

# The Philosophy of the Future: The Relevance of Severino's Metaphilosophy Today

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In the article, we aim at understanding the metaphilosophical implications of Emanuele Severino's concept of philosophy, asking what contribution it can offer to solving the question concerning the scope, form and consequent legitimation of philosophy as a discipline, which occupied the philosophical discourse with more and more urgency over the last few years.

**Keywords:**

**Metaphilosophy, Philosophy, Metaphysics, Truth, Finitude**

In this contribution, we intend to deal with Emanuele Severino's thought from a metaphilosophical perspective. In other words, we will focus on what understanding of philosophy underlies Severino's work. Through this investigation, we aim at highlighting what we would like to call the "radical untimeliness" of Severino's (meta)philosophy.

When speaking of "untimeliness" here, our main reference is the Nietzschean concept of "untimeliness". In the Preface to the second of the *Untimely Meditations* "On the Usefulness and Abuse of History for Life", Nietzsche states that his point of view is "untimely" insofar as he tries "to look afresh at something of which our time is rightly proud (...) as being injurious to it, a defect and deficiency in it" (Nietzsche, 1997, p. 60).

Nietzsche's target in that text was the historicist culture typical of his era. In a much similar way, Severino's thought is "untimely", because it is rooted in an antagonism towards two essential aspects of our time, which are today otherwise looked upon with pride.

Namely, Severino denounces:

- a) the idea that our time has finally freed itself from the need of an absolute, eternal and immutable truth, and
- b) the idea that the only truth of which it would make sense to speak would be the truth of modern science, and that, therefore, philosophy itself should conform to this truth in order to claim a legitimate existence as a discipline in our epoch.

Severino identifies these two aspects as characteristic of our time and offers a critique of contemporary philosophy as an expression of these two elements. Thus, he offers an alternative understanding of philosophy, which overcomes these convictions and is therefore different for the philosophy of the time and is rather a philosophy "of the future". In the article, we aim at understanding the metaphilosophical implications of Severino's conception, asking what contribution it can offer to solving what we call the "metaphilosophical question". By this notion, we mean to identify the question concerning the scope, form and consequent legitimation

of philosophy as a discipline, which occupied the philosophical discourse with more and more urgency over the last few years. In order to do this, we will proceed in three steps:

In the first paragraph, we will present and explore the phenomenon that we call the “metaphilosophical question” and present some of the responses offered by different philosophical traditions to this problem.

In the second paragraph, we will present Severino’s conception of philosophy.

In the last paragraph, we will contrast Severino’s position with contemporary responses to the “metaphilosophical question” in order to assess its “untimeliness” and relevance for today’s metaphilosophical inquiry.

## 1. The metaphilosophical question and its relevance today

Firstly, we need to clarify our methodological premises and approach, and define what we mean by adopting a “metaphilosophical perspective”.

Metaphilosophy is the discipline that aims to clarify the nature of philosophy, its methods, its scope and its applications.

In a way, the metaphilosophical question of “what is philosophy” has always been an inseparable component of philosophical inquiry. The very practice of philosophy, in fact, always entails a peculiar self-reflexivity: since there is no universal definition of philosophy, which determines its object and methodology ahead of its practice, every philosophy is always and structurally called to account for itself and define its discursive form, its aims and its objects (on this, see for example Hegel, 2010, §1). In this sense, philosophy progresses and articulates itself in a much different way than scientific knowledge. Each natural science, once established as a discipline through a shared definition of its object and methodology, develops linearly according to a logic whereby the most recent knowledge absorbs the previous one, expanding it under the same methodological premises. Instead, precisely because the discipline of philosophy as such never presents itself as something already given and established once and for all, philosophical knowledge enjoys a much different relationship to its history (and its future): progress in philosophy is much less linear and its definition is always dependent on the understanding of philosophy one is choosing to work with (Rorty, 2009, pp. 313-394 and 1989, pp. 96-140).

The self-reflexivity peculiar of philosophical practice also explains the paradoxical phenomenon, typical of the study of philosophy, whereby we

see radically different discursive practices, inquiries and styles defining themselves as philosophical. Since these are not simply different ways of articulating the same content, but rather embodiments of different ways of conceiving the nature, the task and the ends of philosophy itself, these different “philosophies” do not even recognize each other as philosophy. What today is called the *Great Divide* between analytic and continental philosophy is only one of the articulations – and perhaps not even the most significant one – of this intrinsic plurality of philosophical practice (for a study of this phenomenon with reference to the specific case of metaphysics, see Zimmermann, 2004. For a comment on the *Great Divide* and possible interactions between continental and analytic philosophy see also Nuzzo, 2010 and Glendinning, 2021).

Despite its being intrinsic and inseparable from the practice of philosophy itself, metaphilosophy has become an established discipline within philosophical inquiry only over the last few years (Miolli, 2017; 2022, Corti, Illetterati, Miolli, 2018). This phenomenon has been paired with an overall increase in attention and awareness towards the self-reflexive need of philosophical inquiry to justify and define itself in its making within contemporary philosophy in general.

The increased sensibility to the problem is perhaps also a sign that the metaphilosophical question has an urgency which is peculiar of our time. The fact that philosophy today so acutely feels the need to clarify and define its practice can also be read as the expression of a crisis rooted in the diminished or even lacking recognition of its relevance as a discipline. As a matter of fact, in any scientific field the need for meta-reflection on the discipline’s own nature, scope, and methodology emerges most urgently when the set of practices, discursive modes and institutional placements defining that discipline lose their relevance: either they are in tension with recent discoveries that they cannot accommodate, or the (social, cultural, scientific) function they served is extinguished or fulfilled differently (Kuhn, 1996; Rorty, 2009). In this sense, it is legitimate to think that contemporary philosophy’s aggravated need to clarify its scope and nature and to give a (new) definition of itself signals that philosophy no longer feels its function and necessity recognized. In this sense, it is not surprising that one of the books that have generated the most interest and discussion in philosophy over the last few years is Timothy Williamson’s *The Philosophy of Philosophy*. In many ways, the premises of the book confirm the intertwining of metaphilosophical questioning and the crisis of philosophy. Williamson himself writes that the idea of the book stemmed from the

perception of a lack of shared direction and definition within contemporary philosophy: according to Williamson, contemporary philosophy lacks an adequate image of itself, a clear vision of its objectives and practice. To contrast this phenomenon, the book aims at producing an image of philosophy that can “*do it justice*” (Williamson, 2022, p. ix).

