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# Eternity & Contradiction

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# Opening Note

by Giulio Goggi

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In dialogue with Graham Priest on the theme of the primal structure of knowledge – see *Eternity and Contradiction*, vol. 2, 2020 – Severino wrote:

Just as “being” does not mean “tree”, “water”, “moon”, and so forth (even though it is the predicate of “tree”, “water”, “moon”, and so forth), so “being” does not even mean, and, in a certain sense, above all does not mean “nothing”. “Being” is not “nothing”. *And yet “being” is also predicated of “nothing”*. In fact, the “nothing” that “being” (the *determinatio* “being”) denies that it is (i.e., that “being” rules out) is a meaning that, unlike all other meanings, signifies the absence of all signification, and is thus a *contradiction*. As such, the meaning signifies *something*, but the meaning “nothing” signifies the absence of any *thing*. The signification of this meaning contradicts what it signifies. Except that, as we have seen, contradiction (being contradictory) is not nothing, but is in turn a being, a meaning, so that “being” is also predicated of the meaning “nothing”. It is only because the *determinatio* “being” is *negatio* of the meaning “nothing” that this *determinatio* can also be predicated of this meaning. Thus, the meaning “being” does not rule out “nothing”, but this is not in turn a contradiction. [...]

The contradiction in the meaning “nothing” (and the aporia brought about by the fact that Nothing is thought about, and thus exists in some way) are addressed in particular by Chapter IV of *La struttura originaria* [Adelphi, 1981] and by *Intorno al senso del nulla*, Adelphi, 2013. Here, in addition to reiterating the distinction between contradiction (which is a being) and the contradictory content of the contradiction (which is a non-being, nothing, or in other words an impossibility), we can point out that in the statement “being is not nothing” – i.e., in the negation of “being is nothing” – “being is nothing” is a contradiction both because, as in all contradictions, the predicate is the negation of the subject, and because the predicate itself is a contradiction, or in other words, it is a meaning whose con-



tent is the absence of all meaning. And the sense of this two-fold contradiction is addressed determinately in the two works cited above. (pp. 78-79).

Therefore, it was decided to dedicate this issue of *Eternity and Contradiction* to chapter IV of *The primal structure* and to *About the Meaning of Nothingness*, translating almost entirely the first one and significant parts of the second one. This was done to return to discuss the “problem of nothingness” that is the aporia that arises from the consideration of what Severino called *the primal structure of truth*, as emerges from the text above.

[I]

*Primal structure* means the foundation of knowledge – the appearing of being in the form of identity/non-contradiction – which is realized as the primal structure of truth only insofar as it is able to *absolutely* remove its own negation; otherwise we would not have to deal with the foundation. Severino puts it like this:

In the primal structure of the authentically undeniable, i.e., of the destiny of truth, Being *qua* Being, i.e., every being, appears in being itself and nothing other than itself on the one hand, and a certain set of beings appear on the other hand. In this combination, the negation of this being itself and of this set is self-negation (p. 74).

The primal structure of the incontrovertible includes the negation of the opposition (and the negation of the beings that appear). If this structure were *only* the appearing of the being’s being itself and thus were not the appearing of the negation of the opposition (if it were *determinatio* without being *negatio*), this structure would be affirmation and negation of the opposition: it would be explicitly (*in actu signato*) the affirmation and implicitly (*in actu exercito*) the negation, because if it were the appearing of only the affirmation of the opposition it could not be the negation of the non-opposition. In other words, it would leave the possibility of the non-opposition open (p. 83).

The primal structure of the incontrovertible *includes* the negation of the negation of the opposition: it does not coincide with it. This structure, in fact, is the appearing of being itself and not other than itself (it is the appearing of the opposition) on the part of being *qua* being, and thus on the part of every being and, primarily, *on the part of the beings that appear*, where both the negation of being itself and the negation of *the beings that appear* is self-negation. Thus, the primal structure *also includes* the negation of the negation of the existence of the beings that appear (p. 83).

The appearing of this “self-negation” of the negation of the foundation is the *mediational structure* of the “élenchos”. Severino has elaborated on this extensively in *The Essence of Nihilism*, par. 6 (Verso, 2016) and in *Eternity and Contradiction*, vol. 2, 2020, in dialogue with Graham Priest. We certainly refer to those writings. The contributions in this issue – first of all, that of Priest – are the ideal continuation of that dialogue and focus precisely on the aporia of nothingness that Plato already indicated as the greatest of the aporias.

[II]

This aporia says that “nothing” is thought and therefore “is”. Now this seems to disprove the primal structure which is the undeniable appearing of the being in the form of being identical to itself and not other than itself: that is, the undeniable appearing of the opposition of each being to his own other and therefore also to that absolutely other than being which is nothingness. Still in *Eternity and Contradiction* vol 2, 2020, Severino wrote:

It could be objected that everything that is denied by the incontrovertible – as the negation of the opposition is denied – is nothing, but nevertheless appears and thus is being. Demonstrating this contradiction – which [...] is at the heart of the aporia of Nothing [...] and seems to belong to the primal structure – this objection does not obviate the need for the negation of the opposition to be self-negation, but demonstrates that this necessity, while remaining such, is joined to that contradiction. And not only, but as this contradiction is (like every contradiction) a negation of the opposition, considering this contradiction as something that must be denied is grounded upon the primal structure and thus cannot be its denial. In other words, it is necessary that the denial be only apparent (p. 83).

In dialogue with his critics, Severino himself said that if, absurdly, he failed to show what he showed, that is, if he failed to resolve the aporia, this would not lead to the denial of the primal structure. In fact, the denial that the meaning “nothing” belongs to the primal structure, i.e. to the structure of the opposition between being and nothing, is self-negation:

If [...] it were affirmed that nothing has no meaning (it is the neo-positivist objection) and that therefore the opposition of being to nothing is also meaningless, and therefore also something like “being” is meaningless, this affirmation would deny being meaningful, precisely because being is to mean, to be meaningful, meaning, and this thesis cannot fail to present itself as a being. Or if it were affirmed that being is nothingness, precisely because the nothingness “is”,

this affirmation (if it recognizes that it is something, that is, a being) would claim to be nothing. On the other hand, the thesis that nothing has no meaning is a tautology that does not know it is: it is a tautology because “having no meaning” is a synonym for “nothing”, so to say that nothing is to have no meaning is to say that nothing is nothing (Severino, 2018, p. 226).

The “nothing” – that is the absolute absence of meaning – appears, allows itself to be considered and shows that it does not mean “tree”, “water”, “moon”, or any other being. And it is precisely for this reason that the fundamental aporia of nothingness opens up. In the writings mentioned above, Severino concretely removed it.

Severino E. (2018). *Dispute sulla verità e la morte* [*Disputes on Truth and Death*]. Milano: Rizzoli.

Severino E. (2020). Discussion with Graham Priest. *Eternity and Contradiction. Journal of Fundamental Ontology*, 2: 67-89.

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# Presentation

by Federico Perelda

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This volume is a special issue dedicated to the theme of nothingness. It originates from the idea, shared with prof. Severino, to translate the chap. IV of his text *La Struttura Originaria [Primal Structure]* (1958), entitled *The aporia of nothingness*. Severino also considered the hypothesis of adding a short piece of writing, a note, which would take into account the orientations of the current debate, but his disappearance made this proposal impossible.

This volume opens offering the English-speaking reader the translations of a large part of the chap. IV of *Primal Structure*, as well as selected passages from the volume, published several decades later, *Intorno al senso del nulla [On the sense of nothingness]* (2012). Then follow the contributions of various scholars who, keeping Severino's text in the background, have dealt with the theme of nothingness.

First of all, a clarification to guide the reader who is not familiar with Severino's work. *Primal Structure* is a text from 1958 to which Severino has constantly referred, over the years, as the foundation of most of the philosophical questions he has dealt with. It is not exaggerated to say that *Primal Structure* plays, with respect to Severino's thought, the role that the *Science of Logic* has in the Hegelian system. Severino is a thinker whom we could define neo-Eleatic (today with other jargon he would be defined as a dynamic eternalist), who centers his thought in the principle of non-contradiction, also called the principle of opposition between being and non-being. It is therefore not surprising that the concept of non-being, of nothing, is taken seriously by him. The nothingness, however, appears as something contradictory, paradoxical.

Severino is a staunch defender of the principle of non-contradiction: for him, contradictions are nothing, that is, there are no contradictory objects or inconsistent states of affairs. And precisely for this reason there is no becoming conceived of as the alleged passage between being and nothing: it would be something contradictory. Yet, there are contradictions of various kinds in his system; and that of nothingness is one of them. That there are contradictions means that there are inconsistent notions; that is, there is the act of *contradicting* oneself, there are *contradicting* sentences, propositions, thoughts, sometimes in an unavoidable, unsolvable way. Nothingness is such an example.

Severino deems the nothingness as an aporetic notion, since it must be said that nothing is nothing but also that nothing is something. Nothing is by definition nothing.

ing; but it is something because of many reasons: because it is what we *refer* to when we say that it is nothing; because it is an object of thought, and, I would say above all, because it is the term of opposition to being. Each of these reasons should be considered separately, also taking into account Severino's proximity to Meinong (a topic that should be adequately investigated). But perhaps it is the last thing that needs to be clarified here. Being is not non-being; this opposition makes not-being the term of a relation and thus hypostatizes it despite its negative nature. Hence the contradiction that, as Russell also said, «in some sense nothing is something» (*The Principles of Mathematics*, § 73).

It is worth noting that the contradiction of nothingness is not resolved in the sense that it is dissolved, canceled. Indeed, some contradictions are resolved in such a way that what first appeared inconsistent, then, thanks to a clarification or a conceptual enrichment, is no longer so. But this is not the case with the nothingness. The contradiction does not derive from an inappropriate conception, from a misunderstanding. Indeed, it is precisely when one has correctly understood what nothingness is, that it appears as something essentially contradictory. However, it is a contradiction to be understood as the act of contradicting oneself, for Severino. That is, it is necessary to contradict oneself in conceiving nothingness; but this does not mean that there is a contradictory object; rather the nothingness consists of two aspects contradicting each other. In this, it is similar to a contradictory notion like 'square circle'. But there is a difference. In the case of a 'square circle' we are dealing with a contradiction due to the logical conjunction between incompatible predicates, such as being circular and being quadrangular; while, in the case of nothing, the contradiction seems to concern a single concept.

But how can a single concept be contradictory? Indeed, it seems that two elements are needed for there to be a contradiction. The fact is that for Severino anything, insofar as it is what it is, has or is a certain meaning; and every meaning, every being has a dual nature, that is, it contains two aspects or moments corresponding to 'positive meaningfulness' and 'determined meaning'. In the case of nothingness, the specific meaning of which it consists is precisely the absence of meaning, the taking away of anything. Hence the contradiction between its positive signifying and the absence it signifies.

This volume collects the contributions of various scholars, who attest to the most varied positions around a theme which, after having been banished from the metaphysical debate for a long time, has returned to being what it has always been: the cross and delight of metaphysicians.

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# The Aporia of Nothingness

Emanuele Severino

*Texts by Emanuele Severino, excerpted from La struttura originaria [Primal Structure] (1958), and from Intorno al senso del nulla [On the Sense of Nothingness] (2013), translated into English by Sergio Knipe, edited by G. Goggi and F. Perelda.*

Translator's note: Translating Emanuele Severino's writing poses a number of terminological challenges, the most obvious being his use of the Italian word "niente". This means both "nothing" (as in "no thing") and "nothingness" (the state of not existing). I have done my best to distinguish between the two. For simplicity's sake, I have instead avoided using "Nothing", with a capital N, except in one case where Severino himself uses it, with reference to Heidegger's work. In the same context, the author also employs the expressions "nullità", which I have rendered literally (as "nullity"), and "nientità", which I have again translated as "nothingness".

# The Aporia of Nothingness I

## Excerpts from *La struttura originaria* [*Primal Structure*], ch. 4.

### I. Formulation of the aporia

The positing of the principle of non-contradiction requires the positing of *not-being*. Not only that, but “not-being” belongs to the very meaning of “being”. [...]

The aporia which we wish to examine pertains to not-being, not insofar as this is *a certain* not-being – or *a certain* being (i.e. a determined being) – but insofar as not-being is “nihil absolutum”, what is *absolutely other* than being, and therefore – we might say – insofar as it is that which lies *beyond* being, understood as the *totality of being*. This is an ancient aporia – which Plato was already fully aware of – yet which in a way has always been avoided, circumvented, and ultimately left unsolved.

Now, precisely because it is ruled out that being is nothing, in order for this exclusion to subsist, nothingness is *posited*, *present*, and therefore *is*. There is a discourse on nothingness, and this discourse attests to the *being* of nothingness. Or there is some knowledge, some awareness of nothingness, which attests to its being. Therefore, we must apparently conclude that contradiction is the foundation on which the very principle of non-contradiction can be realised. Plato clearly presents this aporia in the *Sophist*. But he only presents the aporia here, and then sets it aside for good. Certainly, Plato shows what kind of not-being can be said to be – not-being is as *a certain* being – but in doing so he leaves open the difficulties initially outlined in the dialogue (236e-239a), which stem from the impossibility of excluding not-being, understood as absolute not-being, from being, without thereby including it in the latter. In order to refute the sophist – and especially to show that, contrary to what Parmenides maintained, being does not imply the negation of multiplicity – Plato’s

analysis is certainly sufficient; but the aporia remains with regard to absolute not-being, which Plato – like Parmenides – preserves as not-being: for, by manifesting itself, this absolute not-being bears witness precisely to its being<sup>1</sup>.

## 2. [...]

### 3. Another formulation of the aporia

As absolute not-being, nothingness is like the *horizon* of being: nothingness is what is absolutely *other* than being, or what is *beyond* being<sup>2</sup>.

The principle of non-contradiction expresses precisely the nature of the relation between being and the horizon of nothingness. For this relation, being on the one hand implies the horizon of nothingness, precisely since it is claimed that being is not not-being; but, on the other hand, since this horizon is nothingness, being implies nothing, no horizon at all. Hence, the principle of non-contradiction, which ought to express this implication, cannot be established. (But, once again, it is precisely this acknowledgement that being as such implies nothing outside itself which requires being to refer to nothingness, i.e. the implication of the latter by the former). In other words, if not-being is not, it cannot even be stated that being is not not-being, since not-being, in this statement, in some way is.

- 1 Aristotle formulates the same aporia without explicitly presenting it as such, when he notes that we even say that not-being “is” not-being: “we assert that even what is not *is* a thing that is not” (*Met.*, IV, 2, 1003, b10, transl. by Ch. Kirwan).
- 2 It is clear that not-being is *other* than or *different* from being, not *because of something* which it is but which being is not, but precisely because it is not something. Indeed, if someone were to say that, since not-being is different from being, yet not different *because of something*, it is no different from being, we should answer that, certainly, in this sense it is no different – for this is the sense in which two beings are different – but that it is different in the sense that it is the absolute privation of being. The aporia under scrutiny here instead concerns this absolute privation, which – within the present argument – presents itself precisely as a *being*.

#### 4. General structure of the aporia

The aporia of not-being can therefore be developed in a twofold direction: either by showing that not-being is (§ 1); or, if we keep the not-being of not-being, by showing how those logical structures that imply the positing of not-being cannot constitute themselves (§ 3).

#### 5. Clarification of the sense in which nothingness is

To solve the aporetic situation just outlined, let us first observe – and this is ultimately the fundamental observation – that when we affirm that the positing of not-being attests to the being of not-being, we cannot be seeking to affirm that “nothing”, as such, means “being”; but, rather, that “nothing”, which is meaningful as nothing, is. The presenting itself of nothing does not attest to the fact that “nothing” means “being”; but that “nothing”, meaningful as nothing, is. And, on the other hand, this “being” of nothing is not meaningful as “not-being”; but, being meaningful as being, is the being of nothing (which is meaningful as nothing). The contradiction of not-being-that-is, therefore, is not internal to the meaning “nothing” (or to the meaning “being”, which is the being of nothing); but lies between the meaning “nothing” and being, or the positivity of this meaning. The positivity of meaningfulness, in other words, is in contradiction with the very content of the meaningfulness, which is precisely meaningful as absolute negativity.

#### 6. “Nothingness” as a self-contradictory meaning

Every meaning (every thinkable content, which is to say every entity, however it may constitute itself) is a semantic synthesis between the positivity of meaningfulness and the determinate content of positive meaningfulness; or – which amounts to the same thing – between formal being and the determination of this formality (Ch. 2, § 2) – where formal being is precisely the positivity of the meaningfulness of the determination. Thus, it is clear that the meaning “nothingness” is self-contradictory, which is to say a contradiction, it is being meaningful as a contradiction: the very contradiction whereby the positivity of this meaningfulness is contradicted by



the absolute negativity of the meaningful content. In other words, every meaning is a synthesis of the meaning “being” and of the determination of being; every meaning, that is, is a determinate positivity (“being”). In the meaning “nothingness”, the determination of positivity contradicts – as absolute negativity – positivity, which is to say the positive meaningfulness of the determination.

It is clear, therefore, that “nothing”, understood as a self-contradictory meaning, includes as a semantic moment “nothing”, which – as we have noted in the previous section – is meaningful as nothing. (To put it differently, “nothing”, as a non-contradictory meaning, is the moment of “nothing”, as a self-contradictory meaning).

## 7. General structure of the resolution of the aporia of nothingness

The aporia of the being of nothingness is resolved by noting that the principle of non-contradiction *does not affirm the non-existence* of the self-contradictory meaning discussed in the previous section; rather, it affirms that “nothing” does not mean “being” (as stated in section 5); in other words, it requires the non-existence of the contradiction intrinsic to the meaning “nothing”, which ranks as the moment of the self-contradictory meaning. Not-being, which in the formulation of the principle of non-contradiction appears as the negation of being, is precisely the not-being which ranks as the moment of not-being, understood as a self-contradictory meaning.

The aporias formulated in sections 1 and 3 are produced, on the one hand, by the failure to acknowledge the correct meaning of the self-contradictoriness of the meaning “nothing”; and, on the other, by the abstract adoption of the moments of this self-contradictoriness. It is worth noting that this “self-contradictoriness” is not equivalent to “meaninglessness”: if not, the meaninglessness of nothing would determine the meaninglessness of being – unless by “meaninglessness” we mean self-contradictoriness itself.

## 8. Solution of the aporia formulated in section 1

As regards the first aporia presented, we will answer by acknowledging that, certainly, nothingness is; yet not in the sense that “nothingness” means “being”: in this sense, nothingness is not, and being is – and it is this not-being

of nothingness and being of being that is affirmed by the principle of non-contradiction; indeed, to state that “nothingness” is not absolutely meaningful as “being” is tantamount to stating that nothingness is not. We thus state that nothingness is, in the sense that a positive meaningfulness – a being – is meaningful as the absolutely negative, i.e. as “nothing”; in other words, it is meaningful as that “nothing” which is absolutely not meaningful as “being”. Therefore, nothingness is, in the sense that the absolutely negative is positively meaningful; or, nothingness is, in the sense that the meaning “nothing” is self-contradictory. The two sides or moments of this self-contradictoriness are – as already noted – *being* (positive meaningfulness) and *nothing*, as a *non-contradictory* meaning (precisely because nothingness-as-moment is absolutely not meaningful as “being”).

[...] In order to exclude that being is not – i.e. that it is not-being – it is thus necessary for not-being to be; that it to say, it is necessary for the self-contradictory meaning in which that being of not-being consists to subsist. If the meaning “nothingness” did not rank as this self-contradictoriness – if nothingness were not, in the sense which can correctly be acknowledged – and if, therefore, nothingness were only that absolute negativity whereby it ranks as a non-contradictory meaning (“nothingness” as the moment of self-contradictoriness), to exclude that being is nothingness would be not to exclude anything, since the exclusion would not have anything to which it could apply: nothingness would not appear at all. (But it is also clear that the very assumption that nothingness is only that absolute negativity [...] is self-contradictory: for we can say that nothingness is really nothing, insofar as nothingness is *manifest*, and therefore *is* this being nothing at all).

[...] The establishment of the principle of non-contradiction does not require [...] that the self-contradictory nature of the meaning “nothing” not be removed, but requires the semantic field constituted by this self-contradictory meaning.

## 9. Explication of the reasons for the aporia

The aporia of nothingness emerges because the two abstract moments of the concreteness constituted by “nothing” as a self-contradictory meaning are abstractly conceived as mutually unrelated. By contrast, insofar as these two moments are conceived concretely, nothingness-as-moment does not rank as a self-contradictory meaning, precisely because the self-contradic-

toriness applies to the concrete, of which nothingness-as-moment is a moment.

The concreteness in question is such insofar as the abstract is *removed*, as it is abstractly conceived. If nothingness, as an abstract moment of self-contradictoriness, is understood as being in turn a synthesis of the two abstract moments of being and nothingness, it is posited as *the very concreteness* of which it was a moment. This positing is simply a *repetition* of the previous positing of that concreteness. Hence, it will be necessary to repeat the removal of the abstract. And if not-being, as an abstract moment of repeated concreteness, is posited again as the synthesis of being and nothingness, a second repetition will occur.

The granting of an *actually* endless repetition entails that the meaning “nothing” is not posited, and therefore that not even being is posited, if the positing of being implies the positing of nothingness; therefore, it also entails that nothingness is not posited, if the positing of any meaning implies the positing of being.

But even leaving aside the consequences of the granting of the actually endless repetition, the affirmation of this repetition, as such, is intrinsically contradictory. On the one hand, it leaves what it conceives of as involved in an endless repetition as *something posited* – for, in order to conceive of it like this, it must somehow posit it; on the other hand, precisely by virtue of the content of the conception, what is conceived of *must not be posited* – for else the endless repetition would be limited by the removal of that abstract moment which in turn is not posited as the repetition of the concept. The exclusion of the actually endless repetition of the semantic concreteness of nothingness thus entails the positing of nothingness; and thus its being concretely posited as a self-contradictory meaning. This concrete positing in turn entails, as already mentioned, the removal of the abstract concept of the abstract moments of being and nothingness, where this nothingness – by virtue of the exclusion of endless repetition – means, as an abstract moment, only “nothingness”, and not, in turn, the synthesis of being and nothingness.

The aporetic argument instead keeps the moments of self-contradictoriness abstractly separate, and by considering nothingness-as-moment, finds it as something which lets itself be considered, and which therefore *is*; that is to say: it finds precisely that from which it has sought to prescind (the other moment) by considering nothingness-as-moment abstractly: it finds the being of nothingness. [...]

To sum up: once the moments of the concrete are abstractly assumed

as unrelated, nothingness-as-moment is detected as that self-contradictoriness which belongs to the concrete – that is, the abstract is assumed as the concrete; but at the same time the abstract is assumed as abstract, because the self-contradictoriness that is seen to pertain to it is not allowed to resolve itself into “nothingness” as a non-contradictory meaning, and this not letting the self-contradictoriness resolve itself amounts precisely to assuming as abstract what had been assumed as concrete, notwithstanding the fact that what does not allow itself to be further analysed is the abstract moment. [...]

The non-contradictoriness of nothingness, nothingness as nothing, thus only manifests itself insofar as nothing is held firm as the moment of nothingness as a self-contradictory meaning. [...]

## 10. Solution of the aporia formulated in section 3

As regards the second aporetic direction (§ 4), here too an abstract adoption occurs of the abstract moments of self-contradictoriness. But while in the first aporetic direction the abstract moment constituted by positive meaningfulness – from which one prescind in the abstract consideration of nothingness-as-moment – occurs again within nothingness-as-moment, in this second direction the prescinding from that moment makes one completely lose sight of it. Thus, as what remains evident is the absolute negativity of nothingness – i.e. nothing as a non-contradictory meaning, whereby it cannot even rank as something present – one notes the impossibility for there to exist any kind of relation (such as that which the principle of non-contradiction would establish) with absolute negativity – i.e. with that which, insofar as it is this negativity, cannot even manifest itself.

It is clear that, here too, the aporia can constitute itself, since, at the same time, we both completely lose sight (*in actu signato*) of the moment of the positive meaningfulness of “nothingness” and do not lose sight of it (*in actu exercito*). If this moment were completely absent – i.e. not posited – the aporetic argument would not subsist either: the “nothingness” would continue to be ignored, because talking about it would constitute precisely the presence of the moment from which one absolutely prescind. In other words, the absolute prescinding subsists insofar as, by abstractly considering the non-contradictory moment of nothingness, the possibility of any relation to the absolutely negative is ruled out; and, at

the same time, that absolute prescinding does not subsist, precisely insofar as the absolute negativity *is considered*, and hence is implicitly held in relation to the moment of its positive meaningfulness from which one would wish to absolutely prescind.

The aporia states: being both implies and does not imply a horizon (the horizon of nothingness) (§ 3). It is clear by now that the aporia constitutes itself insofar as, on the second side of this antinomy, nothing, which is the abstract moment of nothingness as a concrete meaning, is abstractly conceived as unrelated to the moment of positive meaningfulness: as the abstract concept of the abstract moment of nothingness. Having assumed this moment as the horizon of being, and having abstractly conceived this moment (that is, having conceived it as the totality of the meaning “nothingness”), it follows that the implication at such a moment resolves itself in a non-implication.

The removal of the abstractness of the moments of nothingness as a self-contradictory meaning is the positing of abstractness and hence the positing of the relation between the abstract moments. Thus, being, which in the relation of non-contradiction excludes not-being, understood as a non-contradictory meaning, excludes *something distinct* from the positivity constituted by the other moment of self-contradictoriness, yet not *something unrelated* to this moment. As something distinct, nothingness-as-moment is not a self-contradictoriness, and hence it can stand in a relation of contradiction with being; but precisely because nothingness-as-moment is something distinct and not something unrelated to the other moment, it is not the case that being, by referring to it, in the relation of non-contradiction, does not refer to it. In other words, in its reference to nothingness, being excludes it as its contradictory only insofar as it refers to nothingness-as-moment; besides, this moment stands in relation to the moment of its positive meaningfulness, and through this relation – which is the very contradictoriness of “nothing” as a concrete meaning – *endures* or *is capable of standing* in a relation of contradiction to being.

## 11. Notes on the concrete concept and the abstract concept of nothingness as abstract moment

a) Based on what has been argued in the previous section, it is also possible to solve an aporia similar to that presented in section 3. It can be stated that: if nothingness is absolute negativity, it cannot rank as the *semantic*

*moment* of nothingness as concrete meaning.

It is clear that in this case too the aporia emerges because nothingness-as-moment is abstractly conceived of as unrelated to its being, to its positive meaningfulness. Insofar as the distinction between the different moments is understood as their abstract separation, nothingness, as absolute negativity, certainly cannot rank as a moment of semantic concreteness. It must thus be stated that absolute negativity can be distinguished from its positive meaningfulness, and rank as semantic moment, precisely insofar as the very positivity of its ranking as a moment is the other moment – it is the other moment of nothingness as self-contradictory concrete meaning; in other words, it is the very positive meaningfulness of the absolute negative or, rather, it belongs to the structure of this positive meaningfulness of the absolute negative; and the negative must be held in relation to this meaningfulness, so that the concrete concept will not become the abstract concept of the abstract. Nothingness is a moment, because the distinction is not a separation; hence, that from which the negative distinguishes itself is precisely the positivity which enables it to rank as a moment. On the other hand, “nothingness” as something distinct from the positivity of its meaningfulness – since it is considered according to the meaning applicable to it insofar as it is thus distinguished – does not rank as a moment (as a positive), precisely because, as absolute negativity, it has no value. Certainly, nothingness is meaningful as absolute negativity, insofar as it *is* a moment; but its very *being* belongs to the horizon that remains excluded by absolute negativity. Its *being* a moment is precisely the *other* moment; more exactly, its *being* a moment belongs to the structure of its positive meaningfulness.

What is absolutely other than being, *qua other than being*, is not a being; but insofar as it *is meaningful as* what is absolutely other than being, it is a being, a positivity. The positivity of this meaningfulness is not included in what this meaningfulness means, it does not determine what this meaningfulness means. The contradiction of “nothing” lies precisely in this, namely the fact that the meaningfulness is the meaningfulness of the absolutely non-meaningful: it lies not in the fact that the non-meaningful means the meaningful (i.e. has the meaning of “meaningful”), but that the non-meaningful *is meaningful as* non-meaningful.

Nothingness, as such, is the non-meaningful (the non-existent). But the non-meaningful is not separate from its being meaningful as the non-meaningful: it is only through its *being* meaningful that nothingness means “what is absolutely other than meaning” (“what is absolutely other



than being”). The meaning “nothing” is not abstractly separate, but is concretely distinct from the positivity of its meaningfulness. Insofar as it is distinct, it is capable of both meaning what is absolutely other than being and of ranking as the moment (and thus as the positivity which is a moment) of the contradiction in which the concrete meaning of nothingness consists.

In other words, nothingness is that which is affirmed to be meaningful, positive, and existent. And insofar as it is the subject of this affirmation, it is a moment. This being meaningful, positive, and existent is the other moment of the concrete meaning of nothingness. Yet precisely because nothingness is that which is said to *be* meaningful, positive, and existent, it is true that its meaning does not include that positive meaningfulness of its own meaning (i.e. “nothingness” does not mean “being”, which is to say that nothingness as such is not being, but what is absolutely other than being). But it is also true that this meaning of nothingness, insofar as it is *that whose* positive meaningfulness is affirmed (i.e. insofar as it is that which is said to *be*, that is meaningful, positive, and existent), can rank as the moment of contradiction in which the concrete meaning of nothingness consists.

In its concrete meaning, nothingness is the contradiction of existing nothingness; but this being of nothingness, which allows nothingness to be a moment, is posited in the other moment (or as the other moment) of that concrete meaning; and, precisely because it is posited in the other or as the other moment, nothingness-as-moment can be the meaning in which only what is absolutely other than all being (including that being which is the being of nothingness as moment) is posited.

b) If, again, one were to state: distinct moments must be set in relation to one another; but nothingness, as something distinct, is absolute negativity; hence, it cannot *stand* in any relation – if one were to state this, we ought to answer that, in such a way, distinct moments are understood as presupposed to their synthesis; hence, once again, they are understood abstractly. Certainly, if at a first moment the distinct aspects are assumed separately, then no synthesis can occur, at a second moment, between the positive and the negative: the negative, as such, will not even have any relevance on the basis of which the synthesis can be established. Therefore, either no awareness of nothingness is given – and this very aporia does not subsist – or, if this awareness subsists, then the negative already finds itself in a synthesis with the positive. In order for the affirmation of the synthesis not to rank as a self-contradictory statement (i.e. in order for the positing

of the self-contradictory meaning in which the synthesis consists not to rank as a self-contradictory or aporetic statement), it will thus be enough for the synthesis to be concretely conceived: as *primal* and *immediate*, and not as a result presupposing the unrelatedness of distinct moments. If their synthesis is primal, and hence the distinct entities are not assumed as unrelated, the negative can both be that absolute negativity which is required by the principle of non-contradiction and stand in relation to the positive: precisely because the negative is distinct, yet not unrelated to the positive. To deny the unrelatedness is to understand the relation as a primal one.

c) It has also been clarified that nothingness *is* nothing (as already Gorgias noted), not insofar as the absolute negative *is* something (albeit the absolute negative), but insofar as the positive meaningfulness of nothingness *is* that particular meaningfulness which it is. In other words, nothingness is nothing, not *qua* nothing, but insofar as it is a positive meaningfulness.

## 12 [...]

### 13. Critical-historical remarks on the problem of nothingness

a) The study of “nothingness” which Bergson has included in the last chapter of *Évolution créatrice* is certainly among the most noteworthy studies on the topic. However, on the one hand it only shows the self-contradictoriness of the meaning “nothing” – thereby still compromising the value of the principle of non-contradiction – while, on the other, it notes the self-contradictoriness of that meaning for reasons other than those which must be acknowledged. Indeed, for Bergson, the idea of nothingness is “destructive in itself”, since the positing of the negative implies the positing of the positive, which is the content that is being denied: if nothingness is the negation of the positive, the *positing* (concept, idea) of the negative ultimately results in the positing of the positive: for this must be posited, in order to remove it.

The first part of the study, which sets out by gradually eliminating the ways in which the idea of nothingness has been introduced, ends as follows: “the idea of the absolute nought, in the sense of the annihilation of everything, is a self-destructive idea, a pseudo-idea, a mere word. If suppressing a thing consists in replacing it by another, if thinking the absence of one thing is only possible by the more or less explicit representation of

the presence of some other thing, if, in short, annihilation signifies before anything else substitution, the idea of an “annihilation of everything” is as absurd as that of a square circle. The absurdity is not obvious, because there exists no particular object that cannot be supposed annihilated; then, from the fact that there is nothing to prevent each thing in turn being suppressed in thought, we conclude that it is possible to suppose them suppressed altogether. We do not see that suppressing each thing in turn consists precisely in replacing it in proportion and degree by another, and therefore that the suppression of absolutely everything implies a downright contradiction in terms, since the operation consists in destroying the very condition that makes the operation possible.” As a general conclusion, Bergson states that: “the idea of Nothing, if we try to see in it that of an annihilation of all things, is self-destructive and reduced to a mere word; and that if, on the contrary, it is truly an idea, then we find in it as much matter as in the idea of All”<sup>3</sup>.

Bergson never mentions Hegel, yet the latter had dwelt on the same topic at length, namely the notion that the negative is richer than the positive which is denied: it removes it and at the same time preserves it. The meaning “nothing” (which should not be confused with the “nothing” oc-

3 H. Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, translated by A. Mitchell, The Modern Library, New York, 2005 (first edition: Heryny Hold and Company, 1911), p. 308, 324. Consider also the following passage: “there is more, and not less, in the idea of an object conceived as ‘not existing’ than in the idea of this same object conceived as ‘existing’; for the idea of the object ‘not existing’ is necessarily the idea of the object ‘existing’ with, in addition, the representation of an exclusion of this object by the actual reality taken in block” (*ibid.*, p. 311).

Bergson does not distinguish between nothing, understood as what is absolutely other from being (the totality of being), and nothing, understood as the annulment of the totality of being. In Bergson’s text what we find is always this latter meaning. Yet it is clear that nothing is not this annulment, even though the outcome of the annulment is nothing. Besides, according to both meanings of the term “nothing”, the positing of nothing implies the positing of the totality of the positive, so that, on the one hand, Bergson’s considerations can be extended to that meaning of nothing which Bergson does not take into account, and in this sense they are examined in the present text; on the other hand, what is stated in the text can also be referred to that meaning of nothing which Bergson considers. In this latter respect, it must be stated that the concept of “annulment of the whole” does not at all exclude – and this is a very important point – that the concept in question is self-contradictory, for indeed, as we shall see, the ascertainment of the self-contradictoriness of such a concept belongs to the primary structure itself, and, we might say, constitutes its most crucial aspect.

curing at the beginning of Hegel's *Logic*) is therefore a semantic field which includes the very totality of the positive, as something denied, overcome. Positing nothingness certainly means positing what lies beyond being, and hence the positing of nothingness includes the positing of being. But are we really to detect some self-contradictoriness in this, as Bergson contends?

