

# Phenomenology without Presuppositions. The Appearing of Being in Emanuele Severino's *The Originary Structure*

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The short contribution aims to redefine Severino's phenomenology in the light of Giovanni Gentile's actualism, interpreted as a repetition of Plato's «parricide», to be placed side by side with Severino's, in the direction of a more concrete and more authentic truth of being. In the following pages it is suggested that actualism has contributed, not without some ambiguity and hesitation, to lead the philosophical discourse on the path that *The Originary Structure* has undertaken with an unprecedented awareness of what is at stake.

**Keywords:**

**Severino, Gentile, Phenomenology, Being, Originary**

## 1. *Premise*

The topic I wish to address, if only in a summary way, is related to the philosophical context in which Emanuele Severino came to develop the notion of originary structure he was to present in the work bearing this title. More specifically, I aim to redefine Severino's phenomenology in light of Giovanni Gentile's actualism, interpreted as a repetition of Plato's "paricide", to be viewed alongside Severino's one, in the direction of a more concrete and more authentic truth of being. In other words, I wish to argue that actualism contributed – not without some ambiguity and hesitation – to leading philosophical discourse onto the path that *The Originary Structure* took with an unprecedented awareness of what was at stake. I will therefore explore some less obvious steps along the itinerary traced in those pages – not without some ambiguity and hesitation, as I just stated: the kind of ambiguity and hesitation that, through a return to Parmenides, enabled (or indeed forced) Severino to turn to Gentile as the spearhead of Western nihilism.

The Gentilean setting of Severino's first metaphysical project, developed within Bontadini's school, can hardly be underestimated. Certainly, the "originally theorematic nature of metaphysics" celebrated by Severino – as the belonging of metaphysics to the structure of immediacy (whereby the "metaphysical journey" is not made starting from an initial withdrawal to a preliminary "level of rest", but is rather "made originally) – does not represent only the outcome of the "elimination of naturalistic realism" caused by the contemporary "end of the philosophy of knowing"; nor is it "to be understood as the assignment to that elimination of some metaphysical significance" of an immanentist sort (Severino, 1981, p. 109). Nevertheless, it is also important to bear in mind that it was precisely Gentile's *System of Logic* – which explores "the fundamental law" of being (identity, non-contradiction, the excluded middle) – that suggested to Severino what meaning he should assign to the originary presence of be-

ing: “the overcoming of the abstract immediacy of any pure being in itself” (Severino, 1981, p. 172).

It is worth noting that while this circumstance links *The Originary Structure* to the development of Gentile’s *System*, it also marks the former’s distance from the latter: in Gentile’s work, this overcoming of the abstract is still something abstract, or proves to be conceived in abstract terms, until it is translated into that actuality whose light envelops all (present, past, and future) things *here and now*. *The Originary Structure* parted ways with Gentile precisely because Severino – a supporter of Bontadini’s neoclassical metaphysics – saw this point as marking the crucial break between actualism and the philosophical tradition. Gentile had dwelled on the related inertia of abstraction in the belief that it might open the door to meta-empirical inference of the theological sort, when in fact it ought to have closed this door for good. Severino had immediately realised this, highlighting the impossibility of keeping the two moments in Gentile’s approach separate. Not least through his preference for Heidegger over Gentile, Severino had adopted (and corrected) Bontadini’s strategy, aimed at ‘domesticating’ actualism. In Gentile view, *the abstract*, i.e. thought being, without ever going beyond the act of thinking, ultimately coincided with the concreteness of pure experience, impossible to transcend and dominated by that being *which is not defective*. The Hegelian changeable and finite, subject to the alternation of beginning and ending, needed to be resolved into the immutable and infinite witnessed by the actual manifestation of the world, in which nothing begins or ends. This dialectical beginning therefore suggested the complete tracing of the first moment back to the second one, destined to give it concrete form. In Hegelian fashion, it assigned the second moment the role of the genuine first one, thereby pushing the whole argument away from tradition and giving it a disconcertingly and unexpectedly new direction. I would argue that it was precisely Severino who spelled out this new direction, by abandoning metaphysical transcendence – in the wake of Gentile’s concreteness – while nonetheless resisting actualism and its persistent and ultimately coherent reference to the Platonic-Aristotelian notion of the becoming of being.