The problem applies both on a theoretical, “internal” level, concerning the object and form of philosophy, but also on an “external” and public level, concerning the relevance and function of philosophy in contemporary society. Philosophers find themselves spread between different departments (especially in Anglophone universities, being divided between cultural studies, sociology, literary studies, etc.), and, while they struggle to define what discursive practices count as philosophical research and what do not, they find it harder and harder to legitimate the need of public funding for philosophical research (on this, see Rorty, 2001 and Redding, 2013).

One main factor in the exacerbation of the metaphilosophical problem today has been the progressive specialization of different disciplinary fields and the progressive advancement and shaping of scientific knowledge. While philosophy was first born in an epoch in which science and philosophy were part of the same inquiry, and this interconnection continued to obtain until the Scientific Revolution and even up until the Romantic Age, now philosophy is radically distinct from scientific inquiry. This has, at least *prima facie*, deprived it of its “traditional” object: it is the sciences who now fulfill the function of discovering how the world is made and how it works, and in this endeavor they seem entirely independent of philosophical inputs or reflections. Philosophy today is clearly on the other side of the divide between the “two cultures”, or between *Natur-* und *Geisteswissenschaften* (Snow, 1959; Dilthey, 1922): it is considered a discipline of spirit, closer to literature than to contemporary physics or chemistry.

Another component that complicated the stance of philosophy is the progressive laicization of (Western) society: with established religion being progressively – and with good reason – relegated to a matter of private choice and preference, even more broadly conceived questions of existential meaning struggle to find recognition and legitimation as relevant pursuits for the collective. Under this respect, too, philosophy finds itself deprived of what seemed to have traditionally been its other essential object and function (Rorty, 2009, pp. 129-312).

Reactions to this shift have been several in the last century, resulting in

an astounding variety of definitions of philosophy's scope and form, and it is hard to establish whether this fragmentation is an effect of the "identity crisis" of philosophical knowledge or if it is a factor in its further aggravation.

In this medley of contemporary metaphilosophies, three main models of what philosophy should look like and be about (today) could be distinguished.

### **1.1 Philosophy as science: varieties of analytic realism**

One response to the "metaphilosophical question" has been that of trying to make philosophy into a science.

This tendency has been most characteristic of "analytic" philosophy broadly conceived (on the difficulty of applying the term "analytic" to designate a specific brand of philosophy, see Zimmermann, 2004).

On this understanding, philosophy derives its scientificity from a well-established, predefined methodology and from the agreement with scientific results and with experience.

The understanding of what this methodology and of what this agreement should be vary greatly. As far as methodology is concerned, probably the best-known proposals have been the criterion of verification of meaning elaborated in the Vienna Circle, the criterion of falsification of scientificity proposed by Karl Popper, and Quine's definition of ontological commitment. As far as the agreement with science is concerned, instead, its understanding changes depending on which of the various forms of realism that have characterized English-speaking philosophy in recent years one is willing to consider. These go from the common-sense and metaphysical realism rooted in logical atomism presented by George E. Moore and Bertrand Russell (Moore, 1903 and 1919; Russell, 2009), to the more refined forms of scientific realism presented in the many declinations of naturalism offered from the 1930s to the present day (De Caro, Macarthur, 2008; Nunziante, 2012).

While the criteria of verification and falsification, associated with an image of philosophy as much detached from ontological claims and as much limited to the task of conceptual and semantic clarification as possible have been overcome and are not representative of the (self-)understanding of analytic philosophy anymore, Quine's definition of ontological commitment still constitutes the main reference for mainstream ana-

lytic metaphysics today (Schaffer, 2009; Ney, 2014). Namely, mainstream analytic metaphysics is devoted to the task of defining “what there (really) is”. While the question might seem rather trivial at first (Quine himself replied to it in a very permissivist way: “everything!”, Quine, 1948, p. 21), it is indeed in certain cases quite relevant: do properties exist? Do numbers, or meanings, or relations? Does essence, as opposed to existence, or being, as opposed to beings, exist? Deciding whether these things exist, not only can legitimize (or dismiss) specific philosophical inquiries, but it also can help achieve a better understanding of our theories about reality and their *actual* implications as to how the world is made. For instance, deciding whether being exists, as something separate from existence, can help decide whether Heidegger’s critique of Western metaphysics as “forgetfulness of being” is a meaningful enterprise, or a delusion induced by linguistic ambiguity (Van Inwagen, 2009). Further, asking whether numbers exist, can help us to better understand what mathematics is about and its role in the description of reality provided by other sciences who rely heavily on it, such as physics (Field, 1980; Maddy, 1992).

In approaching all this very different “existence-questions”, contemporary analytic metaphysics relies on Quine’s definition of ontological commitment, attempting to make explicit the quantification domain of different theories relevant to the question at hand. The quantification domain is defined by the entities over which a theory quantifies, or in simpler words, by the entities that a theory needs to consider as existent in order to be true (Quine, 1948, p. 33).

So defined, metaphysics has a double task: on the one hand, it helps defining the best theory amongst competing ones, clarifying which theory quantifies over the smallest number of entities while retaining the biggest explanatory power (Ney, 2014, p. 49); on the other, it shares the natural science’s task of elaborating a description of the world, insofar as it helps clarify what exactly “is there” according to our best available theory. To these two tasks, we could add a third, “metametaphysical” or “preliminary” task: in applying Quinean methodology to its own traditional questions, metaphysics can determine which philosophical interrogations are indeed substantial (that is, which entail actual existence questions) and which are not (that is, which do not entail existence questions or are easily solved through clarification of ontological commitment of the language used). While to the majority of “continental” or “postmodernist” authors and to few authors from within analytic metaphysics itself the abandonment of questions that so deeply characterized the tradition of Western meta-

physics constitutes a substantial loss (more on this in section 1.3), to mainstream analytic metaphysicians this is a fair price to pay to make philosophy “scientific”.