It is certainly interesting to note that the reason why Bergson detects this self-contradictoriness is the abstract assumption of nothingness as moment. Indeed, if nothingness as moment is abstractly separated from the moment of its positive meaningfulness, it presents itself as that absolute negativity whose positing cannot amount to positing anything positive. Furthermore, once we realise that the positing of "nothingness" even implies the positing of the whole, this implication is qualified as self-contradictoriness: as the contradiction between the intention to positing nothing positive and the the actual positing of the totality of the positive. Hence, if we wished to clear Bergson of the charge of making that abstract assumption – which would mean going against the explicit meaning of his text – we would have to counter that the implication of the positing of the positive by the positing of the negative can only be regarded as a self-contradiction if we mistake that implication for the fact that the meaning "nothing" is meaningful as "being" (according to what has been stated in section 5): in order to posit the negative, it is necessary to posit the positive, yet this does not imply that "nothing" means "being".

However, Bergson implicitly comes close to the genuine meaning of the self-contradictoriness of nothing, since – as has been shown – the absolutely negative is positively meaningful – this being the genuine meaning of that self-contradictoriness – and its meaningfulness is, if one may put it so, so positive that it requires the very positing of the totality of the positive.

b) One of the greatest merits of Heidegger's investigation in *Was ist Metaphysik?* is that it has drawn attention to the basic opposition between being and nothingness. The psychologistic tendencies – most prominent in the concept of "anxiety" – and the author's anti-intellectualistic position do not impinge upon this crucial reference. Besides, this psychologism and anti-intellectualism derives from his incapacity to resolve the aporia of the positing of not-being, which – as Heidegger explicitly acknowledges – lies in the contradictoriness of a not-being which is.

Particularly noteworthy is the aporia consisting in the observation that not-being, as the intellectualistic negation of the totality of being, presup-

poses an understanding or presence of the totality of being. Heidegger actually highlights and exploits this aporia in such a way as to essentially determine the development of his enquiry. He warns us that the presence of the totality of being is impossible in its exhaustiveness or concrete determinacy, or only possible as something *ideal*: as the presence of the *idea* in the totality. Thus not-being would only rank as the *formal* negation of being. But how is it possible to distinguish between formal nothingness and real nothingness? Hence the suggestion to abandon the logical plane in order to realise the experience of nothingness.

However, it is clear that, in Heidegger's argument, the claim that the totality is only present as an idea (i.e. in a formal, or non-exhaustive, way) amounts to the mere *presupposing* that the totality is determined to a further degree than experience as the primal determination of the whole; and that furtherness is the *in itself* which remains unknowable. (A counterpart to this logical situation may be found in Jasper's concept of the *Umgreifende* as a non-objectifiable horizon).

On the other hand, since we will independently come to show that further determination of the whole which Heidegger simply presupposes, it must be added that the negation of the formal whole certainly differs from the negation of the concrete whole; yet this difference entails that *we must* speak of a formal nothing and a real nothing, in the sense that the distinction between formality and reality belongs to the *positive meaningfulness* of nothing, and not to nothing as distinct from this positivity. The absolutely negative is not, or does not mean, anything positive, regardless of whether positivity – which is posited as removed in the concept of nothing – has formal value or concrete value. Indeed, the positive is removed or surpassed, in the concept of nothing, as the *whole* of the positive; thus any possible emergence of concrete determinations of this formal positing of the whole certainly entails a change in the positive meaningfulness of nothing, but does not entail that the absolutely negative is not truly such on account of the fact that the positive which has been removed manifests itself inadequately. Assuming that the manifestation of the positive is a process that becomes increasingly concrete, this increase is no doubt at the same time an increase of *the positive meaningfulness* of nothing, but it is not an increase of nothing, as something assumed to be distinct from its positive meaningfulness. Hence, in this respect, there subsists no distinction between formal and real nothingness.

Heidegger too, therefore, abstractly considers nothingness-as-moment to be unrelated to its positive meaningfulness. With a particular take on

Bergson's position, he notes the inconsistency of the distinction between formal and real nothing: indeed, through that abstract way of considering it, the positive meaningfulness from which he abstractly prescind resurfaces within nothingness-as-moment, producing the aporia. Bergson thus notes the inconsistency of the absolute positivity of nothing; complicating the Bergsonian position, Heidegger notes the inconsistency of the distinction between formal and real nothing. For Bergson, what determines the aporia is simply the resurfacing of the positive within nothingness-as-moment; for Heidegger, the aporia is caused by the further consideration that the positive, which resurfaces, has a formal value, which is why the formality and the resulting distinction between formality and reality are attributed to nothingness as such.

c) The aporia of nothingness is not caused by mere verbal suggestion. Suppose that instead of saying "Beyond, outside being there is nothing", we were to say "There is no positive that lies outside the totality of the positive"; or, in symbols: " $\sim (x)$ .  $x$  is outside the totality of the positive" (where variable  $x$  can assume any positive value). What would still remain to be clarified is the meaning of that "outside the totality of the positive" which is precisely nothing, and whose presence gives rise to the aporia. Carnap has good reasons to claim (*The Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language*) that, in his investigation of nothingness, Heidegger merely substantialises a logical form. (And it may be added that Heidegger – like Schopenhauer before him, and later Sartre and others – inappropriately employs the word "nothing" to describe a certain dimension of the positive which, certainly, is not a certain other dimension, but is not the *nihil absolutum*). However, in the logical proposition " $\sim (x)$ .  $x$  is outside...", Carnap does not distinguish the logical situation in which variable  $x$  assumes a limited number of positive values (whereby that with respect to which  $x$  is "outside", "beyond", is a limited dimension of the positive), from the logical situation in which – as mentioned above –  $x$  can assume all positive values (whereby that with respect to which  $x$  is "outside" is the very totality of the positive). It is precisely in this latter case that nothingness (what is outside the whole) *manifests itself*, insofar as in the proposition " $\sim (x)$ .  $x$  is outside the totality of the positive" the meaning "outside the totality of the positive" manifests itself.



## 14. Nothingness and contradiction

Self-contradictoriness – every self-contradictory meaning – is nothingness itself. To clarify this theorem, consider, for example, the following meanings: “non-triangular triangle”, “non-red red”, “non-here here”, “non- $x$   $x$ ”, etc. (Let symbol  $RnR$  stand for any of these meanings, where  $R$  stands for any determination and  $n$  for the negation of the determination). To posit any of these self-contradictory meanings is to *posit nothingness*. Indeed, *no* positive can be said to be a non-triangular triangle, a non-red red, a non-here here, a non- $x$   $x$ , etc. By stating that being is not not-being (where “not-being” ranks both as absolute negativity and as the contradictory of a *certain* positive), the principle of non-contradiction rules out that the positive be self-contradictory, or that self-contradictoriness *be*. Being is being, so self-contradictoriness is nothing: a being that is not (or which is its own contradiction) *is not*.

But just as *to posit* nothingness is not *to posit nothing*, to posit self-contradictoriness is not to posit nothing. For self-contradictory meanings are *present*, and hence *are*. The aporia of the *being* of self-contradictoriness is the *very* aporia of the being of nothingness. This means that – as with the meaning “nothing” – the meaning “self-contradictoriness” is a self-contradictory meaning.

Let us briefly develop the solution of the aporia. Self-contradictoriness is; yet not in the sense that a self-contradictory meaning is meaningful as non-contradictoriness – for instance, not in the sense that  $RnR$  is or means  $RnnR$  (where  $R$  ranks as the negation of its negation); nor in the sense that the positive meaningfulness of self-contradictoriness is not a positive meaningfulness. A self-contradictory meaning is meaningful *in a non-contradictory way* as that self-contradictoriness which it is – the nullity of self-contradictoriness is not or does not mean a not-nullity; self-contradictoriness is not, or does not mean, both a self-contradictoriness and a non-contradictoriness. Now, it is precisely this self-contradictoriness which is meaningful in a non-contradictory way that *is*, i.e. that is positively meaningful. It thus follows that self-contradictoriness, which is to say the absolutely negative, is meaningful in a non-contradictory or positive way. Self-contradictoriness is meaningful in a non-contradictory way, which is to say – *and this amounts to the same thing* – that the absolutely negative is positively meaningful: this is the self-contradictoriness whose *moments* are the self-contradictory meaning (= self-contradictoriness-as-moment) and the non-contradictory or positive meaningfulness of the self-contradictory

meaning. For example, positing the meaning  $RnR$  means positing a self-contradictory meaning, whose moments are the self-contradictory meaning  $RnR$  and the positive meaningfulness of this meaning. (These moments respectively correspond, in the self-contradictory meaning “nothing”, to nothingness-as-moment and to its positive meaningfulness). These, then, are *distinct*, yet not *unrelated*, moments. We have thereby clarified the condition by which we can speak of a *being* of self-contradictoriness; and the condition whereby self-contradictoriness on the one hand is *nothing* and, on the other, is *removed*, i.e. whereby it stands in a (positive) relation to the positive. [...]

This whole argument has nothing to do with A. Meinong’s position, which simply consists in acknowledging that meanings of the  $RnR$  sort must have some mode of existence (*Sosein*) in order for it be possible to deny their existence (*Dasein*). In other words, according to Meinong even self-contradictoriness – which is to say the content of a self-contradictory statement – *is*. What Meinong believes to be a theory is nothing but the enunciation of the aporia of the being of self-contradictoriness. Therefore, Russell is right to note that this theory is a violation of the principle of non-contradiction. Yet just as the aporia of nothingness (or of self-contradictoriness) is not resolved by Frege, so it is not solved by Russell either, because his statement that “the null-class is the class containing no members, not the class containing as members all unreal individuals”<sup>4</sup> only apparently avoids Meinong’s contradiction. Indeed, “not containing any element” is, like Frege’s “absence of meaning”, something positively meaningful, namely the very positive meaningfulness of nothing. Russell’s theory too fails to go beyond the enunciation of the aporia.

## 15. The aporia and its solution: the twofold meaning of self-contradiction

1) What has been stated in the previous section makes it possible to formulate the following aporia: “The positing of the meaning  $RnR$ , as we have seen, is the positing of a self-contradictory meaning, whose semantic moments are  $RnR$  and the positive meaningfulness of  $RnR$ . Let  $r'nr'$  be this

4 B. Russell, (1905). On Denoting. *Mind* 14 (56):479-493, p. 491 [Editor’s note].

new self-contradictory meaning. But if  $r'nr'$  is a self-contradictoriness, based on what has been established in the previous section it must be stated that the self-contradictoriness  $r'nr'$  is nothing; hence, if to posit  $RnR$  is to posit  $r'nr'$ , to posit  $r'nr'$  is to posit that self-contradictory meaning  $r''nr''$  whose semantic moments are  $r'nr'$  and the positive meaningfulness of  $r'nr'$ . The same must be stated with regard to the positing of the self-contradictory meaning  $r''nr''$ . It follows that the positing of the meaning  $RnR$  is the positing of the endless series of self-contradictory meanings  $r'nr'$ ,  $r''nr''$ ,  $r'''nr'''$ ... This implies that the meaning  $RnR$  cannot be posited, given that its positing requires an endless development.”

The aporia can be formulated by considering, instead of the meaning  $RnR$ , the meaning “nothing”: “If the positing of this meaning is the positing of nothing, understood as concrete self-contradictoriness (which corresponds to  $r'nr'$  in the previous formulation, and hence can itself be indicated with the symbol  $r'nr'$ ), whose semantic moments are nothingness-as-moment and the positive meaningfulness of nothingness-as-moment, then that concrete self-contradictoriness too will be nothing. Hence, its positing will be the positing of a self-contradictory meaning, whose semantic moments are that concrete self-contradictoriness and the positive meaningfulness of the latter. In other word, the very synthesis between the absolutely negative and its positive meaningfulness is, as self-contradictoriness (=  $r'nr'$ ), something absolutely negative, whose positing is the positing of a more concrete self-contradictory meaning ( $r''nr''$ ) which includes that synthesis and the positive meaningfulness of the latter as its moment. The conclusion is as above”.

b) A first way of solving the aporia might be as follows: precisely because *every* self-contradictoriness is nothing, there subsists no difference between the terms of the series  $RnR$ ,  $r'nr'$ ,  $r''nr''$ ,  $r'''nr'''$ ... and nothingness-as-moment. Hence, in this regard not only is there no possibility of endless development, but nor is there the possibility of any development whatsoever. Before proceeding any further, let us briefly develop this first point.

Between the positing of the meaning “nothing” and the positing of any self-contradictory meaning – and therefore between the positing of that meaning and the positing of any term of the series  $RnR$ ,  $r'nr'$ ,  $r''nr''$ ,  $r'''nr'''$ ... – there is a merely verbal difference. Indeed, on the one hand, positing nothingness means positing, as something surpassed, the totality of the positive (which also includes the positive meaningfulness not just of nothingness, but also of the terms of that series); and the positing of a term of the series, for example  $RnR$ , is in turn the positing of what lies beyond

the totality of the positive (which also includes the positive meaningfulness not just of the terms of the series, but also of nothingness). If, in positing  $RnR$ , it is not posited (i.e. known) that, in positing  $RnR$ , one is positing what lies beyond the totality of the positive, then the positing of  $RnR$  results in the implicit negation of the principle of non-contradiction. (In another respect, if self-contradictoriness is, essentially, nothing, then positing self-contradictoriness and not positing it as nothing means not positing it – precisely because it is essentially nothing; hence, only the *intention* of positing it is realised: one claims to posit it, without actually doing so; and this is a self-contradictory claim, insofar as it amounts to stating that what is not a self-contradictoriness, is such).

On the other hand, if the manifestation of the positive is – as already noted – a development (and we will have to get back to this concept, as well as that of the totality of the positive, with particular attention), different levels of this development can be distinguished; and this distinction is the distinction of different levels of the positive meaningfulness of “nothing”. Hence, it is possible to conceive of a level of this meaningfulness in which  $RnR$  is not yet included within the horizon of the positive, which the concept of nothingness implies as something removed; and another level, in which  $RnR$  is included within that horizon. But the difference thereby produced between the positing of the meaning “nothing” and the positing of the meaning  $RnR$  has the same value as the difference produced between two ways of positing the meaning “nothing” that include the totality of the positive according to a different individuation or determination of this totality.

c) To sum up: there is no difference between nothingness and the terms of the series  $RnR$ ,  $r'nr'$ ,  $r''nr''$ ,  $r'''nr'''$ ... (in other words, there is no difference between  $RnR$  and the terms of the series. The argument can be developed in both ways because the endless development can be produced both by considering nothingness and by considering any self-contradictory meaning  $RnR$ ).

However, it may be objected that, while that difference does not subsist, there is still a difference between the positive meaningfulness of those indifferent terms: while nothingness *qua* every self-contradictoriness (and hence too every self-contradictoriness constituted by each of the terms of the series) is nothing, it is nonetheless true that nothing is meaningful in a different way depending on whether what is posited is “nothing” or any of the terms of the series. It is precisely because of this difference in meaningfulness that the aporia cannot be avoided.

d) The aporia formulated under point a) is only removed if two types or senses of self-contradictoriness are distinguished: the contradiction (self-contradiction) and the content of the contradiction (the content expressed by the contradiction). If this distinction is not drawn – as is precisely the case in the aporetic argument – it will be necessary to state that the meaning “nothing” cannot be posited. Consider these two self-contradictory meanings: 1) “Non-red red” (let this be  $xnx$ ); 2) “Nothing”, understood as self-contradictory meaning (let this be  $\mathcal{E}N$ )<sup>5</sup>, which is to say as nothingness-as-moment. Now, what has been established with regard to self-contradictory meanings in section 14 holds for  $xnx$ , yet not for  $N$ . Indeed, as already noted,  $N$  is a self-contradictory meaning not insofar as being ( $\mathcal{E}$ ) is predicated of nothing ( $N$ ), but insofar as what is predicated of nothing (i.e. its being other than the totality of the positive) is; in other words, being here is not predicated (given that the predicate consists in the ruling out that being be predicated), but is the being *of* the predicate. In other words, the proposition “Nothing is” has a different meaning, depending on whether it is taken to mean that “Nothing, *qua* nothing, is” or that “Nothing is nothing”. The former meaning is that according to which the proposition in question ranks precisely as  $\mathcal{E}N$ ; the latter is what is ruled out not just by the principle of non-contradiction, but also by the contradiction “Nothing, *qua* nothing, is” (for this proposition refers being to nothing – and, in this sense, in turn affirms that nothing is not nothing – but refers being to nothing posited as nothing, which is to say as other than the totality of the positive and not as not-nothing). It is clear, therefore, that while it is correct to state that  $xnx$  is nothing (cf. § 14), it is not correct (which is to say, it is self-contradictory) to state that  $\mathcal{E}N$  is nothing: being, the positive meaningfulness of nothing, is not nothing. It is true that thinking – positing – nothing means thinking something, which is to say a positivity, and because the determinateness or meaning of this positivity is what is absolutely other than the positive, it is correct to state that what is being thought is a self-contradictory meaning; but his self-contradictoriness, unlike  $xnx$ , is not a nothing, but rather a positive: it is the positivity of contradiction. What has been established for  $N$  must be repeated for the self-contradictory meaning, whose moments are  $xnx$  and the posi-

5 In the original text, the specification in parentheses is placed at the end of the sentence, but this can be misleading [Editor’s note].

tive meaningfulness of  $xnx$ : for this self-contradictoriness too is not a nothing, but a positive.

From what has been argued so far, it is clear that all self-contradictions of this type (type 2), whose moments are either nothing (as moment) and the positive meaningfulness of nothing, or a self-contradictoriness (such as  $xnx$  or  $RnR$ ) and its positive meaningfulness, are not nothing. What instead are nothing (cf. § 14) are all those self-contradictions (type 1) in which self-contradictoriness constitutes itself within the meaning (or, rather, constitutes itself as the meaning itself), which is to say those in which the mutually contradictory terms are moments of the meaning – by contrast to type-2 self-contradictions, in which the mutually contradictory terms are the meaning (which is either nothingness-as-moment or a type-1 self-contradiction) and its positive meaningfulness.

This distinction resolves the aporia under investigation here: for the series  $RnR, r'nr', r''nr'', r'''nr''' \dots$  is not homogeneous, since  $RnR$  is a type-1 contradiction, whereas all other terms of the series are type-2 self-contradictions. Therefore, while the positing of  $RnR$  is necessarily the positing of  $r'nr'$  – since  $RnR$  is nothingness, and hence to posit  $RnR$  is to posit the positive meaningfulness of the absolutely negative (which is precisely the positing of  $r'nr'$ ) – the positing of  $r'nr'$  is not the positing of a  $r''nr''$  which stands to  $r'nr'$  as  $r'nr'$  stands to  $RnR$ : for  $r'nr'$  is a type-2 self-contradiction, which is to say that it is not nothingness, whose positing must thus be the positing of  $r''nr''$ . Therefore, the endless development ascertained by the aporetic argument cannot be realised; or, rather, the necessity of that development does not subsist.

Corollary: the self-contradiction expressed by the proposition “Nothing is not nothing” is a type-1 self-contradiction; hence, the positing of this self-contradiction is the positing of a type-2 self-contradiction, whose moments are that proposition and its positive meaningfulness.

## The aporia of Nothingness II

### Excerpts from *Intorno al senso del nulla* [*On the Sense of Nothingness*], part II, sections 2-8.

#### 1. [...]

#### 2.

Parmenides brings to light the absolute nullity of nothingness (*me eon*, “non-existent”). Precisely because it is such, nothingness cannot be *something* “knowable” and “expressible” (fr. 2). Indeed, one can know and express only what is, which is to say an existent, whereas nothingness, in absolute terms, is not an existent.

*However*, in the very act whereby these characteristics of nothingness are affirmed, nothingness presents itself as something knowable and expressible. Plato’s *Sophist* reflects a full awareness of this, which is precisely the fundamental form of the aporia of nothingness.

*But Plato leaves this aporia unsolved*, in order to focus on the elucidation of that other sense of “not-being” (not-being understood not as the “opposite” of being but as what is “other” than being), which enables him to “save” multiplicity from the destruction of it carried out by Parmenides. And this aporia remains unsolved throughout the history of philosophy.

#### 3.

Even Carnap’s thesis that the word “nothing” is meaningless (a thesis which, through an entirely different procedure, confirms Bergson’s thesis that nothingness is foreign to genuine thought) disproves what it aims to affirm: for this thesis understands the absolute privation or absence of meaning as meaningful content; yet the absolute absence or privation of meaning is a synonym of nothing. It is precisely because “nothing” means



“the absence of all meaning” that Parmenides affirms the unknowability and inexpressibility of nothingness.

The fact that “nothing” *means* something, i.e. that it *means* the *absence of all meaning*, is precisely the *essential contradiction* of nothingness – which is to say, the essential aporia of nothingness.

In its broader sense, the term “meaning” describes *any* thing, which is to say *any* existent; and it is necessary that in Carnap’s thesis the term “meaning” be present in its broader sense, for if it were present according to a *partial* sense of “meaning” (e.g. as opposed to “meaningful” or “bearer [of meaning]”), then, in affirming that “nothing” has no meaning, one would be affirming that in another partial sense of “meaning” (different from that according to which one affirms the total meaninglessness of nothing) nothingness *has some meaning*, that it is somehow meaningful, i.e. that it is something, an existent. “Nothing” and “absolute meaninglessness” are therefore synonyms.

Even Carnap’s thesis that one must replace expressions used in common parlance such as “There is nothing outside” with expressions such as “There is not something that is outside” disproves what it affirms: for “there is not” or “not being there” is another synonym of “nothing” (as long as one does not take account – as happens with Carnap, by contrast to Heidegger – of the different semantic status which is determined by “there” in these expressions and understands them as synonyms of “not being”). That something, which we would expect to be outside, *is not* means that *it* is nothing.

As we shall see, this is precisely the starting point of the second part of the present essay: the identity between the meaning *nothing* and the *is not* which is present in the something-(that)-*is not* and the something-(that)-*is not* a certain other thing.

#### 4. [...]

#### 5.

In *Struttura originaria* (*Primal Structure*) it is shown that nothing is a *self-contradicting* meaning. Those pages quite explicitly affirm the distinction between the “contradictory” or “self-contradictory” – which is to say the impossible, the *nihil absolutum* – and “contradiction”, which instead is *not* a nothing. It is thus of the utmost importance to bear in mind the clarifi-

cation, provided in that text, that “the meaning ‘nothing’ is a self-contradictory meaning, *which is to say a contradiction*” (IV, 6, p. 213, emphasis added) – that is, precisely, a “*self-contradicting meaning*”. This “which is to say” is crucial in order to understand the pages in question.

Every time the text affirms the existence of that “self-contradictory meaning” – “*which is to say*” that *self-contradicting meaning* – it is not stating that the impossible, the contradictory in itself, is, but rather that the contradiction *is* (and it is not impossible, but rather necessary, that the contradiction *be*; notwithstanding the fact that its being has a “foundation” to which I have always drawn attention in my writings – cf. e.g. *Fondamento della contraddizione*<sup>6</sup>). Each time I speak of nothing as a “contradictory” or “self-contradictory meaning” in that book, it is thus necessary to understand such expressions as indicating the fact that the meaning *nothing contradicts itself*, which is to say as indicating precisely the *self-contradicting meaning* of nothing.

Contradictoriness (the contradictory) is the content of contradiction; contradiction is the appearing of contradictoriness. As the affirmation of something is, first and foremost, the appearing of this something, the affirmation that this lamp is-and-is-not is, first and foremost, the appearing of the being-and-not-being of this lamp as something impossible. The impossible is nothing; the aporia of nothingness is the aporia of the impossible.

The two self-contradictory moments of the meaning *nothing* (and of every impossible thing) are, on the one hand, the “positive meaningfulness” of nothing, which is to say its *being* nothing and the *appearing* of this *being*, and, on the other hand, the absolute nothingness and meaninglessness of nothing, which nonetheless is positively meaningful. On one side we have the positive meaningfulness of that which, on the other side, is the absolute negation of every positivity and meaning (and hence of every knowability and expressibility).

## 6.

These two sides or moments of the meaning *nothing* are originally and necessarily united *because* their separation, i.e. the *isolation* of one with re-

6 E. Severino (2005). *Fondamento della contraddizione [The Foundation of the Contradiction]*. Adelphi, Milano. [Editor’s note].

spect to the other, implies the being of impossibility, which is to say that it implies that nothing is an existent – it implies, precisely, the *aporia* of nothingness, i.e. the contradiction of thought thinking nothing.

Indeed, while the two moments are (more or less explicitly) understood as separate, the absolute nothingness of nothing *appears*, and it appears as *meaningful*, which is to say that it *is*: nothing inevitably appears as an existent. In other words, if the two moments are separated, the positive meaningfulness of nothing (the first moment) will inevitably occur again in the second moment, which is to say in the meaning “nothing” that is the content of that positive meaningfulness; hence, the inevitable *outcome* of that separation is the ascertainment that nothing is an existent.

(In this case, setting out from the absolute nothingness of nothing, we reach the positivity of nothing. If we instead set out from the positive meaningfulness of nothing, we reach that absolute negativity whereby not even the relation consisting in the not being nothing of being can constitute itself).

That outcome essentially differs from the authentic meaning of nothing, which is to say from nothing as a self-contradicting meaning. Indeed, this self-contradiction subsists because, within it, *nothing* (the meaning nothing) does not mean *existent*, which is to say that it is not an existent (and precisely because it is not, the meaning *nothing* contradicts the positivity of its own meaningfulness as an existent).

By contrast, in the outcome of the separation of the two moments of this self-contradicting meaning, we are forced to affirm that nothing, insofar as it is meaningful, *is*, i.e. that it is an existent; and hence that the impossible, the contradictory in itself, which is to say the identity between nothing and being, *is*.

As a result of the separation, therefore, the *aporia* of nothingness presents itself as unsolvable. Thought is bound to the absurdity of contradiction for good.

Thought which thinks nothing is (originally) free from the contradiction only insofar as it sees that *it is the meaning nothing which is a contradiction* – a *necessary* contradiction.

## 7.

[...]

Both sides or moments of the necessary contradiction which constitutes the meaning *nothing* are meanings. But that nothing which is the moment

of this contradiction and which means *nothing*, and not *an existent* – i.e. that nothing which is *not* nothing *qua* positive meaningfulness – *is*, certainly, meaningful (it is, precisely, a meaning); but it *is* only such (just as it *is* only a side and moment of that contradiction) in the sense that nothing, which is a moment, is a moment insofar as it is *distinct* from its *appearing as* something meaningful (and hence as a side or moment): for this *appearing-as* is the *other* moment of nothing *qua* necessary contradiction (this other moment being the positive meaningfulness of nothing, which is meaningful, yet only as something distinct from its own positive meaningfulness). We might say: nothing – which, as a moment of nothing *qua* necessary contradiction, means nothing and not an existent – is meaningful, yet is not posited as meaningful. We may say this, as long as this language, which is the language of idealism, is freed from the sense of “being” and “positing” that idealism assigns to such words.

## 8.

Heidegger aims to show that “Nothing” is not a being, but “also is never what is simply null” (cf. e.g. the pages of *Der europäische Nihilismus* (1940) entitled “Nihilism, *Nihil*, and Nothing”<sup>7</sup>): it is not the “simply null” with regard to which metaphysical thought would take for granted both the fact that it is opposed to the being, and the absence of any other form of opposition to the totality of the being.

Apparently, Heidegger wishes to enter a deeper dimension than that in which the opposition between “what is simply null” – the *nihil absolutum* – and the being is taken for granted; but in stating that “Nothing” (which for him is actually “Being” itself) “also is never what is simply null”, he is implicitly assigning a decisive function to the “simply null”: as that to which both the “Nothing” and the being are opposed. This opposition constitutes the greatest difference, which *contains* in itself the “ontological difference” between “Being” (“Nothing”) and “being” (and where the “simply null”, nothing, is a term of this opposition, insofar as it is a positive meaningfulness, which is to say insofar as it is a moment of the self-contradictory meaning *nothing*).

7 Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. IV: Nihilism, Translated from the German by Frank A. Capuzzi, Edited, with Notes and an Analysis, by David Farrell Krell, Harper, San Francisco, pp. 18-23. [Translator’s note]

In such a way, all the connotations of the “simply null” from which Heidegger wishes to distance himself, and all the aporias which are raised by the “simply null”, but which Heidegger defines as consequences of the failure to rise up to the authentic meaning of “Nothing”, resurface, and do so in their not having been clarified and resolved. This first of all applies to the aporia – already envisaged by Plato (although Heidegger fails to note this) – according to which any consideration regarding nothing makes nothing “something”, which is to say a being.

(It should be added that in the language of nihilism expressions such as “to leave nothingness and return to it”, when properly understood, do not indicate something like a somehow positive dimension which beings would leave and return to, but rather the no longer being and not yet being of entities, an idea which not even Heidegger’s philosophy wishes to abandon).

# *Primal Structure* – Chapter IV

## Guide to Reading

by Giulio Goggi

Chapter IV of *The Primal Structure* (henceforth *PSIV*), translated into English for the first time and published here together with some paragraphs of *About the Meaning of Nothingness*, is entirely dedicated to the description and resolution of the aporia of nothingness. In order to facilitate the reading of the Severinian text, I shall review, below, the crucial passages.

### I. The Aporia of nothingness

The aporia has ancient origins and finds its first explicit formulation in Plato's *Sophist*, where it appears as «the greatest of the difficulties and the first of all». (238): in fact, «if one begins to refute the non-being, he is forced to contradict himself» (238). Such a man will say that, strictly speaking, the non-being cannot «neither enunciate, nor say, nor conceive»; it was what the «venerable and terrible» Parmenides taught. And yet, by saying that it “is” inenunciabile and inconceivable, he will have acknowledged its being. In Plato's text the aporetic of the *absolute non-being* (of non-being as the *opposite of being*) remains in the background as unresolved. As it is well known, Plato's speech *curves* towards the solution of the problem of the *relative non-being*, by providing the conceptual tools to overcome the Parmenidean prohibition of considering the existence of the

multiple. Severino makes a quick historical and theoretical *excursus* (see *PSIV*, parr. 1, 2, 13) by confronting himself with authors who, after Plato, came across this difficulty (Aristotle, Fredegisus of Tour, Bergson, Frege, Heidegger, Carnap, Russell), who were aware of the extreme caution that one must have towards the concept of “nothingness”. But from the analysis it emerges that (even in the authors cited) the aporia reappears in all its gravity, so much so that every consideration intent on nothingness, as Plato already pointed out, renders the nothingness into something that is.

## II. Its formulation in *PSIV*

In *PSIV*, the aporetic arises after Severino already described (in the previous chapters of the same *PS*) the essential features of what he calls the *primal structure* of knowledge (cf. E&C n. 1). That is, the synthesis of logical immediacy and phenomenological immediacy: the phenomenological immediacy is the appearing of the totality of that which appears; the logical immediacy is the appearing of the being in the form of identity-difference, so that we say that *the law of being* is the opposition of the positive and the negative. Given that “x” is any positive (a being), “x” is *primally* posed as what is other than one’s own negative (where the *negative* of “x” means everything that is not “x” and thus the contradictory of “x”) and therefore as other than the totality of the positives that are “other” than the positive considered, but also as other than “nothingness”: “x” is not “y”, it is not “z” and (albeit in a different way from how “x” is other than a positive) “x” is not nothing, it does not mean “nothing” (where the “nothing” is not analogous to the positive elements, but it is a non-x). In the primal opposition, where the opposition of the positive and the negative is thought in its universality, every being (and the totality of being) enters into a plurality of relationships: what is thought is the opposition to every form of the negative, and therefore also the opposition to nothingness. Hence it appears that the meaning of “nothingness” belongs to the semantic field of what we have called *logical immediacy*. This inclusion of the “nothingness” in the primal structure is what defines the aporetic discourse. Severino formulates it this way:

The positing of the principle of non-contradiction requires the positing of *not-being*. Not only that, but “not-being” belongs to the very meaning of “being”. [...] Now, precisely because it is ruled out



that being is nothing, in order for this exclusion to subsist, nothingness is *posited*, *present*, and therefore *is*. There is a discourse on nothingness, and this discourse attests to the *being* of nothingness [...]. Therefore, we must apparently conclude that contradiction is the foundation on which the very principle of non-contradiction can be realised (*PSIV*, par. 1).

The two terms of this *apparent* contradiction are: 1) the primal structure as it excludes *the absolutely other from the being*, that is, nothingness; 2) the assertion of the *existence* of the nothingness, an assertion implied by the very exclusion of the existence of the nothingness. We say that this contradiction is *apparent* because the *primal structure* is essentially joined with the appearing of its *incontrovertibility* (cf. E&C, n. 2). It is therefore impossible that, departing from the incontrovertible foundation of knowledge, one arrives at the negation of the foundation itself.

### III. The two possible aporetic directions

That being said, Severino outlines very clearly the two-aporetic directions that open from the consideration of non-being:

The aporia of not-being can [...] be developed in a twofold direction: either by showing that not-being is; or, if we keep the not-being of not-being, by showing how those logical structures that imply the positing of not-being cannot constitute themselves (*PSIV*, par. 4).

The outcome of the development of the first aporetic direction is the assertion that the primal structure, implying the existence of non-being, is based on its own negation, therefore the foundation would be contradiction. The second aporetic direction, on the other hand, results in the assertion that the primal form of knowledge cannot be that of the *structure* itself: if, in fact, the non-being is not in any way, and in no way is conceivable, then the opposition of the positive and the negative (and therefore of being and non-being) that we have said to be *the primal structure of knowledge* cannot be established.

## IV. The solution of the aporia

### a) Preliminary clarifications

The aporetic discourse does not erase the difference between “being” and “not being”. If it were so (i.e. if no difference between “being” and “not being” were to appear) there would be no contradiction in saying that being is not being:

The presenting it-self of nothing does not attest to the fact that “nothing” means “being”; but that “nothing”, meaningful as nothing, is. And, on the other hand, this “being” of nothing is not meaningful as “not-being”; but, being meaningful as being, is the being of nothing (which is meaningful as nothing) (*PSIV*, par. 5).

As Severino says, this is the “fundamental observation” because it allows us to properly calibrate the sense of the *contradiction* we are dealing with:

The contradiction of not-being-that-is, therefore, is not internal to the meaning “nothing” (or to the meaning “being”, which is the being of nothing); but lies between the meaning “nothing” and being, or the positivity of this meaning. The positivity of meaningfulness, in other words, is in contradiction with the very content of the meaningfulness, which is precisely meaningful as absolute negativity (*PSIV*, par. 5).

Every meaning (every thinkable content, which is to say every entity, however it may constitute itself) is a semantic synthesis between the positivity of meaningfulness and the determinate content of positive meaningfulness [...]. Thus, it is clear that the meaning “nothingness” is self-contradictory, which is to say a contradiction, it is being meaningful as a contradiction: the very contradiction whereby the positivity of this meaningfulness is contradicted by the absolute negativity of the meaningful content (*PSIV*, par. 6).

For the understanding of these paragraphs, consider, first of all, the following. In Severino’s theory, the term “meaning” does not have the narrow meaning that we find in Frege, for example, who distinguishes between sense and meaning; nor does it have the (albeit narrow) meaning of which Wittgenstein speaks in *Tractatus*, where it is said that the “name” is the

simple sign that stands for a simple object which is precisely its meaning. For Severino, the “meaning” is the name, the abstract essence, and the concrete thing to which the name refers. The “meaning” we are talking about here is the determinately meaningful being, and all that “is” is determinately meaningful. In this context it is not a question of wondering if, given a certain meaning (for example “tree”), something corresponds to it, but of understanding that there is the “meaningfulness itself” on the part of the meaningfulness:

Everything is a meaningfulness [...]. The being is the meaningfulness. A certain being is a certain meaningfulness. In its transcendental form the meaningfulness does not mean something other than itself, it is not the “signifier”, nor is it something “signified” by something else [...]. The tree is a meaningfulness which is meaningful itself, that is, it is the meaning of its own meaningfulness (Severino, 2007, p. 366).

