

# 'Being' as the Being of Beings and as Independent of Beings

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Heidegger's thought alternately considers 'Being' as the Being of beings and as independent of beings. But the *independence* of 'Being' from beings inevitably imposes itself, as a logical consequence of a philosophy that conceives of becoming as the passing of beings from not-Being to Being and vice versa.

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## I. Premise

Heidegger's 'ontological difference' – the difference between beings and the Being of beings – presents a revealing fluctuation whereby Being, although it is the Being of beings, tends to constitute itself as independent of beings.

As we shall see, this tendency of Being to be independent of beings not only explains the interpretation that Severino offered in his BA thesis – *Heidegger e la metafisica (Heidegger and Metaphysics)* – but also represents that (crucial) aspect whereby Heidegger's 'ontological difference' newly presents, in a *specific* and certainly brilliant way, the underlying thesis of Western philosophy, namely: the thesis that Being *forms a compound* with essence, keeping it provisionally suspended over the abyss of nothingness.

## II. The *a priori* nature of Heidegger's understanding of Being

1. As is widely known, Heidegger envisages the 'Being' of a being as its 'manifestation', and traces the Greek concept of 'aletheia' as non-concealment – as the being's emerging out of concealment – to the essence of Being: this is the letting-be of the being, i.e. letting the being (which emerges out of its concealment) appear.

In *Einführung in die Metaphysik (Introduction to Metaphysics)*, Heidegger writes that to be a being is "to step forth in appearing" and that not to be is "to step away from appearance, from presence", which makes becoming a stepping-forth and stepping-away from presence (Heidegger, 2000, p. 108). In *Die Frage nach der Technik (The Question Concerning Technology)* we read that the *bringing-forth* "brings hither out of concealment forth into unconcealment" ("Das Her-vor-bringen bringt aus der verborgenheit her in die unverborgenheit vor": Heidegger, 1977b, p. 10), from non-presence into presence. The forgetfulness of Being discussed by Heidegger

would therefore coincide with the forgetfulness of this dimension of appearing. It is philosophy's task to recall it by leading Being back into appearing, which is to say – given the identity between Being and appearing – by leading appearing back into appearing.

2. Through the above-quoted remarks, Heidegger sought to indicate something that, in his view, philosophy had grasped in its early days – starting with Parmenides – but had soon forgotten. However, by adopting this perspective, we risk overlooking the specific essence of Greek thought, according to which Being – which we directly apprehend via beings, i.e. via what 'is' – coincides with beings' being 'not-nothing'. The peculiarity of Greek thought lies precisely in its having brought the meaning of Being to light *in opposition to nothing*, the 'nihil absolutum'.

Besides, in Heidegger's case, the contrast between Being and not-Being (understood as 'nihil absolutum') seems "suspended in mid-air, since it is never explained where it comes from" (Severino, 1989, p. 303) – although it certainly has a powerful influence *also* on his thought. Indeed, given that 'to be' means 'to appear', and that 'to produce' means to lead into – and keep in – Presence, "the not-present is identified with Nothing: it cannot be said that it 'is,' since in that case Being would signify not the Presence of what is present, but that which can be either present or absent. And thus bringing to presence (*poiesis*) is still a making pass from Nothing to Being. Heidegger's translation was designed to restore to *poiesis* the meaning it had lost through centuries of techno-metaphysical distortion; but in fact he defines it according to the very way of thinking that was first expressed by Plato, and which today invisibly sustains not only our civilization itself, but even the diagnoses of the unknown sickness of our time" (Severino, 2016, p. 151).

According to Severino, genuine nihilism – the unknown sickness of our times – is not the nihilism of which Heidegger speaks: it is not the Heideggerian forgetfulness of the meaning of Being, but rather the persuasion that beings are nothing, a persuasion implicit in the view that becoming is the sphere in which things come into being and decay.

3. Against those critics accusing him of taking a nihilist stance, Heidegger firmly responds that the 'nothing' he is talking about – and which he claims to understand as 'Being' – is not at all absolute nothingness. Indeed, as we have seen, Heideggerian 'Being' is the appearing of beings: it is *the Being of beings*.

