

Metaphysics of *Dasein* as foundation of metaphysics. Heidegger in Severino's thought

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In his early book, *Heidegger e la metafisica (Heidegger and Metaphysics)*, Emanuele Severino had considered the “metaphysics of *Dasein*” as Heidegger’s major contribution to metaphysics because it, by affirming the “finiteness” of *Dasein*, was seen as what makes possible the “fundamental question” of classical metaphysics, the one that asks about the absolute Foundation of the factual posing of being.

Within this interpretative project of Heideggerian philosophy, Severino critically introduced a problematic issue in relation to the way Heidegger refers to “Being”. He emphasized that “Being”, for Heidegger, is the *transcendens*. This means that Being, while always remaining the Being-of-being, in Heidegger tends to constitute itself as “separate” from the totality of being.

In the young Severino, there was a non-univocal interpretation of this *transcendens* and it was also understood as the “transcendental capacity of manifesting”, that is, the equivalent of the psychological dimension (or, from Aristotle’s perspective, that of the “soul”). Later on, instead, Heideggerian *transcendens* was identified with Being of the “ontological difference”, through which Heidegger, according to Severino, had to conceive the relationship between “Being” and “being”, if he intended not to deny on a speculative level the existence of (nihilistic) “becoming” of beings that, even for him, is *phenomenologically* evident.

In the perspective of a valorization of Heideggerian thought in relation to a contemporary resumption of metaphysics, according to me the *transcendens* to look at is the constitutive “transcendence” of *Dasein*, which was qualified by Severino as the same “possibility” of the metaphysical question and, then, of the affirmation of the metaphysical-theological difference. Instead, in the perspective that rather detects the inscription also of Heidegger’s thought in the nihilism of Western philosophy, it must be emphasized that the Heideggerian *transcendens* is Being of the “ontological difference”: Being, that is, as the condition of possibility of the (nihilistic) becoming of beings, according to which, for Severino, it is originally impossible to affirm immutable Being.

Keywords

Dasein, Being, being, becoming, ontological difference,
metaphysical-theological difference

1. The fundamental theoretical framework of *Heidegger and Metaphysics* in comparison with Severino's subsequent thought

The introductory pages of Emanuele Severino's youthful book on *Heidegger and Metaphysics*, when they are re-read in the light of the subsequent developments of his thought, allow us to grasp the distance that exists between the interpretation he offered of contemporary philosophy following the "turning point" inaugurated by the famous article *Returning to Parmenides* and the one that oriented the first phase of his thought, of which the book in question constitutes one of the most significant episodes.

In *Heidegger and Metaphysics*, in which the young Severino presented himself as belonging to the School of Bontadini, contemporary philosophy was to be understood "in its being devoid of the solution of its research" (Severino, 1994, p. 33). What it was considered "devoid of", was metaphysical knowledge; what characterized contemporary philosophy because of this absence, was "problematicism".

Metaphysical knowledge, as a response to "problematicism", for the young thinker, however, was not to be found in a future philosophical elaboration, but rather was to be rediscovered in "an answer already *given*" (*ibid.*), that is in classical metaphysics (see Severino, 1994, p. 34).

Of course – Severino added – as a response to contemporary philosophical indigence, "this metaphysics must in turn be re-examined in view of the needs and problems raised by modern and contemporary thought" (*ibid.*). Nevertheless, the essential terms of the relationship between the indigence of contemporary philosophy and metaphysical knowledge remained those indicated above.

Heidegger's philosophy was studied by Severino within this ample background perspective. The latter one, however, included another perspective directly referring to the very defining of Heidegger's thought and for which it was seen in its peculiar specificity in the contemporary panorama. What did this peculiarity consist of?

Severino noted two elements in particular, which he pointed out in the following terms: 1. in Heidegger “the awareness of the essential return of modern speculation to the fundamental thesis of classical metaphysics” is present; 2. the Heideggerian problem, considered in its central element, “is already engaged in an initial elaboration of those theses” (*ibid.*).

