

Aristotle's Aporia and the Thought that looks at Nothing

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Contradiction as pure contradiction – that is, as the *pure* appearing of thesis that is, at the same time, the appearing of antithesis –, is something that cannot exist. This is one of the greatest Aristotelian themes for which it is not only *the contradictory content* that is impossible (i.e. non-existent), but also the *conviction* that the contradictory content exists. Emanuele Severino maintains that *nihilism* represents the soul of Western civilization and defines *nihilism* as the *belief that the being is nothing*, a belief that, given the Aristotelian theorem of the impossibility of self-contradiction, could not exist. The present paper intends to show the necessity that the great Aristotelian thesis concerning the impossibility of the existence of madness, *should be rethought at a higher level*, according to the assertions of Severino. Then we will see how everything relates to the theme of “nothingness” and the thought that contradicts itself as a *thought that thinks the nothingness*.

Keywords:

contradictory content, self-contradiction, nihilism, foundation of the contradiction, positive meaningfulness of nothingness

I. Introduction

Becoming has always been understood as a process in which something becomes something other than itself: when wood becomes ashes, as a result of becoming the wood is the ashes: the being becomes ashes from the wood, is the identity of those not identical that are the wood and the ashes. With the advent of philosophical thought, that introduces the ontological categories into the language, the becoming is interpreted as a process whereby things pass from being to not being (and vice versa) and the madness of the identification of the non-identical is pushed to the extreme:

In order to render conceivable this becoming other on the part of something, which immediately shows its contradictory character in pre-ontological thought, nihilism (i.e. the ontology of the West) asserts that, in becoming other, something becomes nothing, but with this assertion the contradictory nature of becoming something else *doubles* – since nihilism must not only continue to think that, in becoming something else, something (wood) *is* something else because it is another something positive (ash), but must also think that something is something else because it is nothing (it is that something else which is nothing) (Severino, 1995, p. 26).

The belief that things emerge from nothing and return to it implies the absurdity of the identification of being and not being, since «envisioning a time [...] when something become nothing [...] means envisioning a time when Being (i.e. not-Nothing) is identified with Nothing» (Severino, 2016, p. 88), that is the time in which the beings, as such, are nothing: they are nothing before being, and they return to being nothing, at the end of the process of becoming. It is precisely the *nihilism* of which Severino speaks – this *persuasion that the being is nothing*, necessarily implied by the

affirmation of becoming understood ontologically as the process through which things oscillate between being and not being¹.

Nevertheless, in Book IV of *Metaphysics*, Aristotle, while discussing the characteristics of the principle of non-contradiction, incontrovertibly demonstrates that this principle excludes not only the contradiction of the entity, but also the contradiction of thought. It appears therefore that the thesis of nihilism as persuasion that the being is nothing cannot subsist. Severino writes: «If Aristotle's discourse *stands*, and namely if madness is impossible, everything we have ever said about the madness of Western history *does not stand*» (Severino, 2009, p. 249). Severino himself spoke of "Aristotle's *aporia*" (Ivi, p. 253) to express the contrast between the assertion of the existence of nihilism and the assertion of the impossibility of the existence of madness.

We will see how the Stagirian presents his arguments and how Severino responds to the challenges of the Book IV of *Metaphysics* in relation to this topic. But not before of having underlined how this Aristotelian *challenge* calls into question every discourse that intends to show the domination of the contradiction in a certain development phase of thought and history.

1. For Hegel the contradiction is the contradiction of thought as abstract thought (intellect) which keeps the determinations isolated and which is resolved in the concrete thought (reason) which considers the determinations in their unity.

When Hegel states: «We have to concede to the ancient dialectics the contradictions that they detect in the motion, but from this it does not follow that therefore the motion does not exist, but rather that the motion is the contradiction itself as existing» (*Science of Logic*, Vol. I, Book II, Section 1, Chapter II, C, note 3), that is, what he is talking about is the finite reality: the "motion" is the ending of the finite, the process in which the finite determinations pass into their opposite.