The transcendental value of the meaningfulness also includes the meaningfulness of “nothing”. In this case, however, we have a very unusual meaning, because the content means *the absolute not being, the absolute non meaningful*: the meaningful content *contradicts* its very meaningfulness. We are dealing here with a contradictory meaning, where the two sides (or moments) of this contradiction are, on the one hand the meaning “nothing” which is meaningful as nothing (therefore, in this sense, the contradiction is not internal to the meaning “nothing”: in fact, “nothing” means “nothing” and nothing else: it does not mean “tree”, “water”, “moon”...) and, on the other hand, the meaning which is *the positivity of the meaning “nothing”*, its being a meaning, the positivity of its meaningfulness:

It is clear, therefore, that “nothing”, understood as a self-contradictory meaning, includes as a semantic moment “nothing”, which [...] is meaningful as nothing. (To put it differently, “nothing”, as a non-contradictory meaning, is the moment of “nothing”, as a self-contradictory meaning) (PSIV, par. 6).

The self-contradiction of the meaning “nothing” refers to the *concrete* meaning “nothing”, i.e. this meaning as a synthesis of its two sides or constitutive moments: the meaning “nothing” and the *positivity* of this meaning. On this “self-contradiction” – on which the analysis of PSIV focuses – an important clarification must be made:

Every time the text [i.e. *PSIV*] affirms the existence of that “self-contradictory meaning” – “*which is to say*” that *self-contradicting* meaning – it is not stating that the impossible, the contradictory in itself, is, but rather that the contradiction *is* [...]. Each time I speak of nothing as a “contradictory” or “self-contradictory meaning” in that book, it is thus necessary to understand such expressions as indicating the fact that the meaning *nothing contradicts itself*, which is to say as indicating precisely the *self-contradicting* meaning of nothing (Severino, 2013, Part 2, chap. I par. 5).

It should be noted that, in the same *PSIV* (par. 15), Severino had distinguished two types of “self-contradictions”: “type 1” self-contradictions are those «in which the self-contradiction is constituted within the meaning». For example, the meaning «triangle not triangle» is a self-contradiction of “type 1”, and all self-contradictions of “type 1” are nothingness itself; self-contradictions of “type 2” are those in which the contradictory terms are the meaning “nothing” and its positive meaningfulness, or a self-contradiction of “type 1” (as “triangle not triangle”) and its positive meaningfulness. Well, unlike the self-contradictions of “type 1”, the self-contradictions of “type 2” are not the “nothing”: they are not because the being, that is the *positive meaningfulness* of nothing, is not nothing. The clarification of terminology contained in *On the Sense of Nothingness* therefore makes explicit what is already present in *PSIV*, distinguishing between the “contradiction” understood as the positivity of contradicting oneself and the non-existent (impossible) content of the contradiction.

#### *b) General solution of the aporia*

The solution draws on the precious distinction between the two distinct moments of the meaning nothing, distinct yet not separated:

The aporia of the being of nothingness is resolved by noting that the principle of non-contradiction *does not affirm the non-existence* of the self-contradictory meaning [...]; rather, it affirms that “nothing” does not mean “being” [...]; in other words, it requires the non-existence of the contradiction intrinsic to the meaning “nothing”, which ranks as the moment of the self-contradictory meaning. Not-being, which in the formulation of the principle of non-contradiction appears as the negation of being, is precisely the not-being which ranks as the moment of not-being, understood as a self-contradictory meaning (*PSIV*, par. 7).

Acknowledging that “self-contradictory meaning” denotes the self-contradiction of “type 2”, Severino explains that the not-being whose identity with the being is denied is the meaning “nothing” as distinct from its own positive meaningfulness. In other words: the principle of non-contradiction does *not* deny the being of the positive meaningfulness of nothing, but denies the being of nothing.

*c) On the dual aporetic direction*

A distinction is made between the *concrete* and *abstract* consideration of the “moments” of the meaning “nothing”: in the first case, the “moments” are distinct but not separate; in the second case, the “moments” are presumed to be unrelated. On the need not to keep isolated the two “moments” of the contradiction which the meaning “nothing” consists of, Severino himself, addressing some of his critics, writes:

The solution [of the aporia of nothingness] consists in pointing out that the meaning “nothing” is a self-contradictory meaning, that is a *contradiction*, where that “nothing” which means “nothing” and not anything else *is distinct yet not separate* from its meaningfulness, and the two *inseparable* sides of the contradiction are, in fact, “nothing” – as something *distinct* [from its positive meaningfulness] – and its meaningfulness, from which it is distinct (Severino, 2018, p. 242).

To determine the dual aporetic situation outlined above (see point III) is, as we shall now see, an insulating logic (we might even say: separating) whereby the positivity of the meaning of nothingness and the absolute negativity or absence of meaning of its content (the two “moments” of the concrete meaning of nothingness) are considered abstractly.

*c.1) The solution of the first aporetic direction*

The first aspect along which aporia can be developed is that whereby it is said that the nothingness is present in the theorization that we make out of it, so that the nothingness “is”, and the primal structure is based on the contradiction. Here is Severino’s reply:

We thus state that nothingness is, in the sense that a positive meaningfulness – a being – is meaningful as the absolutely negative, i.e. as “nothing”; in other words, it is meaningful as that “nothing”

which is absolutely not meaningful as “being”. Therefore, nothingness is, in the sense that the absolutely negative is positively meaningful; or, nothingness is, in the sense that the meaning “nothing” is self-contradictory (*PSIV*, par. 8).

To be, to appear is that being which is the positive meaningfulness of nothingness, that contradiction which is the contradictory meaning of nothingness. And it is precisely because the nothingness is constituted as such a contradiction that it is possible to posit the principle of non-contradiction:

In order to exclude that being is not [...] it is thus necessary for not-being to be; that it to say, it is necessary for the self-contradictory meaning in which that being of not-being consists to subsist. If the meaning “nothingness” did not rank as this self-contradictoriness [...] and if, therefore, nothingness were only that absolute negativity whereby it ranks as a non-contradictory meaning (“nothingness” as the moment of self-contradictoriness), to exclude that being is nothingness would be not to exclude anything, since the exclusion would not have anything to which it could apply: nothingness would not appear at all. [...]. But it is also clear that the very assumption that nothingness is only that absolute negativity [...] is self-contradictory: for we can say that nothingness is really nothing, insofar as nothingness is *manifest*, and therefore *is* this being nothing at all (*PSIV*, par. 8).

If the meaning of nothingness did not exist, the nothingness would not even appear and it would not be possible to exclude its existence. In this sense: 1) the presence of the contradiction of the meaning “nothing” is a condition for the establishment of the principle of non-contradiction; 2) the meaning of nothingness belongs to the primal structure of knowledge because the “nothingness” is this contradiction. However, it is not legitimate to conclude from this, as the aporetic discourse does, that therefore the negation of the first principle is the condition of its establishment. In fact:

The establishment of the principle of non-contradiction does not require [...] that the self-contradictory nature of the meaning “nothing” not be removed, but requires the semantic field constituted by this self-contradictory meaning (*PSIV*, par. 8).

The passage is crucial: the contradiction of the nothingness, like any contradiction, can only appear as *negated*. Or even: the contradiction can appear only within the authentically ultimate form of thinking that is the negation of the contradiction. And what the principle of non-contradiction asserts is, precisely, the nullity of nothingness. Of that nothingness the meaning of which is distinct but not separated from its positive meaningfulness. Instead, what does the aporetic discourse do? What the aporetic discord does, instead, is abstractly understand the two inseparable sides of contradiction:

Once the moments of the concrete are abstractly assumed as unrelated, nothingness-as-moment is detected as that self-contradictoriness which belongs to the concrete – that is, the abstract is assumed as the concrete; but at the same time the abstract is assumed as abstract, because the self-contradictoriness that is seen to pertain to it is not allowed to resolve itself into “nothingness” as a non-contradictory meaning, and this not letting the self-contradictoriness resolve itself amounts precisely to assuming as abstract what had been assumed as concrete, notwithstanding the fact that what does not allow itself to be further analysed is the abstract moment (*PSIV*, par. 9).

It follows that the “nothingness-moment”, which means the absolute negativity of nothingness, is detected by the aporetic discourse as something which lets itself be considered, that is as something-that-is, and that onto nothingness as such that positivity is transferred, that being that is instead the side of the positive meaningfulness of nothingness. The inevitable being then is the assertion that nothingness is a being, but it is the result of the abstract consideration of the two moments of the concrete meaning of nothingness.

*c.2) The solution of the second aporetic direction*

The second side along which aporia can be developed is the one that holds firm that absolute negativity of nothing cannot in any way manifest itself, thus excluding the possibility that logical structures can be formed which, like the principle of non-contradiction, entails the position of not being. It happens, also in this case, that the abstract “moments” of the concrete meaning of nothingness are considered abstractly:



It is clear that, here too, the aporia can constitute itself, since, at the same time, we both completely lose sight (*in actu signato*) of the moment of the positive meaningfulness of “nothingness” and do not lose sight of it (*in actu exercito*). If this moment were completely absent – i.e. not posited – the aporetic argument would not subsist either: the “nothingness” would continue to be ignored, because talking about it would constitute precisely the presence of the moment from which one absolutely prescind (PSIV, par. 10).

It will then be said that the being can exclude nothingness in the opposition relationship because (as we already know) what is excluded is the nothingness that means nothing, that is the nothingness that is distinct from its positive meaningfulness, but is not separated from it, thus it does not follow that the being, when referring to nothingness in the opposition relationship, does not refer to it:

In other words, in its reference to nothingness, being excludes it as its contradictory only insofar as it refers to nothingness-as-moment; besides, this moment stands in relation to the moment of its positive meaningfulness, and through this relation – which is the very contradictoriness of “nothing” as a concrete meaning – *endures* or *is capable of* standing in a relation of contradiction to being (PSIV, par. 10).

One could further argue that nothingness, *as pure and absolute nothingness*, cannot be a moment or term of a relationship. But this not being in any relationship is precisely the meaning of nothingness which, *being such meaningful*, is a positivity. Furthermore, nothingness does not differ from being because it is something – «for this is the sense in which two beings are different» –, but «it is different in the sense that it is the absolute privation of being» (Severino, 2020, par. 3, note 2); and it is able to be a “moment” of the contradiction in which the concrete meaning “nothing” consists because the nothingness that means nothingness is distinct but not separated from its appearing as something meaningful:

What is absolutely other than being, *qua other than being*, is not a being; but insofar as it *is meaningful as* what is absolutely other than being, it is a being, a positivity. [...]. The meaning “nothing” is not abstractly separate, but is concretely distinct from the positivity of its meaningfulness. Insofar as it is distinct, it is capable of both meaning what is absolutely other than being and of ranking as the

moment (and thus as the positivity which is a moment) of the contradiction in which the concrete meaning of nothingness consists. [...]. It has also been clarified that nothingness *is* nothing [...], not insofar as the absolute negative *is* something (albeit the absolute negative), but insofar as the positive meaningfulness of nothingness *is* that particular meaningfulness which it is. In other words, nothingness *is* nothing, not *qua* nothing, but insofar as it is a positive meaningfulness (*PSIV*, par. 11).

What is essential about the necessary relationship between the two beings which are the two moments of the self-contradictory meaning of nothing is indicated by Severino like this:

Both sides or moments of the necessary contradiction which constitutes the meaning *nothing* are meanings. But that nothing which is the moment of this contradiction and which means *nothing*, and not *an existent* – i.e. that nothing which is *not* nothing *qua* positive meaningfulness – *is*, certainly, meaningful (it is, precisely, a meaning); but it *is* only such (just as it *is* only a side and moment of that contradiction) in the sense that nothing, which is a moment, is a moment insofar as it is *distinct* from its *appearing as* something meaningful (and hence as a side or moment): for this *appearing-as* is the *other* moment of nothing *qua* necessary contradiction (this other moment being the positive meaningfulness of nothing, which is meaningful, yet only as something distinct from its own positive meaningfulness). We might say: nothing – which, as a moment of nothing *qua* necessary contradiction, means nothing and not an existent – is meaningful, yet is not posited as meaningful (Severino, 2013, Part 2, chap. I par. 7).

In other words, everything that is said about nothing belongs to the positive meaningfulness of nothing, which is indeed meaningful as what is absolutely other than being, but is distinct from the positivity of this meaning.

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# NOTHING REALLY MATTERS TO ME

## A critique of Emanuele Severino's Resolution of the Aporia of Nothingness<sup>1</sup>

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This paper analyzes and criticizes Emanuele Severino's resolution of the aporia of nothingness. Severino's solution consists in two theses: A) the meaning of 'nothingness' is self-contradictory; B) the determinate content of the meaning of nothingness is consistent (it does not imply by itself any contradiction). After distinguishing three possible interpretations of the term 'nothing' (as a quantifier, as a noun-phrase, and as a concept), the paper argues that there is no interpretation that makes both theses A) and B) simultaneously true. This shows that Severino's formulation and resolution of the problem of nothingness is untenable; moreover, it is shown that his resolution is based on an *ambiguity* between the noun-phrase and the concept interpretation.

**Keywords:**

**Absolute Nothingness, Severino, Carnap, Noun-Phrases, Quantifiers, Concepts, Empty Terms**

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## 1. Introduction

In this paper I shall analyze and criticize Emanuele Severino's resolution to the *aporia* of nothingness<sup>2</sup>. This resolution is a keystone of Severino's philosophy, already developed in *La Struttura Originaria* (1958). The *aporia* regards the notion of absolute nothingness (*nihil absolutum*) interpreted as 'what is absolutely other than being'<sup>3</sup> and emerges as soon as Severino formulates the Principle of Non-Contradiction as the principle pertaining to the opposition between *being* and *not-being*<sup>4</sup>. As a consequence, this resolution is required in order for the whole Severinian theoretical castle not to crumble to the ground.

My focus will be on the formulation and resolution of the problem present in the famous (at least in some Italian philosophical circles) chapter 4 of *La Struttura Originaria* (and here partially translated into English for the first time). Severino returned to this topic more recently, in a book called *Intorno al senso del nulla*, where he presents a new formulation and resolution of it. I shall not deal with this latter reformulation mainly for two reasons: first, Severino never thought that the latter formulation and resolution could supersede the 1958's version (quite the contrary, the new version presupposes the original one); second, it is the original version that plays a huge role within Severino's philosophy, and upon which a major discussion has developed over the years<sup>5</sup>.

2 I shall sometimes speak of the *paradox* of nothingness, using the term 'paradox' as an interchangeable term for 'aporia'.

3 Severino 1958, chapter 4, §1 p.12 (of the present volume). Most of the quotations from Severino's text come from chapter 4 of *La Struttura Originaria*, and are taken from the English translation present in this volume. The number page thus refers to the present volume.

4 In this paper, I shall consider the terms 'nothing' and 'not-being' as synonyms.

5 See, for instance, Sasso (1987), Visentin (2011), Donà (2008) for some objections;

When one looks at the different occurrences of the term ‘nothing’ and similar terms in natural languages, one immediately notices that there are different *grammatical* usages of them. Most of the time, ‘nothing’ is used as a quantifier; more rarely, as a noun-phrase. One can even imagine a predicate, as in the famous Heideggerian statement ‘The Nothing nothings’ (where the first occurrence is a noun-phrase, while the second is a predicate)<sup>6</sup>. These different usages clashed with Severino’s formulation of the aporia, where no mention of such distinctions can be found. Severino speaks in general terms of the concept of nothing (or of the meaning of nothingness), but he never explicitly makes any of these distinctions. The impression that one may get is that he is trying to let the logical structure of the problem emerge, beyond any superficial grammatical difference. In this way, Severino’s analysis would immediately reach the essential structure of the problem, leaving behind all the non-essential and superficial aspects.

However, those distinctions do not regard merely grammar; rather they mirror important logical differences. The whole of §2 of the present contribution is dedicated to explaining in detail why we cannot avoid considering these distinctions. In particular, attention will be devoted to the different *semantic contributions* that quantifiers, predicates and noun-phrases bring to the meanings of sentences. What this analysis shows is that the different usages of ‘nothing’ (and related terms) as a quantifier, as a predicate (better: as the concept expressed by a predicate) or as a noun-phrase *are not equivalent to each other*. This will clearly emerge when we shall show that the paradox of nothingness requires the interpretation of nothingness as a noun-phrase, and does not arise with the quantificational reading nor with the predicate reading.

Once these three distinctions have been introduced, one naturally wonders how Severino’s talk of the notion of nothingness should be interpreted in light of them. This task will be carried out in §3. First, I introduce Severino’s resolution (§3.1) and then I proceed to analyze and criticize it (§3.2). More specifically, Severino’s resolution consists of two theses:

Severino replies to some of these objections in Severino (2009). See Simionato (2017) for an English discussion of Severino’s solution in relation to the contemporary debate on this topic.

6 The Heideggerian sentence has been at the center of renewed interest: see Casati and Fujikawa (2015, 2019), Oliver and Smiley (2012), Voltolini (2015).

- A) The meaning nothingness is self-contradictory;
- B) The determinate content of the meaning nothingness is consistent (it does not imply by itself any contradiction)<sup>7</sup>.

After dismissing the quantificational interpretation as not apt to capture Severino's resolution, we will show that in neither of the other two interpretations of the term 'nothing' can both theses be simultaneously true. When 'nothing' is considered to be a noun-phrase, then thesis A) is true, but thesis B) turns out to be false; conversely, when we consider the predicate 'to nothing', thesis B) is true, but thesis A) is false.

This shows that Severino's formulation and solution of the *aporia* of nothingness is untenable<sup>8</sup>. The same formulation of the problem he gives is based on an ambiguity between 'nothing' as a noun-phrase and 'nothing' as expressing a concept. In §3.2.2.1 I shall expose some passages where this ambiguity clearly emerges. Finally, §4 concludes with some general reflections on the result of our criticism.

## 2. Preliminary Remarks: Names, Concepts, and Quantifiers

### 2.1 Nothing as a quantifier

Philosophical problems have a strong relation to language, one that is certainly stronger than those of other scientific disciplines. And the problem of nothingness is certainly a case in point: it has long been viewed as a *pseudo*-problem, i.e. a false problem arising from a misunderstanding of the logical structure of language. Carnap (1932) famously argued that the only meaningful reading of 'nothing' in a sentence is the quantificational one, as in the following examples:

- 1) There is nothing (edible) in the fridge
- 2) Nothing really matters to me

<sup>7</sup> This is what Severino usually calls the semantic moment 'nothing' which is meaningful as nothing, or the 'null-moment'.

<sup>8</sup> However, this does not mean that the *aporia* is merely a pseudo-problem, but rather that the specific way in which Severino deals with it is mistaken.



One naturally reads 1) as claiming that no food is in the fridge, and 2) as claiming that there is *no thing* that matters to me<sup>9</sup>. The two sentences may be (partially) formalized as

- 1')  $\sim\exists x(x \text{ is some food \& } x \text{ is in the fridge})$ .  
2')  $\sim\exists x(x \text{ matters to me})$

The term 'nothing' has been translated by means of an existential quantifier ( $\exists x$ ) and a negation ( $\sim$ ).

Quantifiers are expressions of generality by means of which we make general statements. Sentences 1) and 2) are not sentences about a specific subject-matter: sentence 1) is not about this or that food, but rather is a general sentence that denies that this food, that food, that other food etc. are in the fridge; sentence 2) is not about a specific problem or topic, but rather is a general sentence that denies that this problem or that topic or that other topic etc. matter to me (notice the 'etc.' which makes clear that we are dealing with general sentences). For comparison, consider the sentence 'Pegasus does not exist' and its standard translation according to the Russell-Quine theory of negative existential sentences:

- 3) Pegasus does not exist  
3')  $\sim\exists x \text{ Pegasize}(x)$

where '*Pegasize*(*x*)' is an artificial predicate denoting a bunch of properties that the tradition ascribes to a mythological animal called Pegasus<sup>10</sup>. While the informal sentence 3) seems intuitively to be a sentence about Pegasus (and this is exactly what generates the paradox of negative existential sentences<sup>11</sup>), 3') is not a sentence about a specific living being, i.e. Pegasus, but is a *general sentence* that denies that this object, that object, that other objects etc. satisfy the properties traditionally ascribed to Pegasus. In other

9 Or to Freddie Mercury, since this is a famous line from the song 'Bohemian Rhapsody'.

10 Russell (1905) considered terms such as Pegasus as disguised definite descriptions. The idea of introducing artificial predicates of this sort is due to Quine (1948).

11 Such a paradox is a version of the aporia of nothingness: if I want to deny that a certain thing exists, it seems that I have to refer to that thing and to predicate the non-existence of it. But I should not be able to refer to something that does not exist. See Berto (2009) for an introduction to such topics.

words, 3') denies that there is something that falls under the concept *Pegasize(x)*.

To sum up, the Russell-Quine resolution to the paradox of negative existential sentences consists in a double move: first, the translation of the problematic terms (i.e. the noun-phrases that seem to refer to non-existent objects) by means of *quantifiers and predicates*; second, the denial that such sentences are about the problematic entities: when their hidden logical structure has been revealed, it is evident that they do not make any reference to non-existent objects.

Let us go back to sentences 1) and 2) and their respective formal translation 1') and 2'). The term 'nothing' in 1) and 2) that may appear to be a singular term<sup>12</sup> has been translated by means of a quantifier. The difference that emerges here is the one between a *quantifier* and a *singular term*, or more generally between a *quantifier* and a *noun-phrase*<sup>13</sup>. While the former is an expression of generality, the latter is an expression that refers to a determined object (or to more determined objects). Quantifiers are syntagmatic expressions that are usually linked with a name or a verb to form restricted quantifier phrases<sup>14</sup> such as 'some tables', 'every person', 'all human beings'. In contemporary logic, they are normally treated in connection with predicates: for instance, the sentence 'all human beings are mortal' is translated as  $\forall x(Hx \rightarrow Mx)$  to be read as 'for all  $x$ , if  $x$  falls under the concept of human being, then  $x$  falls under the concept of mortal'. In such a sentence, the semantic contribution of the quantifier is not that of referring to some specific human being, but rather specifies for whom the implication in its range ' $Hx \rightarrow Mx$ ' is valid: for *all* human beings (and not, say, for only some of them). On the contrary, the semantic contribution of a noun-phrase, and in particular of a singular term, is the object to which the term refers. In 'Caesar crossed the Rubicon', the semantic contribution of the noun 'Caesar' is the Roman general Julius Caesar. It is because the noun 'Caesar' refers to Julius Caesar that this sentence *is about him*. Simi-

12 This is true in particular for 2), rather than 1).

13 From a grammatical point of view, a noun-phrase is a noun (together with all other words that modify it) that can play the role of the subject, direct or indirect object of a sentence, or it can follow a preposition. Singular terms are noun-phrases, but plural terms and definite descriptions (both singular and plurals) are also noun-phrases.

14 For a general introduction to quantifiers and the way in which they are treated in contemporary logic, see Uzquiano (2020).

larly with the term ‘nothing’. When it is used as a quantifier, it is just a means of denying that something is the case. For instance, 1) denies that some food is in the fridge, and it is not claiming that some particular object – the nothingness – is in the fridge.

## 2.2 The quantificational use of ‘nothing’ is not problematic

If all occurrences of ‘nothing’ could be translated into quantificational terms, then there would be no aporia of nothingness. And in fact, that was Carnap’s view of the matter. Carnap believed that we should translate all occurrences of ‘nothing’ by means of a quantifier, and in this way the problem simply disappears. In Carnap (1932), he considers the sentences ‘Nothing is outside’, and claims that despite the grammatical form suggesting that we are attributing the property ‘being outside’ to the object nothingness, the real logical form is ‘ $\sim\exists x Out(x)$ ’: there is no  $x$  such that  $x$  is outside. The sentence merely claims that no object instantiates the predicate ‘being outside’. As in the examples above, the statement makes no reference to the object nothingness. However, when confronted with some statements made by Heidegger (such as ‘We seek the nothing’, ‘We know the nothing’, ‘The Nothing nothings’), Carnap claims that no translation by means of a quantifier is possible, and as such these statements are meaningless<sup>15</sup>.

In any event, the reason why the quantificational use of ‘nothing’ is not problematic is that such use does not imply any reference to a hypothetical (and problematic) state of nothingness. And this is made evident by the fact that the state of nothingness (or the object nothingness) is not the subject-matter of sentences 1), 2) or ‘ $\sim\exists x Out(x)$ ’.

15 Actually, Carnap’s argument is a little more complicated. For instance, he mentioned the Heideggerian claim that ‘Anxiety reveals the nothingness’ as a clue for supposing that the word ‘nothing’ as used by Heidegger actually refers to something, ‘a certain emotional constitution, possibly of a religious sort, or something or other that underlies such emotions. If such were the case, then the mentioned logical errors [...] would not be committed’ (Carnap 1932, p. 71). Carnap here seems to acknowledge the legitimacy of the term ‘nothing’ (or ‘nothingness’) as a noun-phrase. But he dismisses such interpretation in the case of Heidegger’s *Was ist Metaphysik?* because in the same argument Heidegger treats ‘nothing’ also as a quantifier.

### 2.3 Are the non-quantificational occurrences of ‘nothing’ legitimate?

We can concede to Carnap that many, if not most, of the occurrences of ‘nothing’ in our sentences admit such a translation by means of a quantifier. But are we sure that we can always perform such translation? We are here translating a sentence with an occurrence of ‘nothing’ as a noun-phrase into a sentence where that noun-phrase has been substituted by a quantifier. For the translation to be effective, the quantified sentence must have the same *meaning* of the original sentence. And whatever your preferred theory of meaning is, a necessary condition for two sentences to have the same meaning is that they are materially equivalent, i.e. they have the same truth-value. In other words, if we translate a natural language sentence where the term ‘nothing’ appears as a noun-phrase into a sentence where ‘nothing’ has been rendered by a quantifier ( $\sim\exists x$ ), and the two sentences do not have the same truth-value, then the translation is clearly faulty. To illustrate this with an example, let us consider the following situation:

Filippo is confused about the problem of nothingness: he does not know whether it is a real or a *pseudo*-problem. So he decides to study the issue in more depth; he reads a lot, he spends hours taking notes, and writing on it, and he gets very involved in the problem before making up his mind on it. At a certain point, astonished by the fact that he is so involved in the problem, he exclaims: ‘Nothing really matters to me!’

How should we interpret the last sentence? Is Filippo saying that *there is no* problem or no topic that interests him? This does not seem right. The context suggests that what Filippo is claiming is that nothingness (in the sense of the absolute nothing, i.e. the absence of everything, and the aporia that this absence raises) matters to him. As such, the quantificational translation is simply wrong because it gives rise to a sentence with a *different meaning*. As a matter of fact, the quantificational reading (there is no problem in which Filippo is interested) is false, because there is a problem that interests Filippo, namely the problem of nothingness.

In the literature there are different examples of sentences that cannot be directly translated into quantificational terms<sup>16</sup>; my favorite being an ex-

16 See Priest (2014) and Oliver and Smiley (2012) for some further examples.

ample used by Priest (2014). Consider the sentence ‘God created the universe out of nothing’, and translate it by means of a quantifier: ‘there is nothing from which God created the universe’. But this would be true also in the case God never created the universe. Therefore, the quantificational translation gives us a different sentence that can have a different truth-value with regard to the original one. This should show that in the original sentence ‘nothing’ is not quantifier, but a true noun-phrase<sup>17</sup>.

Of course, Carnap (1932) would have dismissed the latter example because it involves metaphysical concepts such as God, the creation of the world, etc. for which no verificationist criterion of application can be given. However, this depends on the verificationist theory of meaning that Carnap defended at that time, and which has since been clearly disqualified. As such, we need not worry about it.

### 2.3.1 Not-equivalence of the two interpretations of the term ‘nothing’

In the last paragraph, we have shown that the quantificational and the noun-phrase reading of nothing are not equivalent. The sentence ‘Nothing really matters to me’ expresses two different meanings, i.e. two different propositions, when ‘nothing’ is interpreted as a quantifier or as a singular term. Concerning the situation in which Filippo finds himself, the quantifier reading turns out to be false, while the noun-phrase reading is actually true. Since the two readings express propositions with different truth-values, they cannot be equivalent.

It is in virtue of this non-equivalence that Carnap could propose his thesis according to which we should avoid interpreting ‘nothing’ as a noun-phrase, and stick with the quantificational reading. Since they are not equivalent, once we accept the quantificational reading, we are not compelled to accept the noun-phrase reading either. In no way does the quantificational reading imply the other reading.

It is important to stress this difference because it is sometimes confused. For instance, it is confused when one claims that the fundamental ontological question: ‘Why is there something rather than nothing?’ is mislead-

<sup>17</sup> However, this particular example has been challenged by Sgaravatti and Spolaore (2018), who provide an interpretation of the sentence without assuming ‘nothing’ as a singular term. As such, the example cannot be considered conclusive.

ing, because the supposition that there could be nothing would be contradictory. According to such a train of thought, such supposition would amount to considering a situation where there would be at least one thing: the state of nothingness. In other words, to suppose that there would be no thing (quantificational reading) would mean that we are supposing that there is the absence of everything (noun-phrase reading). But if there is one thing, then it is false that there is no thing. Clearly, the mistake here is to confuse the quantificational with the noun-phrase reading. When I consider a situation where there is nothing, I am considering a situation where no thing is present (quantificational reading), and this does not imply that a particular thing – the nothingness – is present<sup>18</sup>. The same confusion can be found in the following reply to Carnap's position:

In particular, Carnap believed that speaking of 'being' as a noun and thus as a subject of predication was the result of a pathology of language. According to him, 'being' was a pseudo-concept born from the illegitimate hypostatization of the logical function of affirming. [...] In a symbolic language [...] the use of the verb 'being' should be substituted by the 'existential quantifier' applied to the variable  $x$  [...]. Now, even if we admit (but we do not truly concede) that the reduction of 'being' to its mere symbolic form is legitimate, one has to recognize that the existence *extra nihil negativum*, which is indicated by the quantifier symbol, is something meaningful [...]. So, it is not hard to recognize that such a symbol expresses nothing more than a judgment of presence: rather than a quantifier, it is a *presentifier* [presentificatore] [...]. This reveals that the neo-positivist attempt of getting rid of ontology put forward again [...] the same ontological difference, i.e. the difference between the 'presence' [the quantifier] and the objects present [the values of the variables]. Pagani 2014, pp. 55-56 (the translation is mine).

In this text, the word 'presence' is a synonym of 'being': as such, the passage is arguing that the Carnapian attempt to get rid of the substantive reading of 'being' in favor of the existential quantifier fails, because the existential quantifier just expresses the same presence, i.e. the same notion of

18 This is exactly (a part of) the objection that Carnap (1932) raises against Heidegger. On this point, Carnap is completely right.

being. The difference between the (existential) quantifier and the values of its bounded variables is interpreted as the same ontological difference, i.e. as the difference between ‘being’ (or presence) and the determinate entities. This reading clearly presupposes an objectual reading of the quantifier<sup>19</sup>; however, even granting this, while the analogy between the values that the bounded variable of an objectual quantifier with the different entities works, the same cannot be said for the parallel between the quantifier ( $\exists x$ ) and the substantive ‘being’, since, as we have already seen, the quantificational and the substantive reading are not equivalent. Such a critique of the Carnap’s view just confuses the two readings<sup>20</sup>.

However, this does not mean that Carnap is right. Having acknowledged the irreducibility of the two readings, one can argue against Carnap that there are occurrences of ‘nothing’ that must be translated by a noun-phrase in order to preserve the sentence’s intended meaning. And this is what we did before. Carnap’s mistake was thus to believe that we can live only with the quantificational reading; on the contrary, sometimes we need to worry about nothing(ness).

## 2.4 Where the aporia arises

When the term ‘nothing’ is considered to be a genuine noun-phrase, then the aporia of nothingness arises. At the beginning of chapter 4 (§1) of *La Struttura Originaria*, Severino says that nothing is ‘what is absolutely other than being, and therefore – we might say – insofar as it is that which lies *beyond* being, understood as the *totality of being*’. As such, nothingness is here characterized as the absence (or lack) of everything. If we use the predicate ‘ $x=x$ ’ to express the notion of being (since everything is self-identical, the predicate applies to any object), the predicate ‘nothing’ will be expressed by ‘ $\sim x=x$ ’ or shorter ‘ $x \neq x$ ’. With the latter predicate, we can express nothingness as ‘the absence of everything’ in the following way:

- 19 And not a substitutional reading. In the objectual reading, the bounded variables are taken to range over objects; in the substitutional reading, the bounded variables range over substitutional classes of expressions. See Uzquiano (2020) for an analysis of such difference.
- 20 Severino gives a different critique of Carnap’s view. I will deal with it later on, after having introduced the notion of concept.

$\iota y. \forall x \sim (x=y)$ <sup>21</sup>. This simply says that nothingness is the object (or the state) which is different from everything, i.e. it is different from each determinate being. Once we admit such a term, it is easy to derive a contradiction. Let us consider the following sentence (that you can often find in Severino's writings):

4. Nothing is opposed to Being.

Here both 'nothing' and 'being' are used as nouns: the natural reading of 4 is that being and nothing find themselves in a relation of opposition. We may formalize 4 as follows:

5.  $O(n,b)$ , where  $O(x,y)$  is the relation of opposition;  $n$  is the term 'nothing', while  $b$  is the term 'being'.

At this point it is natural to apply an instance of  $\exists$ -Introduction to obtain

6.  $\exists x O(x,b)$

This sentence says that there is something which is in the relation of opposition with being, which is equivalent to saying that there is something which is different from each determinate being. As such, this object satisfies the definition of nothingness: it is different from everything. In particular, it will be different from itself  $n \neq n$ . But everything is self-identical, so we have  $n = n$ . Nothingness is a self-contradictory object (or state), and consequently 6 seems immediately self-defeating<sup>22</sup>.

Clearly the aporia depends on assuming 'nothing' as a noun-phrase. The semantic contribution of names to the sentences in which they occur is the objects to which they refer: when we use 'nothing' as a name, it seems

21 This definition comes from Priest (2014) with a slight modification. In that context, Priest uses some mereological notion to define nothingness. I have preferred to avoid such notions in the present context since they do not play any specific role with regard to the present discussion. The symbol ' $\iota$ ' stands for the article 'the'. Given a predicate  $F$ ,  $\iota x.F(x)$  is a singular term that means: the thing that is  $F$ .

22 For a formal derivation of such a contradiction, see Priest (2014) or Costantini (2020, §3).



that we are referring to the state of nothingness. This use directly implies that there is an object which is nothingness<sup>23</sup>. Once the use of ‘nothing’ as a name is recognized as fully legitimate, then one faces the aporia of nothingness. But we argued that there are occurrences of the term ‘nothing’ as a noun-phrase that cannot be paraphrased away: as such, we are committed to the idea that the aporia of nothingness is a real problem, contra what Carnap believed.