Now, not only is it impossible to overlook the setting of *The Originary Structure* without missing certain aspects of its theoretical framework, but it is quite clear that both perspectives, insofar as they traced being back to the actuality of thinking, pursued – in keeping with the Socratic-Cartesian model – a solution that would radically clear the field from all presuppositions: from the point of view of content, originally swallowed up by the

*positing* (or presence) of being; and from the point of view of form, originally turned into the consistency of non-contradictory content. In this regard, Gentile had invoked “absolute formalism” and taken being to indicate “the positive insofar as it is posited” (Gentile, 1987, p. 232); consequently – and I am here quoting from *System of Logic* (Gentile, 1940, pp. 182-183) – the positive may be said to be what it is (an “object”, Gentile writes) insofar as “the negation and consequent contradiction, which is negated, are bound to be of the same object” which is freed from it. *In being*, the object “also denies and erases the absence of being itself when it does not reflect itself and identify with itself.” In such a way, the overcoming of realism found its most essential outcome, which undermined any attempt to keep being – even if only for an instant – beyond the gaze opened up by the I. By evoking the concrete identity of being, actualism thus bound together in an originary bond the two branches of philosophical discourse, the phenomenological and the logical, which were destined to meet in the *same* object, identified as the actual and inescapable imposition of actuality – logic and phenomenology, phenomenology and logic.

## 2. *Phenomenology and logic*

Upon closer scrutiny, in *The Originary Structure* the distinction between the two *moments*, the phenomenological and the logical, undoubtedly points to the *logic* they are destined to share. Logic is indeed the logic of being, but being is that being which appears and which, in appearing, extinguishes every other excess. In other words, the phenomenological weave clearly points to the differing of ontological consistency, yet on the basis of the determination which manifests itself. By virtue of the latter, attention must now be drawn to the “being-for-something-else” of being, which is to say – but here it would be necessary to critically explore the Aristotelian-Husserlian concept of intentionality – to that “*feri aliud*” which “simply coincides with letting the other thing (being, reality) appear” (Severino, 1981, p. 172). Being *is* by manifesting itself; *hence*, by identifying itself, it comes to differ from itself: this is the essential indication that Severino provides in relation to the originary manifestation of determinations.

In this respect, *The Originary Structure* follows the path outlined by Plato, along which one comes across *determination*, which differs from *being* without ever plunging into *nothingness*. “The term ‘being’ indicates a

synthesis [...] between the meaning ‘being’ (*formal being*) and the meanings constituted by *determinations*, which – indeed – *are*” (Severino, 1981, p. 144). They *are* – I would add – insofar as they appear, without appearing being added to or removed from the *determination* that comes to light and withdraws from the light, while remaining in the light. Besides, it is evident that “as different from ‘Being’”, determinations “are that ‘Not-being’ of which it must now be affirmed that it ‘is’” (Severino, 2016, p. 155), since they primarily coincide with those determinations that appear. This being the case, the connection between being and non-being, which Plato significantly evokes through the word *epallaxis* (*Soph.*, 240c4), translates into that *mutual alteration* which, without affecting the ontological resource, only points to the manifesting itself of originary manifested being.

Now, to be more precise, the argument which Severino reaches, supported by Gentile, alludes to a kind of being which *becomes null* in the determination which appears, while the determination *becomes entified*, disappearing from the stage. While – to put it with Bontadini – appearing disappears into being (which appears), it must also be added that being becomes null in appearing (the appearing of being). The circle – to put it with Rosmini, this time – is a solid one: nothing is left over or discarded; nothing exceeds that being which appears. We may also note, therefore, that through his perspective Severino, who in a way follows Gentile’s formulations, traces nothingness back to the ‘other than oneself’ (for *everything* which is, is the ‘other’ of an ‘other’) that each entity, in existing, leaves outside itself. In other words, if the totality of entities alludes to the nothingness that every entity leaves outside itself, this is precisely because, in existing and thereby negating nothingness, each of them reveals the non-being of the other, as though against the light (Severino was later to evoke the image of a ‘trace’). This is not only the absolute non-being to which Plato bids farewell in the *Sophist*; it is not only non-being as determinate being, unaware of nothingness; rather, it is the unique synthesis of the two within the everlasting horizon of transcendental appearing: nothingness is that which every determination leaves outside itself, even through those determinations which, *here and now*, it is not. So while it is evident that *The Originary Structure* is permeated by a spirit which the letter of the text – influenced by neoclassical formulas – is not yet capable of deciphering, it seems quite possible that Gentile’s approach crucially contributed to shattering the metaphysical shell of Severino’s early thesis.