In the metaphilosophical conception offered by contemporary analytic metaphysics, then, philosophy is still conceived, as it was during the so-called “middle period” of analytic philosophy dominated by the Vienna Circle (Simons, 2013), as conceptual clarification through rigorous, pre-defined methodology, but with a stronger realist commitment (Price, 2009). Precisely thanks to its reliance on a clear and “standard” methodology and on scientific theories (and to a significant downsizing and reshaping of its fundamental questions) philosophy can (re)claim its task of being a description of reality, alongside the natural sciences.

## 1.2 Philosophy “after philosophy”, or postmodernist constructivism

While the analytic tradition reacted to the urgency of the “metaphilosophical problem” by trying to limit and structure philosophical inquiry in order to salvage its “scientific” status, many other philosophers, both in the “continental” and in the English-speaking world, decided to go in the opposite direction, and push philosophy as far away as possible from “scientific” definitions of objectivity, truth and reality. This has been a tendency common to the many forms of postmodernism that have characterized philosophical discourse starting roughly from the second half of the twentieth century. “Postmodernism” is an umbrella term which is as broad in its reach and as problematic to use as a unitary label as the “analytic” one, encompassing “continental” projects going from Foucault’s genealogy to Derrida’s deconstruction, and English-speaking Neo-pragmatist projects going from Nelson Goodman’s to Richard Rorty’s (Aylesworth, 2015). Despite working with very different concepts and terminologies, all these currents share the commitment to deconstruct the understanding of truth and reality which shaped traditional Western philosophical inquiry. Against the tradition, postmodernists argue that there is no universal or objective reality, that truth and meaning do not have a univocal definition, and that therefore the task of philosophy should not be that of uncovering an unchanging and eternal truth, or to isolate the universal elements of individual experience. One of the declinations of postmodernism in which the critique to traditional philosophy’s understanding of truth has been paired with explicit metaphilosophical reflection is the one developed by



Richard Rorty. Rorty's philosophy combined suggestions from the so-called "linguistic turn" of analytic or English-speaking philosophy, from Classical American Pragmatism and from continental thinkers such as Hegel, Heidegger and Derrida to refute the analytic conception of philosophy as "rigorous" and "scientific". As showed by Quine (Quine, 1951), this conception was rooted in a correspondist understanding of truth and meaning: the scientificity and rigorousness of philosophical inquiry was defined, even during the "middle period", with reference to the possibility of verifying the correspondence of determinate propositions or beliefs with experience. Quine criticized the possibility of doing so, showing that meaning could not be defined through analyticity nor through reductionism, and suggesting that, while the correspondence with experience was only possible for a whole theory – or a whole interconnected web of beliefs – distinct concepts and propositions were determined holistically by reciprocal relations happening from within the same theory. Later, Quine further elaborated this intuition claiming that empirical referents in the production of (new) knowledge are always "underdetermined": every new belief is much more informed by the other beliefs we are holding in determining it, than it is informed by empirical data (Quine, 1960). Consequently, with reference to the same empirical evidence radically different beliefs could be formed, depending on which theory the knowing subject is moving from. Quine's formulations gave way to the so-called debate on conceptual schemes, asking whether radically different and mutually exclusive definitions of objectivity and experiences of the world are possible depending on which "conceptual scheme" or set of beliefs one held on to (Glock, 2003). In this context, Donald Davidson suggested that the true implication of Quine's formulations is not that for the same empirical input several different interpretations could be given, but rather that no empirical input could be supposed to be the referent of our theories (Davidson, 1973). Rorty drew a radical metaphilosophical thesis from the anti-realist implications of Quine's and Davidson's formulations: not only the idea of truth and meaning as corresponding to actual, concrete objects in the "mind-independent" world, but also the idea of a universal, unchanging truth is an illusion. If our experience of the world and objectivity is informed by the beliefs and concepts that we use to make sense of it, then it is also likely that such experience and understanding will change over time depending on cultural and historical shifts (Rorty, 2001b, 2009).

Consequently, philosophy should not think of itself as an accurate description of the world, nor as the uncovering of a universal, eternal truth

providing the key to all reality (Rorty, 2009; Rorty, 2011, pp. 19-166). To the contrary, philosophy is, just as any other discursive practice, the expression of a specific moment in history and culture (Rorty, 1989, pp. 3-72). Philosophy's task is not that of discovering "capital-T Truth", but rather that of revealing the contingency of our discursive practices, unmasking the illusion that linguistic or conceptual formulations correspond to a world "out there" and showing their dependence on cultural and historical conditions. As such, philosophy is both a critique and a deconstruction of any realist or correspondentist illusions we might entertain, and the joyous unlocking of more creativity and freedom in our discursive practices. In Rorty's conception, once we get rid of the obsession for truth and reality, and we accept the boundaries of our "human" condition as always linguistically, conceptually, culturally and historically situated, we realize that reality can be our creation: both collectively and individually, we can understand and shape our experience to have it reflect our innermost inclinations (Rorty, 1989, pp. 73-140). According to Rorty, then, philosophy should overcome its own self-image as an inquiry into truth, give up its ambitions of "scientificity" and renounce the possibility of enjoying a clear-cut methodological and disciplinary identification (Rorty, 2001d). Through this "sacrifice", philosophy gains the possibility of having greater social and cultural impact, because it would become a public discursive practice capable of unveiling and influencing the historical and cultural movements of its time (Rorty, 1999, 2009, pp. 357-394, 2011, pp. 167-326).

### 1.3 Philosophy as (revised) rationalism and monism

A more recent answer to the "metaphilosophical question" comes from further developments of contemporary analytic metaphysics, which aim at retrieving aspects of traditional Western metaphysics that mainstream analytic metaphysics would normally dismiss. In this image, philosophy is neither "scientific" in the sense of analytic metaphysics, nor an expression of human contingency as postmodernism suggested. To the contrary, this view presents philosophy (or metaphysics) as an inquiry into a kind of reality, which is not quite the same as that explored by the natural sciences, at least insofar as the latter is conceived as an object of experience. In this image, philosophy is aimed at uncovering a kind of truth that, although apparently counterintuitive, is actually "truer" and "higher" than the one uncovered by the sciences or common-sense.

