

# Severino. Eternity of Being and Finite

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First of all must be recognized the speculative force of Severino's proposal of a monistic and eternal being, concept that stands out as a successful attempt to take leave of historicism and idealism. The finite appearing of appearance is effectively rooted in the immutable eternity of being. The question that arises is nonetheless, in my opinion, whether by this one has given adequate reason for the finite as such, in its finiteness and difference and not only in its belonging to the immutable.

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**Beyond Idealism and Metaphysic, Eternity of Being, Appearing of Finite, Interpretation**

## 1.

First of all I would like to thank you for this invitation. It is a pleasure for me to be here for the second time and to have the opportunity to speak again about an Italian philosopher.

This invitation is also a special honour for me, because, as I must confess, I am not an expert on Severino's philosophy, but only a reader of his works. About ten years ago, and this is perhaps at the origin of the invitation, I had called Severino for a five-days seminar of the *Scuola di alta formazione filosofica*, and I had edited his lectures in a book, which was intended to be a self-presentation of his thought. And our seminar is precisely an introduction to Severino's philosophy, to a philosophy, that is well known in Italy, but is nevertheless quite unknown abroad.

I will divide my intervention into three parts. In the first one I will try to place Severino, especially in the years of his intellectual formation, in the Italian cultural or philosophical atmosphere of that time, in the second one I will dwell on some important turning points of his thought for me and then, in the third one, I will conclude with some short notes related to my personal way of understanding philosophy and therefore to the salient differences that distinguish me from Severino.

In order to introduce Severino's thought It is perhaps useful trying to describe the situation of Italian philosophy immediately after the end of the Second World War. It was a time of renewal after decades in which historicism and idealism (first of all Gentile's philosophy) have been, almost officially, also for their support to fascism, dominant. There was no lack of alternative voices, but they had been largely overwhelmed by the official academic culture of an idealistic stamp, which even in the non-politically aligned authors contained strong traces of historicism. Even an author like Gramsci, although in his alternative philosophy, could not avoid a close confrontation with the dominant historicism. And also at the Catholic University of Milan, in which the official philosophy was neothomism,

could you notice how important idealism was. The issue was in fact to reconcile Christian philosophy and modernity (i.e. historicism and idealism) without falling in the immanentism of Modernism. In Catholic circles, the greatest danger was identified with the application of the principle of immanence to the religious and theological terrain, while the purely idealistic philosophies of a secular matrix, precisely because of their reluctance to engage directly with the religious terrain, were taken as testimony to the spirit of the times, susceptible nevertheless to corrections and additions. After the war Gustavo Bontadini, who was the great maestro of Severino, tried for example a rigorous metaphysical path, in which philosophical task was a rational knowledge of being, supported by the principle of non-contradiction (or law of contradiction). A modern neo-Thomism is recognisable by its ability to integrate the demands of modernity into a more comprehensive metaphysical horizon, so thought Bontadini and with him most of the neo-thomist philosophers.

Severino grew up at this school and was early recognized as the best pupil of Bontadini. But in 1970 the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith ruled that Severino's philosophical ideas were not compatible with Christianity as the basis of Severino's belief in «the eternity of all being» eliminates the possibility of a Creator God.

This short and schematic reconstruction deserves some comments. First of all we must recognize that the intention of a new confrontation with contemporary philosophy, beyond idealism and historicism could be said for the entire philosophy of the second post-war period. Even the years between the two wars, as we have just said, had already known a conspicuous series of alternatives to neo-idealism, but, also for political reasons, neo-idealism had turned out to be dominant and had represented a sort of lid on a pot that was boiling.

We can mention between the Catholics Augusto Guzzo, who developed an original form of Christian idealism, inspired to Augustin, or Carlo Mazzantini, who supported a form of metaphysical humanism in the tradition of a continuity between Greece and Christianity (and Del Noce was a pupil of Mazzantini), or Michele Federico Sciacca, with his spiritualistic metaphysic of integrality, or the personalism of Luigi Stefanini or the Thomism of Amato Masnovo. And between the philosophers, whose orientation was not a Christian one, you can remember the names of Piero Martinetti, Nicola Abbagnano, Luigi Bobbio, Antonio Banfi, Enzo Paci. As you see, between the two world wars there have been a lot of philosophers – most of them had an important role after the end of Second world

war too – who professed a philosophy different from idealism. Never the less, they remained for a long time minority. Only after the war there could be a decisive turning point and certainly Severino belongs in this sense entirely to the renewal of Italian philosophy (which thus experienced a phenomenological, hermeneutic, spiritualistic, metaphysical, neo-Marxist flowering and also a new interest for the human sciences). One could not understand the post-war turnaround, which suddenly erased dependence on idealism, if not for the fact that it made use of strands that had already been in operation, albeit under the surface. It takes place like the awakening from a long sleep and sometimes preserves, without consciousness, traces of dreams already dreamt.

