

The Validity of C Contradiction in Human Biology

Emanuele Severino and Thomas Metzinger in Dialogue

NAZARENO PASTORINO

(Dispac – Università degli Studi di Salerno –)

PhD in Philosophy and “cultore della materia” Psicologia Filosofica
nazarenopastorino@gmail.com

This paper try to show that C contradiction has a great value, not only for ontological, logical or metaphysic questions but for biological and medical too. After having established how the part can (and must!) represent totality, excluding a form of *kenosis* or debasement for the whole, it is then practically showed how C contradiction deals with biological human structures of perception. They, according to Metzinger’s perspective (that will also lead readers to know what is the hypothesis of the *ego* tunnel), are accustomed just to receive a small part of reality. Nevertheless, human being considers it as totality, opening a very interesting comparison with Severino’s thought. What seems to be an error or a limitation reveals itself as the only way to perceive the reality as totality and a meaningful world. People who cannot perceive in the part the fullness of the whole, cannot distinguish relevant *stimuli* from irrelevant ones: that’s what doctors call “aberrant salience”.

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1. The C contradiction and the astonishing circle between part and totality

Understanding what Emanuele Severino means with «contradiction», in all its shades and meanings, remains – despite the great proliferation of studies concerning the entire work of the Italian philosopher in recent years – one of the most coveted aims. In fact, it must be pointed out that contradiction is not a pure nothing, on the contrary, it is something that affirms itself with such strength that cannot be ignored or labeled as completely unfounded. In other words, contradiction, being opposite to something posed and determined, must be posed and determined too, in order to op-pose itself and contradict.

Severino deals with the contradiction in many places of his work (Cfr. Severino 1981; Id., 1995a tr. En 2016; Id., 1995b; Id., 2005), and for this reason it acquires a rich semantic nature, indefinable by those who dare to treat it with absolute and unwise carelessness. Of many ways of proposing the contradiction, this work will concern that special kind of contradiction known as “C Contradiction”.

However, before concentrating on the form of the contradiction just mentioned, it should be noted that Severino affirms: “the authentic meaning of the distinction between contradiction (intended as the act of falling in contradiction) and the content of the contradiction [...] is that contradiction is absolutely non-existent, confirming that it is nothing, but it certainly does not affirm the non-existence and being nothing of the contradiction intended as the possibility of falling in contradiction”(Id., 2005).

For this reason, although the concrete content of the contradiction is, for Severino, always removed, that is, always resolved, because of its inevitable auto-denying nature, it is equally sure that falling in contradiction is always possible and its existence has a well-determined ontological nature. So that possibility will be examined from a biological and organic point of view.

In other words, I mean to show the concrete value of contradiction as the only way to exist for living beings, and more specifically, for human beings. Therefore, the contradiction – and above all that majestic form of contradiction which is C contradiction – will prove to be the determining feature of Destiny. C Contradiction belongs to the destiny in a such strong and incontrovertible way that belongs to it also “its own self-denying negation” (Id., 1992, p. 160; Cfr. Id., 1981, p. 70).

The peculiar trait belonging to negation will not only be presented, in this work, as a logical self-amendment, contradiction will not only delete itself, confirming that everything is expected, necessarily, in the glory; such perspective will not limit itself repeating that, according to a logical consequence, “all the Being that appears in time always and forever abides in blessed company with all Being, outside of time”(Id., 1995, p. 30; tr. 2016, p. 83), but it will try to show, through the comparison with Thomas Metzinger’s thought, that C Contradiction is not only «the destiny of truth as a *finite* presence of infinite appearing» (Id., 2005, p. 88) (that is the only way to have totality in the form of non-totality), but also the only way to *live* the concreteness of perception, involving all human possibilities and experiences. In other words, in addition to represent a logical and ontological necessity, it would – surprisingly – also prove to be a biological necessity that allows life to be what concretely is. This aim is reached, according to the perspective illustrated by Metzinger, for a practical-vitalistic need that involves the senses, or more specifically, the imperfect nature of our perception.

So, before explaining in depth the position of the German philosopher, it should be remembered that C contradiction implies for Severino that the infinite appearing, that is the transcendental horizon of appearing, is expressed by the *part*, therefore, unexpectedly: «what appears as totality is not the totality, it appears both as totality and as non-totality» (*ibidem*)

We must then ask ourselves: what does it mean, specifically, to “appear in the part”? What does it imply, for the whole, to be represented by the part that, at first glance, seems just its contrary? How can the whole be said in the part without risking of being incomplete? Moreover, it must be remembered that the C contradiction has just this hard aim to reach: to be that logical space in which the appearances of finite must be sufficient to explicate the infinite and represent, more than anything else, the destiny of truth, just that truth that «cannot be denied by men or by gods, at any time, under any circumstance, in any universe» (Id., 1981, p 16). Therefore, the truth embodied by destiny, that one which remains inviolable,

without any possibility of being scratched or removed, is, paradoxically, entrusted to its part to be the whole.