The need for the retrieval of such an understanding of philosophical inquiry has emerged in the context of debates on grounding and fundamentality, which showed some inadequacies of Quinean methodology (Schaffer, 2009. See also Correia, Schnieder, 2012). Quinean methodology, in fact, implies a “flat ontology” in which all existent entities – as bound variables over which a theory quantifies – are identified in their isolation and not through their essential reciprocal relations. This understanding can hardly account for relations such as supervenience, in which two relata are modally constrained one by the other in such a way that is essential to their definition and individuation, or emergence, in which a whole is characterized by properties that its parts do not have on their own (Schaffer, 2009). Given this shortcoming of Quinean methodology, authors who consider supervenience, emergence, and other instances of relations that participate in the individuation of their relata as essential aspects of reality (Schaffer, 2010a) tried to update the methodology of metaphysics so that it would be “rigorous” and yet capable of accounting for them. This included the reintroduction and study of notions such as grounding, fundamentality and metaphysical explanation to describe such phenomena, and a reconsideration of the requirement for philosophy to agree with empirical evidence in order to have legitimization as a discipline (Schaffer, 2010a; Della Rocca, 2013; 2021).

This latter aspect is especially visible in recent revivals of monism, encompassing Jonathan Schaffer’s “priority monism”, Terence Horgan and Matjaž Potrč’s “existence monism”, and Michael Della Rocca’s “strict monism” (Schaffer, 2018; Horgan and Potrč, 2009, Della Rocca, 2021, pp. xiii-xxiii). While they constitute radically different positions, all these “new monisms” find their root in the debate on grounding: if entities are not (just) bound variables after all, but their definition entails their reciprocal relations of fundamentality, it becomes possible to treat the totality of things in the world as a whole, and to ask if such a whole entertains an essential relationship to its parts, that could make it “more fundamental” than them (Schaffer, 2018 and 2010a; Della Rocca, 2013). Although on different premises, priority-, essence-, and strict monism all hold that the whole is more fundamental than its parts, or that there is a unitary object, which grounds the multiplicity of things that we normally experience as separate and independent. Contrary to Quinean methodology, whose flat ontology indeed matched the immediate experience of things as separate and independent, monism openly contradicts experience and common-sense, claiming that individual things depend on a unitary, “higher” being

and are in some sense (only) “parts” of it. Nevertheless, monism could claim better agreement with more recent advancements in the sciences: for instance, the idea of an interconnected world seems to be more cogent with theories of quantum entanglement and with Big-Bang cosmology (Schaffer, 2010a and 2010b). On these grounds, especially priority monists and existence monists insist that the “scientificity” of philosophy should be defined through the agreement of philosophy with empirical evidence gained through the sciences, as divorced from the evidence provided by common sense experience. In this, contemporary monism challenges an assumption of the analytic tradition, which saw empirical inquiry and common-sense as intertwined (Schaffer, 2010a and 2010b). Yet, monists disagree on the extent up to which philosophy should detach from common-sense, on the one hand, and on what the goal of philosophy in revealing a truth or a reality “beyond” immediate and human experience should be, on the other. Existence monists insist that there is no possibility of making room for the common-sense illusion that there are individuated particulars as concrete objects and philosophy as ontology or metaphysics should work with an entirely different semantic than common-sense (Horgan and Potrč, 2009 and 2012). Priority monists, instead, insist that, although empirical evidence and philosophical inquiry indeed contradict some of our common-sense intuitions, it is still crucial that monism allows for the individuation of particulars in order to retain explanatory power and interest as a theory (Schaffer, 2018, 2010a and 2010b). Strict monists, instead, disagree with both priority and existence monists as to what the task of philosophy should be, as the uncovering of a metaphysical dimension “beyond” and “more fundamental” than the one uncovered by common-sense experience (Della Rocca, 2021, pp. 219-290). According to Della Rocca, philosophy should indeed have a rigorous methodology, which for him is not a specific semantic (as it is for existence monists) nor the application of a supposedly natural notion of priority as the best description of grounding (as it is for priority monists), but the application of the principle of sufficient reason (Della Rocca, 2013). Yet, Della Rocca claims that precisely the rigorous application of the principle of sufficient reason leads not only to monism, but to the undermining of the very same principle (Della Rocca, 2013, 2010 and 2021, pp. 219-225). Introducing a slightly revised version of Francis H. Bradley’s argument for monism, Della Rocca holds that applying the principle of sufficient reason to the very fact of the existence of things forces us to recognize that things are grounded in their relation of coexistence, and that, then, there is nothing

but this very relation of coexistence. Yet, if there is nothing but the relation and there strictly are no *relata*, it becomes impossible to even identify such relation (Della Rocca, 2013, pp. 8-10). Della Rocca uses this demonstration to hold the more general thesis that philosophical inquiry is based on the principle of sufficient reason, the most efficient tool to achieve intelligibility as the main goal of philosophy. The principle of sufficient reason uncovers that no distinction is truly intelligible nor, therefore, truly real. In debunking the consistency or intelligibility of all distinctions, though, the principle of sufficient reason also debunks itself, insofar as its application indeed requires at least the distinction between ground and grounded (Della Rocca, 2021, pp. 197-218). To Della Rocca, this result does not amount to a refutation of the principle of sufficient reason. To the contrary, the principle of sufficient reason is “a ladder which we climb than throw away” (Della Rocca, 2021, pp. xx. See also Della Rocca, 2021, pp. 219-225 and 2013, pp. 18-20): precisely because it is self-refuting, the principle of sufficient reason helps us “see the world aright”, allowing us to access a “higher” level of reality, “beyond” experience, common-sense, and even intelligibility. Only through continuously reminding ourselves of the self-refuting nature of our intelligibility, we can “peek” and “glimpse” towards this “higher” and “truer” form of being as a unitary, seamless Parmenidean whole (Della Rocca, 2021, pp. 218-225; 291-92). Philosophy then, has a double, and yet interconnected goal according to Della Rocca: showing the self-refuting character of the principle of sufficient reason and intelligibility, on the one hand, and revealing the “joy of self-undermining” entailed in this discovery. In revealing the inherent limitations of intelligibility and language, in fact, not only do we get access to a “truer” plane “beyond” them, but we also become free to see any form of expression or experience as a manifestation of this “higher”, “unitary” level which is (at the bottom of) everything. According to Della Rocca, then, philosophy is not as much about making everything intelligible, but rather about the quasi-mystical uncovering of what is revealed as standing beyond our limited attempts at making experience intelligible. Consequently, philosophy is made in two different forms: while in its “deconstructive” role of revealing the self-refuting character of explanation philosophy has the form of a rigorous, almost “scientific” inquiry through the principle of sufficient reason, in its “constructive” role of uncovering and inducing contemplation of this “higher”, unitary plane, philosophy should either consist of silence or fragments (Della Rocca, 2021, pp. 291-92). In this image, then, philosophy does retain some kind of “scientific” rigor, in the sense