However, Heidegger also undoubtedly displays a tendency to regard *Being separately from beings*, a fluctuation clearly witnessed by a ‘fraught’ passage we find in the *Postscript* of *Was ist Metaphysik?* (*What is Metaphysics?*): in the fourth, 1943 edition, the philosopher states that “Being is no doubt [*wohl*] present as Being without being, though nowhere is being without Being” (“Das Sein wohl west ohne das Seiende, niemals aber ein Seiendes ist ohne das Sein”). In the 1949 edition we instead read that Being “is never [*nie*] present as Being without being” (“Das Sein nie west ohne das Seiende”). With regard to this point, though, Heidegger’s views seem to fluctuate within this same text, since he also states that “thinking of Being seeks no support from being” (“Das Denken des Seins sucht im Seiende keinen Anhalt”), as though it were possible to think of Being without paying any attention to being at all.

Later we will see that this independence of the ‘meaning’ Being from beings is something which actually cannot be constructed. Here I will anticipate that what we have is a criticism of Heidegger’s ontology which Severino did not formulate when writing his BA thesis, but which he *could have*. In the foreword to the reprint of *Heidegger and Metaphysics*, we read: “If that essay of mine had been more *demanding* in relation to Heidegger’s thought, it might have raised against it the kind of critical observations I was later to address to the [innatism] of Rosmini’s ‘Being’” (Severino, 1994a, p. 27).

Without going too much into details, we might say that the underlying thesis of Rosmini’s innatism is that Being is the horizon within which every being can be known – it is the originary meaning that makes intellectual processes possible. The ‘idea’ of Being, Rosmini argues, “dominates the mind even all alone and bare, as one ultimately contemplates it after much abstraction” (Rosmini, 1972, sect. V, pag. I, ch. II, art. VI), without the need for any other notion in order to intuit it. We are therefore dealing with a *originary intuition* of Being, without which there could never be any relation between the intellect and beings: from the very beginning we are immersed in the light of indeterminate Being which precedes and underlies the knowledge of beings.

Hence the analogy with Heidegger’s argument. Notwithstanding the difference between Heidegger and Rosmini (for according to the latter Being is not the mere appearing of beings, but the act of every being and every entity, the act of not being nothing), in Rosmini’s innatism – Severino notes – “the idea of Being’ relates to the knowledge of beings in a way that is analogous to the Heideggerian relationship between ‘the understanding

of Being' and 'the understanding of beings'". It is precisely in relation to this topic of the *semantic independence* of the meaning 'Being' that Severino could have developed his critique further.

4. Severino emphasised Heidegger's indebtedness to Aristotle and Kant. The German philosopher was indebted to Aristotle as regards the identification of 'Being' with appearing – not in the sense that according to Aristotle 'to be' means 'to appear', but in the sense that Heidegger drew upon a topic found in *De anima*.

As regards the intellect, Aristotle argues that it is the intelligibles potentially, insofar as it relates to them as the indeterminate does to the determinate. What is indeterminate is thought, the appearing of beings, where the purity and indeterminateness of the intellect means that it is nothing but the appearing of beings; differently put, its 'determinateness' ultimately coincides with its being the appearing, manifestation, and presence of beings. Now, the Being which Heidegger speaks of, Being as 'the nothing of beings' is precisely the appearing of beings.

Severino explains this juxtaposition of Being and nothing as follows: "I believe that one of the best ways to understand the relationship between Being and nothing in Heidegger is to think of colours and light. Light is the nothing of colours, although, from an optical point of view, light includes the totality of colours; but from the visual point of view – from the perspective of the immediate phenomenology of light – light is not a colour: colours are beings, light is that nothing of colour which nonetheless enables colour to be visible, just as Being enables beings to be. The Heideggerian *Sein* is not absolute nothing. What *Sein* and *Seienden*, Being and being, have in common is that neither of them is a *nihil absolutum*". Severino concludes: "On my part, I firmly believe that the origin of the Heideggerian concept of *Nichts* chiefly lies in the Aristotelian concept of *psyche*, or soul [...]. The soul [...] Aristotle states, *pos panta estin*, is all things in a way, for it is in none of them in particular, just as it is the Being of all beings, for it is not one being in particular" (Severino, 2007, pp. 104-105). Indeed, if the soul had a particular nature, this innate nature would hamper its knowledge of other things. Heideggerian Being is *absolutely other* with respect to determinate beings, in the sense that, just like the Aristotelian 'soul', it is not this or that being, but transcends all particular beings. Now, this originary light represented by the ontological horizon which Heidegger sets in contrast to the ontological one of determinate beings, emerges as the condition for the manifestation of beings.

It is here that Heidegger's indebtedness to Kant comes into play: according to Heidegger's interpretation, this originary disclosing itself of Being corresponds to the Kantian transcendental dimension, which makes the manifestation of empirical contents possible and cannot be derived from them. In other words, the ontic knowledge of beings requires the preliminary (a priori) knowledge of Being constituted by the transcendental horizon of manifestation, while what is manifested is that which manifests itself within this horizon, namely Being as *Dawider*, as transcendental object: pure thought is the pure horizon within which Being manifests itself as a pure object of thought.