The more concrete meaning of these two interpretative indications will be shown below. For now is important to note, rather, what *the outcome of the research* carried out by the young Severino was regarding Heidegger’s relationship with metaphysics. He believed that the solution found by the German philosopher was “a *postponement* of the radical solution, which, however, has nothing to do with a transcendental problematicism, this one understood as the problem that raises again necessarily and structurally” (*ibid.*). In order to adequately understand the interpretative thesis contained in this passage, two aspects must be kept in mind: on the one hand, that Severino’s research also came to examine the *Brief über den Humanismus*, that is, the writing that shed light on Heidegger’s thought – then almost unknown – following *Being and Time* and the shorter writings composed in the late twenties of the last century; and, on the other hand, that Severino – in my opinion appropriately – relating to the “problem of metaphysics” read the *Brief* in terms of a substantial continuity with the previous writings of the German philosopher, among which it is good to remember, also for the role assigned to it by Severino himself in his interpretative strategy, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*.

Severino was aware that, thus interpreted, “Heidegger’s thought will perhaps be different from how it is generally concerned”, but he felt that he had been able to offer in his book an adequate justification of the proposed interpretative line (see Severino, 1994, p. 35). It is certainly interesting to note what Severino observed in this regard in another volume published also in 1950: “In fact Heidegger’s philosophy is today *the least understood* and *the least appreciated* in its value as a positive contribution to the construction of metaphysics. The concept of Nothing *does not have*, for example, that meaning that is usually associated with him, but has its own particular calibration [...] *explicitly* indicated by Heidegger” (Severino, 1994a, in Severino, 1994, p. 388 n).

What we can detect in addition is that, following that way, he operated with regard to Heidegger a strategic move that was *analogous* to the one that Gustavo Bontadini had adopted in examining the philosophy of Giovanni Gentile, with results that Severino then, moreover, basically shared, while raising a specific reservation about the character of the “problematic-

cism” that Bontadini had attributed to Gentile. Severino, in fact, certainly considered valid the Bontadinian interpretation of actualism as “situational problematicism” because, if considered on the *theoretical* level, the Gentile’s dialectic of self-concept presented itself simply as a “situation” (see Severino 1994a, in Severino, 1994, p. 436). However, when that same dialectic had been considered on a *historical* level, then it should be noted that, in Gentile’s thought, it was presented as an “absolute affirmation” (cf. *ibidem*). In a more linear way, in Italy the philosophical position corresponding to that of Heidegger in relation to metaphysics was, for Severino, that which Gentile’s major disciple, Ugo Spirito, had reached, although with some fluctuations. Of which, with expressions very similar to those he adopted at the time for Heidegger, Severino wrote: “the *possibility of solution* by Spirito *takes the place of* the impossibility of solution by Jaspers and *is unscrupulously waiting* for a concrete metaphysical construction that *gives the solution to the problem*” (Severino, 1994a, in Severino, 1994, p. 395).

The elements that, on the other hand, characterize the subsequent Severinian reading of contemporary philosophy, including the Heideggerian one, can be summarized in the thesis that the true meaning of post-Hegelian thought, far from being a “problematicism” that is *in search of* metaphysical knowledge or, at least, *to surpass itself* in a “religious faith”, it is an expression – although only rarely explicitly conscious – of an authentic “knowledge”, even though it is radically opposite to metaphysical knowledge. What *kind of knowledge* are we talking about here for Severino?