## 2.5 Nothing as a concept

Until now, we have considered two ways in which we may interpret the term ‘nothing’: as a noun-phrase, which implies the aporia of nothingness, and as a (negated) quantifier, which does not allow the aporia to arise. We have also seen that there are occurrences of the term that cannot be translated with a quantifier, which implies that we must recognize the legitimacy of ‘nothing’ as a noun-phrase. However, one might suggest that there is a further way in which we may interpret the term ‘nothing’, i.e. as a concept. As a matter of fact, Severino often speaks of the *concept* of nothingness. And even Heidegger introduced the predicate *to nothing*, as we saw in the sentence ‘The Nothing nothings’. But what is a concept? In the philosophical literature, the term is not always used with the same meaning; thus, it is essential to be clear on how I shall use such a term. Here, I shall consider a concept as *the meaning expressed by a predicative expression*. In other words, concepts are what Russell called ‘propositional func-

23 I will not discuss here possible ways out of this contradiction. I refer the reader to Costantini (2020) for my preferred solution to the paradox of nothingness.

24 The word ‘concept’ is one used by Frege. For him, concepts are unsaturated entities. My conception of concept is broadly Fregean in spirit, but it is not completely Fregean. According to Frege, predicates have senses, references and extensions. Concepts are the referents of predicates; their sense is the way in which they appear to us, and their extension is the class of objects that instantiate the concept. I find such a view problematic, because it considers the relation between predicates and concepts similar to the relation between names and objects; moreover, it is not completely clear what the senses of concepts are supposed to be. As such, I will not follow Frege in applying the distinction sense/reference to concepts, and I shall follow the standard way (due to Carnap) of simplifying the Fregean view by only distinguishing two aspects of concepts: intension and extension.

tions'<sup>24</sup>.

So conceived, concepts have two aspects: an intension and an extension. We may define the intension of a concept by means of a possible world semantics: the intension of a concept is a *function* from possible worlds to sets of objects. The idea is simply that, given a set of objects (a possible world), the intentional aspect of the concept selects those objects that instantiate it. For example, consider two different worlds – i.e. the earth in the year 55 B.C., and the earth in 2020 – and the concept human being. The concept will determine two different sets of objects: the set of human beings alive in 55 B.C. and the set of human beings alive in 2020. These sets are respectively the extension of the concept in 55 B.C. and its extension in 2020.

One might think that the only difference between a concept and a noun is that under a concept many objects fall, while a singular term denotes exactly one object. In other words, one might suggest that the difference between names and concepts is just the difference between singular expression and general expression. But then, one might continue, there is no real difference between a singular term and a concept under which only one object falls. Against this view, let us consider again the following sentences:

- 3) Pegasus does not exist  
3')  $\sim \exists x \text{ Pegasize}(x)$

Since under the concept *Pegasize*(*x*) only one object falls, namely Pegasus, there should be no difference between the two sentences. But this is clearly wrong. The example shows that the difference between a concept and a singular term is not merely a difference about a singular and a general expression; rather it is a difference in the *logical functions* of the expressions. A name (both singular or plural) refers to something, and in virtue of this semantic reference, a name makes the object to which it refers the subject-matter of the sentences. In 3) the subject-matter is Pegasus, i.e. the sentence is about Pegasus. Pegasus seems to have to exist in order for 3) to be the sentence it is, and as such it is problematic. On the contrary, sentence 3') is not about Pegasus. That sentence is a general sentence that denies that there is an object that has the features of being a winged horse; it is not a singular sentence about a specific object. Even though the concept can admit at maximum one instance (in the counterfactual situation in which Pegasus really exists), still the general nature of concepts reemerges

thanks to the presence of a quantifier in sentence 3'). As such, the concept *Pegasize(x)* does not refer to any object, and for this reason 3') is a way of denying the existence of a winged horse without incurring the problem of negative existential sentences. In other words, 3') does not imply the existence of Pegasus, which means that the existence of the concept *Pegasize(x)* does not imply the existence of Pegasus.

If we now consider the concept of nothing, i.e. if we consider the meaning (or the intention) of the (artificial) predicate *to nothing*, then we must conclude the same as in the case of *Pegasize(x)*. The concept *nothing(x)* – which we previously introduced as the concept ' $\sim(x=x)$ ' – does not refer to any object whatsoever, and so its admission does not imply the aporia of nothingness. It is natural to specify the condition of applicability of such a concept by claiming that  $x$  falls under *nothing(x)* if, and only if ' $\sim(x=x)$ '. Then the concept *nothing(x)* turns out to be an empty concept by means of logical necessity (this means that in every possible world, the extension of this concept is empty)<sup>25</sup>. One has to notice that insofar it is a concept, the concept *nothing(x)* is something, i.e. it is a self-identical object. However, here the aporia of nothingness *does not arise* because there is nothing that forces us to claim that the same concept *nothing(x)* satisfies its own condition of application (i.e. its own definition).

### 2.5.1 Interlude: on the difference between Pegasus and the concept/notion of Pegasus

One might suggest that by admitting the existence of the concept *Pegasize(x)*, we are admitting that *there is a sense* in which the animal Pegasus exists. Pegasus may not exist in our spatio-temporal world, but as an idea or a representation it exists for sure. If this is true, the same should apply to the concept *nothing(x)*. The admission of it should imply the existence of nothingness. And this gives us the aporia. Of course, such objection badly fails because Pegasus is not a representation of Pegasus or the idea of

25 If we admit such interpretation, then Heidegger's sentence 'The Nothing nothings' turns out to be simply false (and not meaningless, as Carnap argued). No matter to which object the term 'Nothing' refers, the sentence claims that this object falls under the concept  $\sim(x=x)$ . But no object falls under such a concept. As a consequence, the sentence is false.

Pegasus, just as I am not a picture of myself. The representation or the idea of Pegasus are not winged horses, they cannot kick somebody, they do not have any weight, while Pegasus has all these properties. And Pegasus has all these properties by definition: since it is characterized as a winged horse, it must have all the properties that horses have. Since Pegasus and the notion of Pegasus satisfy different properties, by Leibniz's Law of identity, they are different objects.

However natural these remarks might seem, they imply that the position Severino defends in *The Essence of Nihilism* (pp. 74-76 of the Italian edition) is wrong. There, Severino considers a passage of Aquinas, where Aquinas says that we can know what 'man' or 'phenix' mean without knowing whether men or phenixes exist<sup>26</sup>. Severino claims that such a position is 'isolating' such meanings (i.e. such notions) from their existence/being<sup>27</sup> (in the text he speaks with Aquinas of 'essences', so he claims that Aquinas is isolating essences from existence/being); but such notions – Severino argues – are something, i.e. they exist, and so they are particular entities: we cannot 'isolate' them from existence<sup>28</sup>. Rather, we should claim that we do not know whether such notions, which are existent and so possess *being* in his most general sense, also possess that particular form of being that is *being in rerum natura*. As such, Severino concludes that Pegasus exists just be-

26 The passage of Aquinas is the following: 'Whatever is not of the understood content of an essence or quiddity is something which comes from without and makes a composition with the essence, because no essence can be understood without the things which are parts of it. Now, every essence or quiddity can be understood without anything being understood about its existence. For I can understand what a man is, or what a phoenix is, and yet not know whether they have existence in the real world. It is clear, therefore, that existence is other than essence or quiddity, unless perhaps there exists a thing whose quiddity is its existence' (Aquinas 1965, chapter IV, pp. 159-160). Aquinas speaks of essences but for our purposes we can read it as if he were speaking of concepts (in the sense of propositional functions).

27 Here I follow Severino in considering existence and being as synonyms.

28 I quote here Severino: 'Is or is not the determination nothing? "Homo," "phoenix," "Socrates," "this bone or this flesh" (*hoc os vel haec caro*)—are they or are they not nothing? To repeat in truth the great step beyond Parmenides—to take it, that is, without being ensnared by the Platonic mystification—we have to say that the determination refuses to be a Nothing insofar as it is a determination; so that not being a Nothing is predicated of the determination as such, and therefore is a predicate that can never be separated from it' (Severino 2016, part I, chapter II, first paragraph of the Postscript; p. 75 of the Italian edition).

29 On this point Severino writes: 'But while the implication between an essence and a

cause it is a determination; we simply do not know which kind of existence Pegasus possesses (it may exist concretely, abstractly or as an idea in our mind)<sup>29</sup>.

In such passages (I have quoted some salient parts of them in footnotes 28 and 29), one can clearly see that Severino fails to distinguish a notion (like ‘man’, ‘phenix’ or ‘Pegasus’) from the objects satisfying that notion. For sure, ‘man’, ‘phenix’ or ‘Pegasus’ are somethings, and in this sense he is right in saying that we cannot ‘separate’ such notions from their existence/being. But this does not imply that there are men, or that there exists a phenix or Pegasus, because while a phenix is a bird, the notion of a phenix is not a bird. Severino’s reason to think that a thing  $x$  exists in general terms – leaving us in the uncertainty of the modes in which  $x$  exists – just conflates the notions of  $x$  (or what we have called the concept of  $x$ ) with  $x$  itself. A consequence of such conflation is his claim that the phenix must appear if we understand what a phenix is: again, what appears is not the phenix, but the concept of the phenix.

## 2.6 The three distinctions and Severino’s reply to Carnap

To sum up what we have done until now, we presented three different ways in which the word ‘nothing’ can occur in our sentences: as a quantifier, as a noun-phrase, and as a concept. We argued that the quantifier and the concept reading are not problematic at all; on the contrary, as soon as we admit the legitimacy of the noun-phrase interpretation, we have to face the paradox of nothingness. In the next paragraph, we are going to expose Severino’s resolution of the aporia of nothingness in the light of these distinctions. More specifically we shall use the noun-phrase reading and the con-

particular modality of its existence (different from the one that it actually possesses) is indeed problematic, there is no problem whatsoever with the implication between essence (in the sense of any essence or determination whatsoever: unreal or real, incorporeal or corporeal...) and pure existence, i.e., existence in its transcendental sense. To the extent that this fabulous bird appears, and according to the modality of its appearing— and it indeed must appear, if “we can understand what a Phoenix is” (*possumus intelligere quid est Phoenix*)—to this extent and according to this modality it is not a Nothing, and this not being a Nothing is immediately (per se) predicated of it, in virtue of (per) its being a what that is in some way meaningful’ (Severino 2016, part I, chapter II, first paragraph of the Postscript; p. 75 of the Italian edition).

cept reading to analyze such a solution. However, before doing so, it is useful to test such distinctions in relation to his own reply to Carnap. Severino (1958, p.26 of the present volume) writes:

The aporia of nothingness is not caused by mere verbal suggestion. Suppose that instead of saying “Beyond, outside being there is nothing”, we were to say “There is no positive that lies outside the totality of the positive”; or, in symbols: “ $\sim (\exists x). x$  is outside the totality of the positive” (where variable  $x$  can assume any positive value). What would still remain to be clarified is the meaning of that “outside the totality of the positive” which is precisely nothing, and whose presence gives rise to the aporia. [...] However, in the logical proposition “ $\sim (\exists x). x$  is outside...”, Carnap does not distinguish the logical situation in which variable  $x$  assumes a limited number of positive values (whereby that with respect to which  $x$  is “outside”, “beyond”, is a limited dimension of the positive), from the logical situation in which – as mentioned above –  $x$  can assume *all* positive values (whereby that with respect to which  $x$  is “outside” is the very totality of the positive). It is precisely in this latter case that nothingness (what is outside the whole) *manifests itself*, insofar as in the proposition “ $\sim (\exists x). x$  is outside the totality of the positive” the meaning “outside the totality of the positive” manifests itself.

In the sentence “ $\sim (\exists x). x$  is outside the totality of the positive”, ‘being outside the totality of the positive’ is a predicative term expressing a concept, i.e. the concept *nothing*( $x$ ), and not a noun-phrase. However, Severino treats it as a singular term, for instance when he says that ‘the nothing (what it is beyond the totality of the positive) appears’ (the presence of the article ‘the’ and the pronoun ‘what’ is a clear clue of this). This is strictly speaking false, since what appears is *the meaning* of the term nothing, and not the nothingness. Compare: thanks to the concept *Pegasus*( $x$ ) what appears is the notion of a winged horse, and not a winged horse. Carnap’s position is not merely a verbalistic one; rather it is based on the logical differences between quantifiers, concepts and noun-phrases. In this passage, Severino just skips all these fundamental distinctions, conflating the semantics of noun-phrases and predicative expressions, and in this way he believes he has shown Carnap’s position to be wrong<sup>30</sup>.

30 This emerges even more clearly in a passage from *Intorno al senso del nulla* (and here translated at p. 34): ‘Even Carnap’s thesis that one must replace expressions used in

### 3. Severino's solution and its critical assessment

#### 3.1 Exposition of Severino's resolution

Severino's resolution is exposed in the famous chapter 4 of *La Struttura Originaria*. Here we find two formulations of the aporia and a general solution for both of them. In the previous chapters of his book, Severino had introduced his way of expressing the Principle of Non-Contradiction: *the being is not the not-being*. In this formulation we have the word 'not-being', and this raises (the first formulation of) the problem of nothingness:

Now, precisely because it is ruled out that being is nothing, in order for this exclusion to subsist, nothingness is *posited, present*, and therefore *is*. There is a discourse on nothingness, and this discourse attests to the *being* of nothingness. (Severino 1958, §1, p. 12)

The second formulation is as follows:

In other words, if not-being is not, it cannot even be stated that being is not not-being, since not-being, in this statement, in some way is. (Severino 1958, §3, p. 13)

Severino's resolution is based on the difference between what he calls the positivity of meaningfulness (*positivo significare*) of a meaning or an entity, and its determinate content:

Every meaning (every thinkable content, which is to say every entity, however it may constitute itself) is a semantic synthesis between the positivity of meaningfulness and the determinate content of positive meaningfulness; [...] it is clear that the meaning 'nothingness' is self-contradictory, which is to say a contradiction,

common parlance such as "There is nothing outside" with expressions such as "There is not something that is outside" disproves what it affirms: for "there is not" or "not being there" is another synonym of "nothing" (as long as one does not take account – as happens with Carnap, by contrast to Heidegger – of the different semantic status which is determined by "there" in these expressions and understands them as synonyms of "being"). That something, which we would expect to be outside, *is not* means that *it* is nothing'.

it is being meaningful as a contradiction: the very contradiction whereby the positivity of this meaningfulness is contradicted by the absolute negativity of the meaningful content. (Severino 1958, §6, p. 14)

Severino distinguishes the existence of an entity or a meaning from the determinate content of that entity/meaning. In the case of the notion of nothingness, he distinguishes the fact that the notion exists, and so it is a positive determination (a being), from its content (i.e. its definition) that indicates the absolute absence of everything. The meaning 'nothingness' is a synthesis of these two sides; in particular it is a self-contradictory synthesis because its content (the absolute absence of everything) contradicts its being a positive determination, i.e. the fact that it is something. Therefore, Severino explicitly acknowledges the existence of a self-contradictory concept<sup>31</sup>.

For Severino, such an existence is not a counterexample to the Principle of Non-Contradiction, and the reason for this constitutes his resolution of the aporia. Severino's version of the Principle of Non-Contradiction does not affirm the nonexistence of the self-contradictory concept of nothingness, but rather affirms that the 'nothingness' has a different meaning from the 'being': it affirms that *being* and *not-being* are different meanings. In other words, the Principle of Non-Contradiction requires that there is no contradiction within the content (i.e. the definition) of the notion of nothingness, and it does not forbid that this content contradicts the fact that the notion is a positive determination. The concept of nothingness is a synthesis of two moments which are not contradictory: the contradiction only regards the synthesis itself.

Severino then applies this general solution to the two formulations of the problem of nothingness. The solution to the first formulation is as follows:

As regards the first aporia presented, we will answer by acknowledging that, certainly, nothingness is; yet not in the sense that 'nothingness' means 'being': in this sense, nothingness is not, and being is [...] We thus state that nothingness is, in the sense that a positive

31 Many authors have thought this to be a problem; see for instance Visentin (2011), Donà (2008).



meaningfulness – a being – is meaningful as the absolutely negative [...] or, nothingness is, in the sense that the meaning ‘nothing’ is self-contradictory. (Severino 1958, §8, pp. 15-16)

And with regard to the second formulation, Severino writes:

In other words, in its reference to nothingness, being excludes it as its contradictory only insofar as it refers to nothingness-as-moment; besides, this moment stands in relation to the moment of its positive meaningfulness, and through this relation – which is the very contradictoriness of ‘nothing’ as a concrete meaning – *endures* or *is capable of* standing in a relation of contradiction to being. (Severino 1958, §10, p. 18)

In addition to his resolution, Severino presents a diagnosis of the rising of the aporia: the problem originates from the fact that we tend to consider the two sides of the synthesis (of which the notion of nothingness consists) as two independent and not-related entities. When one considers the two moments as being independent from each other (in other words, when one separates them), and on the basis of such separation one considers the concept of nothingness, one is naturally led to consider the determinate content of the concept (i.e. what Severino calls the ‘null-moment’) as something (as a positive being), and so one finds oneself within the aporia. In this way, one finds oneself in the situation of considering the content of the notion, which is only a side of the contradictory concept of ‘nothingness’, as the whole notion:

The aporetic argument instead keeps the moments of self-contradictoriness abstractly separate, and by considering nothingness-as-moment, finds it as something which lets itself be considered, and which therefore *is*; that is to say: it finds precisely that from which it has sought to prescind (the other moment) by considering nothingness-as-moment abstractly; it finds the being of nothingness. [...] (Severino 1958, §9, p. 17)

### 3.2 Critical assessment of Severino’s solution

It is now time to critically analyze Severino’s resolution of the aporia of nothingness. The key idea of Severino’s solution is given by two claims:

- A) The meaning nothing(ness) is self-contradictory;
- B) The determinate of the meaning nothing(ness) is a consistent content (it does not imply by itself any contradiction: this is the semantic moment – the null-moment – of the synthesis).

As mentioned in §2, and the exposition of Severino’s resolution should have made clear, Severino does not explicitly distinguish the different logical functions that the term ‘nothing’ can assume. It is thus natural to wonder whether we should interpret Severino’s speech of nothingness as expressing a noun-phrase interpretation or a concept interpretation (in the specific sense of concept as propositional function that we introduced earlier). For sure, we can outright dismiss the quantificational interpretation. It is clear that this is not the reading presupposed by Severino’s formulation of the problem. The quantificational interpretation does not allow the aporia to arise, and as such it cannot be the right reading<sup>32</sup>. But what about the other two interpretations? First, I shall consider the interpretation based on the concept of as introduced in §2.4. I shall argue that the content of such a concept is perfectly consistent (it does not imply any contradiction), and so such a reading makes thesis B) of Severino’s solution true. However, I shall show that thesis A) does not hold for *nothing(x)*. Second, I shall consider the noun-phrase reading. In this case, thesis A) holds, since this reading implies a contradiction; however, I shall argue that thesis B) does not hold, since the contradiction follows from the same *content* of the noun-phrase ‘nothing’.

32 Simionato (2017) develops a solution of the *aporia* of nothingness that combines a noun-phrase interpretation with a quantificational one. According to such an account, the term ‘nothingness’ refers to an abstract object – the empty world – which is characterized as the world which contains *no objects* (quantifier reading). The proposal is clever and cunning, and in a certain way it reformulates in a rigorous setting Severino’s own proposal. I am not going to deal with Simionato’s account here for a simple reason: this paper is about Severino’s solution, and even if his account is indebted to that of Severino, it is ultimately incompatible with Severino’s philosophy (and therefore cannot be an interpretation of Severino’s own account). The determinate content of the meaning ‘nothingness’ is formulated by means of the quantified sentence ‘there is no thing in the empty world’. If this notion is consistent, as Severino’s solution requires, then the notion of empty world must be a consistent notion, i.e. the empty world must be a possible world. But this contradicts the claim that there are things which exist necessarily: to exist necessarily means to exist in all possible worlds. As such, Simionato’s account is incompatible with Severino’s own account.

### 3.2.1 First interpretation: “nothing” as the concept *nothing(x)*

In § 2.4 we have seen that in a sentence like  $\sim\exists x \text{ Pegasize}(x)$  the concept *Pegasize(x)* does not refer to Pegasus, and more generally there is no relation between that concept and Pegasus (since the latter does not exist). We argued that to think that *Pegasize(x)* refers to Pegasus means to confuse a concept with a noun-phrase. As a consequence, when we consider the term ‘nothing’ as expressing a concept – the concept *nothing(x)* – we must conclude that *nothing(x)* does not refer to anything, but rather it is merely a certain kind of intension ( $x \neq x$ ). Of course, *nothing(x)* has an empty extension, in fact no object at all falls under it. And it is empty by necessity: in all possible worlds, its extension is empty. In a Severinian jargon, we may say that what the concept *nothing(x)* denotes is the absolute absence (of everything); however here the verb ‘denote’ does not express any relation of reference. In so far as we define the concept *nothing(x)* by means of the predicate  $x \neq x$ , then Severino’s claim that the Principle of Non-Contradiction requires that *the content* of the concept of nothing is consistent (i.e. that the nothingness-as-moment is a not-contradictory meaning) turns out to be true: the predicate  $x \neq x$  is a perfectly defined predicate (in first-order logic with identity). Since everything is self-identical, no object can fall under it. One has to notice, however, that the other Severinian claim according to which the concept of nothingness is self-contradictory (being a synthesis of ‘positivity meaningfulness’ and its determinate content) does not follow. The existence of the concept *nothing(x)* does not require that *nothing(x)* falls under itself. The concept *nothing(x)* does not satisfy its own condition of application, and this prevents it to be a self-contradictory concept.

Considering concepts as the meaning of predictive expressions allows us to claim that the concept *nothing(x)* does not refer to any object, and that it is a perfectly consistent meaning. Therefore, there is no contradiction in considering a concept that expresses the absence of everything. It is perfectly meaningful to claim that “the absence of everything” is something meaningful, because this simply means that there is the concept *nothing(x)*<sup>33</sup>, and not that a particular object (the referent of the noun-phrase ‘the absence of everything’) has contradictory features.

33 Once again, recognizing the concept *nothing(x)* amounts to recognizing that there is the meaning ‘nothingness’ and not that there is the state (object) nothingness, in the same way as recognizing the concept *Pegasize(x)* amounts to recognizing that there is the meaning of Pegasus (winged horse) and not that there is Pegasus.

It is important to notice how the distinction between the ‘positivity of meaningfulness’ (positivo significare) and its determinate content is preserved when we consider concepts as the meanings of predicative expressions. The content of the concept *nothing*( $x$ ) is simply given by its definition ( $x \neq x$ ); its ‘positivity of meaningfulness’ is given by the *existence* of such definition. As a consequence, it is perfectly legitimate to view the concept *nothing*( $x$ ) as a synthesis of these two sides. But, as we already know, there is no contradiction between these two sides.

### 3.2.2 Second interpretation: “nothing” as a noun-phrase

Despite the fact that Severino often speaks of the concept of nothing, one may insist that what he really has in mind is not a concept in the sense of a propositional function, but rather he is referring to ‘nothing’ as a noun-phrase. And this would be confirmed by a wide range of occurrences of nothing as a noun-phrase in his work. For instance, ‘nothing’ as ‘not-being’ appears as a noun in Severino’s formulation of the Principle of Non-Contradiction (the being is not (identical to) the *not-being*).

We already argued in §2 that the admission of the legitimacy of some occurrences of ‘nothing’ as a noun-phrase leads directly to paradox. We defined ‘nothingness’ as the absence of everything:  $\neg \forall x(x \neq x)$ . We have also seen that the semantic contribution of a noun-phrase to the meaning of a sentence is the object (or the objects) to which it refers. Therefore, the term ‘nothingness’ refers to an object which respects the condition  $x \neq x$ . Informally, we may call this object the state of nothingness, or simply the nothingness. By definition, nothingness turns out to be a non-self-identical object. But every object is self-identical, so the object nothingness is both identical to itself and is not identical to itself. We thus have a contradiction<sup>34</sup>.

When we interpret the term ‘nothing’ as a noun-phrase, we immediately face the aporia of nothingness. Therefore, one might conclude, this is the correct way of understanding Severino’s formulation of the aporia. As a matter of fact, thesis A) of his resolution is now satisfied: nothingness is

<sup>34</sup> Again, I refer the reader to Priest (2014) or Costantini (2020, §3) for a rigorous derivation of the contradiction.

a self-contradictory notion. However, in this setting, thesis B) turns out to be false. In fact, we cannot claim that the determinate content of the notion of nothing (the null-moment) is consistent (recall that this is what the Principle of Non-Contradiction requires), and that the contradiction is given by the synthesis of the positivity of meaningfulness and the determinate content of such positivity. In fact, the content of nothing as a noun-phrase is not simply the predicate  $x \neq x$  anymore, but rather the object satisfying the definition  $\iota x. \forall x(x \neq x)$ . And this is an inconsistent object since it is not identical to itself<sup>35</sup>. If we claimed that the content is to be identified with the meaning of the predicate  $x \neq x$ , then we would treat the notion of nothing not as a noun-phrase but as a concept (we would be back to the case discussed above). Considering ‘nothing’ as a noun-phrase commits ourselves to a contradictory object – the (state of) nothingness – which directly violates the Principle of Non-Contradiction. Thesis B) above cannot be satisfied.

Again, let us consider the distinction between the positivity of meaningfulness and its determinate content, when ‘nothingness’ is treated as a noun-phrase. Of course, the linguistic term has a meaning, which is captured by the definition  $\iota x. \forall x(x \neq x)$  (nothingness as the thing which is different from all other things, and so itself too). The positivity of meaningfulness is the *existence* of such meaning. By contrast, the content is what it is referred to by the definition itself, i.e. the object nothingness, which is a self-contradictory object. In this case the content cannot be a consistent notion.

35 As specified above, this implication requires the standard semantic principle according to which the semantic contribution of a noun is the object to which the noun refers. Oliver and Smiley (2012) have proposed considering the term ‘nothing’ as an empty term, i.e. a noun that does not refer to anything. This is surely a possible way of blocking the paradox. With regard to the exposition of the aporia in §2.4, such resolution implies the adoption of a free logic, which would make sentence 6 not committed to the existence of an  $x$  such that  $O(x, b)$ . In fact, free logics admit quantifiers with no existential commitment. This is not the place to criticize this proposal; here I limit myself to noting that this would not fit well with Severino’s formulation of the aporia. Severino claims that the concept of nothing is self-contradictory; Oliver and Smiley’s proposal makes the contradiction disappear. In such a scenario, even if the notion of nothingness turns out to be consistent (so thesis B) is valid), thesis A is no longer true.

### 3.2.2.1 An important clarification

Our analysis has emphasized the presence of an *ambiguity* in the notion of determinate *content* (the null-moment) of the concept of nothingness. Either the content is to be identified with the meaning of *nothing(x)* or it is to be identified with the nothingness itself. I would like to stress that this ambiguity clearly emerges from a number of Severino's passages. For instance, consider the following passages:

**nothingness is**; yet not in the sense that 'nothingness' means 'being': in this sense, nothingness is not, and being is [...]. We thus state that **nothingness is, in the sense that a positive meaningfulness – a being – is meaningful as the absolutely negative, i.e. as 'nothing'**; in other words, it is meaningful as that 'nothing' which is absolutely not meaningful as 'being'. [...] The two sides or moments of this self-contradictoriness are – as already noted – *being* (positive meaningfulness) and **nothing, as a non-contradictory meaning** (precisely because nothingness-as-moment is absolutely not meaningful as 'being'. (Severino 1958, §8, pp. 15-16).

**Both sides or moments of the necessary contradiction which constitutes the meaning nothing are meanings.** But **that nothing** which is the moment of this contradiction and which means *nothing*, and not *an existent* – i.e. that nothing which is *not* nothing *qua* positive meaningfulness – **is, certainly, meaningful (it is, precisely, a meaning)**; but it *is* only such (just as it *is* only a side and moment of that contradiction) in the sense that nothing, which is a moment, is a moment insofar as it is *distinct* from its *appearing as* something meaningful (and hence as a side or moment): for this *appearing-as* is the *other* moment of nothing *qua* necessary contradiction (this other moment being the positive meaningfulness of nothing, which is meaningful, yet only as something distinct from its own positive meaningfulness). (Severino 2013, pp. 36-37)

The green passages are about the null-moment understood as a meaning (as clearly stated by the latter passage from *Intorno al Senso del Nulla*). That 'nothing' does not mean 'being' is naturally interpreted as a sentence about the meanings (i.e. the concepts) of the words: the definition of 'nothing' ( $\sim(x=x)$ ) is different from the definition of being ( $x=x$ ). The same sentence 'the nothing is not' is understood by Severino as saying that the concept of nothing is a different concept from the concept of being.

One must pay attention that Severino often uses quotation marks when he speaks of the consistent notion of nothingness, i.e. the null-moment. This clearly suggests that he is speaking of the meanings of the words ‘being’ and ‘nothing’. Moreover, the fact that “‘nothing’ means ‘nothing’”, and so nothingness cannot have any semantic positivity’ (Severino 1958, §8, p. 216<sup>36</sup>) depends exactly on the definition of nothing ( $(\sim(x=x))$ ), which does not allow any entity to be identified with it. Clearly, when he directly speaks of the ‘null-moment’ as a consistent notion, Severino (implicitly) exploits the definition of the concept *nothing(x)* the determinate content of the notion of nothing is taken to be the same definition of such a notion.

By contrast, the red passages are (only a few) examples of the self-contradictory notion of nothing, i.e. the concrete synthesis between the null-moment and its ‘positivity of meaningfulness’. Here Severino explicitly says that the nothingness appears, i.e. it manifests itself. Clearly, he does not mean the definition of the concept *nothing(x)*, since this definition is perfectly consistent. Rather, Severino means here the same (state of) nothingness. What it is manifest in the notion of nothingness is the same (object) nothingness. The idea seems to be that we have the notion of nothingness, and through this notion *the nothingness* itself appears. And in fact, the concept is said to be self-contradictory. Therefore, here the synthesis is between a ‘positivity of meaningfulness’ and the (object) nothing, which thus plays the part of the null-moment.

## Conclusion

Severino’s formulation and resolution of the problem of nothingness is based on a general referment to the notion of nothing. In this paper, we have presented three different ways in which we may interpret such notion: as a quantifier, as a noun-phrase, or as a concept (conceived as a propositional function).

The quantifier reading is the simplest and least controversial; it is the reading of nothing that even an anti-metaphysician like Carnap could accept. We have insisted that such an interpretation does not imply any para-

36 This passage has not been translated in the present contribution. As such, the translation is mine (the page number here refers to the Italian Adelphi’s edition).

dox of nothing; moreover, its non-equivalence with the noun-phrase interpretation allows us to reply to some positions that would like to extrapolate the noun-phrase interpretation from it.

The other two readings are more interesting for Severino's solution of the aporia. However, we argued that none of them can simultaneously make true the two theses in which Severino's solution consists. The concept *nothing*( $x$ ) makes thesis B) true, but thesis A) turns out to be false; on the contrary, the noun-phrase reading makes thesis A) true, but then thesis B) becomes false. The conclusion is that none of the three possible ways of interpreting the general notion of nothing can sustain Severino's solution. This shows that Severino's solution is built on an ambiguity: when he claims that the meaning 'nothing' is self-contradictory (thesis A), he is really treating it as a noun that refers to an object that – by definition – should not exist; when he claims that the content of this notion is consistent, he is thinking of the definition of the concept *nothing*( $x$ ). However, the two readings of 'nothing' are different and incompatible, as is clearly shown by the fact that the concept *nothing*( $x$ ) does not involve any contradiction, while the noun-phrase 'the nothingness' leads directly to paradox.

This ambiguity is fatal for Severino's resolution. Once accepted the legitimacy of 'nothing' as a noun-phrase, we face the aporia of nothingness. However, this aporia does not depend on the fact that the meaning ' $\sim(x=x)$ ' is a perfectly consistent notion, or that the meaning of 'nothing' differs from the meaning of 'being'. That ' $\sim(x=x)$ ' is a perfectly consistent notion does not avoid that the noun-phrase 'nothingness' defined by  $\forall x(x \neq x)$  implies the being of a contradictory object.

The general lesson that we should learn from this situation is that analysis and logical distinctions are important. Many scholars in the Severinian tradition have thought that Severino had provided the conclusive word on the problem of nothingness; he would have solved once and for all one of the oldest problems in Western metaphysics<sup>37</sup>. But a bit of logic shows that his solution is only a mirage, a dangerous seduction originated in the ambiguity of natural language. Carnap was wrong in thinking that the problem of nothingness is only a *pseudo-problem*; indeed, it is a real metaphysical challenge<sup>38</sup> worth taking up. However, given the deep connection that

37 For instance, Cusano (2011) makes such kind of claims.

38 I have proposed what I think to be the right approach to such a problem in Costantini (2020).



(some, if not all) metaphysical problems have with the language in which we formulate and elaborate them, Carnap was right in thinking that it is not possible to overestimate the importance of logic in clarifying and delimitating such problems amid the deep fog of their natural language formulations.

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# Aristotle's Aporia and the Thought that looks at Nothing

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Contradiction as pure contradiction – that is, as the *pure* appearing of thesis that is, at the same time, the appearing of antithesis –, is something that cannot exist. This is one of the greatest Aristotelian themes for which it is not only *the contradictory content* that is impossible (i.e. non-existent), but also the *conviction* that the contradictory content exists. Emanuele Severino maintains that *nihilism* represents the soul of Western civilization and defines *nihilism* as the *belief that the being is nothing*, a belief that, given the Aristotelian theorem of the impossibility of self-contradiction, could not exist. The present paper intends to show the necessity that the great Aristotelian thesis concerning the impossibility of the existence of madness, *should be rethought at a higher level*, according to the assertions of Severino. Then we will see how everything relates to the theme of “nothingness” and the thought that contradicts itself as a *thought that thinks the nothingness*.

**Keywords:**

**contradictory content, self-contradiction, nihilism, foundation of the contradiction, positive meaningfulness of nothingness**

## I. Introduction

Becoming has always been understood as a process in which something becomes something other than itself: when wood becomes ashes, as a result of becoming the wood is the ashes: the being becomes ashes from the wood, is the identity of those not identical that are the wood and the ashes. With the advent of philosophical thought, that introduces the ontological categories into the language, the becoming is interpreted as a process whereby things pass from being to not being (and vice versa) and the madness of the identification of the non-identical is pushed to the extreme:

In order to render conceivable this becoming other on the part of something, which immediately shows its contradictory character in pre-ontological thought, nihilism (i.e. the ontology of the West) asserts that, in becoming other, something becomes nothing, but with this assertion the contradictory nature of becoming something else *doubles* – since nihilism must not only continue to think that, in becoming something else, something (wood) *is* something else because it is another something positive (ash), but must also think that something is something else because it is nothing (it is that something else which is nothing) (Severino, 1995, p. 26).

The belief that things emerge from nothing and return to it implies the absurdity of the identification of being and not being, since «envisioning a time [...] when something become nothing [...] means envisioning a time when Being (i.e. not-Nothing) is identified with Nothing» (Severino, 2016, p. 88), that is the time in which the beings, as such, are nothing: they are nothing before being, and they return to being nothing, at the end of the process of becoming. It is precisely the *nihilism* of which Severino speaks – this *persuasion that the being is nothing*, necessarily implied by the

affirmation of becoming understood ontologically as the process through which things oscillate between being and not being<sup>1</sup>.