So, it should be thought, maybe, that if the finite is entrusted (by the infinite itself) to represent all the shades of infinite, it means perhaps that the entrusting of the whole and its significance to the part cannot be read as a *kenosis* or a reduction that leads to an unbelievable abdication.

In 2013, Leonardo Messinese, published in *The future philosophy* an article in which he stated that the C contradiction is the place where the irreducible difference between the appearance of the whole and its constant hiding is manifested prominently (Cfr. Messinese, 1/2013, in *The future philosophy*, pp.115-129, in part. p. 115). It must be said, however this concept has been affirmed several times by past eminent thinkers too, showing that to be hidden does not mean to vanish or to rot. This concealment, on the contrary, this peculiarity of not appearing (or inability to be seen) has a significance that exceed the simply dichotomic comparison between seen/ unseen, light / shadow, whole/part.

The C contradiction – as mentioned at the beginning – therefore prove to be a very particular contradiction. In fact, it has an autonomous logical-ontological value from any position. A contradiction is usually related to a position that it wants to deny, on the contrary, the C contradiction reveal its strength, paradoxically, for what it does not express or omits. This omission, however, does not coincide with a real operation of debasing (it does not mean that what does not appear entirely is ontologically deleted. Furthermore, it does not represent a starting point for the foundation of a history of nothingness in which the nothing is), on the contrary, it indicates that the real history of being goes beyond its appearances: “the content of the normal contradiction is nothing; – Severino affirms in his last work – the content of C contradiction is not nothing, it is, in fact, properly, an abstract content that shows its concreteness only in a formal way” (Id., 2019, p. 40).

The content of the whole has only one possibility of revealing itself, demonstrating its own concreteness, which, however, must be only “formal” because if it were effectively given in all its totality, it would not be the same content that the contradiction itself would try to show. In other words: the abstract content of the whole, desiring to show itself in its totality, must renounce to show itself as totality. Thus, therefore, C contradiction shows in a very eloquent way that «the whole does not reveal itself concretely, so that what it shows is not the whole. It is the totality and is not the totality» (Id., 1984, p. 277).

2. Human nature and the *ego* tunnel: what does biology has to do with C contradiction?

Severino specifies: “man is, in essence, the opening of the whole, but the whole does not reveal itself concretely, so that what it shows is not the whole” (ibidem). For that reason, «the whole is totality and is not totality» (ibidem). Therefore, Severino also supports an anthropological vision together with the ontological one that refers to the destiny of truth as *manifest* and *not manifest*, irrefutable structure of being. Man is naturally turned towards the whole and his natural task is to remove himself from the contradiction (that is to avoid the contradiction) or, more specifically, to eradicate the contradiction. But when man discovers himself as destined to the totality of beings and also discovers their impossibility to dwell in the contradiction, he necessarily faces, paradoxically, the deepest point in which contradiction is still alive, and that because just trying to remove the contradiction, in order to affirm the whole, allows the whole itself not to be affirmed. In that way the contradiction is strongly reaffirmed although as removed or resolved. In other words: the removal of the contradiction of truth is not the denial of its content, but it is the concrete affirmation of it; it is the appearance of what with its absence causes the contradiction of the truth.

From these considerations stands out the following: by necessity and by nature of man, contradiction should be removed since man is linked to totality and to non-contradiction, but just for that, man is also accustomed to admit *the part* as real expression of the whole, that is the only way in which totality can concretely exist. Therefore, the removal of the contradiction to which man is destined, is, paradoxically, its *non-removal*. Only, therefore, not removing the contradiction, man can keep on removing it (with reference to its transcendental trait). About this question Severino affirms: “the progressive appearance of the fundament [intended as underlying principle or what is absolutely originary] [...] is the progressive concrete elimination of the contradiction of the fundament. And this progressive removal is the same progressive appearance of the concreteness of the original necessity. The overcoming of the fundament is the arrival of concreteness (Id., 1981, pp. 76-77). On closer inspection, it is necessary to reflect that this coming of concreteness is also the continuous and constant negation of the appearance of the whole, so that the progressive removal of the negation is, at the same time, its removal and, paradoxically, its perpetual and necessary confirmation.

