meaningfulness, but is not separated from it, thus it does not follow that the being, when referring to nothingness in the opposition relationship, does not refer to it:

In other words, in its reference to nothingness, being excludes it as its contradictory only insofar as it refers to nothingness-as-moment; besides, this moment stands in relation to the moment of its positive meaningfulness, and through this relation – which is the very contradictoriness of “nothing” as a concrete meaning – *endures* or *is capable of* standing in a relation of contradiction to being (PSIV, par. 10).

One could further argue that nothingness, *as pure and absolute nothingness*, cannot be a moment or term of a relationship. But this not being in any relationship is precisely the meaning of nothingness which, *being such meaningful*, is a positivity. Furthermore, nothingness does not differ from being because it is something – «for this is the sense in which two beings are different» –, but «it is different in the sense that it is the absolute privation of being» (Severino, 2020, par. 3, note 2); and it is able to be a “moment” of the contradiction in which the concrete meaning “nothing” consists because the nothingness that means nothingness is distinct but not separated from its appearing as something meaningful:

What is absolutely other than being, *qua other than being*, is not a being; but insofar as it *is meaningful as* what is absolutely other than being, it is a being, a positivity. [...]. The meaning “nothing” is not abstractly separate, but is concretely distinct from the positivity of its meaningfulness. Insofar as it is distinct, it is capable of both meaning what is absolutely other than being and of ranking as the

moment (and thus as the positivity which is a moment) of the contradiction in which the concrete meaning of nothingness consists. [...]. It has also been clarified that nothingness *is* nothing [...], not insofar as the absolute negative *is* something (albeit the absolute negative), but insofar as the positive meaningfulness of nothingness *is* that particular meaningfulness which it is. In other words, nothingness *is* nothing, not *qua* nothing, but insofar as it is a positive meaningfulness (*PSIV*, par. 11).

What is essential about the necessary relationship between the two beings which are the two moments of the self-contradictory meaning of nothing is indicated by Severino like this:

Both sides or moments of the necessary contradiction which constitutes the meaning *nothing* are meanings. But that nothing which is the moment of this contradiction and which means *nothing*, and not *an existent* – i.e. that nothing which is *not* nothing *qua* positive meaningfulness – *is*, certainly, meaningful (it is, precisely, a meaning); but it *is* only such (just as it *is* only a side and moment of that contradiction) in the sense that nothing, which is a moment, is a moment insofar as it is *distinct* from its *appearing as* something meaningful (and hence as a side or moment): for this *appearing-as* is the *other* moment of nothing *qua* necessary contradiction (this other moment being the positive meaningfulness of nothing, which is meaningful, yet only as something distinct from its own positive meaningfulness). We might say: nothing – which, as a moment of nothing *qua* necessary contradiction, means nothing and not an existent – is meaningful, yet is not posited as meaningful (Severino, 2013, Part 2, chap. I par. 7).

In other words, everything that is said about nothing belongs to the positive meaningfulness of nothing, which is indeed meaningful as what is absolutely other than being, but is distinct from the positivity of this meaning.

References

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