The “Foreword” to the new edition of *Heidegger and Metaphysics* expresses with the utmost desirable clarity what has become, for Severino, the essential meaning of contemporary philosophy: “In contemporary thought, the persuasion that there is no immutable and definitive structure and knowledge is the persuasion that the solution to every problem is the reopening of a new problem: the becoming is the inevitable reopening of the problem, its keeping open beyond any solution, that is, of every *stopping* of the process in which Being consists. The problem *transcends* any solution; any stop that arises as an immutable and definitive structure or knowledge is illusory, its consistency is apparent. [...] Inasmuch the problem *transcends* every solution, that constitutes the *transcendental* problematic nature of existence; and the philosophical expression of such a problematic nature is *transcendental problematicism*” (Severino, 1994, p. 15). By virtue of this outcome, both the “situational problematicism” of Ugo Spirito and the metaphysical construction proposed by Bontadini’s

“neoclassical philosophy” must be excluded (see Severino, 2009, pp. 163–164). Fidelity to faith in becoming “requires that one find ‘problematic dialectism’ (‘situational problematicism’) of Spirito a step back from Gentile’s ‘metaphysical dialectism’ (‘transcendental problematicism’), in which the problem becomes the content of the solution (the becoming, the content of the immutable)” (Severino, 2009, p. 164).

In summary, from all said thus far, two essential elements can be noted. 1. Before, following Bontadini’s footsteps, the idealistic “becoming” was also traced back by Severino to the simple position of the *Problematicity of thought* and, therefore, as open to the Solution; at the same time, the position of the Problematicity was, as such, the *authentic position* of the Metaphysical Problem. 2. After, once we have understood the Problematicity, or the “becoming”, as the original *production of Being*, the position of such a Problematicity can only constitute itself as the Absolute, that is to say in its valence of Transcendental. Thus, it will imply both the impossibility of the Immutable, that is, of the Solution understood in the manner of metaphysics re-enacted by Bontadini, as well as of the *hope* of a Solution proper to the “situational problematicism” of Spirito.

Let’s go back and turn our attention to the Brescian philosopher’s relationship with Heidegger. If the “second Severino” will say that Heidegger’s closeness “to classical metaphysics is the proximity to the very matrix of the fundamental alienation of the West”, in the 1950 book that is being examined that same closeness had been seen as “the symptom of the truth of Heideggerian thought” (Severino, 1994, p. 22). What must be added on this point with regard to the new relationship that Severino has entertained with Heideggerian thought is that Heidegger, compared with the most authentic and radical outcomes that must be reached once the Problem (the becoming) is placed as the original situation of thought, is judged less rigorous than Leopardi, Nietzsche and Gentile. *As* the bearer of a thought that, while delaying in the Problem, objectively constitutes itself as an “introduction to metaphysics”, Heidegger is considered by Severino to be close to the matrix of Nihilism of the West. *As* he leaves open the possibility of a transcendent God, Heidegger himself remains a step behind the thinkers who are an expression of the most radical coherence that must be achieved once the Problem, or becoming, be considered in its ontological dimension. The Problem, at the end of the long journey consisting of the adventures / misadventures of metaphysics, appeared coherently to Severino the *True Solution*, to which metaphysics had attempted to oppose by affirming the existence of the Immutable beyond becoming.

The next step we want to take in this paper is to show some essential elements of Heideggerian thought that, for Severino, had to be taken out with theoretical acumen to justify the thesis of Heidegger's positive contribution to the construction of metaphysical knowledge.

2. The metaphysics of *Dasein* and the search for metaphysical knowledge

In a passage from *Heidegger and Metaphysics*, which serves as a passage to the last part of the book, we read: "Metaphysics of *Dasein* is the very essence of this, which destines man to the search of the answer why. But the radically developed research leads to the absolute Foundation of the provisional foundations that Heidegger's investigation has so far illuminated" (Severino, 1994, p. 322). With the expression "provisional foundations" Severino refers to some *foundations* of Givenness (which acts as "methodological foundation" of metaphysical investigation), but which, in a later consideration, fall from such a rank. It's about the "ontical foundation" and the "ontological foundation", which are respectively the objective condition (the act of Being) and the subjective condition (the subject manifesting) of the *appearing* of being, but that do not constitute *the absolute condition* of the "Being" of the being (see Severino, 1994, pp. 255-256). With regard to Heidegger, it should be noted that in *Being and Time* the function of ontological foundation is performed by *Dasein*, which is in relation to physical being not according to "power" (in relation to its act of Being), but only according to "conscience" (with regard to its manifestation). Severino states: "the opening of *Dasein* corresponds to the classic concept of *conscience*, as it goes beyond any gnoseologicistic prejudice" (Severino, 1994, p. 255), that is, the one that had characterized modern thought before the advent of German idealism.