Nevertheless, in Book IV of *Metaphysics*, Aristotle, while discussing the characteristics of the principle of non-contradiction, incontrovertibly demonstrates that this principle excludes not only the contradiction of the entity, but also the contradiction of thought. It appears therefore that the thesis of nihilism as persuasion that the being is nothing cannot subsist. Severino writes: «If Aristotle's discourse *stands*, and namely if madness is impossible, everything we have ever said about the madness of Western history *does not stand*» (Severino, 2009, p. 249). Severino himself spoke of "Aristotle's *aporia*" (Ivi, p. 253) to express the contrast between the assertion of the existence of nihilism and the assertion of the impossibility of the existence of madness.

We will see how the Stagirian presents his arguments and how Severino responds to the challenges of the Book IV of *Metaphysics* in relation to this topic. But not before of having underlined how this Aristotelian *challenge* calls into question every discourse that intends to show the domination of the contradiction in a certain development phase of thought and history.

1. For Hegel the contradiction is the contradiction of thought as abstract thought (intellect) which keeps the determinations isolated and which is resolved in the concrete thought (reason) which considers the determinations in their unity.

When Hegel states: «We have to concede to the ancient dialectics the contradictions that they detect in the motion, but from this it does not follow that therefore the motion does not exist, but rather that the motion is the contradiction itself as existing» (*Science of Logic*, Vol. I, Book II, Section 1, Chapter II, C, note 3), that is, what he is talking about is the finite reality: the "motion" is the ending of the finite, the process in which the finite determinations pass into their opposite.

Moreover, for the Idealism the existence is placed within the thought, so that "the contradiction itself as existing" is the necessary content of every finished thought. Where Hegel states: «All things are contradictory in

1 The contradictory nature of becoming in which things become other than themselves, and in which the beings do not yet exist and no longer exist, implies the affirmation of the eternity of the beings (cf. Goggi, 2019, pp. 43-56).

themselves» (*Ibid.*), he refers to things as the content of the abstract intellect, i.e. the intellect that takes the finite determination as «thing that is and subsists for itself» (*Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, par. 80): thus taken, the “thing” is a contradiction, suppression. The contradictions of which Hegel speaks are therefore not reality “in itself”, existing independently from thought; what is real is instead the *contradiction of thought* which, however, does not fall into nothingness, since the thought process essentially consists in «getting rid of the contradiction» (*Science of Logic*, Vol. II, Section Three, Chapter III) in that *unity of the opposites* (the rational, the speculative) where each determination manages to be itself without dissolving into the other.

For Marx the contradictions of capitalism are dialectical contradictions. But, even here, what contradicts itself is that *way of thinking* which suits capitalism that it is realized, *in its effective praxis*, according to the procedure method of the separating intellect: in the capitalist society «the union appears as accidental, the separation as normal, and therefore the separation [for which the product appears as something separate from the producer, namely appearing as a commodity] is considered the normal relationship» (*History of economic theories*, vol. I).

Therefore, even for Marx, the contradictions provoked by the separating intellect are not to be understood as the impossible existence of a contradictory reality (which is excluded from the principle of non-contradiction) but rather *the contradiction of thought as intellect*, namely the inadequate (untrue) way of conceiving reality which keeps what is united separate. And if the separation «continues until a certain point», writes Marx, «then unity is asserted through a crisis» (*The Capital*, Book I, Section 1, Chapter 3, par. 2, a).

2. These views were briefly mentioned in order to point out that even for the dialectical logic – which intends to think in the most rigorous way the principle of non-contradiction – the assumption that *the first principle does not exclude the existence of the contradiction of thought* remains firm.

For his part, Severino demonstrated, in his writings, that «the meaning of Being [...] has been progressively altered, distorted, and thus forgotten throughout the history of Western philosophy» (Severino, 2016, p. 35) and that the principle of non-contradiction, as understood in the course of Western thought (including its more radical understanding which is dialectical logic), positing that *the being exists when it exists, and that it does not, when does not exist*, «becomes the worst form of contradiction: precise-

ly because contradiction is concealed in the very formula that was designed to avoid it and to banish it from Being» (Ivi, p. 39). Considering the being in time, and thinking of time as the realm in which things oscillate between being and not being, the West is *madness*: the time in which Being is Nothing (when it is not) is *the time of the absurd*, the time in which one thinks that a being, a non-nothing, is nothing.

But madness is *the contradiction of thought*. And it is at this point that we must come to terms with Aristotle and the Aristotelian theorem of the impossibility of contradiction.

## II. The impossibility of contradiction

Aristotle's discourse is anticipated by Plato, who states that no one, not even in a dream, «whether healthy or crazy, has dared to say to himself, with the intention of persuading himself, that the ox is necessarily a horse, or that two is one»; and, to put it broadly, that «something is the other in comparison to which this is the other» (*Thetethus*, 190 b-c). What is impossible, says Plato, is *the persuasion that something is other than itself*: we are dealing with *an impossibility*, not a simple empirical statement that could not enjoy the characteristics of universality.

Established by Plato, this great thesis is demonstrated by Aristotle in *Metaphysics* IV (1005b 11-34). After explaining that it is the task of the philosopher to investigate on the first principle of the demonstration, the Stagirian proceeds as follows:

1. First (*Metaph.* 1005b 11-18), he specifies which are the characteristics that must have the most solid principle of all;
2. Secondly (*Metaph.* 1005b 18-22), he enunciates the principle which the specified characteristics are suited to;
3. Thirdly (*Metaph.* 1005b 22-34), he demonstrates that what has been enunciated as the first principle of knowledge satisfies the specified characteristics. Let us proceed through these steps, point by point.

1. The first characteristic of the principle is that «regarding which it is impossible [*adýnaton*] to be mistaken» (*Metaph* 1005b 12); and this principle, the text continues, «must be the best known» (*Metaph* 1005b 13) because it is the principle of being that is the *maximum known*, and men fall into error about that which they do not know. The second characteristic is

that this principle must be «non-hypothetical» (*Metaph* 1005b 15-16): in fact, a hypothesis cannot be something that is necessary for the knowledge of anything else. The third is the following: «that which every one must know who knows anything, he must already have when he comes to a special study» (*Metaph* 1005b 16-17): that being what is maximum known, this principle cannot be acquired through a demonstration. They are all aspects of the first fundamental characteristic or property: the one for which it is said that the intelligence of this principle is an «always true possession» (*Poster.*, II, 19, 100b 7-8), therefore «about which we cannot be deceived, but must always, on the contrary recognize the truth» (*Metaph* 1061b 34-35).

2. After having outlined the characteristics that belong to the first principle that are summarized in the fundamental property – in Greek: *diorismós* – for which regarding which «it is impossible [*adýnaton*] to be mistaken», Aristotle thus formulates the first principle: «It is, that the same attribute cannot [the Greek text says: *adýnaton*] at the same time belong and not belong to the same subject and in the same respect» (*Metaph.*, 1005b 19-20).

Note the double occurrence of the Greek term “impossible” (*adýnaton*). The first occurrence is the one encountered in the enunciation of the fundamental property of the principle. The second is the one encountered in the formulation of the principle. In this second occurrence it is said that it is impossible that reality is contradictory. In the first one it is said that finding oneself in error in relation to the first principle is impossible. These are two formally different values of the impossibility: not only is it impossible (second occurrence) that the same thing is and is not the same thing, but it is also impossible (first occurrence) that we are convinced that the same is and is not

Having said that, Aristotle sets out to demonstrate that the most solid principle of all is that which possesses the fundamental property specified above. In fact he affirms, reformulating the first principle: «For it is impossible for any one to believe the same thing to be and not to be» (1005b 23-24). Note that this second formulation of the principle is equivalent to the first: “to be” and “not to be” (the being and non-being) have in fact as much copulative as existential value, and they are the “same” of which it is said (in the first formulation) that it is impossible to belong and not to belong to the same thing. The second way of formulation of the principle, however, refers to the “conviction” and the impossibility stated in the fun-



damental property of the most solid principle of all, the one for which around it to fall into error is impossible.

Things, however, are not so peaceful. Łukasiewicz (2003) believes that it is not possible to «prove a priori the incompatibility of beliefs» (p. 35) and therefore it is not even possible to prove what Łukasiewicz himself calls «psychological principle of contradiction» (the impossibility of being persuaded by contradictory beliefs). This principle, he says, «can at most be an empirical law» (Ivi, p. 36). But then he also excludes this possibility, and he does so by recalling what Husserl states in the *Logical Investigations*: «Could there not exist or have there never existed men who sometimes considered two opposite things to be true at the same time [...]? Have scientific investigations been initiated to ascertain whether something similar does not happen among demented people [...]? What about states of hypnosis, delirium, fever, etc.?» (*Ibid.*).

But Łukasiewicz fails to see what is right before his eyes. Aristotle does not simply exclude that it is possible to contradict himself. He proves it.

3. It is, as we will now see, a true and proper re-establishment of the *demonstrandum* (the impossibility of contradicting oneself) in the first principle: a *reductio ad primum principium*. The crucial passage is the following: «If it is impossible that contrary attributes should belong at the same time to the same subject [...], and if an opinion [*dóxa*] which contradicts another [*tês antipháseos*] is contrary [*enantía*] to it, obviously it is impossible for the same man at the same time to believe the same thing to be and not to be; for if a man were mistaken on this point he would have contrary opinions at the same time» (*Metaph.*, 1005b 26-32).

For the comprehension of this text, consider the following: the impossibility that the contraries exist together in an identical subject is a third way of formulating the most solid principle of all, and thus a specification of the first (and therefore the second). In fact, the contraries are such that one is the possession of a form, the other is the deprivation (the absence) of such form and the deprivation, explains Aristotle, «is the denial of a predicate to a determinate genus» (*Metaph.*, 1011b 19). To assert that the contraries exist together in an identical subject therefore implies that the same form belongs and does not belong to the same being, which is impossible.

Moreover, the term opinion (*dóxa*) here does not mean the appearing of an illusory content, but rather the appearing of a certain propositional content, i.e. a link between things, and this link is expressed by a judg-

ment. By “contradictory” opinions among themselves we mean, in general, those that have as their content judgments that are mutually negating each other. It should be noted that what are negations of each other are not only the propositions that in the *Aristotelian square* appear as “contradictory” (“every S is P” – “some S is not P”; “no S is P” – “some S is P”), but also those that in the *square* appear as propositions “contrary” to each other (“every S is P” – “no S is P”). And the principle of non-contradiction excludes not only that one can say that “every S is P” and “some S is not P” (and that “no S is P” and “some S is P”), but also excludes the possibility of saying that “every S is P” and “no S is P”. Even in this case, in fact, *the same thing is affirmed and negated by the same thing*. The term “contradiction”, *antíphasis*, in *Metaphysics* IV therefore indicates the opposition in a broad sense: it includes the “contradictory” and the “contrary” in the *square of the propositions*. And what we have to understand is that the opposite propositions, in the different ways described by the square of propositions, are in the same relationship between them as the contrary terms (*enantia*): that is, an *analogy* is established between the *non apophantic semantic* plane of *meanings* and the *apophantic semantic* plane of *predication*.

Given that in Aristotelian terminology the contrary terms are those that stand in the greatest opposition within the same genre, the analogy is this: the contraries fit amongst themselves as a proposition and its negation. Just as those contraries that are black and white constitute the maximum distance within the color genre, so the propositions “Socrates is white” and “Socrates is not white” have in common the genre (i.e. the argument around the color of Socrates) and, within the same genre, they stand at a maximum distance. It becomes clear then in what sense Aristotle can say that an opinion is valid as contrary of the contradictory opinion: he can say it because, within the same genre around which they converge, the opposite opinions (such as “Socrates is white” and “Socrates is not white”) have the value of maximum difference, and, in such sense, they are valid as contraries.

It follows that if there were a man convinced of something that is a contradiction – that is, if a man thought that two contradictory propositions are both true and that therefore the same thing both “is” and “is not” –, he would have contrary convictions at the same time, since the two contradictory convictions are contrary. To have contrary convictions at the same time is impossible, because the first principle excludes the contraries from being inherent to one and the same thing: it excludes that those contraries

that are contradictory opinions between them can belong at the same time to the very conscience of a man.

It then follows that the fundamental property of the first principle – its fundamental *diorismós* – for which it is said that around it one must always be in truth, is but an *identification* of the principle of non-contradiction that excludes the existence of contradictory content. What is non-existent is not only the content of the contradiction (the contradictory content), but also the contradicting oneself: contradicting oneself, that is, being convinced of the contradiction, is in fact a form of the contradictory content.

### III. Note on *élenchos*

Do not confuse this *deduction* of the impossibility of contradicting oneself with what Aristotle undertakes to demonstrate immediately after the passage I have commented. The text that follows *Metaphysics* IV (1005b 11-34) introduces the great theme of the *élenchos*, which points out the impossibility of denying the first principle of knowledge.

The sequence of the Aristotelian text is remarkable: having demonstrated the impossibility of the existence of contradicting oneself, by taking this thesis back to the first principle, Aristotle asks himself what the value of this first principle is. And he points out (here is the *élenchos*) that the negation of the first principle is a self-negation: this negation is in fact based on what it negates, so that the negation of the first principle is a negation of itself.

Referring to other writings the presentation and examination of this fundamental theme (see E&C n. 2), it should be noted that between the essential property of the first principle (the *diorismós*) and the *élenchos* there is an essential relationship that Severino summarizes as follows:

If *élenchos* and essential *diorismós* of the first principle are to be distinguished, the *élenchos* [...] is also the confirmation of that *diorismós* [...] because the *élenchos* shows that even for the person negating the most solid principle it is impossible to be in error with respect to it, since, precisely in order to be able to deny that principle, it is necessary for the negator to affirm it. The negation of the principle cannot be formed without being truthful to it [...] thus negation is an “intention”, precisely because it cannot be formed as pure negation (Severino, 2005, p. 64).

And so, when Aristotle states, referring to Heraclitus: «For what a man says, he does not necessarily believe» (*Metaph.*, 1005b 25-26), he is not denying that the language that denies the first principle exists (and Aristotle himself will dedicate many pages, in the same *Book IV of Metaphysics*, to those who deny the first principle), but he points out that there cannot possibly exist being convinced of the negation of the first principle.

#### IV. Foundation of the contradiction

The contrast between Aristotle's discourse on the impossibility of contradicting oneself and Severino's thesis that the history of the West is the history of nihilism is resolved (as we shall see) by integrating Aristotle's discourse: It is not a question of saying that he is wrong when he affirms the impossibility of believing in the contradiction, but of understanding «in what sense one can and must affirm, *in spite of all this*, that *erring exists*, and that it exists as an explicit conviction [...]; and even as an explicit conviction that the being comes from nothing and returns to it; and as an implicit conviction that the being, inasmuch as it is being, is nothing» (Severino, 2005, p. 80).

It is a matter of bringing to light what Aristotle does not make explicit and that is that «the appearing of erring, that is, of contradiction, is only possible insofar as the contradiction *appears as negated*» (*Ibid.*). And since the negation of the contradiction, which the principle of non-contradiction consists of, as it is understood in the context of Western thought, hides the contradiction *in the very formula with which one aims to avoid it and banish it from being*, it will be said (something that Aristotle cannot know) that the contradiction of nihilism «is ultimately based on the negation (of erring and contradiction) which belongs to the destiny of truth» (*Ibid.*).

By the *destiny of truth* Severino intends the appearing of the authentic sense of identity (not contradiction) of the being: that sense of identity which “stands” incontrovertibly and which implies the appearing of the eternity of the being as being. The ultimate horizon of thinking is therefore that negation of contradiction, where this negation is a trait of that *destiny of truth* that shows itself outside the boundaries of nihilism.

That it is impossible to be convinced of the contradiction – the impossibility that the thinker himself is convinced of both something and its negation –, Severino explains it as follows:

The appearing of contradiction cannot be simple certainty of thesis and antithesis at once. Contradiction's modality of appearing cannot be pure contradiction. Being certain of the thesis means in fact not being certain of the antithesis. Therefore, being at once certain of the thesis and of the antithesis means being and not being certain of the thesis (and of the antithesis). But the truth of Being, as the impossibility for Being to be not-Being, is therewith the impossibility for certainty of the thesis (or of the antithesis) to not be certainty of the thesis (or of the antithesis). If contradiction's modality of appearing were pure contradiction, then the appearing of contradiction would be impossible (would be a Nothing): self-contradiction would be impossible. If self-contradiction is a pure being convinced of thesis and antithesis at once, then one cannot contradict oneself (Severino, 2016, p. 217).

The thesis and antithesis are the equivalent of the two contradictory opinions (*dóxai*) of which Aristotle speaks: a conscience that is both convinced of the thesis and antithesis is a conscience that is both convinced and unconvinced of the thesis; and such a conscience constitutes a *contradictory being*: it is a form of the contradictory that, given the principle of non-contradiction, is something that cannot be constituted.

The existence of contradicting oneself is therefore impossible, «if it is the content of a conviction, that is, if it appears in its pure being left to be, in its pure being affirmed» (p. 432). In this sense Severino, clarifying Aristotle's discourse, writes that self-contradiction «is possible only if contradiction appears [...] as what must be superseded (negated)» (Severino, 2016, p. 217). But the impossibility that the contradiction appears as a content of the conviction (i.e. the necessity that it appears as negated) does not imply the non-existence of contradicting oneself, *first and foremost* when the contradicting oneself does not appear as such, i.e. when the thinking that contradicts itself *does not know that it contradicts itself*. In fact, if two beliefs are contradictory, «but do not appear as such in the errant's thought, they still remain a negation of each other» but «they are not the content of believing in the contradiction», they are no longer contrary terms which are inherent to that “same” that is the appearing of the being, since the “being inherent” here requires the appearing of their being contraries» (Severino, 1982, pp. 428-432).

That said, we can resume and resolve what we termed, along with Severino, “Aristotle's aporia”.

1. It was seen that the persuasion that the being is becoming (oscillating between being and not being) *necessarily* implies the nihilism of the persuasion that the being is nothing. And assuming that the being is nothing means assuming the being as being (thesis) and not assuming the being as being (antithesis), an impossible (contradictory) being certain and not being certain of the thesis.

But it is precisely because it is impossible for the contradiction to appear as the simple content of a conviction (even in the non-truth of nihilism, the contradiction can only appear as negated) and for this very reason it is necessary that nihilism is not known as such – that is, *it does not know* that it is the contradictory identification of being and non-being – and that therefore the conviction that the being is nothing remains in “latency”.

To account for this situation, Severino distinguishes between nihilism as a *phenomenon* and *nihilism* as a thing in itself:

As a phenomenon nihilism (i.e. the West) is what it appears to itself: the sense with which it manifests itself to itself: what it sees and believes it knows about itself. And nihilism *does not* see itself as nihilism, as conviction that the being is nothing [...]. Nihilism, as a *thing in itself*, is instead the conviction that the thing is nothing (Severino, 1982, pp. 415-418).

Nihilism as a *phenomenon* is comprised of a double stratification: one superficial – the forms of knowledge and action of which the West is aware – the other, more subterranean and essential «which, however, remains close to the surface and emerges and transpires therein. This hidden stratification – which can be called the “preconscious” of the West – is the Greek sense of the thing now present and dominant in every event and in every work of which the West is aware» (Severino, 1982, p. 417). The *pre-conscious* “is the essence of the phenomenon of nihilism” and it is the Greek sense of becoming and of the “thing” whereby the “thing” is posited as “being” and the being is thought of as what oscillates between being and not being.

Nihilism as a “thing in itself” is the conviction of the identity of being and nothing involved (as said) by the Greek sense of the being; this conviction, destined to never emerge in the consciousness that the West has of itself, appears instead, as negated, in the gaze of the destiny of truth that sees the abyss of nothingness over which the explicit consciousness of the

West hovers. The conviction that the being as such is nothing «is therefore the essential “unconscious” of the West. Nihilism, as a thing in itself, is the “unconscious” of that which appears in the phenomenon of nihilism» (Severino, 1982, p. 418).

Therefore, precisely because it is impossible that the contradiction of nihilism should appear in its being merely asserted (it is in fact impossible that the identity of existence and nothingness is what one is convinced of), for this very reason it is necessary that in the *phenomenon* of nihilism such contradiction should appear in an inverted form, that is to say that nihilism appears to itself *not* as an affirmation of the identity of being and not being, but as an assertion of the non-contradictoriness of the being: in the phenomenon of nihilism, «the nientity of the being is accepted [...] not in its direct form, but in the indirect form» of the affirmation of the becoming of the being (Severino, 1982, p. 430). That is, the contradiction is possible if the nexus that unites the indirect form to the direct form is lost from sight, making the direct form of contradiction fall into latency:

In Western thought, *aletheia* is not the non latency (the unveiling) of *lethe*, that is, of one's own self, but the unveiling of what (as a phenomenon of nihilism) hides one's own self by presenting it in an inverted form. In its essence, *alétheia* is *lethe*: it hides its own essential alienation (Severino, 1982, p. 431).

Beyond any psychological compression, the “unconscious” of which Severino speaks is what results from the isolation «that subtracts from language the path that unites with Necessity what has been separated» (*Ibid*), that is, the path that leads from the *phenomenon* of nihilism to nihilism as a *thing in itself*: naming the becoming of the being, and leaving in the unspoken (in the unconscious) what its expression necessarily implies, the language of the West isolates, separates what is necessarily implied by the conviction that things become:

The condition of the possibility of the existence of the contradicting oneself is then, first of all, that contradicting oneself does not appear as such, i.e. that the path that joins the direct form to the indirect form of the contradiction is interrupted, and the direct form remains as an in itself isolated from its own phenomenon (Severino, 1982, pp. 432-433).

At the basis of the possibility of contradicting oneself – of that essential contradiction which the West consists of when it thinks about *the becoming something else* out of things – belongs, therefore, the isolation for which language takes as its content what is not immediately presented as a contradiction, and leaves in the unexpressed what that content necessarily implies.

2. And yet, the indirect form is necessarily linked to the direct form of the contradiction, and continues to stand what is indicated by the text of *Metaphysics* IV (1005b 11-34), whose formal structure indicates a content – the impossibility of erring, the need to always be in the truth – which, although formulated within the alienated dimension of Aristotle's thought, belongs to the destiny of truth, showing in it an essentially different face because it is not altered by the nihilistic understanding of the existence.

It will then be said that nihilism as *a thing in itself*, that is, as the persuasion that the being is nothing, cannot be the ultimate horizon of thinking: it cannot be, because the pure being convinced of the contradiction is impossible. In other words: it is only within the authentic truth of destiny that the non-truth of the contradiction can appear:

The latent conviction that the being is nothing, and whose phenomenon [...] now dominates the entire earth, can only exist in its having always been negated by the Necessity that has always been open beyond the domains of nihilism. Beyond: that is to say in the region which is therefore *the unconscious of the unconscious* in which the nihilism itself consists (Severino, 1982, pp. 432-433).

If the unconscious in which nihilism consists as a *thing in itself* cannot enter into the consciousness that nihilism has of itself, even less can the authentic sense of necessity (the structure of destiny) which Severino calls in the quoted passage «*the unconscious of the unconscious* in which nihilism consists» because it is the one in which appears, as negated, that non-truth which is the history of the West as the history of nihilism.



## V. The contradiction as the positive meaningfulness of nothingness

As with any thought that contradicts itself, nihilism is not a *non-thinking of anything*, but it is, fundamentally, a *thinking that thinks the nothingness*, and it is a contradiction because it identifies nothing with being itself: thinking and wanting that the being is a becoming something else, nihilism, thinks and wants (without being able to realize it and therefore without bringing this thought into the language) that the being, as such, is nothing. At this point, it may be interesting to recall some of the most relevant issues involved in this discourse.

1. Nothingness, and the contradiction in which nihilism consists, are negated by destiny. But, in order to be negated, nothingness and contradiction must appear and, in this sense, they *exist*: as thought, they are a positive meaningfulness. Severino writes: «Any contradiction – like, for that matter, the very meaning “nothing” – constitutes the positive meaning of Nothing» (Severino, 2016, p. 79). The non-appearing of a self-contradictory meaning «is therefore not absolute (*simpliciter*), but it is the absolute non-appearing of the contradictory (null) content of the contradiction in which such meaning consists, where the affirmation of the non-appearing and the nullity of such content must not be separated from its own positive meaningfulness, since, so separated, it does not affirm anything» (Severino, 2013, p. 87). Similarly, the meaning “nothing” must not be separated from its positive meaningfulness.

2. Consider the specifics of the contradiction of nothingness. Given that every meaning is a certain meaning, that is, a way of being a non-nothing – whose moments are: a) the determined semantic content; b) its being a certain positivity –, also with regard to nothingness we will have two “moments”: a) the meaning “nothing” (which means nothing) and b) the *positivity* of this meaning. Otherwise in this case what happens is that what is significant is the absolute absence of meaning. That said, Severino remarks the following:

The contradiction of not-being-that-is [...] is not internal to the meaning “nothing” (or to the meaning “being”, which is the being of nothing); but lies between the meaning “nothing” and being, or the positivity of this meaning. The positivity of meaningfulness, in other words, is in contradiction with the very content of the mean-

ingfulness, which is precisely meaningful as absolute negativity (Severino, 2020, par. 5).

Hence the distinction between nothing as a self-contradictory meaning and nothing as the moment of this contradiction:

It is clear, therefore, that “nothing”, understood as a self-contradictory meaning, includes as a semantic moment “nothing”, which [...] is meaningful as nothing. (To put it differently, “nothing”, as a non-contradictory meaning, is the moment of “nothing”, as a self-contradictory meaning) (Severino, 2020, par. 6).

And this is how to understand the sense of opposition of contradiction between being and not being:

The aporia of the being of nothingness is resolved by noting that the principle of non-contradiction *does not affirm the non-existence* of the self-contradictory meaning [...]; rather, it affirms that “nothing” does not mean “being” [...]; in other words, it requires the non-existence of the contradiction intrinsic to the meaning “nothing”, which ranks as the moment of the self-contradictory meaning. Not-being, which in the formulation of the principle of non-contradiction appears as the negation of being, is precisely the not-being which ranks as the moment of not-being, understood as a self-contradictory meaning (Severino, 2020, par. 7).

Mind you: nothingness as such is the absolute other than being, but as it *is significant* as the absolute other than being, nothingness is a positivity: it is that certain meaning that it is:

If, therefore, nothingness were only that absolute negativity whereby it ranks as a non-contradictory meaning [...], to exclude that being is nothingness would be not to exclude anything, since the exclusion would not have anything to which it could apply: nothingness would not appear at all. But it is also clear that the very supposition that nothingness is solely that absolute negativity [...] is self-contradictory, so much so that it can be said that nothingness is precisely nothingness, inasmuch as nothingness manifests itself, and therefore it is that which is not precisely nothingness (Severino, 2020, par. 8).

This can be put another way: nothingness can only appear insofar as it appears in its positive meaningfulness. And, in this sense, the positive meaningfulness of nothingness is a being: everything we say about nothingness (including its being nothing) belongs to the positive meaningfulness of nothingness and the positive meaningfulness of nothingness belongs to the totality of the beings. But the nothingness of which the primal structure denies the identity with the being is the meaning “nothing” as *distinct* from its own positive meaningfulness. Thus it can be understood the sense according to which being differs from nothing:

If someone were to say that, since not-being is different from being, yet not different because of something, it is no different from being, we should answer that, certainly, in this sense it is no different – for this is the sense in which two beings are different – but that it is different in the sense that it is the absolute privation of being» (Severino, 2020, par. 3, note 2).

And to the possible reply that the absolutely other than being is nothing, so that the being does not imply any horizon other than itself, it can be answered that it is precisely this statement that demands that the being refers to nothingness. Ultimately, this is how Severino explains the meaning of the opposition of being to nothingness:

In its reference to nothingness, being excludes it as its contradictory only insofar as it refers to nothingness-as-moment; besides, this moment stands in relation to the moment of its positive meaningfulness, and through this relation – which is the very contradictoriness of “nothing” as a concrete meaning – *endures* or *is capable of* standing in a relation of contradiction to being (Severino, 2020, par. 10).

To be and to appear is therefore *the positive meaningfulness* of what is absolutely insignificant, that is, the contradiction that (as mentioned earlier) can only appear as negated.

3. Severino calls “land” everything that begins to appear and ceases to appear in the transcendental horizon of appearing, and he calls “isolation of the land” the coming of that being which is the belief-persuasion that things *become something else*: isolated from destiny, the determinations of the “land” are thought of as *becoming other*. But in the gaze of destiny it

appears that *the becoming other* is that nothing (that is, that impossible content) which can neither be nor appear. To be and to appear is instead the belief that there is something as a *becoming other*. And by now we know that the belief in *the becoming other* of things is a contradiction that can appear only if it appears as negated by the incontrovertible appearing of the being itself of the being, that is, by what we have called *destiny*: if it did not appear, nothing could appear.

With the arrival of the belief-persuasion that things become something else than themselves, the contention arises between this belief-persuasion and the destiny of the truth that attests, instead, the eternity of every being and sees that the meaning “nothing” is a contradiction and that the contradictory content of every contradiction is nothing. This being the case, the contents of the isolating belief-persuasion will also be nothing: the beings of the “isolated land” – the starry sky of Kantian memory, like the Goldberg variations, like the most humble of the apparitions – are in fact negations of destiny, that is, they are contradictory contents because they are conceived as isolated from destiny; as such, they *are* what cannot be and cannot appear. In this same statement, such contents appear, but what appears of them (and which must appear for them to be negated) is their positive meaningfulness, not what this meaning means:

Every content of the isolated land is a contradiction. But it is a contradiction not only because it places nothingness as the being, but also because it is that certain content, for example it is the rose in bloom, the pain of man, the stars in the sky, the happiness felt, the lamp lit. For its part, the meaning of nothingness is a contradiction because it is the absolutely negative that appears and is (it is a positive meaningfulness, a being), and therefore this contradiction is the same as every contradiction as such, i.e. the positing of its own null content as a positive meaningfulness (Severino, 2013, p. 91).

Nothingness allows itself to be looked at, and this is only possible because nothingness does not appear isolated from its positive meaningfulness that is the foundation of such appearing. Well, under the gaze of destiny the existence of erring would appear incontrovertibly. Destiny sees that such erring is belief, the will that the non-nothing is nothing. And to appear incontrovertibly is also the content of the erring: the vast and variegated dominion of the thoughts and actions of the West (having in common the Greek sense of the “thing” understood as an oscillation between being and not being) is, in fact, the vast and variegated dominion of the *positive meaningfulness of nothingness*.

## Final remark

At present, the appearing of *destiny* is contrasted by the erring of nihilism. And this contrast is a contradiction.

It will then be said that the condition for this contrast not to be constituted as the impossible concurrence of those opposed to the same, is that it too appears, in the gaze of destiny, as negated. The language that testifies to the destiny is also able to show the necessity that, at a certain “point” of the progressive coming forward of the beings, this contradiction is definitely transcended, that is, that, starting from that “point”, the coming of the beings no longer appears to be opposed by the nihilistic isolating persuasion. But this is a subject whose development must be entrusted to other writings.

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# Representing Nothing(ness)

## An interpretation of Severino's aporia of nothing\*

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Carnap famously held the view that the only sensible interpretation of the word 'nothing' is as a negative existential quantifier. This view, virtually unquestioned for most of the Twentieth Century, has been taken to make hash of the millennial debate on the notion of nothingness. More recently, the view has been challenged on various grounds. Is 'nothing' ever a name? Referring to what? A predicative expression? A description? In this article I retrace Severino's considerations on this issue, illustrating how and why the notion of nothing is indeed peculiarly paradoxical.

**Keywords:**

**Nothing, Nothingness, Metaphysics, Severino, Paradox**

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The concept of nothing, of non-being, has played a fundamental role in western philosophical thought since the very beginning with Parmenides. I do not propose to retrace the stages of this history; I rather limit myself to recalling that in recent times (with respect to Parmenides) Carnap argued that the concept of nothing (as well as all the other concepts of traditional metaphysics), should be banned, as they are nothing but the result of logical-linguistic misunderstandings: *nothing* is not a noun, a singular term, but only a quantifier. *I have said nothing* means that I have been silent, not that I have spoken of nothing. *Nothing* is the negation of the existential and universal quantifiers. This thesis is certainly not new; the logical-linguistic investigations of medieval philosophers had already amply highlighted this meaning of the term ‘nothing’ [cf. Ritter et al. 1984, entry ‘Nichts’]. Among them, it is worth recalling the acute considerations of Anselm of Chanterbury in the ‘Monologion’ (chap. 8 and 19) and in ‘The Fall of the Devil’ (chap. 10). Be that as it may, saying that *being* and *nothing* are quantifiers and not names can certainly help to prevent linguistic misunderstandings; but in itself it does not exclude these notions from the philosophical discourse, because it is also necessary to specify what quantifiers are. Carnap (1929, p. 74) seems to follow Frege in believing that *being* (and correspondingly *nothing*) mean second-level properties: they are properties of concepts, indicating whether their extension is empty or not (Frege 1892a, c, 1884). For Frege, and for Carnap, put crudely, to say that there are dromedaries means to affirm that the concept of dromedary has the property that its extension is not empty.

Carnap’s theses have enjoyed great consideration within analytic philosophy; however, in the most recent debate, a few years after the so-called ‘metaphysical turn’ of analytic thought, they have been downsized. That is: it is true that in many cases *nothing*, *nought* are quantifiers (like *something*, *everyone*, *many*, etc.), as happens in phrases such as: *I have seen nothing*, *I*

*have done nothing, I want nothing*, etc. However, there seem to be cases, to which I will return shortly, in which the word *nothing* has a meaning other than the merely quantificational, syncategorematic one (whatever it may be). For example, Priest (2014, 2019), Voltolini (2012), Simons (2020), Costantini (2020) have criticized Carnap's position, in some cases rehabilitating the reviled Heidegger from Carnap's attacks. Now, when *nothing* is not a quantifier, what is it? Is it a noun? Is it a predicative term? Maybe both? A definite description? Furthermore, given that there are multiple meanings of *nothing*, are they perhaps united by something, as well as by the linguistic expression? Is there perhaps an analogical connection between the meanings of *nothing*, just as there is one between the meanings of *being*, according to Aristotle?

Just to outline a taxonomy, also proposed by others (Voltolini, Costantini in this volume), the following can be said. If *nothingness* is a name, then either it is an empty name (Oliver-Smiley, 2013; Voltolini, 2015), or it denotes something, and in the latter case it denotes something either consistent (Jaquette, 2013, 2015) or inconsistent (Casati-Fujikawa, 2015, 2019; Priest, 2014a, b; Simionato, 2017). Alternatively, *nothing* is a predicative expression, as in Heidegger's cryptic proposition: The nothing *noths*. Or it is a definite description: *that which noths, that is to say the entity that is not an entity, the entity different from each entity*.

It is worth noting that if the word *nothing* has only a quantificational meaning, then the word *being* also has it. This corresponds to the position of the Neopositivists, reaffirmed by Quine's statement, often cited as a slogan, according to which «to be is to be the value of a bound variable» (Quine, 1961, p. 15); which means that when we affirm that there is a certain something, we are affirming, more or less explicitly, that something in the domain of quantification has a certain characteristic. We are saying that some object has a certain property, not that something exists in an *absolute* sense. That is, when we say  $\exists x Fx$  we say that at least one object of the domain has the characteristic F, that is, it is the case that an x is F, which corresponds to the existence not of an object, but of a certain state of affairs, of a truth-maker. Conversely, it should be noted that, even if it is no longer the case that that certain x is F, that x may very well continue to exist – unless the characteristic in question is substantial, essential; but the distinction between accidental and substantial characters is not recognized and expressed by the usual first-order logic, used when translating the utterances of everyday or philosophical language into a logically formalized language. In a certain sense, an existential statement resembles an



answer to a question, addressed to a certain number of people, such as: has anyone parked the car in front of the door? If someone answered *yes*, we could say that someone among us parked the car in front of the door, but we would not be talking about his existence in an absolute sense. And if no one answers, this does not mean that no one exists, but only that none of those present have parked the car in front of the door. If anything, a state of affairs, not an object of the domain of quantification, would not exist.