Moreover, for the Idealism the existence is placed within the thought, so that "the contradiction itself as existing" is the necessary content of every finished thought. Where Hegel states: «All things are contradictory in

1 The contradictory nature of becoming in which things become other than themselves, and in which the beings do not yet exist and no longer exist, implies the affirmation of the eternity of the beings (cf. Goggi, 2019, pp. 43-56).

themselves» (*Ibid.*), he refers to things as the content of the abstract intellect, i.e. the intellect that takes the finite determination as «thing that is and subsists for itself» (*Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, par. 80): thus taken, the “thing” is a contradiction, suppression. The contradictions of which Hegel speaks are therefore not reality “in itself”, existing independently from thought; what is real is instead the *contradiction of thought* which, however, does not fall into nothingness, since the thought process essentially consists in «getting rid of the contradiction» (*Science of Logic*, Vol. II, Section Three, Chapter III) in that *unity of the opposites* (the rational, the speculative) where each determination manages to be itself without dissolving into the other.

For Marx the contradictions of capitalism are dialectical contradictions. But, even here, what contradicts itself is that *way of thinking* which suits capitalism that it is realized, *in its effective praxis*, according to the procedure method of the separating intellect: in the capitalist society «the union appears as accidental, the separation as normal, and therefore the separation [for which the product appears as something separate from the producer, namely appearing as a commodity] is considered the normal relationship» (*History of economic theories*, vol. I).

Therefore, even for Marx, the contradictions provoked by the separating intellect are not to be understood as the impossible existence of a contradictory reality (which is excluded from the principle of non-contradiction) but rather *the contradiction of thought as intellect*, namely the inadequate (untrue) way of conceiving reality which keeps what is united separate. And if the separation «continues until a certain point», writes Marx, «then unity is asserted through a crisis» (*The Capital*, Book I, Section 1, Chapter 3, par. 2, a).

2. These views were briefly mentioned in order to point out that even for the dialectical logic – which intends to think in the most rigorous way the principle of non-contradiction – the assumption that *the first principle does not exclude the existence of the contradiction of thought* remains firm.

For his part, Severino demonstrated, in his writings, that «the meaning of Being [...] has been progressively altered, distorted, and thus forgotten throughout the history of Western philosophy» (Severino, 2016, p. 35) and that the principle of non-contradiction, as understood in the course of Western thought (including its more radical understanding which is dialectical logic), positing that *the being exists when it exists, and that it does not, when does not exist*, «becomes the worst form of contradiction: precise-

ly because contradiction is concealed in the very formula that was designed to avoid it and to banish it from Being» (Ivi, p. 39). Considering the being in time, and thinking of time as the realm in which things oscillate between being and not being, the West is *madness*: the time in which Being is Nothing (when it is not) is *the time of the absurd*, the time in which one thinks that a being, a non-nothing, is nothing.

But madness is *the contradiction of thought*. And it is at this point that we must come to terms with Aristotle and the Aristotelian theorem of the impossibility of contradiction.

II. The impossibility of contradiction

Aristotle's discourse is anticipated by Plato, who states that no one, not even in a dream, «whether healthy or crazy, has dared to say to himself, with the intention of persuading himself, that the ox is necessarily a horse, or that two is one»; and, to put it broadly, that «something is the other in comparison to which this is the other» (*Thetethus*, 190 b-c). What is impossible, says Plato, is *the persuasion that something is other than itself*: we are dealing with *an impossibility*, not a simple empirical statement that could not enjoy the characteristics of universality.

Established by Plato, this great thesis is demonstrated by Aristotle in *Metaphysics* IV (1005b 11-34). After explaining that it is the task of the philosopher to investigate on the first principle of the demonstration, the Stagirian proceeds as follows:

1. First (*Metaph.* 1005b 11-18), he specifies which are the characteristics that must have the most solid principle of all;
2. Secondly (*Metaph.* 1005b 18-22), he enunciates the principle which the specified characteristics are suited to;
3. Thirdly (*Metaph.* 1005b 22-34), he demonstrates that what has been enunciated as the first principle of knowledge satisfies the specified characteristics. Let us proceed through these steps, point by point.

