

# The Error of Wanting to Overturn the Hourglass: How the Heidegger-Severino Relationship Arose

**INES TESTONI**

Director Master in “Death Studies & The End Of Life”  
FISPPA Department, University of Padova  
ines.testoni@unipd.it

## Background

The international conference “All’alba dell’eternità: I primi 60 anni de ‘La struttura originaria” (60SO) [At the dawn of eternity: The first 60 years of ‘The primal structure’] had just concluded. The event had achieved the desired effect, and the feedback in the media and on the web was extremely positive. Severino did not need to attract attention or create situations that would focus on him, but the opposite was true, i.e. it was those who deeply knew “his discourse” and had studied his texts who needed to discuss what they had understood. Nobody knew that Severino would leave us a year-and-a-half later, but among these same scholars, the desire to not waste any more time was intense.

The general impression was that Italian culture wanted to somehow curb rather than enhance the figure of the philosopher, perhaps because of the dominant influence of the Catholic world, which had serious and solemn issues pending with Severino, such as the declaration of the irreconcilability of his thought with the doctrine of the Church.

From my point of view, this sentence of the former Holy Office, which determined Severino’s removal from the Catholic University of Milan, subsequently negatively influenced the diffusion of Severino’s thoughts from Italy. Despite this limitation, the ability of scholars and researchers to reflect went in the opposite direction, but without ever being able to

find an authentic agora for a wide and open philosophical confrontation. What Severino liked very much, however, was that it allowed him to bring those who reasoned on his themes in the direction of incontrovertible reasoning. It was for this reason that I was committed to building an association to fill this unjustifiable void in the Italian cultural scenario.

Immediately after 60SO, in April 2018, I was already ready to make up for the lost Italian cultural time on another crucial aspect: the relationship Severino had with Heidegger's text. What I had wondered until then was why no one between 1970 and 1976 had organised a meeting between the two philosophers. No one had felt the need to do so. Perhaps no one had yet realised the importance of the two thinkers, except Cornelio Fabro, a tenacious opponent of any expression of immanentism, to whom Severino's condemnation by the Church was due.

Those were the years of terrorism in Italy. Where the extra-parliamentary right and left staged the intrinsic propensity for violence that a still immature and illiberal society intended to keep alive to guarantee the subordination and exploitation of entire categories of people. The focus was therefore on what social response to give to the powers that be in the control rooms and adjacent corridors that were keeping the democratic evolution of the country at a standstill. Emanuele Severino's thought, having been considered doctrine non-conforming, has inevitably suffered the consequences.

## The proposal

Severino was one of the first Italian thinkers to realise the importance of Heidegger's thoughts, graduating at 21 years of age in 1950 with a master degree thesis on Heidegger and metaphysics. After Cornelio Fabro's sentence, while Severino was in Venice directing the department of Philosophy and Theory of Science and collecting his writings in the first edition of *Essence of Nihilism*<sup>1</sup>, some translations of Heidegger appeared in the Italian context, such as "The problem of reality in modern philosophy"<sup>2</sup>,

- 1 Severino E. (1972). *Essenza del nichilismo*. Saggi, Brescia, Paideia, 1972; II ed. Milano, Adelphi, 1982; engl. transl. *The essence of nihilism*, New York, London, Verso, 2015.
- 2 Heidegger M. (1912). *Das Realitätsproblem in der modernen Philosophie*; it. transl. *Il problema della realtà nella filosofia moderna*, Padova: La Garangola, 1972.

“The doctrine of judgement in psychologism”<sup>3</sup>, “The doctrine of categories and meaning in Duns Scotus”<sup>4</sup>, “Plato’s Doctrine of Truth” and “Letter on Humanism”<sup>5</sup>. In the very year that Heidegger died, Longanesi published a new translation of *Being and Time* by Pietro Chiodi. Between 1970 and 1976, the two philosophers could have been welcomed into an open agora of thought, which would have allowed them to discuss and give rise to a unique dialogue. This did not happen. Someone says: Severino himself could have organised this meeting. Severino was always only a great philosopher, not an organiser of culturally relevant events. This work should have been done by others, and the fact that it was not done is a sign of a problem that the world of philosophy and culture must seriously address. Starting with Italy and moving towards Europe.