What is known in ontological knowledge and is allowed to 'stand against', therefore, is not the being, but Being.

5. In *Heidegger and Metaphysics* the young Severino engaged with Heidegger's texts in an effort to discover an inferential procedure that might allow him to establish this originary 'Being' as the metaphysical principle of the manifestation of beings. Severino conceived of this principle "as something akin to the structure constituted by Aristotle's 'passive intellect' and 'active intellect'" (Severino, 1994a, p. 26) – which is to say, as something that lies beyond the actual manifestation of beings, insofar as it represents the condition for it.

The idea is that of an initial unveiling, understood as that within which the spectacle of beings unfolds, but which is not itself part of this spectacle: it is like a source of light that lies behind the spectacle of the world which it illumines, while not being illumined itself. As a metaphysical principle, something to be inferred: in *Heidegger and Metaphysics*, Severino writes that "under the drive of that fluctuation which leads Heidegger to understand the ontological [i.e. Being] as independent and hence separate from the ontic [i.e. beings], inference is seen as the attainment of a dimension transcending the phenomenal; so the Heideggerian doctrine of 'Being' presents itself as a form of 'apriorism' which is at the same time a form of 'innatism'" (Severino, 1994a, p. 26).

Hence the analogy with the aforementioned Rosminian innatism of the idea of Being, which is a priori with respect to experience, i.e. with respect to the manifestation of determinate beings.

### III. The impossibility of Heidegger's understanding of Being

1. In *Heidegger and Metaphysics*, Severino's explicit reference was not actually to Rosmini's innatism. With regard to the 'Heideggerian fluctuation' which he himself emphasised (and whereby Being, as *the Being of beings*, tends to be conceived of as something *independent of beings*), Severino drew a parallel with a similar fluctuation to be found in Giovanni Gentile's actualism.

In *Teoria dello spirito come atto puro* (*The General Theory of Spirit as Pure Act*), thought is understood as something non-objectifiable that constitutes the source of the actual manifestation of beings: it is a 'non-actual' source, in the sense that it lies beyond the actual manifestation of beings. Now, while taking due account of the difference between Heidegger's *Being* and Gentile's *thought in act* – the former is a letting-be of beings, while the latter amounts to the manifestation of beings, inseparable from their process of production – Severino notes that "Heidegger too tends to conceive of unveiling, the event which unveils beings [...] as something different and prior, independent and separate, compared to the totality of what is unveiled, i.e. as something which embodies that character of non-objectifiability which Gentile initially assigned to the Transcendental Ego" (Severino 1994a, p. 25) – and which therefore ought to be affirmed on the basis of a meta-empirical inference.

Severino writes "initially", meaning in *Teoria dello spirito come atto puro*, as Gentile subsequently dropped this assumption of a principle that, insofar as it lies behind thought in act, ultimately influences its development: in *Sistema di logica come teoria del conoscere* (*The System of Logic as Theory of Knowledge*), Gentile assumes that the Transcendental Ego can *entirely* be reduced to its being *the thought in act of what is thought*, to its lying *entirely* in actual thinking. In Heidegger's case, by contrast, what we find is that Being, in the very act by which it shows the being, withdraws into non-appearing: "The being itself does not step into this light of Being" (Heidegger, 1975, p. 26).

I now wish to focus on the following point: this appearing of the being, which escapes the dimension of the manifest being, and which makes Being/appearing a further (and independent) dimension compared to that which it illumines, is not merely something that is presupposed (and which ought to be reached through a meta-empirical inference), but is – properly speaking – something that *no inference can ever reach*.

2. Confirming our interpretation of the Heideggerian notion of ‘ontological difference’ as the expression of the abstract separation between Being and beings, in *What is Metaphysics?* the philosopher states that ‘nothing’, which is to say ‘Being’ in the sense just outlined, is more originary than negation. He further clarifies: “If our thesis is correct, then the possibility of negation as a mental act, and therewith the intellect itself, depends in some way upon no-thing”.

According to this perspective, then, there is a originary dimension in which thought is immersed, and where no being or relation appears. In this context, ‘negation’ (and hence the very opposition between positive and negative) presents itself as a subsequent logical act compared to the sheer apprehension of the meaning ‘Being’: a subsequent act founded on the sheer apprehension of Being.