In fact, in order to capture the existence of entities in the absolute sense, a characteristic is used that should concern them *qua* entities: self-identity. For this reason, Russell and Whitehead use expressions such as  $(x) x = x$ ,  $\exists x x = x$  in the *Principia*. “In *Principia Mathematica*, the totality of things is defined as the class of all those *x*’s which are such that  $x = x$ ” (Russell, 1959, p. 86). Now, although it is very reasonable that every existing or even possible object is at least identical to itself, one could object that existence is one thing, being self-identical is another. Apparently, Wittgenstein had a lot of resistance to identifying the two. He seems to affirm that pure existence is not expressible: the objects (of the domain) neither exist nor do not exist; they are, as it were, beyond existence, which instead concerns states of affairs, facts. Russell reports it, immediately after the passage quoted, narrating the anecdote that Wittgenstein in a conversation agreed to say that there are three spots of color on a sheet, but he denied that this would entail that there are three things.

There seem to be different notions of *nothing*. Kant (KrV A 292; 1998, p. 383) distinguishes four, on the basis of the German scholasticism (cf. Ritter et al. [1984], Col. 823-4). Or, perhaps, there are, so to speak, different procedures by which one arrives at the notion of nothing. Different senses, for the same concept (though as according to Frege *nothing* is a second-level concept, like that of *being*). On the one hand, there is *nothingness* as the absence of everything. One can imagine having a domain with a certain number of entities, and removing them, cancelling them, one after the other, until none is left. Nought is thus the absence of all things. One would be tempted to say that it is the empty class, but this does not seem fully correct, because the empty class, despite its emptiness, *is* something. Better to say that it is the emptiness of the empty class (see Dubois, 2013). Others have proposed to define it as a possible empty world (Simionato, 2017). Bergson (1911, ch. IV, p. 296 ff., in part. p. 304) offers a clear example of this notion of nothing. He affirms that *nothing* is understood as the «annihilation of all things» (p. 324), noting that in this way nothing is an even

richer concept than that of being (p. 311, 322), since it includes a reference to all (suppressed) things. In any case, it is for him a contradictory concept (ib. 324). Now, nothingness, understood as cancellation, corresponds to deprivation, lack. So, despite Bergson calling it *absolute naught* (p. 308), or *absolute nothing* (p. 321), it is more correctly the *nihil privativum*, the same to which, according to creationist theology, things before creation correspond (s. Ritter et al. [1984], col. 815 and *passim*). The tradition of Scholasticism (Aquinas, Scotus, etc.) distinguished the *privative* nothing, that is what the created things “were” before they were created (or after the world has been annihilated; that is the nothingness of possible things, when they are not yet, or no longer, actual), from the *negative* nothing, also called the *prohibitum, omnino nihil* (s. Ritter et al. [1984], col. 816), that in which the impossible, contradictory things consist. This distinction between *negative* nothing and *privative* nothing runs up from the medieval scholasticism to the German one of Baumgarten and Wolff, and underlies the Kantian distinctions mentioned above (Ritter et al. [1984], col. 815).

Another conception of nothingness seems to arise, not by subtracting or by deleting things, but by considering their totality. This is Nothing(ness) construed as that which is outside of Being, as other than anything that exists. Let’s try to follow this second (or third) sense of nothing. Being is the totality of what (there) is. This definition seems to be circular, because the verb *to be* occurs both in the *definiendum* and in the *definiens: to be... is*. This difficulty could be solved by specifying that the second occurrence of the verb *to be* (‘the totality of what *is*’) is predicative, so that the *definiens* indicates the totality of what is subject to predication; which leads back to the idea that *to be* is to be the value of a bound variable. In this way, being is the totality of the unrestricted domain of quantification, the broader domain of the variable. However, there is a lively debate on whether there is an unrestricted domain of quantification, known as the question of absolute generality (see Rayo, & Uzquiano 2006). Already Aristotle, while calling his philosophy first the science of being qua being, denied that being is a genus. There are many skeptical arguments, in the contemporary debate, against the possibility of absolute general quantification (they have been identified in the following: 1) indefinite extensibility, 2) the All-in-one principle, 3) the argument from reconceptualization 4) the argument from semantic indeterminacy, 5) The argument from sortal restriction; see. Rayo & Uzquiano 2006a). Overall, they can be divided, put crudley, into two groups: one kind of argument is grounded on considerations of indefinite extensibility and the open-ended character

of mathematical concepts and structures; the other is based on the relativity of ontology to a conceptual framework. Clearly, the discussion I am about to develop assumes that none of these skeptical arguments against the notion of totality is decisive.

Now, nothingness, in the sense introduced above, is non-being, conceived as that which is outside of being. But there is nothing that is outside of being. The nothingness, therefore, does not exist, that is, there is nothing that is nothing. All this is somewhat convoluted; yet does it make the concept of nothing even paradoxical? It does not seem paradoxical, any more than the concept of chimera seems to be. In fact, there is not even anything that is a chimera (in concrete reality), although the concept of chimera certainly exists. Why, then, would it be paradoxical to say that 'nothing is not', when it would not be paradoxical to say that the chimera does not exist? The concepts of nothing and of chimera exist, even though nothing fall under them (their extension is empty). To face the paradox of nothing it is necessary to carry out some reflection, especially one wants to arrive at a general answer that can be valid independently of specific positions in ontology or in the philosophy of language.

A first answer applies to positions such as Meinong's: nothingness is at least an object of thought, so it is an object. Furthermore, in order to say that something does not exist (concretely), it is necessary to allow that it is something, what one is talking about. Therefore nothingness is something; not just the concept of nothing, but nothing itself. Priest, Casati-Fujikawa and others follow this path. Given the contradictory results they arrive at, which imply adherence to dialetheism, one can also draw the opposite conclusion, namely that all this is one more reason not to be Meinongian.

Another answer, Severino's answer, is centred in a general premise: entities are determinate, that is their identity implies mutual difference. Being, in other words, is not the indeterminate being of which Parmenides speaks or of which Hegel speaks at the beginning of his *Science of logic* («*Being, pure being* – without further determination. In its indeterminate immediacy it is equal only to itself and also not unequal with respect to another; it has no difference within it, nor any outwardly») [Hegel 2010, p. 59]). Absolute monism is untenable (which is precisely what Hegel argues with the first triad). Rather, being is determinate; that is, what exists are entities distinct from each other.

Now, it could be said that *otherness* is a propositional function, *x is different from y*, which is saturated by things, and which gives rise to true

propositions when the variables take on different values; es. *the table is not the chair*. However, in addition to being different, things share some characteristics. There are tables and chairs. The set of tables includes the tables and excludes chairs and everything else; but in turn it is a subset of a larger genus: pieces of furniture, which excludes other things, and so on. Each grouping of entities includes one or more things and excludes others. The point is: what happens when one considers the universal grouping, the set of all things, taken together for the fact that, despite their differences, they are things, entities? How is this grouping determinate? Of course, it is internally determinate, in the sense that it contains the most diverse things. But is it externally determinate? Every entity is defined negatively, if it is accepted that *omnis determinatio negatio est*, that every determination is also a negation. And therefore also the totality of things is defined negatively with respect to its other. But if the totality includes everything, there is nothing else besides it.

The totality of all things, the being, contains everything: nothing is outside it. In this regard it may be useful to recall what Russell (1918, p. 502-3) said about the existence of general facts and the universal quantifier, namely that the notion of *all* is more than a simple list of atomic facts. Similarly, once the members of the domain of quantification throughout the universe are individually listed (or chronicled, as Russell said), it must be added that they are *all*, that is, there is nothing else. Nothing else in absolute, that is, there is nothing in the most absolute way, which is not included in that whole. This delineates the further notion of nothing. This argument can be considered Severino's answer to Carnap's thesis that *nothing* is a quantifier. Severino partially agrees, but replies (I am adapting his argument) that when we say that there is nothing that exceeds the unrestricted domain of quantification, we make use of the notion, of the predicate *exceeding the unrestricted domain of quantification*, which seems to delineate the complementary class to that of the whole. Of course, it is said that that predicate is not satisfied by anything, that is, that the complementary class is empty. But the class and the relative predicate that characterizes it exist, and they express precisely the notion of nothing, of nothingness.

The aporia of nothingness is not caused by mere verbal suggestion. Suppose that instead of saying "Beyond, outside being there is nothing", we were to say "There is no positive that lies outside the totality of the positive"; or, in symbols: " $\neg (\exists x). x$  is outside the to-

tality of the positive” (where variable  $x$  can assume any positive value). What would still remain to be clarified is the meaning of that “outside the totality of the positive” which is precisely nothing, and whose presence gives rise to the aporia. [...] [I]n the logical proposition “ $\neg (\exists x). x$  is outside...”, Carnap does not distinguish the logical situation in which variable  $x$  assumes a limited number of positive values (whereby that with respect to which  $x$  is “outside”, “beyond”, is a limited dimension of the positive), from the logical situation in which – as mentioned above –  $x$  can assume *all* positive values (whereby that with respect to which  $x$  is “outside” is the very totality of the positive). It is precisely in this latter case that nothingness (what is outside the whole) *manifests itself*, insofar as in the proposition “ $\neg (\exists x). x$  is outside the totality of the positive” the meaning “outside the totality of the positive” manifests itself. (Severino 1958, here § 13, c; here, p. 26)

With this argument, Severino introduces the non-quantificational, non-synchategorematic notion of nothing. In this case, *outside the totality of the positive* describes an entity that is not an entity, that is, something contradictory, as Carnap himself points out to be the case, if nothingness were not a quantifier (Carnap, 1932, p. 71).

The two previously distinct senses of nothing (such as the absence of everything vs. what is different from every being) therefore converge in the basic meaning: non-being, absolute nothingness. In both cases the “absolute deprivation of being” (in this volume, p. 13, note 2) refers to the totality: “in both meanings of the term ‘null’, the position of the null implies the position of the totality of the positive” (ib., p. 23 note 3). The nothingness, however it is indicated – as *nihil privativum* or as the other from being, or even as what tradition indicated as the *nihil negativum*, that is the impossible – is in any case the total absence of anything. This is a paradoxical concept for Severino. Why?

Nothing is at least a concept. But what is its quiddity? The absence of everything. If we call *content* (of thought) what is thought or understood, and which constitutes the quiddity of a concept, then the content of the nothingness is the absence of any content. Severino faces the paradox in these terms:

the meaning “nothingness” is self-contradictory, which is to say a contradiction, it is being meaningful as a contradiction: the very contradiction whereby the positivity of this meaningfulness is con-

tradicted by the absolute negativity of the meaningful content. (§ 6, in this volume pp. 14-5)

The problem also arises when we use the more technical notion of *intension*, understood as a function that associates possible worlds with extensions of linguistic expressions (nouns, predicates, sentences). For instance, the intension of the predicate 'red' associates that predicate with a certain class of things in the actual world, but with another class, differing in extension from, in another possible world where, for instance, fire extinguishers are green rather than red and grass is red rather than green. The question is: what is the intension of nothing? In the case of *nothing* the problem is that a world in which nothing exists is not a world, neither possible nor actual. The function, then, has no argument and therefore cannot even have a range. This is true regardless of the specific conception of what possible worlds are. If one is a realist, à la Lewis, obviously there is no empty world: a world without entities is not a world. Conversely, if one believes that a possible world is a coherent and maximal conjunction of propositions, it might seem, at first glance, that the possible empty world exists: it is the world that consists of the maximal conjunction of all negative existential propositions. But they must really all be, and therefore among them there will also be that proposition which states that all these propositions do not exist. Yet, the proposition that affirms that there are no propositions is paradoxical, since it negates its own semantic conditions. Therefore, that world, being a contradictory world, is not a possible world at all. Of course, one could apply the distinction between what is true *in* a world and *at* a world, and argue that the possible empty world is describable from the point of view of the current, non-empty world, avoiding the paradox. And yet, what would the situation be like if that possible empty world were actualized? The same paradox can also be seen in another, in another, semantic way, so to speak: the concept of nothing would be satisfied if nothing existed, and therefore it would be satisfied if that very same concept did not exist either.

This precisely leads us to think that there is a contradiction between nothingness being a concept and nothingness having no quiddity. Severino understands this contradiction as existing between two moments or aspects of that meaning. Some explanation is needed. For him, each entity is made up of two moments: formal being, that is, the fact of being, and the specificity of what it is. (see Severino, in this volume, p. 14, § 6). This conception has been assimilated to the distinction between essence and ex-

istence (Simionato, in this volume). In my opinion, it is better understood if we consider what for Severino is the great innovation in ontology after Parmenides, that is, the doctrine of Plato's Sophist of the being of non-being. For this reason, I now make a brief excursus in which I expose Severino's reconstruction of that passage. With Parmenides' conception of being, it is impossible to say that this computer is or exists, since the meaning 'computer' is not synonymous with the meaning 'being'. If it is not synonymous, then 'computer', whatever it means, means something other than 'being', and therefore means what is not being, that is 'non-being'. It follows that to say that *the computer is* means that *non-being is*, which is a contradiction. Plato, with the well-known patricide, notes that although 'computer' does not mean 'being', it does not mean the opposite of 'being' either. So, if the contents, the meanings 'computer' and 'being' are different but not opposit, their synthesis is not contradictory. And therefore we can affirm the being of the computer, that is, that the computer is or exists. This synthesis is the constitution of every determination, of every entity whether abstract or concrete, it doesn't matter: the synthesis between the general and abstract meaning of 'being', and the specific meaning of the thing considered: 'computer', 'home', etc.

Plato therefore manages to show that "being" must no longer be understood as pure Parmenidean being [...] but as the synthesis between pure being and determinations. For Parmenides, only pure being is; Plato shows that [...] every determination (that is, everything "different" from pure being) is; "Being" therefore means what is, that is, any determination-which-is. [...] [T]he problem of establishing that which is identical in the totality of all things (the problem that arises together with philosophy [i.e. the thought of the totality of beings]) reaches [...] its definitive solution. What is identical in every "thing" is precisely its being a determination-which-is; where both the "determination", both its "being" and their synthesis are the intelligible content of the conceptual thought with which philosophy addresses the Whole. From Plato onwards the entity is precisely this synthesis between the something and its being. (Severino 1984, pp. 96-7)

If nothingness is a concept (whose genesis is at least twofold: as the absence of everything, or as the otherness with respect to everything), it is a determination-that-is. There is no doubt that it is; but what it is, its quiddity, is precisely the absence of any determination: pure nothingness. The paradox



of nothing consists in the contradiction between the fact that the meaning “nothingness”, just like any other meaning, is something, exists, and its specific meaning, that is the quiddity of being the absence of any meaning.

I would like to use a philosophical simile. For Descartes the ideas of our mind are “like pictures or images” (*Meditations on First Philosophy, Third Meditation*): they represent something, which may or may not exist in the external world. Then, a painting has, so to speak, two components: the material component of which it is made, that is the canvas, the pigment, etc., and what is represented by the material support. Descartes calls the first component the *formal reality* of an idea, and the second its *objective reality* (in the sense that it is the object of thinking). As regards the first aspect, all ideas are equal: they are affections of thought. In the metaphor, all the paintings are similar: they consist of canvas and pigment. Conversely, ideas differ in their objective reality, in what they represent; and this also applies to paintings. That said, we can imagine a painting that faithfully portrays a landscape or a person; or we can imagine a fantasy painting or a very abstract painting. In any case, it represents something. But what would a representation look like representing nothing? Or, what should a painter paint if he were asked to represent not a landscape or a person, real or fictional, it doesn’t matter, but the nothingness itself? It should certainly be a painting, that is, there would be the material support; but whatever semblance it had, it would be, as it is something, different from nothing, because this is the absence of everything.

For Severino there is a contradiction between the two aspects that make up the meaning ‘nothing’: between its representational nature, that is, having a quiddity, and the absence of any content, of any quiddity. Severino calls the fact that nothingness is something the moment of positive meaningfulness; and he calls the absence of content the nothingness moment. This contradiction is, according to Severino, an external contradiction between the two aspects:

The contradiction of not-being-that-is, therefore, is not internal to the meaning “nothing” (or to the meaning “being”, which is the being of nothing); but lies between the meaning “nothing” and being, or the positivity of this meaning. The positivity of meaningfulness, in other words, is in contradiction with the very content of the meaningfulness, which is precisely meaningful as absolute negativity. (§ 5, in this volume p. 14)



Then there are further complications or paradoxes that according to Severino arise when a moment of meaning ‘nothing’ is considered independently of the other. However, I leave out these paradoxical aspects, not because they are not interesting in themselves, but because they are solvable contradictions, precisely by relating the two moments to each other. The point is: but what is the relationship between these two moments, exactly? Simionato (in this volume) proposes the image of the relationship between container and content. He is probably right in believing that that relationship is not entirely clear, since, on the one hand, the contradiction is said to be external and therefore between terms that seem to be independent from each other; but, on the other hand, it is repeatedly said by Severino that the two terms are inseparable, so that their relationship seems to be anything but external.

A fundamental point is that for Severino the contradiction of nothing is inevitable: precisely when one has rightly understood what nothing is (and one must understand it by understanding the notion of being), one has also understood that it is a contradiction. Does this mean that there are contradictory objects? No, it means that it is inevitable to contradict oneself, for Severino, that is, that the nothingness is a contradictory concept. But even that of a square circle is! So, what difference is there between the contradiction that takes place when we affirm that something is a square and circular, and therefore the predicate “squared circle” is delineated, and the contradiction that takes place with the concept of nothing? In my opinion, the difference is that the concept of a squared circle, or of any other contradiction, is in any case deriving from a logical conjunction, and therefore from a complex notion. Conversely, the contradiction that takes place with the notion of nothingness arises with a simple notion, with a single concept.

## Conclusion

The question of nothing has troubled philosophers for millennia. When an issue is so thorny and long-lasting, one can think either that at the base there is a deeply rooted error, difficult or impossible to amend (as is the case of metaphysics according to Kant), or that there is a profound underlying question. Carnap was of the first opinion, arguing that the concept of nothing has no philosophical value. Severino, on the other hand – cu-

riously anticipating some orientations of contemporary analytical metaphysics – considered it a fundamental concept of ontology, recognizing however its essentially paradoxical nature.

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## Severino on Nothingness

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There is an obvious paradox concerning nothing(ness). It is *something*—for example, we can think about *it*. But almost by definition, it is *nothing*. Emanuele Severino has tried to solve this paradox by drawing a crucial distinction. In this paper, I consider whether his approach is successful. I argue that this resolves one way of articulating the paradox but not a more acute version.

**Keywords:**

**Nothing(ness), Emanuele Severino, paradox, abstract/concrete universal, sense, referent**

## 1. Introduction

Nothing(ness) is a tantalizing thing. It has played a crucial role in the work of many great philosophers including Hegel, Heidegger, and Sartre. Yet it wears the mark of paradox on its face. Nothing is, well, no thing; but it is something (some thing) as well, or we could not talk about it.

Emanuele Severino was a staunch defender of the Principle of Non-Contradiction. It is natural, then, that his thought should have turned to this paradoxical object. Indeed, he claims, the Principle seems itself to generate the paradox<sup>1</sup>:

The positing of the principle of non-contradiction requires the positing of *not-being*. Not only that, but “not-being” belongs to the very meaning of “being”.

Recently some of his thoughts on the subject have been translated into English. What follows are comments on these.

A word on notation. The English word ‘nothing’ can be a noun phrase or a quantifier. It is important to keep these distinct, or court confusion. In what follows, I will always use ‘nothing’ as a noun phrase. When I want to use the quantifier, I will write ‘no-thing’. (Compare *something* (something); everything (every-thing).) The contradiction is, then, that nothing is (a being/object/thing) and is not (a being/object/thing).

1 Kneipe, Goggi, and Perelda (2021), p. 12. Unless noted, all page references in what follows are to this. Italics in all quotations are original.

## 2. Severino's Formulations of the Paradox

Severino formulates two different versions of the paradox of nothingness. Let us start by putting these on the table.

The first version of the paradox is as follows (p. 12):

The aporia which we wish to examine pertains to not-being ... insofar as not-being is "nihil absolutum," what is *absolutely other* than being, and therefore—we might say—insofar as it lies *beyond* being...

But (*Ibid.*):

There is a discourse on nothingness, and this discourse attests to the being of nothingness. Or there is some knowledge, some awareness of nothingness, which attests to the being of nothingness.

In other words, nothing is, by definition, the absence of all things. It is nothing. But we can discuss it, and even know things about it. So it must be something for us to do this.

Severino's articulation of the second version of the paradox is as follows (p. 13):

being on the one hand implies the horizon of nothingness, precisely because it is claimed that being is not non-being; but on the other hand, since the horizon is nothingness, being implies nothing, no horizon at all.

In other words, for there to be beings, there must be something (some thing) beyond being. This must be nothing. But since nothing is not a thing, there is no-thing beyond being.

## 3. Prolegomenon to a Solution

As we shall see, Severino's solution to both versions of the paradox involves drawing a certain distinction between two moments (or aspects) or not-

1 See, e.g., the title of Sect. 11, p. 19: 'Notes on the concrete concept and the abstract concept of nothingness as abstract moment[s?]'.

ing. The exact nature of the distinction is not exactly explained in pellucid terms, and I am not entirely confident that I have understood it. But as best I can understand it, it is as follows. Though applied to nothing, the distinction is, in fact, a quite general one.

Let me first put the distinction in the Hegelian terminology Severino himself employs<sup>1</sup>. Take any universal, say redness. We can distinguish between two moments of this: abstract and concrete. The abstract universal is what we might call the concept; in this case, that of being red. The concrete universal is the totality of things to which the universal applies, in this case the totality of red things.

We can put essentially the same distinction in terms that are more familiar to contemporary logicians as follows. Take a predicate; again, for example, 'is red'. We can distinguish between two aspects of its meaning. There is its intension. In the present case, this is the sense (*sinn*) of the predicate 'is red', to put it in Fregean terms. Then there is its extension, the totality of things to which the predicate applies; in our case, the totality of red things. This is the referent (*bedeutung*) of the predicate, to put it again in Fregean terms.

To help to keep Severino's distinction straight I will employ the following conventions. I will write the abstract universal (concept, intension, sense) in italics, thus: *red*. I will write the concrete universal (extension, referent) in boldface, thus: **red**.

There is a question as to how best to understand the notion of totality involved in the latter of these. A modern logician might take **red** to be the set of red things, but one might equally take it to be the mereological sum of all red things. In the present context, I think it makes more sense to think of it as a mereological sum. For consider the the concept *is not*. If its extension is a set, it is the empty set, which is a perfectly good non-paradoxical object. There is no temptation to say that this is no-thing. But if it is a mereological sum, it is the sum of no things, which is exactly nothingness: the absence of all things<sup>2</sup>—which is exactly the object of our paradox. There is certainly a temptation to say that this is no-thing: by definition, it is the absence of every thing.

2 As Priest (2014) argues.

## 4. Severino's Solution to the Second Version

We can now turn to Severino's solutions to the two versions of the paradox. Let us start with the second. Severino's explains this as follows (p. 19):

The aporia states: being both implies and does not imply a horizon (the horizon of nothingness). It is clear by now that the aporia constitutes itself as, on the second side of the antinomy, nothing, which is the abstract moment of nothingness as a concrete meaning, is abstractly conceived as unrelated to the moment of positive meaningfulness: as the abstract concept of the abstract moment of nothingness. Having assumed that this moment is the horizon of being, and having abstractly conceived this moment (that is having conceived it as a totality of the meaning of "nothingness") it follows that the implication at such a moment resolves itself into a non-implication.

Again, this is hardly pellucid, but we can explain it in terms of the distinction made in the last section. Note, first, that if something has a boundary, this must be provided by the distinction between it and something else—indeed, something else of the same kind. The even number are bounded by the odd numbers. The Northern Hemisphere is bounded by the Southern Hemisphere. The two parts must partition the appropriate logical space, as it were.

Now consider the concept *being*, viz., *a thing which is*. This is bounded by its opposite, the concept *nothing*, viz., *a thing which is not*. These opposite concepts partition the appropriate space. (Every object satisfies one or the other.) But since both are concepts, they both *are*. In particular, there is no contradiction in saying that *a thing which is not* is a being. Concepts do not, generally speaking, apply to themselves: to say that the concept *a thing which is yellow* is yellow, is simply false; to say that the concept *a thing which is a number* is a number, is simply false. In the same way, to say that the concept *a thing which is not* is not, is simply false.

But consider **being**, the totality of all beings. If this has a boundary, it would have to be the things outside the totality of beings. There are no

3 Indeed, Severino seems to suggest (p. 27, top) that every self-contradictory concept (e.g. *non-triangular triangle*) refers to nothing. I think he would have been better to say that it refers to no-thing.



such things. The concept *a thing that is not* is self-contradictory, so it has no-thing as its extension. So it has no boundary<sup>3</sup>.

In other words, *being* has a boundary—something beyond its horizon, another concept *nothing*. On the other hand, **being** has none: the concept *that which is not* applies to no-thing. So the aporia is solved. *Being* has a boundary, but **being** does not. And I think that this does indeed provide a solution to the aporia. Once one distinguishes between a concept and its extension, one can say quite consistently that the concept *being*, like all concepts, is bounded by its negation. But its extension, **being**, knows no bounds.

Note that whichever way one looks at matters, one can hear the claim that being is not non-being as true. If we are talking about concepts, the concept of *being* is indeed distinct from the concept of *non-being*, so it is not *non-being*. But if we are talking about extensions, **being** = **non-being** is false, since one side refers to something, and the other does not. So its negation is true<sup>4</sup>.

## 5. Severino's Solution to the First Version

Let us now turn to the solution Severino offers to the first articulation of the paradox, where things are not so happy. He explains this as follow (p. 16):

We thus state that nothingness is, in the sense that a positive meaningfulness—a being—is meaningful as the absolute negative, i.e., as “nothing”; in other words, it is meaningful as that “nothing” which is absolutely not meaningful as “being”. Therefore, nothingness is, in the sense that absolute negativity is positively meaningful; or nothingness is, in the sense that the meaning of “nothing” is self-contradictory.

Severino wishes to explain the sense in which nothing is. And he notes that one can do so quite correctly, by saying that the concept *nothing* is. He does not mention the sense in which nothing is not, but as we saw in the

4 That is what, I am sure, Severino would say. But even if one is a noneist, and takes the name ‘**nothing**’ to refer to something, it is not what the name ‘**being**’ refers to. So the claim is still true.

last section, he is happy to take this to be true as applied to the concrete universal (*bedeutung*) **nothing**. **Nothing** is the absence of all things. It is therefore no-thing; it is not. Indeed, since *nothing* is contradictory, then assuming the Principle of Non-Contradiction, as Severiano does, it can refer to no-thing.

So far, so good. But unfortunately, it does not resolve the problem. For there is a problem with **nothing** itself. It is not. But as Severino himself notes, there are discussions about it. Of course there are discussions about *nothing* as well, but that is beside the point. When we say, for example (truly or falsely), that God created the world out of **nothing**, we are not saying that God created the world out of a concept. We are saying that he created it out of nothingness, i.e., nothing itself.

In other words, that **nothing** is not, is fine. But there are arguments to the effect that **nothing** is (an object) as well. It is an object since we can think about it. (I am thinking about **nothing**, and wondering whether it is the same thing as **being**.) One can quantify over it. (There is something that Hegel and Heidegger both talked about, though they said different things about it, namely **nothing**.)

Indeed, even to say that **nothing** is not (an object) appears to be talking about the object. One could dispute this. If one supposes that ‘**nothing**’ has no extension (referent, *bedeutung*), and one takes reference failure to be governed by a negative free logic, then ‘**nothing** is an object’ is false, and so its negation is true<sup>5</sup>. The problem with this move is that it makes other patently true things false, such as ‘Heidegger thought about **nothing**’, and ‘**nothing** is **nothing**.’

Hence, an antinomy still stands. To resolve this version of the paradox, one needs to take on those arguments for the claim that **nothing** is something, and show that they don’t work. Let me spell out this paradox again. By definition, **nothing** is the *absence* of everything. It cannot be an object since it is what remains, as it were, after all objects have been removed. But even to talk about **nothing**, as we do, it must be something, an object, or else there would be no-thing of which to say anything.

5 For negative free logics, see Priest (2008), esp. 13.4.

## 6. A Couple of Final Points

Let me conclude with a couple of final observations on Severino's comments.

First, the two aspects (moments) of nothing (and of all other universals/predicates) are clearly closely connected: it is the abstract universal (intension) plus the world that determines the concrete universal (extension). Severino clearly agrees that there is a connection; but in several places he says that the paradox arises because of taking them to be *unconnected*. Thus, he says (p. 16):

The aporia of nothingness emerges because the two abstract moments of the concreteness constituted by "nothing" as a self-contradictory meaning are abstractly conceived as unrelated.

This is somewhat puzzling. If the paradox arises because of the failure to draw the appropriate distinction, then the problem would seem to arise when one takes these two things to be *too* intimately related—indeed, identical.

I am not entirely sure what Severino means by his claim about disconnectedness, but I think it must be something like this. Once one seems that the concept of *thing that is not* determines its extension, one can see that this extension is empty. Hence, there is no-thing there to be talked about. If one does not realise this, one may take the extension to be a positive being itself.

Secondly, all the passages from Severino I have discussed so far come from *La struttura originaria*. I think that by and large the comments from *Intorno al senso del nulla* add little to the matter. However, there is one paragraph that is worth noting. He says (p. 36):

...the aporia of nothingness presents itself as unsolvable. Thought is bound to the absurdity of contradiction for good. Thought which thinks nothing is (originally) free from contradiction only in so far as it sees that it *is the meaning* nothing *which is a contradiction*—a *necessary* contradiction.

This stumped me for a while, since the first paragraph seems to suggest that the the aporia of nothingness cannot be resolved. That Severino thinks so, is, of course, most unlikely. I think that the paragraph has to be interpreted as saying only that the paradox *appears* to be unsolvable. In other words, that it is a paradox. The second paragraph then says that the

paradox *is* resolved by noting that *nothing* is a contradictory concept, and so necessarily refers to no-thing.

## 7. Conclusion

At any rate, Severino has not succeeded in resolving his first version of the aporia of nothingness. In fact, I do not think it can be satisfactorily resolved. Nothing *is* a dialethic object, but a perfectly coherent one, with some important properties<sup>6</sup>.

Of course, Severino cannot accept this, since the Principle of Non-Contradiction is the corner stone of his whole philosophy. For my part, I think his defence of the Principle fails<sup>7</sup>; as do all the others of which I know<sup>8</sup>. There are, in fact, many reasons why Principle itself fails<sup>9</sup>. Indeed, the paradox of **nothing** is one of these.

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6 See Priest (2014), (202+).

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8 See, for a start, Priest (1998).

9 See, e.g., Priest (2006).

# Nothingness and ineffability

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The present work deals with the contemporary debate about the question of nothingness, especially focusing on Emanuele Severino's solution (1981) to the related aporia. After an overview of the main accounts of nothingness (§1), I argue that they seem to have difficulties to dispel the classic aporia of nothingness (§2). Then I recall the account of nothingness by Emanuele Severino (1981; 2013) and the solution he proposed to the puzzle of nothingness (§3). Despite the criticism against it (§4), I argue that the solution by Severino could still be the most promising if we revamped his account within the question of ineffability and the so-called "apophaticism" (§5). To this end, first I compare Severino's solution with Chien-Hsing Ho's solution (2006) to the so-called paradox of ineffability (§6). Secondly (§7), I underpin Severino's account of nothingness by appealing to the notion of conceptual ineffability by Shaw (2013) and the relation of entailment between an ineffable insight and the effable consequences such an insight might generate, as suggested by Kukla (2005). The outcome is a revamped account of nothingness that could reply to some of the main objections against the solution by Severino (§8), whilst leaving some questions open (§9).

**Keywords:**

**Ineffability, apophaticism, aporia of nothingness, Emanuele Severino**

## Part I: an overview of the contemporary debate about nothingness

### 1. Quantificational, non-quantificational and hybrid accounts of nothingness

From at least the time of Parmenides, ‘nothing’ (or ‘nothingness’) was also used as a noun phrase. That gave rise to the so-called “*aporia*” of nothingness, i.e., the fact that we can *say* and *think* what is absolute *unsayable* and *unthinkable*: the absolute non-being. Plato notoriously tried to solve the Parmenidean puzzle of nothingness, distinguishing between ‘nothingness’ as absolute non-being (*enantion*) and ‘nothingness’ as different-being (*heteron*)<sup>1</sup>. After that, Plato’s strategy has been assumed the best way to disentangle the phrase ‘nothing(ness)’ yet Plato probably didn’t consider his own strategy a solution; rather, he considered it a way to escape from the puzzling question about nothingness that was implicitly maintained<sup>2</sup>. Indeed, as Severino (1981, 2013) notes, Plato still acknowledges the Parmenidean unsayability or unspeakability and the unthinkability of nothingness as absolute non-being (*enantion*), whereas he (correctly) acknowledges that non-being as difference (*heteron*) can be said and thought because, e.g., the proposition  $\langle x \text{ is not } y \rangle$  does not mean that  $x$  is identical to nothingness. Rather, it means that  $x$  is different from  $y$ .

The present work deals with the contemporary debate about the question of nothingness, especially focusing on Emanuele Severino’s solution to the related *aporia*. Indeed, Severino developed a very appealing strategy to treat the phrase ‘nothingness’ (see in particular Severino 1981, ch. IV): I will show later that his approach to the question of nothingness

1 See *Sophist* 237b- 258e

2 See Severino (1981), chapter IV.

can still be one of the most promising in the current debate, although some adjustments of Severino's account may be desirable to reply to the main objections against it (see §§6-8).

The starting point of the contemporary debate about nothingness is the well-known Carnap's criticism against Heideggerian use of 'Nothing(ness)'. From this crucial point, at least three main kinds of accounts have arisen. I would call them: quantificational, non-quantificational and hybrid accounts of nothingness, respectively.