Although I am a scientist and a philosopher, I am also able to organise events “despite of everything”, that is, despite obstacles, opposition, the narcissistic self-interest of “little men”, and latent ideological resistance. I have always firmly believed that the open discussion of ideas is one of the fundamental ingredients for social maturation and the prevention of absolutist drifts. I care about this because I am a woman and I know the sense of discrimination and abuse.

I was still discussing the 60SO results with Severino, and I was still committed to the idea of promoting the revision of Fabro’s sentence – something I had been discussing animatedly with him for some time – when I had a very precise feeling: there was no time to lose. I did not say anything to him and thought to myself: *what do we risk losing again in the agora of thought that has formed around Severino if we don’t make the most of the time that remains?* It was then that I suggested to him: “Why not focus the next conference in Brescia on the Heidegger/Severino relationship?” I took for granted that there would have been another conference on him and that he would have accepted. I spoke as if I already knew that we had to go in that direction without hesitation: “This is exactly what Italian cul-

3 Heidegger M. (1913). *Die Lehre vom Urteil im Psychologismus*; it. transl. *La dottrina del giudizio nello psicologismo*, Padova, La Garangola, 1972.

4 Heidegger M. (1915). *Die Kategorien- und Bedeutungslehre des Duns Scotus*; it. transl. *La dottrina delle categorie e del significato in Duns Scoto*, traduzione di Albino Babolin. Bari, Laterza, 1974.

5 Heidegger M. (1931/32, 1940). *Platons Lehre von der Wahrheit, Brief über den Humanismus*; it. transl. *La dottrina di Platone sulla verità, La lettera sull’umanesimo*, Torino, SEI, 1974.

ture was unable to do when the time was right. We can do it now. Let's try to turn the hourglass upside down and do what history has failed to do. I am sure it will be a success". Severino was impressed by the proposal to overturn the hourglass because it was an image that could be philosophically reasoned with. It was about the impossible, and it was necessary to establish in what sense it was an 'error'. Since the philosophical answer on the impossibility of giving back to history what had been taken away from it was not, in fact, a negation of the proposal, I immediately spoke to Giulio Goggi about it, and together we began the long work of constructing the "call" that we launched in our networks.

We discussed the title and whether to maintain the organisational 60SO structure we had just closed with Giulio. We were frightened because we knew we would have to work hard, at least three hours each day to achieve an acceptable result. But the stakes were too high. In the end, the title was decided: "Heidegger in Severino's thought". The idea was to see if and how Severino's very precise interpretation of the German philosopher had been intercepted. Furthermore, it would have been important to take into consideration what Massimo Cacciari had said, namely that the question of being was played out between Heidegger and Severino with an *aut aut* relationship.

It was a success, as Giulio and I had predicted. The Catholic University and the University of Brescia immediately gave their consent and support, and dozens of authors sent proposals for contributions to be evaluated. Once the committee of referees had been established, the scientifically suitable papers were gradually accepted, read and examined by two judges. All the contributions were fascinating, original and philosophically relevant. It was confirmed: this was exactly what was needed, and the time had come to make room for this expertise.