The development of the "Metaphysics of *Dasein*" offered in the book of 1927, was considered by Severino the greatest contribution of Heidegger to metaphysics, whose "*methodological*" character must be specified. As I said, it was analogous – but now I would add that, in some ways, an even greater importance was recognized by Severino – to the methodological contribution for the restoration of metaphysics that Gustavo Bontadini had been able to grasp in the thought of Giovanni Gentile. Thus, this contribution was summarized by Severino in the following terms: "The 'meta-

physics' of *Dasein*, as a radical finitude of the latter, makes the fundamental question of classical metaphysics possible, which asks about the absolute Foundation of the factual standing of being" (*ibid.*).

The first moment of the investigation which, in this regard, should be carried out more analytically than is possible here, concerns the clarification of the precise configuring of the "finitude" of *Dasein*, which is equivalent to the highlighting of the "Metaphysics of *Dasein*" and what is implicit in it. The understanding of the "essence" of *Dasein* limited to what emerges from *Being and Time* – specifying, therefore: not yet the understanding of its "metaphysical essence" – according to the Severinian interpretation of Heideggerian thought, "urges to ask what even Heidegger recognizes as the fundamental problem of metaphysics: 'Why is there being and why not rather Nothing?'" (Severino, 1994, p. 322). Although in very synthetic terms, it must be further explained that the finitude of *Dasein* that is highlighted here implies its "unfoundedness", which opens to the search for *whence* and *towards where* of *Dasein* itself. Such a finitude is affirmed, first of all, because *Dasein* is *manifestative* of being, but it has no *power* over it. Therefore *Dasein*, already for this reason, that is, because it leaves unfounded being (which it manifests) in its "onticity" – according to the convincing interpretation that Severino gave of Heidegger in his book of 1950 – cannot be absolutized. Secondly, *Dasein* cannot be the absolute foundation of being even by looking at itself, at its Being "being". For this very reason, *the Problem* – which is a metaphysical problem – needs a response. Hence, for Severino, the famous Heideggerian question arose: "Why is there being and why not rather Nothing?". On the other hand, the perspective explicated by Heidegger regarding the meaning of such a question, without excluding – since it stands on a different plane – the one on which I am relying in this paper, is indicated in the last few paragraphs of the 1949 "Introduction" to his 1929 Prologue (see Heidegger, 1998, p. 290).

The second moment of an investigation that intends to "repeat" the *way* proposed by Severino in *Heidegger and the Metaphysics*, is closely connected to the first one. It consists in showing that the analyses of *Being and Time* lead to the thesis that time constitutes the "sense of Being of *Dasein*" (see Severino, 1994, p. 264) – of *Dasein*, let us repeat it, not of "Being in general" – and such clarification sheds its precious light on the inherent question of the Heideggerian position on the meaning of *Being* as such.

By this we mean that, similarly to what Heidegger affirms in *Being and Time* about the essence of man, not even the analyses of "temporality" lead

to a thesis of a “metaphysical” order and, in this case, to a thesis about the relationship between time and Being in which it is affirmed that *Being as such* is “time” and, therefore, is finite – according to an interpretation about Heidegger which is, however, still very widely accepted. On the contrary, those analyses show, on the one hand, that the temporality on which the Being of *Dasein* is based, in the unity of the three ecstases of the present, the past and the future, stands as “the unit of methodological foundation, ontical foundation and ontological foundation” (Severino, 1994, p. 259; for further study on these three areas of the foundation structure, the respective meanings of which have been indicated above, see Severino, 1994, pp. 254–261); and, on the other hand, that temporality itself “is nothing other than thought in its immanence to the real and in its transcendental to this one”: that is, that “time is *human thought*, in its finiteness, in its non-power over the manifested” and, consequently, that “time is the same *horizon* within which metaphysics can reach its decisive results” (Severino, 1994, p. 268; italics are mine). Once again, Severino detached himself from the understanding of a Heidegger “closed” in his *existentialism* and of which, instead, one came to show the objective openness to metaphysical knowledge.