Mention had been made of the similarity between Rosmini’s ‘idea of Being’ and Heidegger’s ‘understanding of Being’: the similarity lies in the way in which the relationship between the originary dimension of ‘Being’ and the understanding of ‘beings’ is defined.

According to Rosmini, we can know ideal essences and pass a judgement of existence only if ‘Being’ is present in the mind *prior to any operation of the intellect*. The primacy of the ‘idea of being’ is logical and temporal: this idea is prior “by nature and by time” (Rosmini, 1972, sect. V, pag. I, ch. III, art. IV). Likewise, according to Heidegger, “we are able to grasp beings as such, as beings, only if we understand something like Being” (Heidegger, 1982, p. 6). Although Heidegger’s concept of ‘Being’ cannot be taken to coincide with that of ‘Being’ in Rosmini’s argument, the two philosophers share the idea of the necessary intuition of a *originary meaning* which, in developing his ontological investigation, Heidegger defines as *what must necessarily be understood beforehand, in advance*.

Severino could have levelled at Heidegger the same criticism he had raised against the meaning of the semantic independence of Being in Rosmini’s philosophy, where it is assumed that Being can appear without its determinations. The fundamental criticism here is that, once freed from any connection with its determinations, ‘Being’ presents itself as a *limited* meaning. But it is contradictory to posit a ‘limited’ meaning as something which can subsist *absolutely* without having posited ‘what limits’ it. Severino writes: “The contradiction lies in this, namely: that not positing what limits means not positing the limitation, and therefore not positing even the limited, which, on the other hand, one *intends* to preserve in its semantic significance, or in its *being* limited [...]. It is argued, therefore, that if



what limits is not posited – is *absolutely* not posited – then neither is the limited posited: it is *absolutely* not posited. In other words, the meaning constituted by that limitedness *disappears as meaning*” (Severino, 1994b, pp. 554-555).

The abstract positing of ‘pure Being’ therefore amounts to the positing of nothing at all. Much the same criticism could be directed against Heidegger’s Being/appearing, insofar as it takes the form of the positing of the independence of ‘Being’ from beings.

3. In order to further develop this criticism of Heideggerian ‘Being’, let us consider the following theoretical issue: if Being did not appear in the form of that self-identical Being which is *identical* to its being non-contradictory, Being could never appear.

Indeed, if any ‘not-nothing’, including indeterminate Being (in the Heideggerian sense of the appearing of the being) did not appear in the form of identity/non-contradiction, what would appear would not be that ‘not-nothing’, for its being meaningful in ‘such and such a way’ would not appear: what would appear would be *something else*. Yet even this *something else* is a ‘not-nothing’, and if Being in the form of identity/non-contradiction did not appear in any way, then neither would that *something else*, i.e. nothing at all would appear.

Ultimately, the originary understanding of Heideggerian Being/appearing – i.e. the ‘abstract’ positing of Being, conceived of *as separate* from the appearing of identity/non-contradiction – is not achieved. What is and appears cannot be this sheer apprehension of the ‘meaning’ Being, but rather the contradictory *intention* of positing this sheer apprehension.

Furthermore, not only is it necessary for Being in the form of identity/non-contradiction to appear, but what must also appear in an originary way is a certain content, namely the *concrete determinateness* which is claimed to be an existent. And the reason is this: being an existent and being a positive something, just like being identical/non-contradictory, are transcendental meanings – Severino calls them ‘persyntactic’ meanings, which is to say meanings constituting the form of everything ‘that is’; and precisely because they are the form of everything ‘that is’, these meanings must relate to some content. Indeed, a form is always a *relation to something*: if it were the form-of-nothing, it would be the nothing-of-form.

Therefore, that Being which Heidegger speaks of, that Being which withdraws and into which, in this withdrawal, “the being does not enter”

in any way, is a Being-of-nothing, which is to say a nothing-of-Being, a ‘nihil absolutum’.

#### IV. Towards the affirmation of the *independence* of Being from beings

1. The Greek understanding of becoming, based on the infinite opposition between Being (the *not nihil absolutum*) and nothing (the *nihil absolutum*), underlies Heidegger’s attempt to prescind from it (cf. II.2 above). And within this context, it is inevitable to conclude that Being *only accidentally* forms a synthesis with essence.