## Quantificational approach

It consists of treating any occurrence of 'nothing', 'nothingness', 'non-being', and similar phrases, as quantifier phrases. All those phrases *are not* singular terms: we can *fully* replace them with (negative) quantifier phrases with *no loss of meaning*. The now classic example is Carnap's treatment of some Heideggerian sentences. According to Carnap (1932), those sentences where the phrase 'nothingness' (and the like) occurs are not speaking about real philosophical topics because they

[are] simply based on the mistake of employing the word "nothing" as a noun, because it is customary in ordinary language to use it in this form in order to construct a negative existential statement [...] In a correct language, on the other hand, it is not a particular name, but a certain logical form of the sentence that serves this purpose. (1932, p. 70)

Here, Carnap is reading the well-known passage by Heidegger [1929]

What is to be investigated is being only and—nothing else; being alone and further—*nothing*; solely being, and beyond being—*nothing*. *What about this Nothing? . . . Does the Nothing exist only because the Not, i.e. the Negation, exists? Or is it the other way around? Does Negation and the Not exist only because the Nothing exists? . . . We assert: the Nothing is prior to the Not and the Negation. . . . Where do we seek the Nothing? How do we find the Nothing. . . ? We know the Nothing. . . . Anxiety reveals the Nothing. . . . That for which and because of which we were anxious was 'really'—nothing. Indeed: the Nothing itself—as such—was present. . . . What about*

*this Nothing?—The Nothing itself nothings.* (Selected passages from Heidegger's work, quoted by Carnap 1932, p. 69)

Therefore, according to Carnap, a sentence like

(1) The Nothing is outside  
should be paraphrased as follows:

(1\*) There is nothing (does not exist anything) which is outside  
i.e.,

(1\*\*)  $\neg \exists x . Ou(x)$  [where *Ou* is the predicate ‘...is outside’]

So, Carnap admits the use of ‘nothing’ just as a (negative) quantifier phrase, whereas Heidegger seems to use it (also) as a noun phrase<sup>3</sup>.

Besides, the author of *What is Metaphysics?* – as Carnap notes – cannot be defended by stating that he is using that word by introducing a special meaning:

The first sentence of the quotation at the beginning of this section proves that this interpretation is not possible. The combination of “only” and “nothing else” shows unmistakably that the word “nothing” here has the usual meaning of a logical particle that serves for the formulation of a negative existential statement (Carnap, 1932, p. 71).

Indeed, “being only and *nothing* else” would prove that Heidegger is thinking of the negation of something since “what is investigated” is included in the domain of (all) entities and beyond it *there are no entities at all*: ‘nothing’ is (at least) implicitly used as a negative quantifier. There is an additional attack by Carnap: even if we admitted ‘nothing’ as a noun phrase that denotes an object, we could not affirm, as Heidegger seems to do, that Nothing exists without falling into a blatant contradiction, because “the existence of this entity would be denied in its very definition” (1932, p.71), since Heidegger should not assign the property of *being* to the alleged object Nothing, that is, an object beyond the domain

3 Similarly, ‘not’ should be used just as logical connective; it cannot be used as a noun.



of all entities, as the German philosopher seems to affirm when he considers it exactly beyond being. Finally, Carnap criticizes the use of the verb ‘to nothing’ because it is completely invented by Heidegger without any link to a meaningful word.

## Non-quantificational approach

Priest (2002, 2014) and Voltolini (2012, 2015) have tried to overcome the critic of Carnap in order to reconsider more deeply Heidegger’s thesis, adopting very interesting strategies that I am going to recall.

Priest (2002) argues that ‘nothing’ can be used not only as a quantifier but also as a substantive.

‘Nothing’ can be used as a substantive. If this is not clear, merely ponder the sentence ‘Heidegger and Hegel both talked about nothing, but they made different claims about it’. ‘Nothing’ cannot be a quantifier here. Or consider the sentence:

(\*) God brought the universe into being out of nothing.

This means that God arranged for nothingness to give way to the universe. In (\*) ‘nothing’ cannot be parsed as a quantifier. If we do so, we obtain: For no  $x$  did God bring the universe into existence out of  $x$ . And whilst no doubt this is true if God brought the universe into existence out of nothing, it is equally true if the universe has existed for all time: if it was not brought into existence at a time, it was not brought into existence *out of* anything. And the eternal existence of the universe is, in part, what (\*) is denying. (p. 241)

So, what does the phrase ‘nothing’ mean when it cannot be reduced to a quantifier phrase like in (1\*\*)? Priest (2002, 2014a; 2014b) offers the follow reply: **nothing**<sup>4</sup> is the absence of all things (absolutely nothing).

4 Following Priest (2014a, 2014b)’s device, I write ‘nothing’ in boldface (**nothing**) when I use ‘nothing’ in order to point out its difference from ‘nothing’ as quantifier phrase.

Therefore, it is also essentially related to a quantifier since it is *no entity*, *no object* but it cannot be considered *only* a quantifier: *it* is an *object* that is the absence of all objects. So – Priest concludes – **nothing** is a contradictory object: “it both is and is not an object; it both is and is not something” (2014a, p. 7). Then Priest (2014a) links this topic to non-existent objects and mereology in order to offer an account of **nothing**. Indeed, according to Priest (2014a), there are existent objects and non-existent objects; he assumes that ‘to exist’ means ‘to have the potential to enter into causal interactions’ (2014a, p. 146). Since **nothing** is the absence of all things, it is a non-existent object because it could not enter into causal interactions. Mereology offers us a chance to establish what **nothing** is:

What could nothingness be? An obvious answer is that it is the fusion of the empty set [...]. **Nothing** is what you get when you fuse no things. There is nothing in the empty set, so **nothing** is absolute absence: the absence of all objects, as one would expect. (2014a, p.152)

Certainly, Priest can propose this strategy since **nothing** is nothing, and the “content” of the empty set is exactly no thing at all. The question is whether one can obtain a mereological fusion when one considers the members of the empty set, i.e., no members at all! Priest assumes the following defining characterisation for a mereological fusion: every collection of objects has a mereological fusion if its members are not a disparate bunch<sup>5</sup>. The notion of disparate bunch refers to a bunch in which some members fail to “cohere” with others, as, for example, a bunch composed by the roof of my house, a flower in Central Park and a coin in my pocket. Certainly, it is quite difficult to find a good criterion for distinguishing a disparate bunch from a coherent one; anyway, this problem does not undermine Priest’s account because «the members of the empty set are not a disparate collection; it has no members which fail to cohere with others – whatever that means. The members are all as intimately connected as one might wish!» (2014a, p. 152)

Priest’s strategy could give us a solution to the puzzles of the empty set. The empty set existentially depends on the object **nothing**. The empty set can be distinguished from any individual because it cannot be con-

5 See Priest 2014a, pp.152ff.

sidered just memberless: the empty set includes *only nothing*, i.e., the fusion of no things. Priest (2014a) argues that the empty fusion is a part of everything (p. 153) so it is also a part of any individual. However, the empty set is different from any individual since it is a set that includes only empty fusion.

According to Voltolini (2015), the well-known Heidegger’s sentence

(2) The nothing nothings [*Das Nicht nichtet*]

may be read in a logically correct way [...]. So, once [...] [«The nothing nothings»] is *appropriately* understood, there is no problem with its logical form. Moreover, it will be claimed that the predicate “nothings” is definitely meaningful. (Voltolini 2015, p. 20).

I am going to focus on the main points of Voltolini’s article. First, Voltolini’s strategy is represented by the treatment of ‘nothing’ as a definite description (‘the nothing’) that should be eliminated by Russellian strategy.<sup>6</sup> To this end, Voltolini introduces the property of *being a thing such that there is no thing that is identical with that thing*, i.e.,  $\lambda x((-\exists y)(y=x))$  (2015, p. 23); consequently, ‘the nothing’ can be taken to mean the same as ‘the thing that is identical with no thing’ (*viz.* ‘the thing such that there exists no thing that is identical with it’).

By means of the Russellian elimination of definite descriptions, (2)

6 Russell’s strategy is well known. Consider, for example, a sentence like “the present King of France is bald”. According to Russell, it should be spelled out in the following way:

(R1) At least one person is presently King of France;

And

(R2) At most one person is presently King of France

And

(R3) Whoever is presently King of France is bald.

In the case of “(The) nothing nothings”, the paraphrase is the following:

(V1) At least one thing is such that there exists no entity that is identical to it

And

(V2) At most one thing is such that there exists no entity that is identical to it

And

(V3) Whatever is such a thing, it nothings

can be paraphrased as:

$$(2^*) (\exists x)((\sim\exists y)(y=x) \wedge (\forall z)((\sim\exists y)(y=z) \rightarrow (z=x)) \wedge Nx)$$

where the quantifying purpose served by ‘nothing’ is given by the *second* existential quantifier -  $\exists y$  - in the formalized sentence, the quantifier contained in the predicate by means of which the definite description ‘the nothing’ is eliminated away. (Voltolini 2015, p. 24)

Secondly, Voltolini argues that the above-mentioned definite description could have a Russellian denotation only if such a denotation was an impossible object (therefore only in an ontology that allows *impossibilia*). According to Voltolini, the thing that is identical to no thing is an impossible entity because only an impossible object could instantiate the property  $\lambda x((\sim\exists y)(y=x))$ . Indeed, each object is self-identical, but this object cannot be identical to itself because it cannot be identical to anything. However, as an entity, it is at least identical to itself. Therefore,

one such entity will be something that is made impossible precisely by the fact that it instantiates not only the property of *being identical with nothing*, but also, like any other entity whatsoever, the property of *being identical with something*. (Voltolini 2015, p.24).

Appealing to impossible objects induces Voltolini to review his treatment of ‘nothing’ to reply to the objection according to which ‘nothing’ could not have a denotation since there is no object that could instantiate the property  $\lambda x((\sim\exists y)(y=x))$ . To this end, he uses a sort of Meinongian strategy (2015, p.29 ff). Let us consider, for example, an impossible object as a square-non-square. It is a thing such that *it is a square and it is a non-square* rather than a thing such that it is a square and it is not a square. Following this strategy, ‘nothing’ as a definite description should denote *a thing that is both identical with something and not-(identical with something)*, rather than a thing according to which there is no thing that is identical to it and there is something that is identical to it. Since the property of *being not-(identical with something)* is the property of *being not identical to each thing*, i.e.,  $\lambda x((\forall y)(y\neq x))$ , we should read (2) as follows:

$$(2^{**}) (\exists x)((\forall y)(y\neq x) \wedge (\forall z)((\forall y)(y\neq z) \rightarrow (z=x)) \wedge Nx)$$

Since this thing is at the same time non identical to everything but it is identical to something, it is an impossible object...and this thing “nothing” (*nichtet*)! According to Voltolini (2015, p. 35), a good way to read the predicate “nothings” (*nichtet*) is the following: ‘*x* is such that every *y* is not identical to it’; therefore:

$$(2^{***}) (\exists x)((\forall y)(y \neq x) \wedge (\forall z)((\forall y)(y \neq z) \rightarrow (z=x)) \wedge (\forall y)(y \neq x))$$

So, the controversial sentence “The nothing nothings” could be simply interpreted in this way: the thing such that everything is not identical to it (i.e., the nothing) is such that each thing is not identical to it (i.e., it *nothings*). As Voltolini notes, this reading of Heidegger’s sentence seems very trivial; however, he also proposes considering it in a more interesting way: «insofar as the thing that is non-identical with everything is no *possible* thing, it evaporates from the only reality that counts—the subdomain of *possibilia* — it nullifies itself» (Voltolini 2015, p. 36).

## Hybrid approach

The aim of this section is to recall two accounts of nothingness that I think we can name “hybrid”. Indeed, they combine a quantificational with a non-quantificational approach, although starting from two different backgrounds. The first has been developed by Oliver and Smiley in their 2013 work; the second comes from Lewis (1986) and Van Inwagen (1996). To be sure, there would be a third hybrid account of nothingness, that by Severino (1981), but I will introduce it in a dedicated section (see §3).

Oliver and Smiley (2013) offer another alternative to Carnap’s strategy. They propose to distinguish (the use of) ‘nothing’ as a quantifier from (the use of) ‘nothing’ as a singular term. ‘Nothing’ as a singular term – they say – is an *empty* term, i.e., a term that fails to refer to anything. To this end, they introduce the empty term ‘zilch’, a term such that

[it] is empty as a matter of logical necessity. Any logically unsatisfiable condition will do to define it via description. [...] With an eye on formalization, we opt for ‘the non self-identical thing’ [ $x : x \neq x$ ] (2013, p. 602).

Since everything is self-identical, 'zilch' does not denote anything, not even an impossible object. One should note that the self-identity of 'zilch' does not contradict the non-self-identity of the non-self-identical thing that 'zilch' denotes. The ancient puzzle of nothing(ness) can be solved by stating that the empty term that denotes the non-self-identical thing is identical to itself without undermining the non-self-identity of the denoted thing (and I would point out that a proposition like <'zilch' denotes the non-self-identical thing> simply means that 'zilch' does not denote anything, i.e., it is an empty term).

Oliver-Smiley's account seems to be a hybrid approach to nothingness because on one hand it provides non-quantificational treatment of the phrases 'nothing' or 'nothingness': these can be read as the singular empty term 'zilch'; but on the other hand, what 'zilch' denotes is no entity at all: 'zilch' does not pick up any object at all and this fact needs to be exactly treated by means of a quantificational approach *a la* Carnap.

Let's now pass to the possible worlds' strategy to account for nothingness. Possible worlds are primarily used to account for modality.

Philosophers typically recognize four central and interrelated *cases* of modality: possibility (can, might, may, could); impossibility (cannot, could not, must not); necessity (must, has to be, could not be otherwise); and contingency (maybe and maybe not; might have been and might not have been, could have been otherwise). (Divers 2002, p. 3)

Through the possible worlds-approach, one can understand claims about possibility, impossibility, necessity and contingency as:

- (P) It is possible that *A* if and only if there is a (possible) world in which *A* is true
- (I) It is impossible that *A* if and only if there is no (possible) world in which *A* is true
- (N) It is necessary that *A* if and only if *A* is true in every (possible) world
- (C) It is contingent that *A* if and only if *A* is true/false in the actual world but there is some other possible world where it is false/true.

For the sake of this brief overview, I assume the following general definition of a possible world: an entity *w* is a world if and only if *w* represents a maximal consistent situation according to which things could be.

The metaphysical question about possible worlds deals with the question about what the possible worlds are. Generally, there are three conceptions of a possible world: *concretism*, *abstractionism* and *combinatorialism*<sup>7</sup>.

Concretism is mainly based on Lewis' strong modal realism. According to Lewis (1986), a possible world is a maximal mereological sum of spatiotemporally interrelated things: «An individual *x* is a world *if and only if* any parts of *x* are spatiotemporally related to each other, and anything spatiotemporally related to any part of *x* is itself a part of *x*» (See Divers, 2002, p. 46). Therefore, a world is a *concrete* object, i.e., – broadly speaking – a physical object, composed by – say – physical parts<sup>8</sup>.

According to abstractionism, worlds are maximal consistent ways according to which things could be, i.e., they are total consistent situations, or they represent total consistent situations. Unlike concretism, the abstractionist's world is an abstract entity. Menzel (2016) usefully summarizes the basic intuitions of this approach as follows:

[Situations] are *states* or *conditions*, of varying detail and complexity, that a concrete world could be in — they are *ways* that things, as a whole, could be. [...] Roughly speaking, then, a possible world for an abstractionist is the *limit* of such a “process” of consistently extending and adding detail to some initial state of the world; it is a *total* way things could be, a consistent state of the world that settles every possibility; a consistent state to which no further detail could be added without rendering it inconsistent (2016, §2.2)

Finally, combinatorialism is a term referring to those accounts of possible world according to which a world is just the “re-combination, or re-arrangements, of certain metaphysical simples” (Menzel 2016), where these simples are: simple individuals, i.e., individuals that lack proper parts; and simple properties, i.e., properties that do not have other properties as constituents<sup>9</sup>.

7 I use the same terminology as Menzel (2016). As Menzel notes, there are also other accounts of possible world that deserve to be considered.

8 The distinction between abstract and concrete objects is surely controversial in metaphysics. Lewis (1986) does not consider the distinction useful; anyway, he offers a very useful recap of the main strategies for accounting for abstractness and concreteness such that none of them allow us to conceive his world as an abstract object.

9 See Divers (2002), pp. 175-176 for a deeper understanding.

Using possible worlds' approach to the question of nothingness, the terms 'nothing' or 'nothingness' have been considered singular terms that refer to an empty possible world. As far as I know, this account was initially developed by Lewis (1986), then by Van Inwagen (1996), although they are inclined to reject the existence of such an empty world. An empty possible world is a world at which there are no objects at all. According to the account of possible world one assumes, the idea of an empty possible world substantially changes. For example, if one assumes a "Lewisian" account of possible world, an empty world is not possible at all, because any possible world is the sum of spatiotemporally interrelated things<sup>10</sup>. It is more plausible that an empty possible world can be admitted in the ontology of those who assume an abstractionist or a combinatorial account of possible worlds, although there might be relevant issues also in that cases (see Coggins, 2010; Simionato, 2017). Besides, according to the account of abstract/concrete objects one assumes, the "scenario" of empty possible world substantially changes. Usually, those who deal with the empty possible world refer to a world with no *concrete* objects, because they think that there are abstract objects (e.g., numbers) in all possible worlds. The topic about the different approaches to the idea of empty possible world is beyond the scope of this paper (see Coggins 2010; Goldschmidt 2013; Simionato 2017 for more details). Also, the link between the account of nothingness as empty possible world and the so-called metaphysical nihilism (i.e. the thesis according to which there could have been nothing) is out of the scope of this work (again, see Coggins, 2010; Goldschmidt, 2013; Simionato, 2017 for more details)<sup>11</sup>. For the sake of the brief overview about the accounts of nothingness within the philosophical "market", I just need to recall some main tenets of the empty possible world.

10 «If a world is a maximal mereological sum of spatiotemporally interrelated things, that makes no provision for an absolutely empty world. A world is not like a bottle that might hold no beer. The world *is* the totality of things it contains. [...] There can be nothing much: just some homogeneous unoccupied spacetime, or maybe only one single point of it. But nothing much is still something, and there isn't any world where there's nothing at all» (Lewis, 1986, p. 73).

11 Besides, the most relevant argument for the existence of an empty possible world is the so-called subtraction argument by Baldwin (1996) and its alternative versions (e.g., by Rodriguez-Pereyra, 2013).



Let us assume that the naïve idea (or pre-theoretical intuition) of nothingness is the absolute absence of all objects or the global absence. We can consider that absence simply as the maximal (all-encompassing) consistent *situation* according to which there are no objects at all. Since a *maximal consistent situation according to which things could be* is – broadly speaking – represented by a (possible) world, the maximal consistent situation according to which there are no objects at all is what is represented by what is called *empty world*, i.e. a world that represents the absence of all objects (namely the *global* absence). So, nothingness is an entity – i.e. a possible world – that *represents*<sup>12</sup> the absence of all objects. Therefore, when ‘nothingness’ is not used as a negative quantifier phrase, we can use ‘nothingness’ for referring to the absence of everything (the maximal consistent situation of the global absence), but only if we are aware that at the same time we are referring to the *entity* according to which there are no objects at all, i.e. we are referring at the same time to the empty possible world.

The account of nothingness as empty possible world is hybrid because it combines a non-quantificational with a quantificational approach to the phrases ‘nothingness’ or ‘nothing’. Indeed, on one hand, ‘empty possible world’ refers to something, i.e., the empty possible *world*: an (abstract) entity that represents the global absence; on the other hand, such a global absence can be fully paraphrased by a quantifier phrase (*a la* Carnap), since the situation represented by the *empty world* is exactly the situation according to which *there is no* objects at all. Not by chance, some philosophers, like Efrid and Stoneham, have “translated” the “emptiness” of the possible world through a quantificational approach<sup>13</sup>.

## 2. The puzzle of nothingness seems to remain

The aim of this section is to show why the hitherto proposed accounts of nothingness do not seem able to dispel the puzzle of nothingness.

12 I ask the reader to assume a “representative” account of possible worlds, rather than a “concretist” account.

13 See for example Efrid and Stoneham (2005):  $\exists w \forall x \neg E!xw$  (where  $E!xw$  means ‘ $x$  exists at world  $w$ ’ and  $x$  range over concrete objects).

Carnap's strategy to paraphrase 'nothingness' was challenged by Severino (1981). Severino assumes that the phrase 'nothingness' cannot always be reduced to a quantifier phrase, *contra* Carnap. As he writes:

[...] Carnap non tiene distinta, nella proposizione  $\langle \neg(\exists x) . x \text{ è al di fuori di} \rangle$ , la situazione logica in cui la variabile  $x$  assume un numero limitato di valori positivi (sì che ciò rispetto a cui  $x$  è 'al di fuori', 'oltre', è una dimensione limitata del positivo), dalla situazione logica in cui [...]  $x$  può assumere *tutti* i valori positivi (sì che ciò rispetto a cui  $x$  è 'al di fuori' è la stessa totalità del positivo). È appunto in questo secondo caso che il nulla (l'al di fuori dell'intero) *si manifesta*: appunto in quanto nella proposizione:  $\langle \neg(\exists x) . x \text{ è al di fuori della totalità del positivo} \rangle$  è manifesto il significato: 'al di fuori della totalità del positivo'. (1981, p. 228)<sup>14</sup>

In other words, when we try to paraphrase 'nothing' by means of Carnap's strategy, if we admit that the domain of our discourse can be absolutely unrestricted, then the strategy does not work, since – according to Severino – we are constrained to quantify over a putative thing that is beyond the all-inclusive domain of all things. It is clear, then, that this criticism against Carnap's treatment of nothingness assumes the possibility of unrestricted quantification<sup>15</sup>.

Priest's account of nothingness also challenges Carnap's way of paraphrasing 'nothing', but his strategy needs to admit in our ontology contradictory objects. That is not a problem for a dialetheist as Priest, of course. However, even if we admitted contradictory objects and dialetheias in our philosophy, there would still be relevant issues in the pe-

14 «Carnap does not distinguish the logical situation in which variable  $x$  assumes a limited number of positive values (whereby that with respect to which  $x$  is "outside", "beyond", is a limited dimension of the positive), from the logical situation in which – as mentioned above –  $x$  can assume *all* positive values (whereby that with respect to which  $x$  is "outside" is the very totality of the positive). It is precisely in this latter case that nothingness (what is outside the whole) *manifests itself*; insofar as in the proposition  $\langle \sim(\exists x) . x \text{ is outside the totality of the positive} \rangle$  the meaning 'outside the totality of the positive' manifests itself » (see p. 26 above).

15 For an overview about unrestricted quantification, see e.g. Rayo-Uzquiano, 2006 and Florio, 2014. About the (possible) link between absolutely unrestricted quantification and the question of nothingness, see Simionato, 2014 and Costantini, 2019.

cular case of nothingness, as Ho (2016) points out<sup>16</sup>. In a nutshell, if nothingness is *absolutely* unthinkable and unspeakable, then we cannot describe it in any way because it *defies any* determination or description. I shall return to this point in Part II. For now, I just need to point out that nothingness seems to be “beyond” – as to say – the domain of contradictory entities and non-contradictory entities: it *absolutely is not*. For similar reason, we should not even say that nothingness is an impossible entity or a non-existent object. Although one extends her ontology to include “zany” entities in it (impossible objects, contradictory objects, non-existent objects, etc.), then one is not picking up the “real” or “authentic” nothingness because the latter is different from *any* item of our (extended) ontology: nothingness is «al di fuori della totalità del positivo» (*viz.* beyond the all-inclusive domain of unrestrictedly everything), as Severino noticed. The same issue seems to affect Voltolini’s account. Oliver and Smiley seem to be closer to the idea of such an absolute nothingness when they acknowledge that it is nothing at all, «whether existent or subsistent, real or imaginary, concrete or abstract, possible or impossible» (2013, p. 602). But their account seems to propose again the same issue of Carnap’s strategy. Indeed, the main difference between Carnap’s paraphrase and Oliver-Smiley’s account is that the former *completely* paraphrase ‘nothing’ or ‘nothingness’ via a negative quantifier phrase, whereas the latter holds the singular term ‘nothing’ as an empty term (‘zilch’: see above) that does not denote anything at all, since it is *empty*. Again, Severino’s challenge can be restored: how can we account for the absence of absolutely everything that the empty term ‘zilch’ (implicitly) refers to<sup>17</sup>? Compared to Carnap’s strategy, the further step of Oliver-Smiley’s account is the possibility to use ‘nothing’ as a singular term and so the possibility to discern ‘nothing’ as singular term from ‘nothing’ as negative

16 «A contradiction is as determinate as a tautology. Correspondingly, to claim that reality is contradictory is to predicate of reality a determinate, though contradictory, structure describable in words or logical symbols. Yet, what if reality is indescribable and, somewhat like an amorphous lump, empty of any determinate structure? Perhaps, the idea of a contradictory reality fits better with a logically possible world, but not the concrete world of lived experience» (Ho, 2016, p. 77, emphasis added). We will see in §6 that Ho is speaking about something that is ineffable in general, including the case of nothingness.

17 I say that ‘zilch’ *indirectly* refers to the absence of absolutely everything because it denotes the non self-identical thing, i.e., it does *not* denote *anything* at all.

quantifier phrase, but the “emptiness” of the empty term ‘zilch’ is still there and no account has been provided for it<sup>18</sup>.

Finally, let us consider the empty possible world account of nothingness. An *absolutely* empty world risks to be a self-contradictory entity. Indeed, if we say that a possible world is an entity (e.g., an abstract object) that represents the maximal consistent situation according to which there are *no entities at all*, then we are entitled to count the empty *world* among those entities that there are not. Heil (2013) effectively summarizes this objection against the possibility of an empty world. According to Heil, an empty world is neither possible nor impossible: *it is not a world at all*:

[...] an empty world is not a world with nothing in it. It is nothing at all. The ‘empty’ world is not a world that would cease to be empty were something *added* to it. The empty world is not a shell, a container with nothing inside it. The empty world is not an *it*. [...]. Nothingness, conceived of as the ‘empty’ world, is not one option, one world among others; it is not an option at all. The only possibilities are something. (2013, p. 173)

So, Heil’s criticism could be spelled out by means of the following argument:

- (H1) Nothingness is the absence of everything
- (H2) Any possible world is – broadly speaking – a thing
- Therefore
- (H3) If one identified nothingness with the empty world, then one would identify the absolute absence of everything with something, i.e., one would fall in contradiction.

I am not sure that an empty possible world is a self-contradictory item. Neither I am sure that speaking about an empty possible world lead us to fall in contradiction. Although this question is out of the scope of the present work, I would like to recall a few brief comments on that<sup>19</sup>.

18 Furthermore, as Casati-Fujikawa, 2015 note, «[Oliver and Smiley] don’t give any argument for this referential-failure: they seem just to assume that ‘nothing’ as a singular term and ‘zilch’ are empty terms» (p. 256).

19 I would address the reader to Coggins (2010), Goldschmidt (2013) and Simionato (2017) to explore this issue. I would also point out that I have provided a reading

First, we could try to avoid the contradictory outcome by distinguishing the empty world *as world*, i.e., a *representational device*, from the empty world *as empty*, i.e., the absence of all things. Indeed, we can discern what represents a situation from what is represented. Yet, one could still object that the absence of *all* things should be understood as *unrestrictedly global*. Therefore, what such a representational device would represent is the absence of absolutely everything, *including the empty world*<sup>20</sup>. Again, that's seems to be a contradictory result.

Second, we could employ the difference between what is for a world to be *actual existing* and what is for a world to be *actualized*. In a – broadly speaking – actualist realism conception of possible worlds (see Divers, 2002, p. 169 ff.) each possible world actually exists, but «among the many possible worlds that actually exist, one possible world is distinguished from the others by being (absolutely) actualized» (Divers, 2002, p. 169). Therefore, if the absolutely empty world *was actualized*, then there would be neither concrete objects, nor abstract objects, *included the world itself*. The empty world *as a world* would not exist at all *if it was actualized*. Maybe this distinction allows us to speak about an empty possible world without falling in contradiction, but I leave aside this question in this work.

### 3. The twofold structure of nothingness according to Severino

To understand Severino (1981)'s account of nothingness it is useful starting from how he recalls the classical *aporia* (or puzzle) of nothingness in Severino (2013):

Parmenide porta alla luce l'assoluta nullità del nulla (*me eon*, 'non essente'). Proprio perché essa è tale, il nulla non può essere *qualcosa* di «conoscibile» e di «esprimibile» (fr.2). Infatti si può conoscere ed esprimere solo qualcosa che è, ossia un essente, mentre il nulla, as-

of Severino's account of nothingness by means of the empty possible world account in Simionato (2013, 2016, 2017).

<sup>20</sup> We can rephrase this objection in terms of *facts*, as Mark Jago did (in a personal communication): «[...] the absence of everything would be a fact, that there is nothing. But that fact would be something that exists, contradicting itself. So, necessarily, there can't be absolutely nothing».

solutamente, non è un essente. E *tuttavia*, proprio nell'atto in cui si affermano questi caratteri del nulla, il nulla si presenta come qualcosa di conoscibile ed esprimibile. (2013, p. 106)<sup>21</sup>.

More systematically, Severino (1981) proposes two ways to present the above-mentioned aporia based on the use of 'nothingness' as a noun phrase:

- (i) Nothingness is posited (or thought) as what *is not anything*; but since it is *posited*, it somehow *is something*.
- (ii) Nothingness is the opposite of *what it is*; but since it is absolutely nothingness, it is not even the opposite of *what it is*.

Another way to spell out aporia could be the following:

- (1) Everything that exists is positive [assumed]
- (2) Nothingness is not positive [assumed]
- (3) For all  $x$ , if  $x$  appears, then  $x$  is positive [assumed]
- (4) Nothingness appears (for example, it appears as what is beyond the totality of positive)

Therefore

- (5) Nothingness is positive [by (3), (4)]
- (6) Nothingness is not positive, and nothingness is positive [by conjunction of (2) and (5)]

Could we avoid the contradictory result by rejecting (2)? That would mean affirming that nothingness is positive so that we would be constrained to reject our intuition about the *nihil absolutum*, i.e., the idea that nothingness is the absence of everything, so the absence of all positive determinations. Nor could we state that nothingness is positive by

21 «Parmenides brings to light the absolute nullity of nothingness (*me eon*, “non-existent”). Precisely because it is such, nothingness cannot be *something* “knowable” and “expressible” (fr. 2). Indeed, one can know and express only what is, which is to say an existent, whereas nothingness, in absolute terms, is not an existent. *However*, in the very act whereby these characteristics of nothingness are affirmed, nothingness presents itself as something knowable and expressible» (see p. 33 above).

means of the idea of *nihil negativum*; namely, a self-contradictory object: there are no contradictory positive determinations in Severino's ontology (see 1981, ch. 3). Nor could we reject (3) since it would be counterintuitive. Indeed, appearance (*apparenza, erscheinung*) and positivity are two strictly related notions: what appears is *present* and it would be very hard to affirm that what is present is not somehow positive (positum).

The solution by Severino is an account of nothingness that is based on the following premise:

ogni significato (ogni contenuto pensabile, cioè ogni ente, qualsiasi il modo in cui esso si costituisce) è una sintesi semantica tra la positività del significare e il contenuto determinato del positivo significare; o, che è il medesimo, tra l'essere formale e la determinazione di questa formalità [...] – dove l'essere formale è appunto la positività della significanza della determinazione (1981, p. 213)<sup>22</sup>.

According to Severino, 'meaning' (*significato*), 'entity' and 'positivity' or 'positive (being)' *convertuntur*. Besides, for any entity or meaning, we can distinguish *the fact that it is an entity or a positive determination* from *the content of that determination*. Broadly speaking, we can state that for any entity, we can distinguish its *existence* from its *essence*. We should also note that in Severino, the existence of any entity is logically equivalent to its self-identity so that: for all  $x$ ,  $x$  exists if and only if  $x$  is self-identical. As Berto (2013) recalls,

What Severino calls in his works existence or being *simpliciter*, or existence "in a transcendental sense", corresponds to self-identity: the being of existence unrestrictedly shared by all things at all times just is their being themselves, that is, their being something, or their being what they are (and not something else).

Things that for the Meinongian lack being and/or existence [...] exist in the Severinian sense. [...] When Severino says that  $x$  has being or exists "in a transcendental sense", the Meinongian says that  $x$  is an object, something, a thing. (p. 154)

22 «Every meaning (every thinkable content, which is to say every entity, however it may constitute itself) is a semantic synthesis between the positivity of meaningfulness and the determinate content of positive meaningfulness; or – which amounts to the same thing – between formal being and the determination of this formality [...] where formal being is precisely the positivity of the meaningfulness of the determination» (See p.14 above).

The self-identity (namely, the existence) of any entity and what it essentially is<sup>23</sup> cannot be *separated* although they can be *discerned*. For example, the noun ‘table’ refers to the fact<sup>24</sup> that the table is/exists/is self-identical and – at the same time – to the table as determination. The self-identity or existence of anything is the formal concept of being (“*essere formale*”), whereas any entity is a determination of being.<sup>25</sup> I recalled before that existence and essence – or self-identity as such and any particular determination – cannot be separated; Severino spells out this principle by stating that existence and essence are a “synthesis”, i.e., a structure of two conceptual aspects such that one can be discerned from the other but cannot be separated. By following Hegel’s use of ‘moment’ (*das Moment*), Severino also spells out the above-mentioned structure as a two-moments structure<sup>26</sup>.

With this essential background in mind, let us consider the notion of nothingness. According to Severino, since nothingness somehow appears in our thought (for example, as what is beyond the all-inclusive totality), it is positive, it exists, it is self-identical. Yet, its essence, what is a determination, is the negation of unrestrictedly everything, the total absence of all entities. Therefore, the positivity of nothingness contradicts what nothingness really is and, *vice versa*, the negation of all entities contradicts the existence (or self-identity) of such a negation because that negation is an entity itself, as well as the outcome of that negation. In other words, if the negation of unrestrictedly everything succeeds in negating *everything*, then such an absolute negation needs to be *self-refuting*<sup>27</sup>. To

23 According to Severino, there is no distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic properties or between contingent and essential properties. See, e.g., Severino (1980).

24 Here, I use ‘fact’ broadly speaking, with no commitment to any account of facts.

25 «Il termine ‘essere’ indica un sintesi [...] tra il significato ‘essere’ (essere formale) e i significati costituiti appunto dalle determinazioni che, appunto, sono» (Severino 1981, p. 144).» [«The term ‘being’ refer to a synthesis [...] between the meaning ‘being’ (the formal concept of being) and all the meanings. Indeed, these are the determinations that *are* (beings)» (translated by M. Simionato)].

26 It is useful to recall the Hegelian use of ‘moment’ (*das Moment*). A moment is not an instant of time but a (conceptual) aspect of a (semantic) structure that *cannot be separated* from the structure itself or from the other aspects of it; yet such an aspect *can be distinguished* from the structure or from the other aspects of it.

27 We will find again this figure in §6 when I rephrase the aporia of nothingness in terms of the paradox of ineffability.



solve the puzzle of nothingness, Severino appeals to the two-moments structure of nothingness, that is – formally – the same structure that we use to think about something<sup>28</sup>:

(Nothingness<sub>-p</sub>) The moment of positivity, i.e. the self-identity or existence of nothingness<sup>29</sup>

(Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>) The moment of the negation of unrestrictedly everything, resulting in the absence of all entities (or the global absence)<sup>30</sup>

Severino also refers to (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>) by using a phrase such as ‘the content of the positive meaning of nothingness’ or ‘the absolute negativity that is the content of the positive moment’. (I have some doubts about what kind of relation there could be between Nothingness<sub>-p</sub> and Nothingness<sub>-N</sub> if the latter is the *content* of the former: what is the nature of this relation? I will consider this topic later<sup>31</sup>). According to Severino, (Nothingness<sub>-p</sub>) and (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>) is an inconsistent pairing: since what is absent (or negated) is unrestrictedly *everything*, (Nothingness<sub>-p</sub>) is in contradiction with (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>) because (Nothingness<sub>-p</sub>) counts among the entities (or positive determinations, things, objects, etc) *negated by* (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>)<sup>32</sup>.