The second observation is that, in this climate, Severino, in a certain sense continuing an element of his own school of origin, became the exponent of a radical metaphysical return to classicism. The contemporary philosophy that was closest to him, from Heidegger to Carnap, is taken as a springboard for a return to the origin, for a radicalism that uses the principle of Bontadini's incontrovertibility as a sword that cuts the Gordian knot of ambiguities and half-reforms of post-war philosophy and of the whole history of philosophy. Here, too, we could observe that the operation initiated by Severino takes to its extreme consequences an orientation that was present in the school of Milan, that of considering the history of philosophy as a substantially unitary whole, even in the variety and even in the opposition of the individual philosophies, and of seeing in Aristotelianism the foundation of a perennial metaphysics. Severino maintains the idea of a unity of philosophy, but turns it upside down in the direction of a madness that ultimately consigns being to appearance.

In presenting his book I used the image of the nonexistent knight (*Il cavaliere inesistente*) of Italo Calvino's memory, Agilulfo, to outline what seems to me a salient feature of his philosophy, which is precisely, as in the figure of Agilulfo, perfection. Not mixing with the inaccuracies and vulgarities of the body and life (which are satirical portrayed in his servant Gurdulù), he is, even in battle, unattainable in his perfection. We can surely remember the first pages of this roman, when Charles the Great, while reviewing his troops, is interdicted in front of this enigmatic figure, which arouses admiration, astonishes and has no equal. Everything in him runs to perfection. Severino's thought is a sort of inexorable Occam's razor that goes back to the beginnings of western philosophy, unmasking its infidelities and restores being in its perfection. (In his eyes, I fear, we are all educated Gurdulù).

In this sense, however, Severino is suddenly devoid of interlocutors and, despite his many students, without a possible prosecution. The almost religious qualification of Maestro, somebody one must listen to, is well suited to him (and you can find sometimes, mixed with the rigor and dryness of logical argumentation, also vaguely oracular expressions). Sure, a discussion with him is possible, it is also suited, but it is not a dialogue. Venerable and terrible as Parmenides, even in the exquisite trait of his distinguished human kindness, he is far from the midwifery of Socrates (an aristocratic trait, tempered in him by courtesy, that remains in his scholars, as you can see for example with Cacciari).

## 2.

But let us now venture into some of the themes of his philosophy that seem most stimulating to me.

Precisely because we are now using English, the dominant language of an analytical philosophy that conceives philosophizing as writing on a blackboard that contains only the words that are written on it, it is for me interesting to underline, in opposition to this orientation, the intense relationship that Severino has with the history of philosophy. In him there is not only a privileged relationship with the greats of classicism (Parmenides and Aristotle *in primis*) but an incessant dialogue with subsequent developments, from Thomas to Descartes, up to Leopardi, Gentile, Husserl and Heidegger and even the neo-positivism. In the whole development of philosophy you can read the history of the West. As he writes: «The history of the West is a metaphysical experiment» (*The essence of Nihilism*, p. 149). Which one? «The assenting to the non-being of being» (ib. 207). But «in affirming that being is not – in assenting to the not-being of being – metaphysics affirms that the not-Nothing is nothing» (ib. 207) and has needed therefore, in its seeking for reasons, a privileged (divine) being, exempt from birth and death, something perfect and eternal.

