

The Unconscious of Nihilism and the Unconscious of the *Élenchos*

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Emanuele Severino's work pushes thought beyond nihilism by identifying and unveiling unconscious of nihilism. I propose to demonstrate that there is something unconscious also in a key concept of Severino's work: in the figure of the *élenchos*, in its constitutive act precisely. I also propose to demonstrate how, by unveiling the unconscious of the *élenchos*' constitutive act, beginning from Severino's work one can advance further along this line of thinking. By this unveiling, the statement of a coexistence of eternity and temporality results, through which, paradoxically, eternity is affirmed with greater force, because its desirability is emphasized. I argue that this coexistence is not contradictory even though it appears to be so because it is not subject to the principle of non-contradiction, but this happens because it is a condition of the possibility of that principle. To achieve this aim, it is critical to fully comprehend a Freudian discovery that has remained un-understood and even unidentified as such by Freud himself: the discovery of the absence of contradiction of the unconscious.

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Introduction

Emanuele Severino's work pushes philosophical thinking beyond the whole preceding tradition united in the definition of nihilism: "Nihilism is the essence of the West", he states (Severino, 2016, p. 272), where – because the West "rules the whole Earth" (*ibid.*) – "even the entire history of the East has now become the pre-history of the West" (*ibid.*).

Severino defines nihilism as "the belief that being is nothing" (*ibid.*), i. e. that everything that is, every entity, is nothing. But how can one be convinced that the being, which is being and not nothing by definition, is nothing? And how can Severino's work free philosophical thinking from such a universal, albeit contradictory, conviction?

The unconscious of nihilism

1. Nihilism can believe "that being is nothing" because it does not acknowledge that it consists in such belief. No Western or Eastern individual could be convinced that being is nothing if he or she happened to be convinced of that.

Everyone is convinced that beings, or at least a major part of them, have not always been and will not always be: everyone is convinced that beings are subject to becoming. Severino claims that Western philosophy considers that being is "that of which it is to be said that it *is*, but *was not* and *will not be*" (*ibid.*, p. 272). He goes on to say that "it appears [...] as that which, wholly or in part, issues from and returns to nothingness; it oscillates between Being and Nothing" (*ibid.*).

Yet, to consider that beings, or parts of them, oscillate between Being and Nothing is to be convinced that they came from nothing and will return to nothing. Thus, this acknowledges a period of time when they are nothing – in both the past and the future –, and "envisioning a time [...]"

when something becomes nothing, therefore, means envisioning a time in when Being (i. e., non-Nothing) is identifies with Nothing” (*ibid.*, p. 96). From this, it follows that the belief that beings become, “the belief that the thing is Becoming” (*ibid.*, p. 275), is “linked *with necessity* to the faith that the thing, as such, is nothing” (*ibid.*).

Nihilism, therefore, is being explicitly convinced that things become and this is based on being implicitly convinced that things are nothing. This latter conviction is hidden in nihilism’s unconscious: “it is *Necessity* that the conviction that being is nothing [...] remains the ‘unconscious’ of nihilism” (*ibid.*, p. 280).

Hence, there is an unconscious of nihilism, which is essential to nihilism itself in two ways: because its content – “the belief that being is nothing” – is the essence of nihilism, and because nihilism can only exist because it is unaware of its essence, which hides in its unconscious. Nihilism can only dissolve once this unconscious essence is unveiled, i.e. removed from the darkness of the unconscious and exposed to the light of conscience. This because such belief is essentially contradictory, where the fundamental law of conscious thought is the principle of non-contradiction, which identifies and sanctions contradictions by amending them.

2. Severino’s work can go beyond nihilism simply by unveiling its unconscious, by exposing its hidden essence to the light of awareness.

Once “the belief that being is nothing” has been unveiled and dissolved, the conviction that beings become has no basis and thus dissolves too. Therefore, it must be stated not only that all beings are something and not nothing, but also that they are not subject to becoming and thus are in themselves eternal. Everything that is, is eternal, even the most elusive of events, the tiniest of things, and all the “shades and shadows of things and of the mind” (*ibid.*, p. 63).

3. This statement, that may appear as the most paradoxical and absurd of all statements – how can the smallest of things, the most elusive of events like a gesture of the hand be eternal?! – in Severino’s work acquires the status of undeniable truth.