The next step we are about to take will allow us to broaden the horizon of Severino’s Heideggerian interpretation, casting at least a first glance at what the Brescian philosopher intended to highlight by focusing attention on the Heideggerian concept of “Being”.

3. Heideggerian Being, Being of metaphysics and becoming

Within this interpretative project of Heideggerian philosophy, a theme of great importance was constituted by a specific “oscillation” that the young Severino found critically in Heidegger and that in the “Foreword” at the republishing of his 1950 book shows that it acquired even greater importance. The oscillation concerns the relationship “Being – being”, therefore the relationship of the ontological with the ontical. Severino wrote in 1994: “‘Being’, for Heidegger, is the *transcendens*; that is, it ‘transcends’ being, while always remaining Being-of-being; but this transcendence tends to be constituted, in Heidegger, as a separation of ‘Being’ with respect to the whole of being; so that “Being”, so separate, is no longer something that can be grasped phenomenologically, but something that must be

achieved by a metaphysical-metempirical inference” (Severino, 1994, p. 25).

Both in the same period of time when the book *Heidegger and Metaphysics* was composed, and in later times also very recent, Severino was strongly critical of the affirmation of this Heideggerian thesis about the “transcendence” of *Being* with respect to beings. If we refer to Severino’s new position, this *transcendence* is nothing more than the Being of Heideggerian “ontological difference” which – Severino always notes – beyond the knowledge that Heidegger himself may have, “is the way in which it is necessary to think about the relationship between ‘Being’ and ‘being’ if one wants to avoid the denial of the evident existence [for Heidegger] of becoming” (Severino, 2006, p. 119). Severino here means to say that Heideggerian Being, unlike full Being – the Immutable – of the metaphysical-theological tradition, is not the “ontical foundation” of beings implied by their appearing, to the point that Heidegger can say of *Being* that it is “not foundation”, i.e. it is *Abgrund*; but precisely because Being is so understood, it is congruent to “becoming” of beings: Being of Heideggerian ontological difference, *the Abgrund*, is for Severino the “letting-be” *becoming* of beings (understood as *beginning to be* and *ceasing to be* of beings). This is a criticism that, although it is based on the reference to the way which Heidegger, in the aftermath of *Being and Time*, proceeded to affirm the thesis of “ontological difference”, is evidently constituted in the horizon of the radical criticism matured by Severino at the “nihilistic” root of Western philosophy, because of the nihilistic interpretation, offered by the latter, about “becoming” of beings (cf. Messinese, 2018, pp. 245-266).

If we look instead at the kind of criticism that, immediately after the publication of his book on Heidegger in 1950, Severino came to formulate in a short Note of 1953 on this same point (see Severino, 1994b, pp. 347-353), the “material” content of his critical remarks to Being as *transcendens* is the same, but its theoretical context was clearly different, as Severino was still of the opinion that Heidegger’s contribution to the resumption of classical metaphysics – which for the Brescian philosopher, always keeping this in mind, then constituted the content of philosophical truth – was substantially valid. In that 1953 Note, one of the observations is, in fact, that Heidegger “often insists on the ‘aprioriness’ of ontological knowledge and its ‘independence’ from the ontical truth, in a Kantian way” (Severino, 1994b, p 347). But in that same paper, in tune with one of the theses of *Heidegger and Metaphysics*, Severino also presented a “benevolent” interpretation of this *transcendens*. This latter one, in fact, while on the one