With regard to finite beings, in *De ente et essentia* (ch. V) Thomas Aquinas states that *Being* is something extrinsic (*adveniens extra*) with respect to their *essence*. The beings we experience are conceived of as that which, considered ‘in itself’, is nothing – “prius naturaliter est sibi nihilum quam esse” (Aquinas, *De aeternitate mundi*) – and which participates in Being only provisionally: it is *for as long as it is*. Generally speaking, merely considering a being *qua being* does not allow us to rule out that this being is not: we must prove that there is a ‘being’ whose essence is Being itself. In his *Teosofia* [*Theosophy*] (1998, n. 848) Rosmini argues that the ideal ‘Being’ is immutable and “belongs to God”, who is infinite and unchangeable; in the case of finite essences, by contrast, synthesis with Being remains possible, so – in this respect – Being is an occurrence: the finite is what may either be or not be.

2. Indeed, the belief that beings become – that this is the fundamental evidence we have and that in becoming things leave nothing and return to it, according to the meaning assigned to becoming, once and for all, by Greek thought – is the very soul of the West, which also informs Heidegger’s philosophy. According to the German philosopher, the beings we experience, just like *Dasein* (which is to say, man’s being there), become: “That there are ‘eternal truths’ will not be adequately proved until someone has succeeded in demonstrating that *Dasein* has been and will be for all eternity. As long as such a proof is still outstanding, this principle remains a fanciful contention which does not gain in legitimacy from having philosophers commonly ‘believe’ it” (Heidegger, 1962, pp. 269-270).

Heidegger displays a double attitude with regard to this point. On the

one hand, he claims to be unable to say anything about metaphysical problems (e.g. the existence of God, the immortality of the soul): “With the existential determination of the essence of man, therefore, nothing is decided about the ‘existence of God’ or his ‘non-being’, no more than about the possibility or impossibility of gods” (Heidegger, 1977a, pp. 252-253). On the other hand, he believes that thought can only provide provisional, historical answers: “However, the thinking that is to come can no longer, as Hegel demanded, set aside the name ‘love of wisdom’ and become wisdom itself in the form of absolute knowledge. Thinking is on the descent to the poverty of its provisional essence” (Heidegger, 1977a, p. 265).

This is a “real slipping” (Severino, 2006, p. 166) which leads from a sort of *situational problematicism* – whereby metaphysics presents itself as a possibility which does not rule out, as its outcome, the kind of *stable*, incontrovertible knowledge that the Greeks called *episteme* – to a *transcendental problematicism* according to which the problem instead transcends any solution, and any kind of knowledge claimed to indicate the ultimate meaning of the world’s becoming is illusory. In this regard, it is worth quoting Severino’s remarks in full:

Now, Being is an *Ereignis*, event, a thought very close to the radical forms of the destruction of *episteme*. *Ereignis*-Being is no longer the foundation of the being, but rather that letting it be, which is to say that *void* that enables the being to become in the traditional sense. It is that void in which *appearing* consists that makes that void possible in which *not-Being* consists and according to which becoming is structured – which is to say, the fundamental meaning that the West has assigned to becoming. Just as the atomists posit the need for ‘void’ in order to save the evident becoming of every being, so *this* Heidegger, in a dizzying transposition of this saving of becoming, denies epistemic Being [...], because, if it existed, there could not be that void, that nothing, which enables beings to become. Well, this is the valuable Heidegger that approaches the perspective of Nietzsche, Leopardi, and Gentile – a Heidegger who, unconsciously, comes up with the notion of ontological difference *in support* of becoming, which is the ultimate evidence for the West. Being, in other words, is not a *full* foundation, but must constitute itself as *Ab-Grund*, which is to say as that nothing (recoiling, making room for, clearing the field) that gives everything the possibility to become. Along this path, Heidegger approaches the *destruction* of *episteme*. He seeks to “save phenomena”, *sozein ta phainomena*: to save becoming (Severino, 2006, pp. 169-170).

*The very direction* of Heidegger's argument – the fact that it approaches the most advanced positions in contemporary philosophy (Nietzsche, Leopardi, and Gentile), which deny the existence of unchanging forms and structures governing the becoming of the world – resolves the ambivalence of his 'ontological difference', leading it to the affirmation of the *independence of Being from beings*, whereby beings are left to fluctuate between Being and not-Being.

## V. Final note

Beyond the soul of Western thought which has guided and dominated its history – the belief that beings become by passing from not-Being to Being and vice-versa – there lies the eternal appearing of the truth of Being, in which it appears that this transition from not-Being to Being implies the absurd deadlock of identifying Being with not-Being. It appears that the self-identity of the existent implies its eternity (cf. Goggi, 2019, pp. 45-58) and therefore that Being is neither separate nor separable from beings: such issues lie at the very heart of Emanuele Severino's writings.

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