Within this picture, the stratification of (transcendental and empirical) appearing which is repeatedly invoked in *The Originary Structure*, by

drawing upon Gentile's vocabulary, enables the coming and going of determinations, bearing witness to the "quiet becoming" of being. In the late 1960s, Severino (Severino, 2020, p. 175) continued to interpret this as "the secret of the Hegelian concept of becoming", where being and nothingness share this role in turns. However, it must be added and stressed once more that the Hegelian secret is also – and especially – the Platonic secret entrusted to the pages of the *Sophist*. It was a matter of finally deciphering that "secret of philosophy" which Gentile (Gentile, 1940, p. 98) had identified with the Platonic formula of the "unity of being and non-being", by inviting Western thought to finally grasp "becoming" as the whole of being, rather than as the unfolding of a disquiet destined to plunge into a quiet result – the outcome and starting point of that ideal dialectic exposed to the inrush of the negative. It is not the case that everything becomes through the alternation of being and nothingness, but rather that *the whole* becomes, coming into (and at the same time withdrawing from) the light that shines on its determinations *here and now*. "Not being that reveals itself, but being that consists precisely in its revealing", is how Gentile put it (Gentile, 1942, p. 166).

### 3. Against the logic of anticipation

The presupposition for appearing, therefore, is not being, but that being which appears (whose appearing is appearing). The most mature fruit of philosophical idealism thus fell on the fertile soil of the originary structure, which in its own way preserved it, turning it into a sprout that pointed to a dimension that included the coming and going of existent determinations, yet without anticipating it. Severino's approach therefore appears to be essentially anti-metaphysical, if metaphysics takes it upon itself to point to being as an anticipation of the world. In this respect, the appearing of being is not rooted in a foundation destined to heal the ontological *wound* inflicted upon determinations of the world; rather, being rootless, it consists in the infinite appearing of being which appears and disappears. Besides – as Severino aptly clarified – the logic of anticipation is the logic of nihilism, according to which being, while seeking a safe refuge, ultimately exposes itself to nothingness and yields to it, altering itself. The logic in question, despite countless reassurances to the contrary, is incapable of preventing nothingness from bursting upon the stage of being, even when

it narrows down the gap between the two, without ever being able to bridge it. After all, is it not from nothingness that being's obedience to the law which governs it springs, by guarding its development and breaking free from the latter (without being ever simply coinciding with this law which governs it)?

When we instead look at the act of thinking, we see that the appearing of being does not ensure that break in ontological continuity which – as Gentile suggests – prevents the circle of experience from having any consistency. Established by the immutable, determination is destined to extinguish itself, by giving back to the immutable that being which determinations have never really possessed. In this regard, Gentile insightfully notes that, in its awareness of the contradiction which traditional philosophical discourse runs into, philosophical realism – realism being the essence of philosophy, in his view – gradually provides experience with an anticipation of itself, thereby providing the world with an anticipation of itself (George Berkeley clearly took this direction). The outcome is baffling: on the one hand, insofar as it differs from the anticipation of itself, experience does not differ from it and from nothingness; therefore, if it is to be genuinely conceived of, it cannot in any way be subtracted. On the other hand, insofar as it differs from experience, anticipation ceases to anticipate it and forever abandons the task which it cannot avoid.

The originary structure is therefore intended to make room for the presence of an unprecedented “difference”, such as to render being precisely “different from itself”, because this “diversity is not established between two positives, each of which lacks something which the other possesses”, but rather between being (identical to thought) and the determination which bears witness to it, by coming to light. In other words, it was necessary for Severino to assign being a ‘coming to light’ free of any presuppositions that might govern its development. Infinite appearing, which according to Severino encompassed the totality of manifest determinations, did not anticipate (or was proceeding not to anticipate) the finite appearing that bore witness to its incessant alternation: it was this appearing, *without* being it. Severino spoke of “ontological difference”, pointing to what Heidegger – through his famous formula – had instead concealed, slipping back into that logic from which he had sought to radically distance himself.