The figure of the *élenchos*, which Aristotle had already used to demonstrate the undeniability of the principle of non-contradiction, is what makes it so, precisely an undeniable truth. Anyone seeking to deny the eternity of every being, i.e. its being firmly what it is, its being itself and not being able to become other than itself, should attribute the right to be

itself and not be able to become other than itself to that entity which is his or her own words, the words with which he or she precisely pronounces this negation. In this way, one would find oneself validating this firmly, hence *that* eternity, which one had intended to reject. That is, that everything is eternal is an undeniable truth inasmuch as it is also affirmed even by its own negation, for the attempt to deny it fails. The *élenchos* consists precisely in this, which – as can be seen – plays an essential role in Severino’s work: the role of the undeniable foundation of what it states.

The unconscious of the *élenchos*

1. Pushing thought beyond nihilism, Severino’s work thinks something had not been thought of before and would have appeared unthinkable: it pushes forward what had previously been the boundary of thought.

But is there something that has become visible from this new boundary, i.e. from the boundary of thought that his work has advanced? Hence, is there something that can become thinkable only thanks to his work but that, at the same time, pushes beyond it?

If Severino’s work has pushed itself beyond nihilism by unveiling its unconscious, advancing beyond it will be possible if something unconscious will be identified in it too.

2. Now it seems to me that there is something unconscious in one of Severino’s work key concepts: the fundamental figure of the *élenchos*.

This figure, as we have seen, consists in the undeniability of what is stated from the failure of the attempt to negate it. However, in order for any attempt of denying to fail, it must first exist. Only an intention that exists in a first moment and that becomes concrete with an act, can in a second moment fail. Furthermore, an intention destined for failure can progress to failure, and not stop in time, only because it is unconscious to be destined to this failure. That is, the attempt to deny the eternity of beings, can exist only because it is unaware that it is doomed to fail.

This implies that there is something unconscious in the *élenchos*’ constitutive act, in the act of its formation (Pulli, 2022). In other words, if the negation of the eternity of beings was aware of turning into an affirmation, it would give up from the beginning on itself: not only it would not complete the act of constituting itself as a negation, but it would not even begin it. Hence, its attempt to deny, before and even more than failing,

would cease to exist. It is true that the failure of this negation consists in the fact that it cannot be such, but in order not to be such, it must first exist as what it believes to be such: as that which maintains its own truth in its own unconscious.

And, just as nihilism would not exist if there were not its unconscious, so the *élenchos* would not exist if there were not its unconscious.

Eternity and temporality

1. If the pushing of thought beyond nihilism, advanced by Severino's work, derives from the unveiling of unconscious of nihilism, what will derive from the unveiling of unconscious of the *élenchos*' constitutive act?

It appears to me that two opposing consequences derive from this. The first consequence is that the eternity of beings will no longer result an undeniable truth, given that it is the failure of the attempt to deny it that makes it undeniable, and the failure of this attempt presupposes that such an attempt has been made; where awareness of being doomed to fail would lead to its vanishing. If there is no the attempt to deny the eternity of beings, there cannot be its failure, and the eternity of beings, not being affirmed by the failure of its denial, will no longer be undeniable. This does not mean that the eternity of beings will be denied, but that it will have to coexist with the opposite affirmation of their temporality.

The second result that derives from the unveiling of the unconscious of the constitutive act of the *élenchos* is that the eternity of beings will be affirmed with more force. Indeed, the act of rejecting it would not only fail to do so, but it would not even seek to do so, and it would cease to exist as a denial attempt. The eternity of beings would thus be even more solidly protected from the attack of its denial: precisely because this attack, even more than failing, would not exist at all.

2. These two consequences – the coexistence of the affirmation of the eternity of beings with the opposite affirmation of their temporality, and the simultaneous acquisition of a greater force by the affirmation of eternity – both derive from the same element, which is the absence of any attempt to deny the eternity of beings (which in turn derives from the unveiling of the unconscious of the constitutive act of the *élenchos*).

Hence, they cannot exist without each other; they can only live together, only simultaneously and inseparably: the eternity of all being must co-

exist with the opposite affirmation of their temporality and at the same time is affirmed with greater force.

3. But how can eternity coexist with temporariness? It seems to me that this coexistence is what happens every time we truly succeed, with intensity and completely, to live what we live, every time that life does not appear to us as what escapes us. If what we live in a given moment had nothing temporary it would have no intensity, and it would have nothing absolute of its own, unique and unrepeatable. What intensity could one experience in a given morning, if it could be experienced in any circumstance, instead of just in that determinate unrepeatable, irreplaceable circumstance in which it has been lived?! What is the meaning of living now what could be experienced at any moment? And how could that particular experience be fully, exclusively what it is, if it were only one of infinite, equal experiences?!