1. The first characteristic of the principle is that «regarding which it is impossible [*adýnaton*] to be mistaken» (*Metaph* 1005b 12); and this principle, the text continues, «must be the best known» (*Metaph* 1005b 13) because it is the principle of being that is the *maximum known*, and men fall into error about that which they do not know. The second characteristic is

that this principle must be «non-hypothetical» (*Metaph* 1005b 15-16): in fact, a hypothesis cannot be something that is necessary for the knowledge of anything else. The third is the following: «that which every one must know who knows anything, he must already have when he comes to a special study» (*Metaph* 1005b 16-17): that being what is maximum known, this principle cannot be acquired through a demonstration. They are all aspects of the first fundamental characteristic or property: the one for which it is said that the intelligence of this principle is an «always true possession» (*Poster.*, II, 19, 100b 7-8), therefore «about which we cannot be deceived, but must always, on the contrary recognize the truth» (*Metaph* 1061b 34-35).

2. After having outlined the characteristics that belong to the first principle that are summarized in the fundamental property – in Greek: *diorismós* – for which regarding which «it is impossible [*adýnaton*] to be mistaken», Aristotle thus formulates the first principle: «It is, that the same attribute cannot [the Greek text says: *adýnaton*] at the same time belong and not belong to the same subject and in the same respect» (*Metaph.*, 1005b 19-20).

Note the double occurrence of the Greek term “impossible” (*adýnaton*). The first occurrence is the one encountered in the enunciation of the fundamental property of the principle. The second is the one encountered in the formulation of the principle. In this second occurrence it is said that it is impossible that reality is contradictory. In the first one it is said that finding oneself in error in relation to the first principle is impossible. These are two formally different values of the impossibility: not only is it impossible (second occurrence) that the same thing is and is not the same thing, but it is also impossible (first occurrence) that we are convinced that the same is and is not

Having said that, Aristotle sets out to demonstrate that the most solid principle of all is that which possesses the fundamental property specified above. In fact he affirms, reformulating the first principle: «For it is impossible for any one to believe the same thing to be and not to be» (1005b 23-24). Note that this second formulation of the principle is equivalent to the first: “to be” and “not to be” (the being and non-being) have in fact as much copulative as existential value, and they are the “same” of which it is said (in the first formulation) that it is impossible to belong and not to belong to the same thing. The second way of formulation of the principle, however, refers to the “conviction” and the impossibility stated in the fun-

damental property of the most solid principle of all, the one for which around it to fall into error is impossible.

Things, however, are not so peaceful. Łukasiewicz (2003) believes that it is not possible to «prove a priori the incompatibility of beliefs» (p. 35) and therefore it is not even possible to prove what Łukasiewicz himself calls «psychological principle of contradiction» (the impossibility of being persuaded by contradictory beliefs). This principle, he says, «can at most be an empirical law» (Ivi, p. 36). But then he also excludes this possibility, and he does so by recalling what Husserl states in the *Logical Investigations*: «Could there not exist or have there never existed men who sometimes considered two opposite things to be true at the same time [...]? Have scientific investigations been initiated to ascertain whether something similar does not happen among demented people [...]? What about states of hypnosis, delirium, fever, etc.?» (*Ibid.*).

But Łukasiewicz fails to see what is right before his eyes. Aristotle does not simply exclude that it is possible to contradict himself. He proves it.

3. It is, as we will now see, a true and proper re-establishment of the *demonstrandum* (the impossibility of contradicting oneself) in the first principle: a *reductio ad primum principium*. The crucial passage is the following: «If it is impossible that contrary attributes should belong at the same time to the same subject [...], and if an opinion [*dóxa*] which contradicts another [*tês antipháseos*] is contrary [*enantía*] to it, obviously it is impossible for the same man at the same time to believe the same thing to be and not to be; for if a man were mistaken on this point he would have contrary opinions at the same time» (*Metaph.*, 1005b 26-32).

For the comprehension of this text, consider the following: the impossibility that the contraries exist together in an identical subject is a third way of formulating the most solid principle of all, and thus a specification of the first (and therefore the second). In fact, the contraries are such that one is the possession of a form, the other is the deprivation (the absence) of such form and the deprivation, explains Aristotle, «is the denial of a predicate to a determinate genus» (*Metaph.*, 1011b 19). To assert that the contraries exist together in an identical subject therefore implies that the same form belongs and does not belong to the same being, which is impossible.