In great parallelism to this thought philosophy has invented the notion of truth as something hitherto unheard of, as something that stands above all variations and mutability. A great thought that cannot simply be dismissed, but which is nevertheless, similarly to God, destined to die. And it is destined to do so on the basis of an internal logic, whereby truth, which is what is, is configured as power and therefore also at the same time as prediction and destruction. Truth, in short, by defining being, also in-

roduces non-being, becoming, and indeed makes this an entity: to use Severino's expression, it gives rise to an entification of nothingness. This is the origin of the oppositions that have lacerated philosophy over the centuries, the oppositions between being and nothingness, between being and becoming, and the oscillation between one and the other, already in Parmenides, between day and night, being and nothingness. Nothingness thus constantly accompanies the history of being. As he writes (and we are compelled to think also to his Maestro, Bontadini): «In this history, the mammoth attempt to construct an incontrovertible and infallible knowing is, in its hidden essence, the very attempt to posit, incontrovertibly and infallibly, the nothingness of being» (ib. 295).

One can glimpse in Severino's entire procedure a subterranean duplicity through which he, on the one hand, describes the fatal vicissitude of a philosophy that forgets being and, on the other, continues to hold on to the deepest, though forgotten, matrix of thought. Metaphysics is in fact in its origin the thought of the whole - and to this it is always necessary to refer again - even if then metaphysics has become an alienation absenting to the not being of being (s. 207). Metaphysics is that alienation which makes man become a mortal (s. 235), metaphysics is forgetting that immediate certainty that is contained in the affirmation that being is.

The opposition of being and nothingness, which runs through history and which Plato believed he could resolve in terms of otherness and diversity, is a poison from whose destructive power one can only escape by recognizing that everything is, that also nothingness is, and that calling it nothing is a blunt weapon, which ends up turning against those who use it. This is not the way to get to the bottom of what appears and disappears, because the logically inevitable consequence is that being itself, which is no longer the whole and can transform itself into something else, becomes nothing, as the «fatal» (Severino's word, s. ib. 40) Platonic solution has shown us.

How to escape from this madness, from this will to become something else what is, that is to make it become nothing? By evading that interpretation that describes the phenomenological evidence of the occurrence of phenomena in terms of becoming. Certainly, phenomena enter and leave the perception of the consciousness of us mortals. And this is what Severino calls phenomenological evidence. But calling it becoming is a (false) interpretation, which assumes that the appearance of appearance is a transition from being to non-being. We are not dealing with becoming but with appearing, suggests Severino. «Appearing is not appearance, appearances

too, like realities, appear» (ib. 170). And the appearance of appearing appears and disappears, as, we might say, the light of a flashing light appears and disappears alternately, without therefore becoming nothing or coming to be something again.

Severino's entire discourse, with a logical move that is both elegant and stringent, plunges the history of the West into nothingness and reads it as a succession of interpretations – i.e. expressions of the will to power - that impose a meaning on that changing vicissitude of experience that they themselves have previously consigned to the senselessness (madness) of becoming.

We can try to say otherwise: Parmenides has the greatness of having thought of being (and for this we must return to Parmenides) but, like a cracked apple, has also placed next to being the non-being of doxa. He has made the mistake of thinking of being as something without determinations and not as the whole of the differences where even the nothing, not abstractly entified, manifests a positivity because it belongs to the whole, where the becoming turns out to be apparition of the immutable.

In this way, however, Parmenides admitted the existence of a being that is not, a pure appearance. This phantom of nothingness, recluse in the corner of appearance, however, threatens the incontrovertible consistency of being, that is, the immediate perception that being is and the equally immediate perception that non-being is not because of the immediate incontrovertible contradiction on the basis of which it is assumed. Severino is a tenacious opponent of mediations! A knot is cut, not untied, because in this way it becomes more and more tangled. And as he notes, a dialectical thinking is nothing else than the pure expression of becoming. Moreover, it gives rise to the desire, an act of the will and not of reason, to explain how non-being can come from being (exemplary in this sense is the Jewish-Christian idea of creation). An extreme and unsuccessful attempt to remove the contradiction that has been introduced.

The history of the West is then a history of nihilism: a nihilism first introduced and then removed by a philosophizing that departs from myth, but does not reach Philosophy, that necessary and joyful thinking that is not produced by any particular philosopher, but which manifests itself to those who do not make the mistake of evading it. You can hear the voice of Spinoza, even if Severino judges not radical enough the great Jewish Philosopher (Spinoza undertakes to demonstrate the existence of a Being that necessarily exists: an erroneous attempt, because, as we know, that being is, is an immediate evidence, s. 193).