But if this temporality were to give itself on its own, the threatening shadow of nullification would weigh on everything we live: “All that he would otherwise have loved and admired seemed to him to be shorn of its worth by the transience which was its doom”, observes Freud, referring to “a young but already famous poet”, in the short, intense essay *On Transience* (Freud, 1915b, p. 305). If we lived everything we live only in an elusive and anguished way, we could not equally say that we are able to live it fully and completely.

Only when something is experienced together as eternal and as temporary can escape from the shadowy cone of the threat of nullification and at the same time enter the cone of light, in the intensity of its uniqueness, thus acquiring a full, double splendor.

4. But how can this coexistence of eternity and temporality be at the same time an affirmation of eternity with greater force?

It seems to me that such a question must be answered simply: by virtue of its desirability, where the desirability of something implies its lack. Who “desires, desires what is lacks, or does not desire if it does not lack”, Socrates says in Plato’s *Symposium* (Plato, 1997b, 200 b, p. 482).

Therefore, the desirability of eternity implies temporality. Now it is just the desirability of eternity that makes it possible to affirm eternity with greater force: because it affirms its value. By virtue of its desirability, thus of its coexistence with temporality, eternity is not affirmed alone as a neu-

tral and obvious fact, but together with precisely what gives it its value: hence, in the most effective and complete way.

The absence of contradiction of the unconscious

1. Among the many possible objections to this discourse that can be made, and which I myself would make, the most compelling one seems to me the following: admitting the coexistence of eternity and temporality implies making two mutually exclusive affirmations at the same time – beings are eternal and beings are temporary – thus, this is contradictory.

But this coexistence appears as what makes livable what is livable. Is it then a contradiction that must be admitted in order to be able to account for the vitality of life? I prefer to argue that the coexistence of eternity and temporality, precisely inasmuch as it is vital, *is not* a contradiction, it only *seems to be* so. And it seems to be so for a limit of our gaze, for a limit of our thinking. Thus, we shall return to the problem from which we had started: to the work of Severino who, by pushing beyond the entire tradition of Western philosophy that preceded it, has pushed forward the boundary of thought, and the possibility of pushing thought even beyond this new border. That is, can we configure a way of being of thought, in virtue of which admitting and denying eternity, in its *appearing* as a contradiction, would *not result* a contradiction?

2. I would like to articulate the answer to this question in two stages. Firstly, I shall try to show how there is an area in which something can appear contradictory without being so: the area of apparent contradiction. Secondly, I shall try to show how the coexistence of eternity and temporariness can fall within this area.

That the area of apparent contradiction exists seems to me to be attested above all by a discovery made by Freud. A discovery that he did not consider further in any way, and which he did not even identify as such, so that in his same work, and even more so after Freud, it remained completely misunderstood. It is the absence of contradiction of the unconscious.

3. In a famous passage, Freud states that in the system unconscious “the logical laws of thought do not apply [...], and this is true above all of the law of contradiction” (1932, p. 73). Previously, he had stated that the contradiction is absent in the system unconscious; not the principle of non-

contradiction, which reveals the contradiction when it exists, but the contradiction itself: “exemption from mutual contradiction, primary process, [...] [etc.], are the characteristics which expect to find in processes belonging to the system *Ucs.* [unconscious]” (1915a, p. 187). He made no distinction at all between the absence of contradiction and the absence of the principle of non-contradiction, so that the absence of the principle of non-contradiction in the unconscious has appeared as a specification of the absence of contradiction of the unconscious previously mentioned and it was thus universally understood.

However, the absence of contradiction in a system does not necessarily imply the absence of the principle of non-contradiction in it. Contradiction, indeed, may be absent in a system not only because the principle capable of detecting and sanctioning it is absent, but also simply because it is not present in that system. And it is possible that this is not present not because the contradiction is allowed to exist unchallenged, but rather because the need to oppose contradiction is so pervasively active to prevent the coming into being of contradiction.

If no fines are imposed for traffic offenses in a small town over a given period of time, this could be because, for example, the new traffic police commander is an extremely good-natured person who is on the verge of failing to fulfill his duties and has extended this good-naturedness to his colleagues. In short, it is possible that traffic violations were not identified and sanctioned. But, the fines may not have been issued because all citizens, possibly as a result of an effective road education campaign, were very careful to follow the traffic law. Aside this metaphor, in the first case, an infringement of that fundamental rule, not of the traffic law but of thought, that is the principle of non-contradiction, existed but was not identified and sanctioned, whereas in the second case no such infringement ever existed. The principle of non-contradiction was absent in the first case, and the contradiction itself was absent in the second case. Therefore, the absence of contradiction of the unconscious is not the same as the absence of the principle of non-contradiction: it is a specific and deeper characteristic of the unconscious.