In 2009 Thomas Metzinger published *The ego tunnel* in which the German philosopher proposed, from the first pages of his foreword, the following idea: what is believed to be deep and holistic is a “form of conscious representational content, and it can be selectively manipulated under carefully controlled experimental conditions” (Metzinger, 2009, p. 6). According to Metzinger, therefore, the necessary structure of reality, the totality of the world perceived (and the silent one not perceived) is configured as a representation that relies on its specific way of appearing. Therefore: “the content of our conscious experience is not only an internal construct but also an extremely selective way of representing information. This is why it is a tunnel: What we see and hear, or what we feel and smell and taste, is only a small fraction of what actually exists out there” (ibidem). The small part of the real we perceive represents also, however, the only horizon for us that exists. It is an horizon of limited possibilities and imperfections that, however, with its “persistence” digs, within the perceiving ego, it digs something immensely rich, vivid and real without which we would not be able to perceive anything. Through the words of the author: “[every color, sound, taste, every experience, everything] is nothing more than a low dimensional projection of the inconceivably richer physical reality surrounding and sustaining us” (ibidem) (which, however, because of its immensity and completeness we are unable to perceive). This inaccessible dimension for us, the “realm” of the totality of being and truth confirms to be only: “an ocean of electromagnetic radiation, a wild and raging mixture of different wavelengths. Most of them are invisible to you and can never become part of [our] conscious model of reality” (ivi, p 20).

In this sense and in relation to what has been mentioned at the beginning about the logic of contradiction in general, but above all as regards to the C form of the contradiction, also in the perspective showed by Metzinger the part will never be the whole but just for this very reason - confirming the genuine perspective of this contradiction and his immovability – the same part, is and will always be considered as the whole. Just this partiality and reduction is what man is able to perceive and absorb according to a codification built by himself, for himself and so, it is totality without really being it.

For this reason, according to Metzinger, man is endowed by nature – as also stated by Severino and has been already highlighted a few lines above – with a general orientation towards totality, indeed the German philosopher affirms clearly: “The PSM (*Phenomenal Self Model*) of Homo sapiens is probably one of nature’s best inventions. It is an efficient way to allow a

biological organism to consciously conceive of itself (and others) as a whole” (ivi, p. 4).

For Metzinger, in other words, the founding structure of the ego and its self-perception (i.e., the PSM) has always been oriented, by nature, to conceive every human being not as the part but as totality. More incisively: every manifestation, every phenomenal appearance with which the human being constantly relates is not only that phenomenal appearance, that moment, but also and always the *totality of moments* that preceded or will follow that specific appearance. Even according to this perspective, therefore, the part represents the whole in the *only way* in which it wants to be represented. “our conscious models of bears, of wolves, of books in our hands, of smiles on our friends’ faces, must serve as a window on the world. This window must be clean and crystal clear. – says Metzinger – [must have, that is,] a phenomenal transparency” (ivi, pp. 45-46).

Every representation, therefore, is in Metzinger’s language, a model that introduces us to the totality without ever showing it completely. This phenomenal window must have a clear and throbbing character, an immediate and selective character, that, paradoxically, must show and obscure the horizon just to help what must appear and, at the same time, what, absolutely, must not. That’s why human evolution has allowed the development of the ego which, for the German philosopher, is like a tunnel that allows, through a potent steering and reduction of external *stimuli*, the only possible relationship between man and reality. To be clear: this does not open at all to the absolute relativism of perception; what appears, always does according to the part, that is according to the rules of partiality, but not for this reason that appearance should be considered as misleading, faded or even unable to prove the existence of a world. In fact, Metzinger specifies: “consciousness is the *appearance of a world*. The essence of the phenomenon of conscious experience is that a single and unified reality becomes present: If you are conscious, a world appears to you” (ivi, p. 15). So appearance must be conceived as something in relation to consciousness that is the privileged focal point around which world can truly exist, just appearing to someone.

The ego with its consciousness is in all respects: “the ingenious strategy of creating a unified and dynamic inner portrait of reality” (ivi, p. 5), a portrait we never manage to perceive in its totality and, at the same time, however, we always have it in front of us.

As far as it concerned Severino, he would affirm, in agreement with Metzinger that totality of being corresponds and does not correspond to

the appearance of that totality because totality is really itself if it is not totality and so, in other words, it expresses itself in the *part*. But the only way to allow the part represent the whole without falling in contraction, avoiding any impossible reduction or *kenosis* of the totality is to admit, through a new coming configuration, a new horizon that is always ready to be surpass and be surpassed, configuring limits and possibility of human perception.

Likewise, we live in the reality crossing the ego tunnel so that reality is, in a certain way not totality, it is, in fact, the partiality that wonderful evolutionary and biological mechanism called ego tunnel allows us to live. It preserves us from totality just giving us a very particular totality. To be clear: I mean with this expression a totality that, on one hand, is however partial because it gathers only what human perception is able to obtain, on the other hand, it is however a totality just because what it is gathered is just *all* we perceive.