Moreover, the term opinion (*dóxa*) here does not mean the appearing of an illusory content, but rather the appearing of a certain propositional content, i.e. a link between things, and this link is expressed by a judg-

ment. By “contradictory” opinions among themselves we mean, in general, those that have as their content judgments that are mutually negating each other. It should be noted that what are negations of each other are not only the propositions that in the *Aristotelian square* appear as “contradictory” (“every S is P” – “some S is not P”; “no S is P” – “some S is P”), but also those that in the *square* appear as propositions “contrary” to each other (“every S is P” – “no S is P”). And the principle of non-contradiction excludes not only that one can say that “every S is P” and “some S is not P” (and that “no S is P” and “some S is P”), but also excludes the possibility of saying that “every S is P” and “no S is P”. Even in this case, in fact, *the same thing is affirmed and negated by the same thing*. The term “contradiction”, *antíphasis*, in *Metaphysics* IV therefore indicates the opposition in a broad sense: it includes the “contradictory” and the “contrary” in the *square of the propositions*. And what we have to understand is that the opposite propositions, in the different ways described by the square of propositions, are in the same relationship between them as the contrary terms (*enantia*): that is, an *analogy* is established between the *non apophantic semantic* plane of *meanings* and the *apophantic semantic* plane of *predication*.

Given that in Aristotelian terminology the contrary terms are those that stand in the greatest opposition within the same genre, the analogy is this: the contraries fit amongst themselves as a proposition and its negation. Just as those contraries that are black and white constitute the maximum distance within the color genre, so the propositions “Socrates is white” and “Socrates is not white” have in common the genre (i.e. the argument around the color of Socrates) and, within the same genre, they stand at a maximum distance. It becomes clear then in what sense Aristotle can say that an opinion is valid as contrary of the contradictory opinion: he can say it because, within the same genre around which they converge, the opposite opinions (such as “Socrates is white” and “Socrates is not white”) have the value of maximum difference, and, in such sense, they are valid as contraries.

It follows that if there were a man convinced of something that is a contradiction – that is, if a man thought that two contradictory propositions are both true and that therefore the same thing both “is” and “is not” –, he would have contrary convictions at the same time, since the two contradictory convictions are contrary. To have contrary convictions at the same time is impossible, because the first principle excludes the contraries from being inherent to one and the same thing: it excludes that those contraries

that are contradictory opinions between them can belong at the same time to the very conscience of a man.

It then follows that the fundamental property of the first principle – its fundamental *diorismós* – for which it is said that around it one must always be in truth, is but an *identification* of the principle of non-contradiction that excludes the existence of contradictory content. What is non-existent is not only the content of the contradiction (the contradictory content), but also the contradicting oneself: contradicting oneself, that is, being convinced of the contradiction, is in fact a form of the contradictory content.

III. Note on *élenchos*

Do not confuse this *deduction* of the impossibility of contradicting oneself with what Aristotle undertakes to demonstrate immediately after the passage I have commented. The text that follows *Metaphysics* IV (1005b 11-34) introduces the great theme of the *élenchos*, which points out the impossibility of denying the first principle of knowledge.

The sequence of the Aristotelian text is remarkable: having demonstrated the impossibility of the existence of contradicting oneself, by taking this thesis back to the first principle, Aristotle asks himself what the value of this first principle is. And he points out (here is the *élenchos*) that the negation of the first principle is a self-negation: this negation is in fact based on what it negates, so that the negation of the first principle is a negation of itself.

Referring to other writings the presentation and examination of this fundamental theme (see E&C n. 2), it should be noted that between the essential property of the first principle (the *diorismós*) and the *élenchos* there is an essential relationship that Severino summarizes as follows:

If *élenchos* and essential *diorismós* of the first principle are to be distinguished, the *élenchos* [...] is also the confirmation of that *diorismós* [...] because the *élenchos* shows that even for the person negating the most solid principle it is impossible to be in error with respect to it, since, precisely in order to be able to deny that principle, it is necessary for the negator to affirm it. The negation of the principle cannot be formed without being truthful to it [...] thus negation is an “intention”, precisely because it cannot be formed as pure negation (Severino, 2005, p. 64).