that it is not a dimension of pure “literary” invention and cuts deeper into “mind-independent” reality than any possible declination of “contingency” in postmodernist sense. Yet, it is not an expansion of the results of science and aims at a “higher” or “deeper” plane, precisely for its “rationalist” and strictly apriori vocation. The characteristic component of experience, and namely finitude, is transcended: no individuation, no distinction is ultimately real from the standpoint of the kind of philosophy championed by Della Rocca.

Precisely for this reason, monism seems a relevant and urgent pursuit: being a reflection on the limitedness of our -finite, fallible, human- point of view, it is also a path of “liberation” from it. As such, philosophy fulfils an existential, “therapeutic” aim.

## 2. Severino’s metaphilosophy

We believe that Severino’s thought could provide crucial insights with respect to how to consider the above presented “metaphilosophies” of our time, and, vice versa, we believe that the encounter with the contemporary “metaphilosophical question” could help highlight some peculiarities of Severino’s thought and appreciate its relevance.

In order to bring our investigation forward, and to understand the relevance as well as the “untimeliness” of Severino’s thought, we now need to ask: what is philosophy for Emanuele Severino?

In order to answer this question, we will consider some texts, trying to encompass the whole arc of Severino’s thought.

### 2.1 Philosophy as the “inevitable future of humanity”

The first text we are going to consider is a short paper published in 1965 in “Giornale di metafisica” and then included in the collection of essays, *L'essenza del nichilismo* (*The Essence of Nihilism*), originally published in 1972 (Severino, 1995. An English translation of the main parts of the volume is found in Severino, 2016). This essay is especially important for our inquiry because it concisely presents a “metaphilosophical” scheme that is found as an underlying thread in all of Severino’s writings, distinguishing a kind of philosophy proper of the past, one proper of the present and one proper of “the future”.

This short paper, which is entitled “Philosophy in Today’s World” begins with this statement:

“Philosophy is the inevitable future of humanity” (Severino, 1995 p. 135. Our translation. All further quotes in this section are from this same work and our translation, unless specified otherwise)

In saying this, Severino is saying that philosophy is neither anything from the past nor anything from the present. This also means that what Severino is referring to as “philosophy” in this text is not the philosophy of tradition. According to Severino, what the tradition has called philosophy is – if anything – metaphysics, and its inevitable outcome in the present is technique, the structure that governs the contemporary world.

Hoping this would not be too simplistic of a formulation, one could say that metaphysics is, to Severino, a mode of thought that moves within an irreconcilable contradiction: on the one hand, it claims to be *episteme*, a term Severino understands as denoting a firm, stable and eternal knowledge, while on the other hand it moves from the conviction that being is something that can go out of and return to nothing, a conviction that invalidates the very possibility of its object being firm, stable and eternal as it would be required by *episteme*. Metaphysics, therefore, is the *desperate* search for the immutable that can save us from becoming, that can save us from the anguish that is connected to becoming, to the idea that what is will inevitably no longer be. Thus, metaphysics is the desperate search for a sense within a reality that, as dominated by becoming, is the very negation of such sense. In other words, metaphysics claims to grasp the immutable within becoming, thereby considering becoming something consistent enough to be its object of inquiry. Thus, the very immutable metaphysics seeks to grasp is indeed in contradiction with becoming, being’s coming from and returning to nothing, which metaphysics insists to assume as its object. In this sense, metaphysics is Western thought’s major and most radical error.

Precisely for this reason, Severino argues that technique is the coherent, necessary and inevitable outcome of metaphysics. Indeed, from a certain point of view, technique is consistent with the program of metaphysics. While metaphysics claims to think the immutable and at same time still holds fast onto the evidence of becoming, technique somehow solves this tension and contradiction by embracing becoming and by abandoning metaphysics’ commitment to thinking the immutable, or by giving up the



very idea that there is something eternal and immutable. This conviction, that there is nothing eternal and unchangeable, implies that technique can therefore dispose of everything, that it has no limits, that it is able to produce and modify everything, endlessly. The absence of limits of technique cannot even be mitigated or held in check by a discourse that relies on values – be they religious, political or generically cultural – because those values either belong to metaphysics and are therefore overcome and dismissed by technique as its radicalization, or stem from within technique and therefore cannot limit its relentless advancement.

If metaphysics is the philosophy of the past, and technique the philosophy of the present, what kind of philosophy does Severino have in mind as *the inevitable future of humanity*? Under a certain respect, just as technique is the coherent outcome of metaphysics, so philosophy as the *inevitable future of humanity* is the inevitable outcome of technique.

Indeed, Severino says:

“Techne can overcome every limit, but not that consisting in the doubt that everything one is or has can be swept away in an imminent catastrophe. Only the logic of truth – that is, only an absolute and incontrovertible answer to this question – can remove this doubt. And precisely for this reason philosophy, as the locus of truth, is the future of man, who, when he is on the verge of believing himself to be the master of being, will feel, with a strength never before experienced, the need to know the truth of his belief and therefore, first of all, the need to know what truth is” (149).

Philosophy is thus identified here with the locus of truth, that is, with the knowledge of absolute and incontrovertible truth, which is presented at the end of this short paper in these terms:

“To think seriously, that is above every aporia, the impossibility that being is not and to understand being no longer as the pure indeterminate or as a limited dimension, but as the concrete whole of things and events” (pp. 150-151).

Future philosophy, that is, the philosophy that no longer moves within the mistake or contradiction of metaphysics, and that arises from the extreme fulfillment of the dominance of technique, or from the urgency of mitigating the anxiety that “everything one is or has can be swept away in an imminent catastrophe” is therefore a kind of thought which goes back



to think the truth. In order to think the truth, philosophy has to place itself beyond the error of the West, of that line of thinking that attempted to think what is, according to Severino, structurally impossible to think, that is, that non-being is and being is not.