3. The salience and its aberrant form: medicine and C-contradiction

One of the greatest challenges for any organism that interacts in a sensorially complex world is to be able to distinguish efficiently relevant *stimuli* (whether they are attractive, aversive, or potentially supportive) from neutral ones, and respond adequately to them. The world surrounding the individual is particularly complex and seemingly limitless, while the perceptual *stimuli* that come from the outside compete for limited cognitive and physical resources. However, it is necessary to understand and re-discuss the meaning of limit in order to understand in what way a certain vision of the world can really exist, what is its usability and improvement. The limit, in fact, is, in this respect, even what preserves the organism and its correct body functions: by clearly establishing possibilities and structural deficiencies of the body, limit awareness defends it from possible damages.

Dynamis – the Greek word that refers to potentiality – reveals a meaning that is two-faced, calling into question possibility and limit. On closer inspection, they are not antithetical, showing, on the contrary, perfectly, the nature of man as who acts *despite* and *thanks* to limit.

The appearance of *a* world – this world that now is present, strictly this one that appears, the only one we are able to see – stands on the characteristics of the consciousness that succeed in preserving its constant location

in a unitary and limited reality, thanks to the right evaluation of external *stimuli*.

Although consciousness is many things: “memory, attention, feelings, the perception of colors, self-awareness, and higher-order thought” (ivi, p. 19), the ability to let appear a unitary world has remained intact over thousands of years. The appearance of the world, as it is, as a well-ordered totality, is always linked to the appearance of what seems to be the opposite, that is the part. Likewise, *dynamis* reveals what man can do just because it reveals, at the same time, what is man limit, so underlying what man cannot do.

According to these premises, salience, that is the ability to give importance to some *stimuli* then others (to give importance to the part rather than to the whole) allows the subject to experience concrete reality. In other words, the whole is formally denied, some of its parts, in fact seems to pass in transparency, and just for this, surprisingly, is possible to human being live the totality. Being denied the totality, it can be perceived. So, the denied parts of the whole are not erased at all, they are silently still alive in their own denial.

From a biological point of view, the process of attributing salience to a certain *stimulus*, in a certain time and in a certain space, exclude totality in order to recover it according to the index of importance and attention.

In this sense, that tunnel called “ego” seems to be like a linkage, which excludes the whole, emphasizing the part, just when, through its specific channels, it admits and makes possible the reality as totality concretely realized.

If the phenomenon of salience were not active, if it were not able to intervene as a sieve or as an “enhancer” of *stimuli* or internal sensations perceived, the subject would be lost in the whole which would be equivalent to nothing, having no meaning. On the contrary, every peculiarity of existence, or rather, according to Severino’s terms, every slightest trail can legitimately «claim» to be the whole and to be eternal because: 1) as a part it shows the whole 2) through the specificity of the part, it acquired its own salience within the whole and for this reason (overall for this reason!), it can claim to be eternal (that is, to have its own specific meaning in the per-syntactic horizon designated by each everlasting moment).

The correct functioning of the mechanism for attributing salience is so important that when it does not happen we can speak, on a pathological level, of *aberrant salience*. It is described by medical researchers as the experience in which “*stimuli* that normally appear neutral become salient,

significant and able to capture attention, helping to structure the ‘revelation’” (Cfr. Bowers MB Jr & Freedman DX 1966, 15, pp. 240-248; Cfr. Bowers MB Jr. 1968; 19, pp. 348-355). This “revelation” would mark, in the patient, the false sensation of an increasing of the meaning, the sensation, for example, of being at the beginning of some important step forward an *eureka* that can finally explain, in a global perspective, better things or certain events.

To put it differently: these patients are no longer able to assign the right salience to the *stimuli*, they are therefore convinced that everything is revealing itself indiscriminately, ignoring the great richness of partiality with all its necessary and blessed limits. Through Montale’s words, on one hand they are convinced they have finally found the total point in which “things/ let themselves go and seem almost/ to reveal their final secret” (Montale 1925), but on the other, everything seems confused and meaningless. Everything shows itself as relevant for perception and so the subject remains stuck without any possibility to act or give attention to something. So, in order to recover a deeper sense of the whole, people affected by this disfunction, lose the perception of the world and reality. In this sense, the C contradiction – like the *ego*, rediscovered by Metzinger as a tunnel that conveys and makes possible every perceptive experience – demonstrates itself to be an effective and necessary «tool» not only for the logic of the originary but also from the a practical and medical-biological point of view, since without the *limit* imposed by the appearance of the part (which in fact only in a fictitious way marks a logical discontinuity with the whole) nothing could be confirmed as totality.

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