hand was criticized as an erroneous hypostatization of *Being* separated from beings – that is, as the hypostatization of the *presence* of beings, without there being “being in its totality” – so that Being is grasped as “being”, however, thanks to what Severino called the “theoretical development” (see *ibid.*) offered by him in the book on Heidegger of 1950, *transcendens* was intended in positive terms. Noting that “it is legitimate to ask what this being [i.e. *transcendens*] is” (Severino, 1994b, p. 352), Severino believes it should be understood as the “transcendental capacity of manifesting” being (*ibid.*) that characterizes *Dasein*: that is, as what, in *Heidegger and Metaphysics*, had been called the “ontological foundation” of Givenness or experience and which had been indicated as an equivalent of the psychological dimension (or, in Aristotelian terms, of “soul”).

Conclusions

The conclusions of the twofold set of considerations set out in the second and third paragraphs, in order to remain within a Severinian hermeneutical as regards the issues addressed, may be as follows.

In the perspective of a *valorization* of Heideggerian thought in relation to a contemporary revival of metaphysics, the *transcendens* to look at, while bearing in mind Severino’s critique above indicated about a hypostatization of Being in Heidegger, is the constitutive “transcendence” of *Dasein* – which in the 1950 book is qualified by the Brescian philosopher as the “possibility” of asking the metaphysical question (that is: “why being and not rather Nothing?”). Heidegger, thus, appears as the one who “clears the way” to metaphysics in its traditional sense. In short, following such a perspective, one should basically “repeat” the speculative effort contained in Severino’s *Heidegger and Metaphysics*, which is to point out within Heideggerian thought the “methodological” foundation of metaphysical knowledge, although then Severino’s new theoretical position would now prohibit it.

Instead, in the perspective of wanting to emphasize including Heidegger’s thought as part of Western philosophy’s *nihilism*, according to the subsequent hermeneutic perspective introduced by Severino, looking at the Heideggerian *transcendence* we can see – but taking our distance immediately afterwards – the Being of “ontological difference”, that is, Being as the condition of possibility of becoming (nihilistic) of beings: that *be-*

coming because of which it is impossible to affirm the existence of the immutable Being, the eminent content of metaphysical knowledge. Obviously, it is this second aspect of *transcendens* that Severino invited us to look at from a certain moment on, as one of the contemporary examples of *forgetting* the truth of Being; that is, of *forgetting* the truth of the “Being-itself” of beings, whose affirmation leads to the sunset of the Immutable of metaphysics and, albeit unconsciously, awaits the sunset of the “technological paradise”.

However, Severino himself had also pointed out that, in Heidegger’s attempt to go *beyond* being, therefore in that *transcendens* which he himself criticized for its objective nihilistic implication, there is an echo of Heidegger’s “search for the divine” (see Severino, 2008, p. 167). In this way, it is as if Severino returns to look at Heideggerian *transcendens* – at Being – and to see there the entity that no longer corresponds to the classical “psychological dimension”, but to the “theological” one: to God. On the other hand, as we know, for Severino there can be no “search” for the divine, given that *every being is “divine”*. Thus, in spite of this serious observation, for our part we can, however, ask ourselves: what if the meaning of metaphysical “research” was not that, with a nihilistic flavor, of those who consider that the “original” – the original truth – is constituted by the Problem? Therefore, what if the search were not about the question of *whether* God exists, but rather about the answer to the question that develops the original knowledge, namely, “*Who is God?*”? In this case, Severino’s last remark, that I mentioned, could be come a cue for placing Heidegger’s “ontological difference” – whose criticality has been pointed out – in the background; and to put again in the foreground Severino’s youthful valorization of “metaphysics of *Dasein*” as an opening (or foundation in the Heideggerian sense) to metaphysics. The latter could thus receive an unprecedented “resumption”, consisting in justifying the statement of the metaphysical-theological difference as an answer to the question “*Who is God?*” (see Messinese, 2017, pp. 231-251).

This, however, is evidently a further discourse, which could properly be entitled “from the original metaphysicality of *Dasein* to the original metaphysics”. And therefore, once we have come to highlight the aforementioned point, it is well to end this paper.

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