And so, when Aristotle states, referring to Heraclitus: «For what a man says, he does not necessarily believe» (*Metaph.*, 1005b 25-26), he is not denying that the language that denies the first principle exists (and Aristotle himself will dedicate many pages, in the same *Book IV of Metaphysics*, to those who deny the first principle), but he points out that there cannot possibly exist being convinced of the negation of the first principle.

IV. Foundation of the contradiction

The contrast between Aristotle's discourse on the impossibility of contradicting oneself and Severino's thesis that the history of the West is the history of nihilism is resolved (as we shall see) by integrating Aristotle's discourse: It is not a question of saying that he is wrong when he affirms the impossibility of believing in the contradiction, but of understanding «in what sense one can and must affirm, *in spite of all this*, that *erring exists*, and that it exists as an explicit conviction [...]; and even as an explicit conviction that the being comes from nothing and returns to it; and as an implicit conviction that the being, inasmuch as it is being, is nothing» (Severino, 2005, p. 80).

It is a matter of bringing to light what Aristotle does not make explicit and that is that «the appearing of erring, that is, of contradiction, is only possible insofar as the contradiction *appears as negated*» (*Ibid.*). And since the negation of the contradiction, which the principle of non-contradiction consists of, as it is understood in the context of Western thought, hides the contradiction *in the very formula with which one aims to avoid it and banish it from being*, it will be said (something that Aristotle cannot know) that the contradiction of nihilism «is ultimately based on the negation (of erring and contradiction) which belongs to the destiny of truth» (*Ibid.*).

By the *destiny of truth* Severino intends the appearing of the authentic sense of identity (not contradiction) of the being: that sense of identity which “stands” incontrovertibly and which implies the appearing of the eternity of the being as being. The ultimate horizon of thinking is therefore that negation of contradiction, where this negation is a trait of that *destiny of truth* that shows itself outside the boundaries of nihilism.

That it is impossible to be convinced of the contradiction – the impossibility that the thinker himself is convinced of both something and its negation –, Severino explains it as follows:

The appearing of contradiction cannot be simple certainty of thesis and antithesis at once. Contradiction's modality of appearing cannot be pure contradiction. Being certain of the thesis means in fact not being certain of the antithesis. Therefore, being at once certain of the thesis and of the antithesis means being and not being certain of the thesis (and of the antithesis). But the truth of Being, as the impossibility for Being to be not-Being, is therewith the impossibility for certainty of the thesis (or of the antithesis) to not be certainty of the thesis (or of the antithesis). If contradiction's modality of appearing were pure contradiction, then the appearing of contradiction would be impossible (would be a Nothing): self-contradiction would be impossible. If self-contradiction is a pure being convinced of thesis and antithesis at once, then one cannot contradict oneself (Severino, 2016, p. 217).

The thesis and antithesis are the equivalent of the two contradictory opinions (*dóxai*) of which Aristotle speaks: a conscience that is both convinced of the thesis and antithesis is a conscience that is both convinced and unconvinced of the thesis; and such a conscience constitutes a *contradictory being*: it is a form of the contradictory that, given the principle of non-contradiction, is something that cannot be constituted.

The existence of contradicting oneself is therefore impossible, «if it is the content of a conviction, that is, if it appears in its pure being left to be, in its pure being affirmed» (p. 432). In this sense Severino, clarifying Aristotle's discourse, writes that self-contradiction «is possible only if contradiction appears [...] as what must be superseded (negated)» (Severino, 2016, p. 217). But the impossibility that the contradiction appears as a content of the conviction (i.e. the necessity that it appears as negated) does not imply the non-existence of contradicting oneself, *first and foremost* when the contradicting oneself does not appear as such, i.e. when the thinking that contradicts itself *does not know that it contradicts itself*. In fact, if two beliefs are contradictory, «but do not appear as such in the errant's thought, they still remain a negation of each other» but «they are not the content of believing in the contradiction», they are no longer contrary terms which are inherent to that “same” that is the appearing of the being, since the “being inherent” here requires the appearing of their being contraries» (Severino, 1982, pp. 428-432).