### 3.

We find ourselves in the presence of a fascinating philosophical alternative. It points to a 'path of the day' in which, even in the disappearance of death, a Joy shines forth. It is a monistic vision, at times also approached to Spinoza (although Severino, as we have just seen, denies such a reference), which must, however, admit an immanent duality within itself. Being is eternal, but its appearing (which is not appearance) appears and disappears. Appearance is certainly saved in the eternity of being, but neither the appearance nor the disappearance of that appearance is saved.

We, philosophers of chiaroscuro, marked by hermeneutics (and among Severino's pupils many, I remember one for all, Mario Ruggenini, have taken this road, while others, like Carmelo Vigna, have found refuge in a renewed minimal metaphysics) would like, in one sense, less and, in another sense, more than Severino. We want less, because we do not move from the idea of an incontrovertible truth and we believe even less that it is the logical stringency that ensures it. We think that the interpretation, as interpretation of the truth, is not a product of will, an expression of the will to power, but an act of freedom that at the same time finds and invents the right way to tell the truth, without therefore claiming a possess of it. Truth is a being which is existing only in interpretation and interpretation is existing only in the claim to tap in the being of truth.

But we want even more, because we would like not only to inscribe what is manifested in the eternal and immutable truth of being that is, we would like to understand not only the belonging of appearance to being, but also to grasp what the appearing of appearance consists of, what its sense and meaning is, or in other words we should like to understand the finite in its finiteness and not only in its belonging to the immutable. We are looking for meaning and consistency of difference and we are not content to take note of the deferral of the difference from an eternal, which is always. And in doing this, time - a great theme that Severino systematically treats with suspicion, not to say that he rejects - seems to me an inescapable issue, in its tense unfolding of a relationship between finite and infinite.

Luca Illetterati has provided us with an insightful reconstruction of Severino's thought which - and it is interesting to underline this - finally culminates in an evaluation that, probably coming from other philosophical matrices, converges with what I have tried to suggest. But before focusing on these conclusions, I would like to underline the two central aspects of his exposition: the notions of meta-philosophy and truth. I do this



starting from my hermeneutic perspective (the Turin school of Pareyson), a perspective that has been trivialized by Vattimo in the form of debolism, but which is on the contrary an attempt to get to the bottom of the task of philosophy.

Meta-philosophy – he suggests – means that philosophy is not a method, it is not the application of a more or less rational procedure to an object, but it is a form of knowledge that is questioned and reconfigured in the very act of confronting its object. The many philosophies are the search for the most appropriate way to come to terms with this question.

Truth, therefore,—can neither – Illetterati underlines – be trivialized, reduced, dismissed, nor stiffened in a form that continues to think of truth as a possession that is removed from all consummation: a kind of insured real estate investment. Truth is only given in the form of interpretation. However, we must also say that interpretation does not occur where there is a renunciation of stating a proposition as capable of telling the truth.

Now here comes the final point that shows my convergence with Illetterati, but also the debt we owe to Severino. Severino, in fact, has held high the question of truth and in doing so has overshadowed the finiteness of the finite. We, on the other hand, seem to agree on the urgency of talking about this finiteness. Perhaps, but it is more a question than an observation, what we differ on is that in thinking about this finite. Illetterati accentuates the theme of death, but for me, in its dramatic nature, death cannot be elevated to a foundation, but on the contrary, it is a barrier, an obstacle, something against which we collide. Finiteness cannot be thought of with a sleight of hand that transforms this barrier (objective) into a limit (still controlled) by the finite. Death must be thought of starting from life and not vice versa. But then the finite must also be thought of in its relationship, tension with the non-finite and perhaps metaphysically and religiously, in its tension with the infinite.

Exactly this form of tense relation is the reason of my interest for the theme of time. Time has an unstable character: it is always and never. If we use Severino's vocabulary, time is an appearing which is not only appearance, because it is the form in which we have experience of being. Time and being stay in a relationship, that I found symbolized in the biblical account of Jacob's struggle with the Angel. This tense relationship is, for us finite beings, the only way to conceive the relation between finite and infinite.

In my notion of being I am certainly distant from Severino, but the distance often allows to perceive even better the greatness of another thought

and provokes at the same time the comparison and the challenge of a discussion. We can any more discuss with Severino, so we have a double task: let his writings speak with respect and attention and make them part of our discourse, as a provocation and testimony of one who has sought the path of the day.

## Reference

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