But underlining its difference from the absence of the principle of non-contradiction is not yet sufficient to define the absence of contradiction of the unconscious. To be fully identified and defined, this latter must be distinguished not only from the unconscious absence of the principle of non-contradiction but also from the absence of contradiction of conscious thought. Otherwise, it could not be that feature of the system unconscious

that it is, that trait that distinguishes such system from conscious thought that it is. Contradiction is, in fact, absent even in conscious thought: a correctly formulated conscious thought is such in that it is precisely free of contradictions. To fully define and individuate the absence of contradiction of the unconscious, and to reveal it in its complete specificity, it is thus also necessary to differentiate it from the absence of contradiction in the consciousness.

Now, to differentiate it from the absence of contradiction in the consciousness, the absence of contradiction of the unconscious must be understood as a non-contradictory result of the same elements that appear as such in conscious thought. Not because the principle that reveals the contradiction is missing, but because the contradiction does not exist at all. The absence of contradiction of the unconscious must be understood as a harmonious coexistence of what in conscious thought would be contradictory opposed. Two or more elements that in conscious thought are incompatible, in the system unconscious would have found a way to coexist.

Now, if there is a psychic area, that of the deepest unconscious where this occurs, it means that it seeks refuge in this area – as if to avoid a misunderstanding – something that appears contradictory to conscious thought without being in itself so. This area contains what in itself is not contradictory, although it may appear so, even if it appears so to conscious thinking.

4. If true, this means that conscious thought, by communicating with this area, has the possibility to go beyond itself, to push its boundaries further forward.

In this case, it is the inverse of what occurs as a result of the other characteristic of the unconscious, the absence of the principle of non-contradiction. By virtue of the absence of the principle of non-contradiction, it is possible that something contradictory in itself may seek refuge in the unconscious, taking advantage of the circumstance that, since the principle of non-contradiction is absent, the contradiction is not detected and sanctioned; and this is what happens to the essence of nihilism, for which, by contradiction, beings are nothing. In that case, unveiling the unconscious content, exposing it to the light of consciousness, implies that it dissolves. In that case, a path from the unconscious to consciousness is determined, a path in which something unconscious moves towards the way of being of consciousness. By virtue of the absence of contradiction of the unconscious, something that is not contradictory in and of itself takes refuge in

the place where this characteristic is understood rather than being misunderstood. Thus, exposing this content to the light of consciousness may result in its dissolution, but only when conscious thought may not seize the opportunity to evolve, to push itself beyond its boundaries. In this case, a path from consciousness to the unconscious is determined, a path in which something conscious goes towards the way of being of the unconscious.

5. But how can there be anything that is not contradictory if it appears to be so? And how can it appear contradictory, if it is not so?

This question, it seems to me, can be answered if we think further about the absence of contradiction of the unconscious. To be more specific than how I have been so far, we must understand the absence of contradiction of the unconscious not simply as the not being contradictory of something but as the having nothing to do with contradiction at all. Freud has said something analogous about another characteristic of the system unconscious: the absence of time. After noting that “unconscious mental processes are in themselves ‘timeless’” (1920, p. 28), he immediately adds that “the idea of time cannot be applied to them” (*ibid.*). Because the characteristics of the unconscious are linked – given that they form a system – we must think likewise about the absence of contradiction: if the absence of time is defined as the inability to apply the representation of time, the absence of contradiction must be defined as the inability to apply the concept of contradiction. This because being contradictory and not being contradictory both derive from the application of the concept of contradiction. This means that the absence of contradiction of the unconscious refers to something that is neither contradictory nor non-contradictory but rather exists outside of the concept of contradiction.

Now, that the absence of contradiction *is not* contradictory is obvious because it results from its definition. And this means that it follows the principle of non-contradiction. What does it mean instead that the absence of contradiction is not even non-contradictory? It means that it is not subjected to the principle of non-contradiction. Yet, this not being subjected to the principle of non-contradiction does not mean that it violates it, otherwise, it would not be absence, but presence of contradiction. What can it ever be – then – this not being subjected to the principle of non-contradiction that yet is not violating it?

It is its condition of possibility. There may be, so to say, couples of opposite statements that do not respond to the principle of non-contradiction.

tion only because they constitute the condition of its possibility. Thus, it is true that they do not respond to the principle of non-contradiction, and that is why they appear contradictory, but it is not true that they are contradictory. They do not respond to the principle of non-contradiction, i.e. they are not submitted to its law, because they are what establishes it.

6. But what can all this mean in practice? What could be an example of this not being subject to the principle of non-contradiction which is not a violation of it because it is what establishes it?