That said, we can resume and resolve what we termed, along with Severino, “Aristotle's aporia”.

1. It was seen that the persuasion that the being is becoming (oscillating between being and not being) *necessarily* implies the nihilism of the persuasion that the being is nothing. And assuming that the being is nothing means assuming the being as being (thesis) and not assuming the being as being (antithesis), an impossible (contradictory) being certain and not being certain of the thesis.

But it is precisely because it is impossible for the contradiction to appear as the simple content of a conviction (even in the non-truth of nihilism, the contradiction can only appear as negated) and for this very reason it is necessary that nihilism is not known as such – that is, *it does not know* that it is the contradictory identification of being and non-being – and that therefore the conviction that the being is nothing remains in “latency”.

To account for this situation, Severino distinguishes between nihilism as a *phenomenon* and *nihilism* as a thing in itself:

As a phenomenon nihilism (i.e. the West) is what it appears to itself: the sense with which it manifests itself to itself: what it sees and believes it knows about itself. And nihilism *does not* see itself as nihilism, as conviction that the being is nothing [...]. Nihilism, as a *thing in itself*, is instead the conviction that the thing is nothing (Severino, 1982, pp. 415-418).

Nihilism as a *phenomenon* is comprised of a double stratification: one superficial – the forms of knowledge and action of which the West is aware – the other, more subterranean and essential «which, however, remains close to the surface and emerges and transpires therein. This hidden stratification – which can be called the “preconscious” of the West – is the Greek sense of the thing now present and dominant in every event and in every work of which the West is aware» (Severino, 1982, p. 417). The *pre-conscious* “is the essence of the phenomenon of nihilism” and it is the Greek sense of becoming and of the “thing” whereby the “thing” is posited as “being” and the being is thought of as what oscillates between being and not being.

Nihilism as a “thing in itself” is the conviction of the identity of being and nothing involved (as said) by the Greek sense of the being; this conviction, destined to never emerge in the consciousness that the West has of itself, appears instead, as negated, in the gaze of the destiny of truth that sees the abyss of nothingness over which the explicit consciousness of the

West hovers. The conviction that the being as such is nothing «is therefore the essential “unconscious” of the West. Nihilism, as a thing in itself, is the “unconscious” of that which appears in the phenomenon of nihilism» (Severino, 1982, p. 418).

Therefore, precisely because it is impossible that the contradiction of nihilism should appear in its being merely asserted (it is in fact impossible that the identity of existence and nothingness is what one is convinced of), for this very reason it is necessary that in the *phenomenon* of nihilism such contradiction should appear in an inverted form, that is to say that nihilism appears to itself *not* as an affirmation of the identity of being and not being, but as an assertion of the non-contradictoriness of the being: in the phenomenon of nihilism, «the nientity of the being is accepted [...] not in its direct form, but in the indirect form» of the affirmation of the becoming of the being (Severino, 1982, p. 430). That is, the contradiction is possible if the nexus that unites the indirect form to the direct form is lost from sight, making the direct form of contradiction fall into latency:

In Western thought, *aletheia* is not the non latency (the unveiling) of *lethe*, that is, of one's own self, but the unveiling of what (as a phenomenon of nihilism) hides one's own self by presenting it in an inverted form. In its essence, *alétheia* is *lethe*: it hides its own essential alienation (Severino, 1982, p. 431).

Beyond any psychological compression, the “unconscious” of which Severino speaks is what results from the isolation «that subtracts from language the path that unites with Necessity what has been separated» (*Ibid*), that is, the path that leads from the *phenomenon* of nihilism to nihilism as a *thing in itself*: naming the becoming of the being, and leaving in the unspoken (in the unconscious) what its expression necessarily implies, the language of the West isolates, separates what is necessarily implied by the conviction that things become:

The condition of the possibility of the existence of the contradicting oneself is then, first of all, that contradicting oneself does not appear as such, i.e. that the path that joins the direct form to the indirect form of the contradiction is interrupted, and the direct form remains as an in itself isolated from its own phenomenon (Severino, 1982, pp. 432-433).