These remarks clarify what we called the “metaphilosophical scheme” underlying Severino’s works: the philosophy of the past is metaphysics as an error of the West; philosophy of the present is technique as a coherent outcome of metaphysics’s contradictions and therefore as the destiny of the West; philosophy as the “inevitable future of humanity” is the thought of truth as the only way out of nihilism which is the necessary result of metaphysics and technique as its radicalization.

Yet - and this is perhaps of some interest for the metaphilosophical perspective we are trying to advance – the distinction between metaphysics and philosophy, which was very sharp in the writings of the ‘60s, seems to be softened in his later writings.

## 2.2 Philosophy of the past?

The shift from the sharp distinction between metaphysics and philosophy, as forms of thinking respectively from of the past and the future, to a more nuanced use of the two terms, happens in parallel to a progressive modification in the use of the term “philosophy”. The latter goes from being associated to the dimension of future, as we have seen above, to being associated to the dimension of the past, previously identified as metaphysics. Evidence of this is found in a text appeared about 15 years after the essay mentioned above, and namely *Law and Chance* (Severino, 1979. Translated in English in Severino, 2023. All references in this section are to this text and our translation unless noted otherwise).

There we read:

« In the history of the West, the knowledge that has taken upon itself to exhibit *truth* is philosophy: that is, “science” — regarded not in the modern sense, but as *episteme*. According to what the Greek word itself suggests, this is the knowledge whose content is able *to stand*, firmly imposing itself *on* everything that would like to displace it and put it into question. This is the knowledge that, precisely by virtue of its standing, is truth» (Severino 1979, p.13).

This quotation allows us to say something more about Severino's concept of philosophy and perhaps also to highlight some ambiguities in it.

In *Law and Chance*, Severino holds that:

1. Philosophy is science, and as such has the task of showing the truth.
2. Philosophy is science, but in a different sense than that the term has in the modern understanding.
3. The difference between *episteme* (the kind of science philosophy is) and modern science is relative to their respective understanding of truth. Science as *episteme* is the knowledge of a truth that has the characteristics of immutability and incontrovertibility, whereas science in the modern understanding sees truth as always hypothetical, changeable and disputable.

The point on which Severino insists is that science in the modern sense rises from the ashes of science as *episteme*. More precisely, modern science rises from the ashes of *episteme's* understanding of truth as immutable, eternal and incontrovertible. In fact, the *episteme* of the West has had for Severino an antinomian character right from its first apparition. *Episteme* is the attempt to dominate the mutability of the world, or becoming, through reference to the immutable. *Episteme*, that is, assumes becoming as its starting point, thereby contradicting the very idea of immutability for which it strives. If the world was becoming, in fact, no *episteme* would be possible, because if everything becomes, nothing is stable (and, therefore, there is nothing immutable to be striving for as instead *episteme* does). In this sense, the emergence of modern science is the death of philosophy as *episteme*. This death is necessary, because it is a direct consequence of the contradiction that inhabits the very idea of *episteme*. When modern science arises, philosophy is dead, Severino says, because the dream of definitive and incontrovertible truth is dead, too. Philosophy is dead, that is, because through modern science it comes to the full realization of its necessary renunciation of truth, or, of the impossibility to know the truth. And that is why philosophy, in its inherent nihilistic implication, is the condition of possibility of technique and of the domination of science in the contemporary world.

Severino argues that whenever the dream of truth is over, i.e., when one no longer even thinks of truth as stability, immutability and incontrovertibility, truth necessarily becomes synonymous with dominance and power. In other words, if truth as immutability and incontrovertibility is denied,

then truth becomes whatever works, whatever is efficient, which is also what is imposed by force. It is on this basis that the dominance of modern science is affirmed. Thus, we read in *Law and Chance*:

“Modern science, *qua* theoretical and technical structure, is the highest form of power, and therefore of ‘truth’, that exists today on earth.” (Severino 1979, p.14)

The modern world is the world in which truth is translated into the form of the efficient and the functional. And this does not happen, says Severino, only within the world of science. In the contemporary world, the truth that is proper of modern science becomes the model of truth in all spheres of human activity and discourse. The very organization of contemporary society is governed by this idea of truth. What is considered “right” or “good”, on a social and political level, is the same as what is true in the sense of modern science: it is what works, what is exploitable, what is effective and efficient. To make a concrete example: from Severino’s point of view, one could say that what is mostly presented today as the crisis of politics, that is, its inability to govern economic and social processes, is not rooted in a lack of willingness or ability on the side of politics, but rather it is an embodiment of the necessary and inevitable outcome of Western thought, i.e. of an understanding of truth that no longer exists as truth (immutable and incontrovertible), but only as domination. Necessarily, this understanding of truth becomes power also in the form of technical administration.

Further, Severino notes that modern science, in exchanging incontrovertible truth for hypothetical prediction, is always open to the risk of failure (Severino 1979, p. 29). Hence, its understanding of truth as hypothetical, stochastic and controvertible is the form of domination most adequate to the Greek sense of becoming, to the idea that being can come out of and return to nothing (p. 30). Modern science is the most rigorous form of rational understanding of reality as it has been thought by the West, since it explicitly recognizes the impossibility of any immutability and incontrovertibility. It is the most adequate form of reason that can arise from faith in becoming, as it recognizes the impossibility of the immutable, or the impossibility of truth, turning truth into a hypothesis, or something essentially and structurally questionable. Modern science is the most rigorous and coherent form of rationality in the West because it “controls, dominates and grounds the abyss of becoming” (p. 15).

In considering all the previous remarks from a metaphilosophical point of view, one could detect a certain ambiguity permeating Severino's concept of philosophy.

On the one hand, philosophy is identified with metaphysics, or with the ambition to know an immutable truth within a horizon that denies it, that is within the horizon of becoming. In this sense, philosophy is dead because, as technique reveals, it entails an insurmountable contradiction.

On the other hand, however, philosophy is not dead, since the necessity of knowing the immutable is still recognized by Severino as the "inevitable future of humanity".