## The self-invitation and the role reversal between Severino and Heidegger

Now we had to figure out which foreign guest to invite. The previous year, for 60SO, we had invited Graham Priest, thanks to the precious collaboration of Federico Perelda. It had been a risky undertaking, due to the absolute lack of funds to pay qualified translators to simplify the dialogue between Priest and Severino. We knew this, but we had not had time to look

for resources, and we might not have found them anyway. Now we were still in the same situation. Giulio and I did not lose heart, and we began a discussion with other scholars. Ironically, we were both aware that the ideal would have been for Fabro to bring us the testimony of whether and how, in discussing with Heidegger, Severino's discourse had come about. We knew, in fact, from some confidences received from scholars, that Fabro himself had had the opportunity to confront and discuss Severino's theses with the German philosopher. It was impossible to overturn the hourglass in this case, too. But if someone knew, why not open the discussion before Fabro died? Before 1995? That was what outraged me. There had been plenty of time to reopen the discussion between Fabro and Severino on the Church's ruling and in parallel on what Heidegger thought of Severino's discourse.

Umberto Galimberti wrote in his enlightening book *Heidegger e il nuovo inizio* [*Heidegger and the New Beginning*]: “Cornelio Fabro (1911–1995), theologian, philosopher and academic, prepared a long and careful examination of Emanuele Severino's thought for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (formerly the Holy Office), which in 1969 officially proclaimed the irreconcilability between Severino's thought and Christianity. In his contacts, Fabro sent Heidegger some of Severino's writings. And after reading them, Heidegger called Severino a ‘hyper-ontist’ (Hyperontisch)”<sup>6</sup>. “Hyperontisch”? Why are philosophers sometimes so convinced that they know and understand and do not problematise what is incomprehensible?

However, comprehensible or not, unfortunately, Fabro had also passed away and we could not invite him to discuss everything at the next conference.

We were in the midst of the heavy work of organising the general programme of the conference and we continued to discuss possible international names to be involved, when one fine day Severino telephoned me: “Madam, I have just received an email from Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann, who informs me that he has received news of the conference and is willing to participate”... “Oh, gosh, the Destiny exists and is are unanimous as well! I could not think of anything else.

It was a joy to share this initial news with Giulio and with those who

6 Galimberti U. (2020). *Heidegger e il nuovo inizio. Il pensiero al tramonto dell'Occidente*. Milano, Feltrinelli, p. 97.

had participated in our organisational meetings. But the most important news was that Von Herrmann's assistant, Francesco Alfieri, had found a note in the still unpublished black notebooks in which Heidegger quoted Severino. On 13 June 2019, it was scorching. At the opening, after the authorities' welcome, Alfieri's speech was impressive: 'This conference should be held on Severino in Heidegger's thought'.

It was a triumph. Eighty splendid plenary and parallel papers. Almost two hundred attendees. The press gave great prominence to the event. Work began immediately afterwards on the proceedings, and the contributions to be published here in *E&C* were selected.

I knew that this conference would be the last one I would organise on Severino with him present, but I did not understand where this knowledge came from. I did not know how to handle it. I looked at him and he seemed to know it, too. He was very tired, but ecstatic.

## Conclusions

*“Maestro, I do not just want to hold a conference that restores to history a confrontation that the world of culture has not been able to set up. I do not simply want to turn the hourglass. I know it is impossible, even if it is conceivable. I also want to make it clear that Heidegger is the philosopher of the big questions and you are the philosopher of the definitive answers to those questions. Questions have meaning when they are answered. Unanswered questions are forgotten, even if the structure from which they arise has meaning. As you teach, ‘problematicism’ is neither absolute nor definitive. The relationship between you and Heidegger is like that between Socrates and Plato: Socrates knew that he did not know. But Socrates was also the one who knew that something fundamental had to be known. Plato ventured into the implantation of what is to be known when one understands that the time has come to embark on the path of knowledge. Heidegger, by posing the question of being, needed to understand what he was talking about by reopening the question of primal philosophy that had previously been forgotten. That is why he asked questions. Since he never met interlocutors at his level who could understand the questions he posed and answer them adequately, Heidegger lived the last years of his life alone. Heidegger lived his last years alone, searching for a God who would answer him and save him from the labyrinth in which he was lost, while leaving behind traces and markers to remember the path he had travelled—and he never went back. It is a pity, Maestro, that Heidegger never had the chance to meet and confront you”.*