At the basis of the possibility of contradicting oneself – of that essential contradiction which the West consists of when it thinks about *the becoming something else* out of things – belongs, therefore, the isolation for which language takes as its content what is not immediately presented as a contradiction, and leaves in the unexpressed what that content necessarily implies.

2. And yet, the indirect form is necessarily linked to the direct form of the contradiction, and continues to stand what is indicated by the text of *Metaphysics* IV (1005b 11-34), whose formal structure indicates a content – the impossibility of erring, the need to always be in the truth – which, although formulated within the alienated dimension of Aristotle's thought, belongs to the destiny of truth, showing in it an essentially different face because it is not altered by the nihilistic understanding of the existence.

It will then be said that nihilism as *a thing in itself*, that is, as the persuasion that the being is nothing, cannot be the ultimate horizon of thinking: it cannot be, because the pure being convinced of the contradiction is impossible. In other words: it is only within the authentic truth of destiny that the non-truth of the contradiction can appear:

The latent conviction that the being is nothing, and whose phenomenon [...] now dominates the entire earth, can only exist in its having always been negated by the Necessity that has always been open beyond the domains of nihilism. Beyond: that is to say in the region which is therefore *the unconscious of the unconscious* in which the nihilism itself consists (Severino, 1982, pp. 432-433).

If the unconscious in which nihilism consists as a *thing in itself* cannot enter into the consciousness that nihilism has of itself, even less can the authentic sense of necessity (the structure of destiny) which Severino calls in the quoted passage «*the unconscious of the unconscious* in which nihilism consists» because it is the one in which appears, as negated, that non-truth which is the history of the West as the history of nihilism.

V. The contradiction as the positive meaningfulness of nothingness

As with any thought that contradicts itself, nihilism is not a *non-thinking of anything*, but it is, fundamentally, a *thinking that thinks the nothingness*, and it is a contradiction because it identifies nothing with being itself: thinking and wanting that the being is a becoming something else, nihilism, thinks and wants (without being able to realize it and therefore without bringing this thought into the language) that the being, as such, is nothing. At this point, it may be interesting to recall some of the most relevant issues involved in this discourse.

1. Nothingness, and the contradiction in which nihilism consists, are negated by destiny. But, in order to be negated, nothingness and contradiction must appear and, in this sense, they *exist*: as thought, they are a positive meaningfulness. Severino writes: «Any contradiction – like, for that matter, the very meaning “nothing” – constitutes the positive meaning of Nothing» (Severino, 2016, p. 79). The non-appearing of a self-contradictory meaning «is therefore not absolute (*simpliciter*), but it is the absolute non-appearing of the contradictory (null) content of the contradiction in which such meaning consists, where the affirmation of the non-appearing and the nullity of such content must not be separated from its own positive meaningfulness, since, so separated, it does not affirm anything» (Severino, 2013, p. 87). Similarly, the meaning “nothing” must not be separated from its positive meaningfulness.

2. Consider the specifics of the contradiction of nothingness. Given that every meaning is a certain meaning, that is, a way of being a non-nothing – whose moments are: a) the determined semantic content; b) its being a certain positivity –, also with regard to nothingness we will have two “moments”: a) the meaning “nothing” (which means nothing) and b) the *positivity* of this meaning. Otherwise in this case what happens is that what is significant is the absolute absence of meaning. That said, Severino remarks the following:

The contradiction of not-being-that-is [...] 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 mean-

ingfulness, which is precisely meaningful as absolute negativity (Severino, 2020, par. 5).

Hence the distinction between nothing as a self-contradictory meaning and nothing as the moment of this contradiction:

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) (Severino, 2020, par. 6).

And this is how to understand the sense of opposition of contradiction between being and not being:

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 (Severino, 2020, par. 7).

Mind you: nothingness as such is the absolute other than being, but as it *is significant* as the absolute other than being, nothingness is a positivity: it is that certain meaning that it is:

If, therefore, nothingness were only that absolute negativity whereby it ranks as a non-contradictory meaning [...], 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 supposition that nothingness is solely that absolute negativity [...] is self-contradictory, so much so that it can be said that nothingness is precisely nothingness, inasmuch as nothingness manifests itself, and therefore it is that which is not precisely nothingness (Severino, 2020, par. 8).