This sort of ambiguity is further emphasized in Severino's great book on Nietzsche (Severino, 1999). There Severino argues that Nietzsche, together with Leopardi and Gentile, represents the peak of the Western philosophical tradition, or the point at which this tradition reaches its own limit and is consequently forced to look beyond itself.

The book begins with the following statement:

«In its *essence*, contemporary philosophy is the *inevitable* destruction of the philosophical tradition and of the entire tradition of the West» (Severino, 1999, p. 15. Our translation)

In a somehow Wittgensteinian fashion, Severino seems to hold here that the task of contemporary philosophy is to destroy philosophy itself.

Contemporary philosophy, says Severino, inevitably destroys the Western tradition because it attempts to get out of its folly, which consists, as we have seen, in the belief in becoming, and in the possibility of truth within a horizon which is the very negation of the stability which is constitutive of truth itself. To overcome this folly, contemporary philosophy renounces to *episteme*, to the very possibility of a stable and eternal truth, or, in Severino's eyes, to truth as such. In the renunciation of truth, contemporary philosophy finally conforms to the Greek sense of being as becoming and ends up destroying itself.

### 2.3 Philosophy as the future?

Based on our survey of Severino's work, we can now isolate three different meanings of philosophy:

1. Philosophy as Metaphysics: Philosophy as the epistemic claim to expound an eternal and incontrovertible truth within a horizon that in fact makes it impossible to think of an eternal and incontrovertible truth in rigorous terms, i.e., within an horizon assuming the consistency of becoming.
2. Contemporary Philosophy: Philosophy as criticism of metaphysics' claim for an immutable truth, and as demonstration of the impossibility of truth within the conception of being as becoming.
3. Future Philosophy: Philosophy as the discourse of truth.

We can conclude that Severino's answer to the "metaphilosophical problem" is that philosophy should abandon both its traditional form as metaphysics, or as search for eternity within becoming, and its contemporary form as an expression of technique, as a form of denial of the possibility for truth and as a celebration of endless, unstoppable becoming. Instead, philosophy should finally become philosophy as "the inevitable future of humanity". This metaphilosophical requirement takes two different shapes. On the one hand, "new" or "future" philosophy should entail a critique of past understandings of philosophical inquiry as metaphysics or technique. On the other, the philosophy of the future should take a positive form beyond these very understandings that it aims to overcome. Yet, it is hard to find a clear description of the latter positive dimension in Severino's works. In speaking of philosophy as "the inevitable future of humanity", Severino offers a new, alternative vision of philosophical practice. Such vision, Severino says, does not prescribe anything "but glimpses the inevitable path that the world actually travels below the 'Paths of Night' along which the will to power believes it is pushing it" (Severino, 1995, p. 64). Philosophy as "the inevitable future of humanity", then, cannot be positively articulated; it is excluded by its very nature that we could prescribe what form and methodology characterize this form of inquiry. The only way it can be grasped is through its critical dimension. According to Severino, in fact, philosophy as such can only be witnessed, and namely through the refusal of alienation and violence. These are negative connotations. Despite being somewhat lacking – and maybe necessarily so – in the positive articulation of what form philosophy should have as "the inevitable future of humanity", Severino seem very clear in what not only its object of inquiry but also its aim should be. Precisely from the latter, philosophy gains its legitimation as meaningful enterprise for the collective

and as science, although this entails a revision of what modernity calls science and a return to the more traditional understanding of the term as *episteme*. As amply demonstrated above, the philosophy of the future should have truth as the immutable and eternal as its object. In other words, philosophy as the “inevitable future of humanity” is an inquiry into, or at least a contemplation of the inevitable truth of the eternity of being, of being’s impossibility to not be, to start and cease to be, to become. This contemplation serves philosophy’s aim and is precisely what makes it a meaningful, relevant pursuit for humanity. Being a revelation of this truth, philosophy indeed fulfils its aspiration to be ‘salvific’. As Severino says, this aim has characterized the philosophy and human expression in the whole course of the Western tradition: myth, metaphysics, philosophy, technique and philosophy as the “inevitable future of humanity” are all attempts at salvation from death. They all share the common aspiration to give meaning to the experience of pain and death and to exorcise the fear of death. According to Severino, myth and the philosophy of the tradition indeed fail in this task because they have been immersed in error, believing in becoming, thinking that being is not and non-being is, and failing to see the eternity of every being. Only philosophy as the way of truth, or the way that appreciates the eternity of being, is the one that can save humanity from the anguish of death.

### 3. Severino and the “metaphilosophical question”

We have left to consider how Severino’s conception of philosophy can help respond to today’s “metaphilosophical question”. In order to do this, we will consider some possible interactions between Severino’s answer and the other contemporary metaphilosophical suggestions presented in section 1.

#### 3.1 The untimeliness of Severino’s thought

Under several respects, Severino’s reply to the “metaphilosophical question” is untimely in the positive and Nietzschean sense highlighted in the introduction. Indeed, Severino’s reflections can help identify aspects that, albeit proudly championed by contemporary metaphilosophical understandings, are problematic. Namely, Severino offers a radical and convincing critique of both the understanding of philosophy as having to conform

to the standard of (modern) science, which characterized analytic philosophy, and the understanding of philosophy as expression of (human) contingency, offered by postmodernism.

Concerning the contemporary attempt at making philosophy “scientific” which characterizes analytic philosophy and mainstream analytic metaphysics, Severino helps to see how the necessity to conform to the methodology and rigor identified with science is not an absolute necessity, because the truth of science is not the only possible truth. Further, partially in line with contemporary monists, Severino insists that conforming to the truth of science, both under a methodological and a substantial perspective, leads philosophy to lose its own identity and scope, which was more clearly stated in the tradition: philosophy is indeed about uncovering some “mind-independent” truth and reality, but this truth is not to be found in a description and systematization of our experience, as an experience of becoming and finitude. Rather, precisely the questions that contemporary mainstream analytic metaphysics would discard as “linguistic nonsense”, are those defining philosophy, because they ask about a dimension laying “beyond” experience and finitude and which, in grounding finitude, it could also redeem it and save it from itself.