It seems to me that the most stringent example, a sort of prototype of the apparent contradictions, is the one constituted by the notion of the border. To show this, I would start with what the so-called paraconsistent logics, and in particular dialetheism, defines as «true contradictions», where my intent is precisely to show that such «true contradictions» are not true contradictions but only appear so. By «true contradiction», also called «dialetheia», one means the pair of opposite statements that are both true. In his short essay *What is so bad about contradiction?*, Graham Priest, an eminent figure in dialetheism, uses the example of threshold, thus the border in space: “I walk out of the room: for an instant, I am symmetrically poised, one foot in, one foot out [...]. Am I in or out the room?” (Priest, 1998, p. 417). The answer he gives, contradictory but true, is: “I am both in and not in” (*ibid.*). Or, he adds, one could also say: «neither in nor not in” (*ibid.*).

He then uses the example of border in time: “Maybe Socrates *is* both sitting and not sitting sometimes: at the instant, he rises” (*ibid.*, p. 416). In this regard, Francesco Berto observes: “the notion [of dialetheia] could also be implicated in our simple and basic ability to recognize the border [...] between one thing and another” (Berto, 2007, p. 59, my tr.).

Now, it seems to me that dialetheia essentially refers to boundaries. But the boundary between two things is what allows each thing to be what it is and only that, i. e. not to violate the principle of non-contradiction. The boundary between being seated and being standing is what allows us to say that Socrates is seated when he is seated and that he is standing when he is standing. That is, to avoid the contradiction of saying that he is also standing when he is sitting and is also sitting when he is standing. Likewise, only insofar as there is a boundary between a tree and what surrounds it, the tree cannot be what surrounds it; and it can, not contradictorily, be only itself. In short, borders are what allows the affirmation that each thing is what it is and is nothing other than what it is, that is the principle of non-contradiction.

In this case, therefore, we see how opposite statements may not respond to the principle of non-contradiction only insofar as they constitute the condition of its possibility, only insofar as they establish it. They seem contradictory insofar as they do not respond to the principle of non-contradiction; and they are non contradictory insofar as they are what establishes it.

7. If the essential characteristic of apparent contradictions is that of constituting the condition of the possibility of the principle of non-contradiction, the coexistence of eternity and temporality seems to possess it. Socrates being seated and not seated at the moment he gets up, which is what allows us to avoid the contradiction of declaring him standing when he is seated and sitting when he is standing, is in fact a coming together, at the same time, of eternity and temporariness. At that moment he as being seated, he is still seated; his being seated has not become subject to becoming. Instead, as he is not seated, he is already not seated, his being not seated has become subject to becoming. Thus, in that moment, his being seated has resulted at the same time as subject and not subject to becoming, temporary and not-temporary: which means temporary and eternal.

What I mean may perhaps be clearer if we refer directly to the prototype of Priest's example, to the instant being out of time which Plato speaks about in *Parmenides*: "this queer creature, the instant, lurks between motion and rest – being in no time at all – and to it and from it the moving thing changes to resting and the resting thing changes to moving" (1997, 156 d-e, p. 388). And if we refer at the same time to the unconscious being timeless of which Freud speaks ("unconscious mental processes are in themselves 'timeless'" [1920, p. 28]). In the unconscious, and not by chance, time is absent in the same way that contradiction is absent. But what does it mean to be timeless?

It means that it is absent what puts an end to things: if there is no time, there is no ending of things in time, so everything is eternal. But that time is absent also means, at the same time, that it is absent what allows things to continue. As is the case when you tell someone, who may be making the last corrections to a paper to be delivered: "I'm sorry, there is no more time". This means that the deepest unconscious is the area in which Socrates' way of being when he gets up always applies: the coexistence of eternity and temporariness.

8. Thus, even of such coexistence of eternity and temporality, even when it is understood in the broadest and most general sense, can be said

that is not subject to the principle of non-contradiction since it constitutes the condition of its possibility.

As we have seen, this coexistence makes life *livable* by giving eternity and temporality their own value: it gives eternity the value of letting things escape from the shadow of the threat of annihilation, and it gives temporality the value of situating things within the cone of light of its intensity. Thus, that coexistence restores life to itself, to being itself and not other than itself, therefore it removes life from the contradiction of not being itself. It is the condition that allows *life* to avoid the contradiction of not being itself. Thus, that coexistence is not subject to the principle of non-contradiction not inasmuch as it violates it but inasmuch as it establishes it. By making life *livable*, this coexistence of eternity and temporality restores life to its fullness, to the possibility of being completely – not contradictorily – itself.

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