This can be put another way: nothingness can only appear insofar as it appears in its positive meaningfulness. And, in this sense, the positive meaningfulness of nothingness is a being: everything we say about nothingness (including its being nothing) belongs to the positive meaningfulness of nothingness and the positive meaningfulness of nothingness belongs to the totality of the beings. But the nothingness of which the primal structure denies the identity with the being is the meaning “nothing” as *distinct* from its own positive meaningfulness. Thus it can be understood the sense according to which being differs from nothing:

If someone were to say that, since not-being is different from being, yet not different because of something, it is no different from being, we should answer that, certainly, in this sense it is no different – for this is the sense in which two beings are different – but that it is different in the sense that it is the absolute privation of being» (Severino, 2020, par. 3, note 2).

And to the possible reply that the absolutely other than being is nothing, so that the being does not imply any horizon other than itself, it can be answered that it is precisely this statement that demands that the being refers to nothingness. Ultimately, this is how Severino explains the meaning of the opposition of being to nothingness:

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 (Severino, 2020, par. 10).

To be and to appear is therefore *the positive meaningfulness* of what is absolutely insignificant, that is, the contradiction that (as mentioned earlier) can only appear as negated.

3. Severino calls “land” everything that begins to appear and ceases to appear in the transcendental horizon of appearing, and he calls “isolation of the land” the coming of that being which is the belief-persuasion that things *become something else*: isolated from destiny, the determinations of the “land” are thought of as *becoming other*. But in the gaze of destiny it

appears that *the becoming other* is that nothing (that is, that impossible content) which can neither be nor appear. To be and to appear is instead the belief that there is something as a *becoming other*. And by now we know that the belief in *the becoming other* of things is a contradiction that can appear only if it appears as negated by the incontrovertible appearing of the being itself of the being, that is, by what we have called *destiny*: if it did not appear, nothing could appear.

With the arrival of the belief-persuasion that things become something else than themselves, the contention arises between this belief-persuasion and the destiny of the truth that attests, instead, the eternity of every being and sees that the meaning “nothing” is a contradiction and that the contradictory content of every contradiction is nothing. This being the case, the contents of the isolating belief-persuasion will also be nothing: the beings of the “isolated land” – the starry sky of Kantian memory, like the Goldberg variations, like the most humble of the apparitions – are in fact negations of destiny, that is, they are contradictory contents because they are conceived as isolated from destiny; as such, they *are* what cannot be and cannot appear. In this same statement, such contents appear, but what appears of them (and which must appear for them to be negated) is their positive meaningfulness, not what this meaning means:

Every content of the isolated land is a contradiction. But it is a contradiction not only because it places nothingness as the being, but also because it is that certain content, for example it is the rose in bloom, the pain of man, the stars in the sky, the happiness felt, the lamp lit. For its part, the meaning of nothingness is a contradiction because it is the absolutely negative that appears and is (it is a positive meaningfulness, a being), and therefore this contradiction is the same as every contradiction as such, i.e. the positing of its own null content as a positive meaningfulness (Severino, 2013, p. 91).

Nothingness allows itself to be looked at, and this is only possible because nothingness does not appear isolated from its positive meaningfulness that is the foundation of such appearing. Well, under the gaze of destiny the existence of erring would appear incontrovertibly. Destiny sees that such erring is belief, the will that the non-nothing is nothing. And to appear incontrovertibly is also the content of the erring: the vast and variegated dominion of the thoughts and actions of the West (having in common the Greek sense of the “thing” understood as an oscillation between being and not being) is, in fact, the vast and variegated dominion of the *positive meaningfulness of nothingness*.

Final remark

At present, the appearing of *destiny* is contrasted by the erring of nihilism. And this contrast is a contradiction.

It will then be said that the condition for this contrast not to be constituted as the impossible concurrence of those opposed to the same, is that it too appears, in the gaze of destiny, as negated. The language that testifies to the destiny is also able to show the necessity that, at a certain “point” of the progressive coming forward of the beings, this contradiction is definitely transcended, that is, that, starting from that “point”, the coming of the beings no longer appears to be opposed by the nihilistic isolating persuasion. But this is a subject whose development must be entrusted to other writings.

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