Concerning the metaphilosophical understanding offered by postmodernism, Severino’s thought allows us to recognize this attempt as an expression of technique, and to criticize it as such. More precisely, Severino helps us to see the delusion of salvation of which postmodernist thought has fallen victim: just like technique, postmodernist philosophy tries to find salvation in the very rejection of the possibility of eternal, universal truth and embraces the endless repetition of becoming. Everything is nothing but contingency, and this bittersweet exaltation of finitude and mortality becomes a promise of salvation in itself: since there is no higher meaning, within becoming and finitude we can at least enjoy the freedom of free invention and expression. Recognizing this as an expression of technique, Severino helps us to see how the freedom promised by postmodernism remains abstract. On the existential plane, it does not truly satisfy the need for salvation that gave rise to the need for philosophy. On the political plane, the postmodernist understanding of truth as “whatever works” serves the worse kind of domination and power, and it therefore does not yield any true revolution nor liberation.

### 3.2 The timeliness of Severino's thought

On the other hand, confronting Severino's work with contemporary answers to the "metaphysical question" also serves to raise some concerns with respect to Severino's own answer to it. Indeed, this comparison reveals that Severino's understanding of philosophy might have more in common with contemporary metaphilosophies than Severino himself would like to admit. Just like Rorty and Della Rocca, Severino has the problem of providing a positive articulation of the philosophy of the future, or of the kind of philosophy that is the only true philosophy and the only true answer to the need for salvation from finitude and mortality. For all three the characterization of this new or future philosophy remains played in the negative, that is, only through a definition of what future philosophy is not: for Rorty, "future" philosophy is philosophy liberated from the illusion of capital-T truth; for Della Rocca, "future" philosophy is philosophy liberated from the illusion of intelligibility and explanation; for Severino, "future" philosophy is philosophy liberated from the folly of the West or the illusion of the consistency of becoming. Being always determined with retrospective reference to the mistake from which it had liberated itself, the philosophy of the future seems on these accounts to be stuck in the past, or to at least always have a foot in it (a brilliant version of this criticism with respect to postmodernism is found in Maker, 1994, pp. 179-198).

The specific way in which Severino frames the difference between past and present philosophy, though, helps raise a specific metaphilosophical question relevant not only for Severino's work, but also for the contemporary debate on analytic metaphysics and monism. According to Severino, philosophy was born as an attempt to dominate becoming through the immutable, and precisely from the experience of becoming came the fear of death philosophy was born to mend. But if we overcome faith in becoming, have we also overcome the need for philosophy? Is the philosophy of the future the end of philosophy in the achievement of peace, in the overcoming of the fear of death, once and for all?

These questions, nevertheless, are crucial to understand what the legitimate task of philosophy should be today: should philosophy work towards its own demise and "end itself" in revealing the path to an eternal salvation? Is it a "ladder" we should climb and throw away as fast as possible? Or could there be more substance to philosophical inquiry? Could there be a philosophy not only *of* the future, but *in* the future?



### 3.3 What future for philosophy (or what philosophy for the future)?

To try and reply to these questions and as a way of conclusion to this essay, we would like to consider some reflections from Franz Rosenzweig's *The Star of Redemption* in order to better understand what the "salvation" that Severino associated with the most characteristic task of philosophy could amount to. Much alike Severino, Rosenzweig held that the entire Western philosophical tradition is a deceptive attempt to heal and soothe the deepest wound that afflicts humans, namely the awareness of their being destined to death.

"From death, it is from the fear of death that all cognition of the All begins. Philosophy has the audacity to cast off the fear of the earthly, to remove from death its poisonous sting, from Hades his pestilential breath." (Rosenzweig, 2005, p. 9. All references in this section to this text unless otherwise noted)

According to Rosenzweig, philosophy deludes mortals into thinking it can cure them of their own mortality. Despite all its attempts, though, philosophy is ineffective in the face of the individual's fear of death:

"That the fear of death knows nothing of such a separation in body and soul, that it yells I, I, I and wants to hear nothing about a deflection of the fear onto a mere "body"—matters little to philosophy."

[...]

"For man does not at all want to escape from some chain; he wants to stay, he wants—to live." (p. 9)

According to Rosenzweig, philosophy has been deceptive and vacuous in its attempt to take the weight of death away from the mortal, because it sought to "think away" finitude, claiming that it is eludible as opposed to some non-finite, non-becoming "beyond". And yet, it is precisely the very finitude that philosophy tried to exorcise and suppress, that which humans asked to be made meaningful. Thus, one could say that, if philosophy wants to be "salvific" in the sense of being able to address and ease the mortals' fear of death, it needs to focus on the very experience of finitude that triggers and substantiates this fear, instead of dismissing and denying its consistency. Under this respect, Severino's thought fares just as badly as the philosophy of the tradition. Severino's philosophy as a path of truth, as the

path of the eternity of being, leaves no room for the finite, for the experience that the finite makes of itself as finite. Precisely for this reason, perhaps, he had a hard time providing a positive description of philosophy as the “inevitable future of humanity”: without any finitude to account for anymore, there might not be any possibility for philosophy – or humanity, for that matter – either. This is a problem for Della Rocca and existence monists, too (Schaffer, 2018). The rigor of Severino’s metaphilosophical reflections helps us see that there is no easy way to make philosophy a philosophy of finitude, showing that postmodernist attempts to concentrate on the experience of finitude fail in giving it true, satisfying and “salvific” meaning, and why the path of a *pensiero debole* is therefore not the one to follow. Yet, much in line with the latest debates within contemporary monism, the confrontation with Severino’s thought might show us that precisely the question of how to make sense and truly account of finitude as finitude, without diluting it in a seamless absolute nor exalting it as something independent and standing in itself, is the true question of a philosophy of the future and in the future. In other words, philosophy should not claim to save the finite from itself, but rather attempt to recognize it for what it is; that is, to recognize that finitude is not what prevents existence from being truly and authentically itself, but rather what allows existence to truly and authentically be what it is. Precisely through this inquiry, philosophy would be able to open a horizon of “salvation” in which humans are not “dissolved” as finite, little things, but rather are called to live up to the awareness of being finite and confirmed and reassured in their existence by it. Precisely through the awareness of being finite, in fact, a dimension of responsibility in the most authentic and radical sense of the term is awakened: in knowing that we are finite, we are in the position to take charge of who we are, being and living the finitude that we are to the fullest.

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