#### 4. *Ex se oritur*

As it folds back – so to speak – onto the determination which ventures into the finite circle of appearing, Severino’s being does not come from something else, but rather *from itself*, although it never lingers on the threshold of appearing, paradoxically awaiting its turn to make an entrance on stage. In this respect, *The Originary Structure* establishes a horizon within which, bearing all due distinctions in mind, there is no longer room for anything except the venturing of being into the finite circle of appearing. In coming to light, being comes from being itself which, in differing, announces its presence in the determination which is to manifest itself. Before being, then, there is only being; but this ‘before’ (*being*) is, clearly, only the ‘before’ of the ‘after’ (the *determination*), with no ontological leaps or gaps. As there is no being apart from the determined being which arrives *in* and departs *from* that circle, we realise that the actual appearing of being, in its unfolding, bears witness to the nullity of all its previous consistencies.

Severino therefore follows in Gentile’s footsteps, yet ultimately turns his back on him, in the belief that the previous nullity of being, evoked by actualism, still alludes to some origin (and therefore to an ontological fluctuation on the Platonic sort). But where does Gentile’s act originate from (if it indeed originates from anything)? “Eternal, it cannot be preceded by anything; but [precisely] insofar as act coincides with becoming, it is never consumed,” Gentile writes (Gentile, 1942, p. 227). What this means is: never *made*, being is never annihilated, if not through the determination, which – without entifying it – appears (and to the degree that this determination appears). Besides, the appearing of being evoked by Severino is also, and especially, the *annihilation of nothingness*, which is what the determination consists in as, being exposed to the *before* and *after*, it is in each case encompassed within the finite circle of the originary structure. The determination, which carves out a portion of the whole for itself, unaware of the eternal constellation destined to portray its genuine features, is indeed *nothing*; therefore, by lingering within itself, *nothingness* annihilates itself and entifies itself, expected by something else – precisely and exclusively because everything appears, *while* something appears and disappears. In this respect, as there is no nothingness from which being originates by entifying itself, since there is only being that annihilates itself by manifesting itself, or appearing that vanishes by being, the actual appearing of being does not entify the nothingness destined to precede it; rather,



it confirms its nullity (visible – from the reverse perspective – in determinations, which, in arriving and departing, bear witness to the concealment of everything they are not).

The (phenomenological, ontological or theological?) difference made explicit by the reference of finite appearing to infinite appearing enables us to access being as that which – to quote Gentile again (Gentile, 1942, p. 81) – *ex se oritur* and not *ex facto*. The brocard recalled by the Sicilian philosopher refers to *ius* as that justice which imposes itself independently, encompassing the freedom of the eternal. Certainly, this is “becoming” – as suggested by Hegel, whose portrayal of the inextinguishable Gentile draws upon – but it is becoming as *autoktisis*. This philosophical concept, one of the most notable outcomes of Western philosophy, equates *positing* with *what is posited*, yet without blurring the two. It can thus point to the features of a positive, whereby it is *novelty without facts* or the *world without things* that proves dominant on the contemporary philosophical stage. To repeat: “Not being [fact, thing, datum] that reveals itself, but being that consists precisely in its revealing” – by diverging from itself. Actual becoming, therefore, as the appearing of being (which appears and disappears) does not plunge into the quiet screen of the world, giving rise to the spatio-temporal punctuality in which Western nihilism lies. What is quiet is rather the disquiet itself: the passing of an eternally past being from itself to itself, in the fulness of a gesture which, by making the originary spectacle multifaceted, exposes itself to the gaze of a spectator who identifies with it *once and for all*.

*The Originary Structure* announced and outlined this theoretical space, awaiting the hand – the hand of Necessity – capable of bringing out its shapes and colours. Besides, by taking a step forward, after Parmenides, yet without following Plato, it was not at all a matter of bidding farewell to becoming, which actualism had emphasised in its own particular way, but rather of safeguarding it for the first time. As Severino put it, “only if *everything* is eternal, is becoming possible” (Severino, 2007, p. 18).

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