Anyway, Severino argues that the contradictory two-moments structure is exactly the device for solving the aporia of nothingness:

28 How can nothingness fulfil the same structure of something? That seems to be a puzzle in itself since we should not use a formal structure for something in order to understand the absolute nothingness. However, the solution to this puzzle will be clear as well as the solution of any puzzle of nothingness (at least according to Severino’s proposal).

29 Severino usually calls this moment: «il positivo significare del nulla» or «il momento positivo del nulla». Kneipe also translates: «the positive meaningfulness [of nothing]».

30 Severino usually calls this moment: «il nulla-momento». Kneipe also translates as «nothingness-as-moment».

31 See §7

32 I recalled before that according to Severino, ‘meaning’, ‘determination’ and ‘entity’ are synonymous. Since, for example, ‘entity’ ranges over absolutely everything, also the negation ‘not’ is – broadly speaking – an entity. We can find a similar situation in Priest (2014b): “anything we can think about is an object, a unity, a single thing” (p. 15). If we replace ‘object’/‘unity’/‘single thing’ with ‘entity’/‘meaning’/‘determination’, then we get a similar result.

[...] allorché si afferma che la posizione del non essere attesta l'essere del non essere, non si può intendere di affermare che 'nulla' significhi, in quanto tale, 'essere'; ma che il nulla, che è significante come nulla, è. [...]. E, dall'altro lato, questo 'essere' del nulla non è significante come 'non essere'; ma, essendo significante come essere, è essere del nulla (che è significante come nulla). La contraddizione del *non-essere-che-è*, non è dunque *interna* al significato 'nulla' (o al significato 'essere' che è l'essere del nulla); ma è tra il significato 'nulla' e l'essere, o la positività di questo significato. La positività del significare è cioè in contraddizione con lo stesso contenuto del significare, che è appunto significante come l'assoluta negatività. (1981, p. 213)<sup>33</sup>.

Therefore, Severino makes a distinction between the “external” contradiction between the two moments of nothingness and the (putative) “internal” contradiction of each moment: the first contradiction holds, whereas the second contradictions do not. In other words, the presence of (Nothingness<sub>-p</sub>) in the meaning ‘nothingness’ contradicts the presence of (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>) because (Nothingness<sub>-p</sub>) expresses the existence of an entity (since *any* positivity is an entity) and (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>) expresses the negation of any existence, including (Nothingness<sub>-p</sub>). In contrast, the “internal” contradictions do not hold because the two moments are not singularly (self)-contradictory entities: (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>) is itself and it is not (Nothingness<sub>-p</sub>), as well as (Nothingness<sub>-p</sub>) is itself and it is not (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>). The puzzle of nothingness would be an unsolvable aporia if we didn't consider its two moments. Instead – according to Severino – nothingness is and is not a positive determination at the same time but *in different respects*: nothingness is a positive determination *as* (Nothing-

33 «[...] when we affirm that the positing of not-being attests to the being of not-being, we cannot be seeking to affirm that “nothing”, as such, means “being”; but, rather, that “nothing”, which is meaningful as nothing, is. The presenting itself of nothing does not attest to the fact that “nothing” means “being”; but that “nothing”, meaningful as nothing, is. And, on the other hand, this “being” of nothing is not meaningful as “not-being”; but, being meaningful as being, is the being of nothing (which is meaningful as nothing). The contradiction of not-being-that-is, therefore, is not internal to the meaning “nothing” (or to the meaning “being”, which is the being of nothing); but lies between the meaning “nothing” and being, or the positivity of this meaning. The positivity of meaningfulness, in other words, is in contradiction with the very content of the meaningfulness, which is precisely meaningful as absolute negativity» (See p. 14 above)

ness<sub>-p</sub>), whereas nothingness is not a positive determination *as* (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>). The two-moments structure of nothingness is surely self-contradictory in Severino's ontology; yet – as I recalled – the contradiction “externally” holds between the two moments and it does not “internally” occur in each moment: «I due lati o momenti di questa autocontraddittorietà (il negativo e il positivo) sono incontraddittori: il nulla è nulla e il positivo è positivo» (1981, p. 217)<sup>34</sup>.

The difference between the meaning ‘nothingness’ and other meanings is granted by the fact that the two-moments structure of the other meanings does not imply a contradiction between the two moments (nor – certainly – an “internal” contradiction in each moment). Indeed, a positive determination, as – say – a table, does not imply a contradiction between its positivity (the fact that the table exists) and its essence.

At this point, the reader can understand why I included Severino's account of nothingness amongst the “hybrid” accounts. Indeed, Severino seems to use ‘nothingness’ as *both* a singular term that denotes something, i.e., (Nothingness<sub>-p</sub>); *and* a negative quantifier phrase, the negation of unrestrictedly all things, i.e., (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>).

Given the two-moments structure of nothingness, (i) and (ii) are not controversial anymore because they should be read as follows:

(iii) Nothingness is posited (or thought) in virtue of (Nothingness<sub>-p</sub>); that determination is the absolute negation of everything in virtue of (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>). Nothingness holds as the opposite of being in virtue of (Nothingness<sub>-p</sub>); nothingness is truly what absolutely is not in virtue of (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>).

To this end, Severino notes that the two moments are not two entities that were previously separated and then somehow “joined” in order to form the meaning ‘nothingness’. Rather, they are originally joined so that they cannot be thought as separated, although we can discern them by considering them different (“Hegelian”) moments<sup>35</sup>. Yet one could ob-

34 «The two sides or moments of the self-contradictory structure of nothingness (the positive moment and the negative moment) are internally consistent in themselves: nothingness is nothingness and the positive determination of nothingness is the positive determination of nothingness» (Translated by M. Simionato).

35 Although Severino inherits the notion of moment by Hegel's philosophy, he does not approach the question of nothingness as Hegel does: see Severino (1981), chapter IV.

ject that one of the two moments, namely (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>), could not be an entity, a positive determination, otherwise the aporia of nothingness surely would appear again (see §4).

Finally, Severino's strategy allows us to solve the aporia spelled out by means of (1) – (6). Indeed, by means of the two-moments structure, we can rephrase premise (2) and (4) in terms of (2\*) and (4\*), without ruling out our intuition of nothingness as absolutely negative: nothingness is positive and so it appears in virtue of (Nothingness<sub>-p</sub>), whereas it is absolutely negative in virtue of (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>):

- (1) Everything that exists is positive [assumed]
- (2\*) (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>) is not positive [assumed]
- (3) For all  $x$ , if  $x$  appears, then  $x$  is positive [assumed]
- (4\*) (Nothingness<sub>-p</sub>) appears (for example, it appears as what is beyond the totality of positive)

Therefore

- (5\*) (Nothingness<sub>-p</sub>) is positive [by (3), (4\*)]
- (6\*) (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>) is not positive and (Nothingness<sub>-p</sub>) is positive [by conjunction of (2\*) and (5\*)]

where the conclusion is no longer a contradiction.

Severino (1981) examines a fundamental objection to his strategy: since (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>) is the absolute negation of unrestrictedly everything, how can it be a (“Hegelian”) moment? Indeed, a moment is broadly speaking an entity, it is an aspect of a semantic structure, it is somehow a determination. In other words, (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>) as the absence of all entities is afflicted by the same contradiction in Priest's **nothing** (see §1) because it is and it is not something; but – unlike Priest – Severino does not admit contradictory objects in his own ontology therefore he cannot count (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>) among entities. Severino's reply is based on the fact that the two moments cannot be separated, as I pointed out before. To this end, Severino uses an abstract/concrete distinction that we can call – following Lewis' (1986) phrase – “the way of abstraction”. To be more precise, Severino's way is based on Hegel's and the Italian Neoidealists' distinction between abstract and concrete. As Lewis (1986) notes, according to the Way of Abstraction, “abstract entities are abstractions

from concrete entities. They result from somehow subtracting specificity, so that an incomplete description of the original concrete entity would be a complete description of the abstraction” (pp. 84–85). If we apply this schema to the Hegelian use of “moment”, we get the following: each moment of a (semantic) structure is an abstraction from the concrete entity to which they belong (certainly, we should not read ‘concrete’ and ‘abstract’ as we usually do; for example, by means of a spatiotemporally or causal account of concreteness). Besides – I suppose – concreteness and abstractness are features of our thoughts and not just simple features of the objects we think about. In this way, we are *concretely* thinking of a moment of a structure only if we are thinking of it *as related to the other moment of its own structure (and to the structure itself)*. In the case of nothingness, (Nothingness<sub>-p</sub>) and (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>) are two abstractions of the concrete structure since each is an incomplete description of nothingness, for the latter is a positive determination, namely (Nothingness<sub>-p</sub>), that is the absence of every determination, namely (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>).

Given that, we have two options: either thinking of each moment as related to its own structure and to the other moment; or thinking of each moment as separated from the other one and from the structure itself. Severino calls the first way of thinking: *concrete thought of the abstract moment* («pensiero concreto dell’astratto»); the second way is called: *abstract thought of the abstract moment* («pensiero astratto dell’astratto»)<sup>36</sup>. According to Severino, if we employ such a distinction, we can avoid the above-mentioned objection:

È chiaro che anche in questo caso l’aporia sorge perché il nulla-momento è astrattamente concepito come irrelato al suo essere, al suo positivo significare. In quanto la distinzione dei momenti viene intesa come la loro astratta separazione, certamente il nulla, come negatività assoluta, non può nemmeno valere come momento di una concretezza semantica. Si dovrà dunque dire che l’assoluta negatività può distinguersi dal suo positivo significare, e valere come momento semantico, proprio in quanto la stessa positività di questo valere come momento è l’altro momento [...] e cioè [...] appartiene alla struttura dello stesso positivo significare dell’assoluto negativo, col quale significare il negativo deve essere tenuto in re-

36 Kneipe also translates «concrete concept of the abstract» and «abstract concept of the abstract», respectively.

lazione affinché il concetto concreto non divenga concetto astratto dell'astratto. (Severino 1981, pp. 221-22)<sup>37</sup>

In other words, we are not really quantifying over (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>); we just need to quantify over (Nothingness<sub>-P</sub>). The positivity of (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>), its being somehow an entity, is in fact the positivity of (Nothingness<sub>-P</sub>) as we expected. The aporia would arise if one considered (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>) without relating it to (Nothingness<sub>-P</sub>); in this way, the positivity of (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>) would be puzzling because we should quantify over (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>) *before* thinking about it as a positive determination. Instead, we quantify *just* over (Nothingness<sub>-P</sub>): any positivity one attributes to (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>) is *de facto* the positivity of (Nothingness<sub>-P</sub>). So (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>) – one of the abstract moments of nothingness – can be intentioned either by means of an abstract thought («pensiero astratto dell'astratto») or by means of a concrete thought («pensiero concreto dell'astratto»). In the first case, the aporia appears again and it produces a *regressus* or *progressus in indefinitum* (since (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>) should be treated as a two-moments structure – say: (Nothingness<sub>-N'</sub>) and (Nothingness<sub>-P</sub>); but (Nothingness<sub>-N'</sub>) would be aporetic as well as (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>); therefore, one should introduce another two-moments structure, *et sic in infinitum*). In the second case, the aporia does not appear at all since we can quantify over (Nothingness<sub>-P</sub>) in order to refer to (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>), given that the latter is not separated by the former.

Anyway, it is not clear which kind of relation holds between (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>) and (Nothingness<sub>-P</sub>) if (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>) does not exist at all; Severino would reply that such a question presupposes a mistaken sepa-

37 «It is clear that in this case too the aporia emerges because nothingness-as-moment is abstractly conceived as unrelated to its being, to its positive meaningfulness. Insofar as the distinction between the different moments is understood as their abstract separation, nothingness, as absolute negativity, certainly cannot rank as a moment of semantic concreteness. It must thus be stated that absolute negativity can be distinguished from its positive meaningfulness, and rank as semantic moment, precisely insofar as the very positivity of its ranking as a moment is the other moment [...] in other words [...] it belongs to the structure of this positive meaningfulness of the absolute negative; and the negative must be held in relation to this meaningfulness, so that the concrete concept will not become the abstract concept of the abstract» (See p. 20 above).

ration between the two moments as well as any aporia of nothingness. Yet I am not fully convinced of that reply. Severino's solution seems to be afflicted by a vicious circularity: in order to avoid the aporia of (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>), he assumes the two-moments structure of nothingness, where (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>) is already "at work". Besides, it is not clear what the belonging of (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>) to (Nothingness<sub>-p</sub>) («the other moment belongs to the same structure one needs to use to understand the positivity of the absolute nothingness») means. I am going to deal with these issues in the next sections.

#### 4. Standard criticism about Severino's account of nothingness

The account of nothingness by Severino (1981) and his solution of the relevant aporia have been criticized by several Italian scholars (see below for some references)<sup>38</sup>. In this section I propose a four-part classification of those criticism and objections, notwithstanding my proposal does not claim to exhaust the riches and complexity of each particular objection. Furthermore, the philosophical lexicon I am going to use to introduce those objections is consistent with the lexicon I use throughout this work, but the Italian scholars might have used different phrases. Although these differences might generate misunderstanding – and I am the only one responsible for that – I hope my four-part classification can shed light on the common-ground shared by the objections against Severino's approach to the question of nothingness.

##### Objection from indiscernibility

(OI) There is no way of discerning (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>) from (Nothingness<sub>-p</sub>).

As far as I know, this is the most frequent objection against Severino's account of nothingness in the philosophical "market" (see for example

38 I think it is very difficult to criticize Severino's account of nothingness without undermining his solution of the related aporia, and *viceversa*. Therefore, I assume that an objection against his solution counts as an objection against his account of nothingness, and *viceversa*.

Bacchin 1984; Sasso 1987; Sasso 2011; Donà 2008; Visentin 2011; Simionato 2011). Intuitively, the two moments of nothingness seem to have precisely the *same* conceptual content: the absence of all things. Therefore – the objection continues – we cannot hold that there are *two* moments. So, Severino’s twofold account of nothingness fails. In reply to (OI), I think Severino would say that one can secure the discernibility between (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>) and (Nothingness<sub>-p</sub>) based on the discernibility between *essence* and *existence* (see above). Such a distinction (which is not a separation - as we have seen) works for any entity or determination: we can always distinguish the fact that *x* (transcendentally) exists, i.e., the fact that *x* is self-identical (see above), from the fact that *x* is *that* particular determination, e.g., a table. In the case of nothingness, we can still distinguish between its essence and its existence. Indeed, the essence of nothingness is the global absence, i.e., *what* nothingness *is*, its “identity” – as to say; the existence of nothingness is the fact that nothingness is *self-identical*, i.e., nothingness is itself *and it is not another thing* (for example, nothingness is the global absence and it is not a table). It is important to note that Severino includes a *plurality* of (Nothingness<sub>-p</sub>) in his ontology (he speaks about «la ricchezza del positivo significare del nulla»<sup>39</sup>) because the essence of whatever non self-identical determination is the same as (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>). So, nothingness is one and many in different respects: a round-square item and a white-non-white item are two *different* positive determinations, but their content is the *same* absolute nothingness. However, the reader should note that such a plurality of (Nothingness<sub>-p</sub>) does not account for the difference of (Nothingness<sub>-p</sub>) from (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>). The fact that there are many (Nothingness<sub>-p</sub>) does not show how (Nothingness<sub>-p</sub>) can be different from (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>). Indeed, Severino would not reply to (OI) by appealing to the difference among those entities or positive determinations we recognize as (Nothingness<sub>-p</sub>). He would reply that (Nothingness<sub>-p</sub>) can be distinguished from (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>) *as well as* the existence of any entity can be distinguished from its own essence. Yet, the objection could continue by saying that Severino’s reply begs the question: his reply assumes that the discernibility between (Nothingness<sub>-p</sub>) and (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>) can be *understand* as a distinction between existence and essence, whereas the objec-

39 «The myriad aspects of the positive meaningfulness of nothingness» (translated by M. Simionato). See for example Severino (2011, 2013).



tion wonder if that discernibility (between (Nothingness<sub>-p</sub>) and (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>)) *obtains at all*.

## Objection from internal contradiction

(OC) (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>) is self-contradictory.

According to this criticism - (see for example: Bacchin 1984; Sasso 1987; Sasso 2011; Donà 2008; Visentin 2011; Simionato 2011) - (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>) is a self-contradictory item<sup>40</sup> because it is the global absence of unrestrictedly all things *and – at the same time –* it is *something* because it is exactly the absence of unrestrictedly all things. So – the objection concludes – (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>) is *internally* contradictory, *contra* what Severino affirms (see above), and the aporia of nothingness comes back in terms of the aporia of (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>). Severino (1981) is clearly aware of the objection (OC), as I recalled in §3, where I also recalled how Severino replied: he uses the *distinction* between (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>) and (Nothingness<sub>-p</sub>) to hold that *any* objectification<sup>41</sup> of (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>) should be ascribed to (Nothingness<sub>-p</sub>). As I noticed before, we *quantify over* (Nothingness<sub>-p</sub>), preserving (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>) from any objectification. However, I think Severino's reply is not enough to remove the objection (OC). Indeed, his reply is based on the possibility to discern (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>) from (Nothingness<sub>-p</sub>), but we have seen that such a discernibility is exposed to the objection (OI).

The objection of internal contradiction can also be rephrased as follows:

(OC\*) Nothingness is a self-contradictory fully real entity

In this case, what is at issue is the twofold structure of nothingness, rather than one of its moments. This objection is based on the fact that Severino uses a Hegelian approach (or what Lewis would call “the way of abstraction”) – see above. As Visentin (2011) showed, given that Severino's ac-

40 I use ‘item’ to refer to whatever determination, entity, object, meaning, concept, etc.

41 I use ‘objectification’ to mean the act of treating an item as an entity (i.e., an object broadly construed).

count of nothingness is a self-contradictory two-moments structure and given that such a structure is *concrete* (whereas their moments are both abstract),<sup>42</sup> nothingness turns out to be a contradictory object of reality for, somehow, concreteness and reality *convertuntur*<sup>43</sup>. Yet, such a conclusion should not find a place in Severino's ontology for he does not admit any contradictory entity or impossible entity<sup>44</sup>. Of course, Severino would reply that (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>) and (Nothingness<sub>-p</sub>) are not "internally" self-contradictory since the contradiction of nothingness just "externally" holds between the two non-contradictory moments. Yet, the *whole* two-moments structure of nothingness is self-contradictory, as Severino affirms; and such a structure is *concrete*, therefore it is *fully real* as a determination (it is not the object of an incomplete description)<sup>45</sup>.

42 He uses 'abstract' and 'concrete' in the same way I recalled in §3.

43 «Si tratta insomma di approfondire la concreta struttura di questo porre [cioè del porre l'autocontraddizione del nulla, author's note] (che, proprio in quanto concreta, tuttavia, non può essere, come invece ritiene possa essere Severino, autocontraddittoria). Pertanto, se la domanda di partenza fosse quella che consiste nel chiedersi che cosa realmente (concretamente) pensa chi si contraddice, essa dovrebbe essere interpretata nel senso non di attribuire una realtà alla contraddizione o al pensiero che si contraddice, ma in quello di chiedere a che cosa effettivamente corrisponda quella posizione, posto che essa non può corrispondere a ciò cui sembra corrispondere, ovvero ad un contraddirsi reale: se il pensiero si contraddicesse realmente, [...], visto che il pensiero è una realtà, la realtà sarebbe autocontraddittoria (almeno in quella sua individuazione che è rappresentata dal pensiero che si contraddice)» (Visentin 2011, p. 321). As far as I know, there is no English translation of Visentin (2011). I have translated the above excerpt as follows: «So, we should better understand the concrete structure of affirming [that nothingness is self-contradictory] (if this structure is concrete, then it can not be self-contradictory, unlike what is claimed by Severino). Therefore, if the original question was a matter of identifying what the object of a contradictory thought is, then such a question should be meant as a question of correspondence between our contradictory thought and the contradictory *concrete* [i.e., real] thing our thought refers to, rather than a question of whether that very contradictory thought is concrete or not. We should assume that a contradictory thought can not correspond to what it seems to correspond, i.e. a real self-contradictory thought. Indeed, if our thought was really [i.e., concretely] self-contradictory [...], then reality would be self-contradictory (at least the chunk of reality that consists in that self-contradictory thought), inasmuch our thoughts are real [i.e., concrete] entities» [emphasis added].

44 See, for example, Severino (1981, 1982).

45 Severino affirms that the concrete self-contradictory two-moments structure of nothingness exists (namely, it is something, it is a determination, it is a meaning,

## Objection from relation

(OR) The (putative) relation between (Nothingness-P) and (Nothingness-N) cannot hold because one of the two *relata*, i.e. (Nothingness-N), does not (transcendentally) exist at all.

According to this objection (see for example Sasso 1987; Stella 2014; Stella-Ianulardo 2018), if (Nothingness-N) is the (result of the) negation of unrestrictedly everything, i.e., the absence of all entities (or the global absence), then (Nothingness-N) cannot be anything at all. Therefore, it cannot even be the moment of nothingness which (Nothingness-P) is related to. I think that this objection is substantially reducible to the objection (OC): the reason why (Nothingness-N) cannot count as a *relatum* is the fact that (Nothingness-N) is internally contradictory, i.e., self-contradictory, whereas Severino can hold (Nothingness-N) as a *relatum* because he treats (Nothingness-N) as internally consistent (*viz.* self-identical). However, I think there is still something puzzling to be said about the relation between the two moments of nothingness. I mean the *nature* or *kind* of such a relation. Severino usually speaks about this relation in terms of – let me say – *content-container* relation: (Nothingness-N) would be the content of (Nothingness-P)<sup>46</sup>. Although a metaphorical residual is unavoidable within any language, it seems to me that the content-container kind of relation is quite obscure to account for the peculiar relation between the two moments of nothingness, also due to the issues about the (Nothingness-N) moment that I have already recalled. What does it mean that (Nothingness-N) is *the content of* (Nothingness-P)? So, I would add the following objection<sup>47</sup>:

and so on) only as negated by the Law of Non-contradiction (as he writes in Severino 1981, chapter IV). However, that is not a solution because Severino himself affirms that the Law of Non-contradiction must negate the concrete structure of nothingness. And, in order to negate it, such a structure must be somehow a determination, so the aporia appears again.

46 See, e.g., Severino 2013, p. 110: «[il] secondo momento [viz. il nulla-momento], ossia [...] [il] significato 'nulla' che è il contenuto di quel positivo significare» [«the second moment [viz. nothingness-as-moment], i.e., the meaning 'nothingness' that is the content of the related positive meaningfulness» (translated by M. Simionato).

47 The objection I am going to consider occurs in Simionato (2016), but I suppose it also occurs in other works by other authors.

(OR\*) There is no account of the relation between (Nothingness-N) and (Nothingness-P)

To be sure, Severino might reply that he has already provided an account of that relation. Indeed, the relation between the two moments of nothingness is some kind of an instantiation of the essence-existence distinction that we can apply to any determination (see §3). However, this account doesn't seem right to nothingness because it needs to assume that there is a *distinction* between (Nothingness-N) and (Nothingness-P), turning out to be exposed to the objection (OI). Neither the "way of abstraction" seems to be a good way to account for the relation between the two moments of nothingness. Indeed, the fact that (Nothingness-N) and (Nothingness-P) are two abstract moments (or two incomplete descriptions) of the concrete structure of nothingness does not shed light on the kind of relation between *the two* moments. At most, the relation between a concrete meaning and its own abstractions (its own incomplete description) can shed light on the kind of the relations between: (i) (Nothingness-N) and the concrete structure of nothingness; and (ii) (Nothingness-P) and the concrete structure of nothingness. But there isn't enough light on the kind of relation that holds between (Nothingness-N) and (Nothingness-N)<sup>48</sup>.

### Objection from the difference between discerning and separating

We have seen (§3) that the difference between *discerning* (or *distinguishing*) two items and *separating* two items is fundamental in Severino's approach to the question of nothingness, as well as in his solution of the related aporia (and in other key places of his works). Specifically, (Nothingness-N) can be discerned/distinguished from (Nothingness-P) (and *viceversa*), but they cannot be separated. Some philosophers (see for ex-

48 Neither we can appeal to a denoting relation, since the denoted item is nothing at all. Even if we appealed to a denoting relation, we should treat (Nothingness-P) as an empty term, something like Oliver-Smiley's 'Zilch'. That is not a promising way because the treatment of nothingness as an empty term is not able to solve the aporia of nothingness: see §2.

ample Bacchin 1984; Tarca 2001; Tarca 2013) point out that Severino does not explain the difference between *discerning* and *separating*:

(OD) There is no explanation about the difference between discerning and separating

Although it is clear that two separated items are also discernible, it is not likewise clear how two discernible items can be acknowledged as such if they are not somehow separated.

Despite all these objections against Severino's approach to nothingness, I think his account is still more promising than those we can find in the philosophical "market"<sup>49</sup>. In the second part of this work, I shall propose a way to rephrase Severino's account of nothingness that might solve some of these objections. Quite surprisingly, a refresh of Severino's account might come exactly from the approach that Severino (1981, chapter IV) definitively rejected: the so-called "apophaticism".

<sup>49</sup> In fact, his account does not have to reject the Law of non-contradiction; it does not have to admit impossible or non-existent or contradictory objects; and it provides an explanation for the intuitive idea of nothingness as the global absence.

## Part II. From the twofold structure of nothingness to the twofold structure of the “apophatic” nothingness

### 5. The “apophatic” nothingness

Severino clearly highlights that the aporia of nothingness is the aporia of the *nihil absolutum*, i.e., the outcome of the *absolute* negation of *unrestrictedly* everything. Therefore, who wants really speaking about nothingness would miss the target if one spoke in terms of a “mystic” entity, or something that one could not conceptually grasp in any way, or something that defied any expression, and so on. Indeed, if the notion of *nihil absolutum* is construed by negating *unrestrictedly* everything, then the domain of such a negation includes *any* entity, no matter how different, strange and immensely distant: «Heidegger – like Schopenhauer before him, and later Sartre and others – inappropriately employs the word “nothing” to describe *a certain* dimension of the positive which, certainly, *is not* a certain other dimension, but is not the *nihil absolutum*» (Severino 1981, p. 228, translated by S. Kneipe, see p.26 above). Let us call the nothingness that is not the *nihil absolutum*, because it is a certain other positive determination: ‘apophatic nothingness’. In other words, if we assume (like Severino seems to do) that  $\langle x \text{ exists} \rangle$  (in a transcendental sense: being a thing, a positive determination) and  $\langle x \text{ is self-identical} \rangle$  are logically equivalent (see above §3), then the positivity of the apophatic nothingness makes it *something*, rather than absolutely nothing. Of course, one could rise the same objection against the *nihil absolutum*, but Severino would reply that it is exactly the aporia of nothingness he dispels by means of his two-moments structure of nothingness. Yet, the objector might continue by asking why we should prefer the *nihil absolutum* instead of the apophatic nothingness. Again, the reply has already appeared: within the *content* of the apophatic nothingness there still is a certain positivity, whereas the *nihil absolutum* is the absence of unrestrictedly all positivity. Although both the apophatic nothingness and the *nihil absolutum* are positive determinations, the content of the latter is (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>), whilst the content of the former is something («a certain dimension of the positive»). Furthermore, whilst the structure of the *nihil*

*absolutum* is (externally) contradictory<sup>50</sup> because the content of it *contradicts* the positivity of it ((Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>) contradicts (Nothingness<sub>-P</sub>)), within the structure of the apophatic nothingness does not occur a similar contradiction because the content of the apophatic nothingness is a certain positive entity (an example might be God conceived as infinitely distant).

The idea of apophatic nothingness pervades the history of philosophy alongside the idea of the *nihil absolutum* (see Givone 1995). Probably, its theoretical roots are in Plato's idea of «Good beyond being» («epekeina tēs ousias», *Republic* VI, 509b8–10), and consequently in the Neoplatonic tradition. Although the apophaticism established itself within a theological context, its use of notions such as *ineffability*, *inexpressibility*, *unsayability*, *unspeakability*, *unthinkability*, and the like, makes the apophatic approach suitable for the question of nothingness in so far as the *nihil absolutum* is precisely inexpressible, unsayable, unthinkable, etc. *par excellence*, since (at least) Parmenides' poem<sup>51</sup>. Furthermore, the idea of nothingness as *apophatic* nothingness seems to be afflicted by the same aporia of nothingness as *nihil absolutum*, precisely because they both are conceived as *ineffable*:

Mystics and mystically minded philosophers have often claimed that God, the Godhead, nirvana, the Dao or some other object of

50 About the difference between the external and internal contradiction of nothingness, see §3.

51 For example, we can consider Gab (2020)'s definition of apophaticism: «Apophaticism is the claim that *we can neither grasp God in conceptual thought nor express him in language. God is inconceivable and ineffable*. He transcends our cognitive capacities and our concepts cannot be meaningfully applied to him. This is more than just believing that there are a lot of things we don't know about God – you can admit that you don't know a lot of things about God, and still believe that these things are in principle conceivable; you just happen to not know them. Apophatics believe, rather, that since God transcends our epistemic capabilities, we are unable to even conceive or understand certain facts about him. *We don't know, because we don't understand what it is we don't know*. Apophaticism has a long tradition which extends well back into antiquity and encompasses a multitude of Western and Eastern thinkers (not all of them theists). Among others, Plotinus, Proclus, and Pseudo-Dionysius held apophatic positions, as well as Cusanus, Maimonides, Al-Arabi, Nagarjuna, Laozi, or Zhuangzi» (2020, p.191, emphasis added). One might replace 'God' with 'nothingness' to recognize that there is a common ground.

mystical experience is ineffable, that it cannot be described or put into words. This claim is so deeply connected to virtually all kinds of mysticism that William James declared ineffability to be the first of four essential properties of mystical experience. But there is a problem about the statement that God or any other object of mystical experience is ineffable: how can I meaningfully say about something that it is ineffable? For if it were ineffable, I could not say anything about it, not even that it is ineffable. And vice versa, if I can say about it that it is ineffable, there is at least one thing I can say about it – namely, that it is ineffable – and then it cannot be ineffable. It seems as if any proposition of the form ‘X is ineffable’ (I shall call this the ineffability thesis) is paradoxical. [...] we ought to find a way to resolve this paradox. Is it possible to say that something is ineffable without contradicting oneself? Or is any such utterance analytically false, simply because of the meaning of the term ‘ineffable’? (Gab 2017, p. 289)

Not for chance, some philosophers, e.g., Ho (2006), acknowledge that the paradox of ineffability deals with the idea of the absolute nothingness, as well as God or other ideas (see. 2006, pp. 410-411). It seems quite plausible to affirm that nothingness is ineffable. Therefore, it seems likewise plausible to say that nothingness is undermined by the paradox of ineffability. Indeed, as Severino highlights, «It is precisely because ‘nothing[ness]’ means ‘the absence of all meaning’ [author’s note: the absence of all things or entities] that Parmenides affirms the *unknowability* and *inexpressibility* of nothingness» (Severino 2013, translated by S.Kneipe, see pp. 33-34 above, emphasis added). In the next section I will briefly recall the paradox of ineffability and the solution that Ho has proposed in his works (2006; 2016). The move from the aporia of nothingness to the paradox of ineffability allows me to adjust Severino’s account of nothingness. That means revamping the apophatic way that Severino rejected, by leveraging the fact that both the apophatic nothingness and the *nihil absolutum* share the same ineffability. Hence, following this line of thought, the apophatic nothingness is not merely «a certain other positive» – as Severino would say. Rather, the apophatic nothingness is the absolute nothingness *conceived as ineffable*.

At this point, it is crucial to understand which sense of ineffability I will use in the rest of this work (unless otherwise indicated). Intuitively, we can say that something is ineffable if it defies any expression in a lan-



guage or it cannot be grasped by any concept. That is a general definition that needs to be fine-tuned. First, we need to distinguish between what is *essentially* or *in principle* ineffable from what is merely *in practice* ineffable (see Bennet-Hunter 2014, part I.1). A similar distinction occurs within Shaw (2013)'s account of ineffability, which I appeal to:

*A concept or a proposition is ineffable in [a language] L if there is no expression of L which expresses that concept or proposition. Naturally, I am not offering this definition as a way of clarifying the expression relation – the relation which holds, say, between a given word and the concept it expresses. Rather, I am taking that notion for granted in giving the definition, and grant that in appealing to this intuitive notion my definition may inherit some unclear applications. This is acceptable for my purposes as long as we can pick out some clear cases of expressive limitation. [...] A conceptual ineffability in L is the ineffability of a concept in L (2013, pp. 65-67)*

I will adopt the same approach of Shaw, i.e., taking the notion of expression for granted, since the question of what expression is would be out of the scope of my paper. Shaw (2013) continues:

Call any interpreted language  $L^*$  an extension of a language  $L$  if it has at least the conceptual resources of  $L$ : any concept  $c$  expressible in  $L$  is also expressible in  $L^*$ . Then the following definitions track an important sense in which an ineffability can be avoided.

An ineffability in  $L$  is *removable* if it is absent from an extension of  $L$ .

An ineffability in  $L$  is *essential* if it is present in all extensions of  $L$  (2013, p. 67)

In the light of these distinctions, I assume that the ineffability of the absolute nothingness is an *essential* ineffability. Indeed, if the ineffability of the *nihil absolutum* was *removable*, then one would not deal with the *nihil absolutum*, but with something that has a positive content that someone might express by means of a more expressive language or a more powerful conceptual apparatus<sup>52</sup>.

52 However, the fact that the absolute nothingness is an essential ineffability, rather than a removable ineffability, is not an undisputed fact: see §9.

## 6. From the aporia of nothingness to the paradox of ineffability: the solution by Ho

Saying or thinking that something is ineffable, i.e., unsayable or unthinkable, seems to generate a paradox – at least *prima facie*. The paradox of ineffability can be spelled out as follows:

P1: X is unspeakable.

P2: The statement «X is unspeakable» is true. (From P1)

P3: X is speakable by the predicate word ‘unspeakable’ (From P2)

P4: The statement «X is unspeakable» is not true. (From P3)

Therefore, the statement «X is unspeakable» is both true and not true. (From P2 and P4)

(Ho, 2016, p. 69)

If we replace ‘X’ with ‘nothingness’, we have something very similar to the aporia of nothingness (besides, I think we can reshape a similar argument in terms of unthinkability or inexpressibility).

The aim of this section is to recall Ho (2006)’s solution to the paradox of ineffability<sup>53</sup> to show some relevant similarities with Severino’s solution to the aporia of nothingness. (As far as I know, Ho developed his own solution without knowing Severino’s work – and *viceversa*. That makes the matter more interesting, I guess).

First, Ho assumes that the relation between a predicate and an object can occur in two ways: the relation of *saying* and the relation of *imposition*. Given a word *w*, a concept *c* expressed by *w*, and an object *o* which the concept *c* is applied to, the relation of saying holds between the word *w* and the concept *c*; the relation of imposition holds between the concept *c* and the object *o*<sup>54</sup>. This is what happens in ordinary cases, when the object *o* is “accessible” to our conceptual apparatus. But if one says

53 The solution by Ho consists in a development of some thesis by the fifth-century Indian grammarian-philosopher Bhart hari (see Ho, 2006).

54 Commenting this account of predication, Gab (2020) proposes the following example: «If [...] I say that chocolate is tasty, I (1) *say* that the concept of tastiness applies to chocolate and (2) thereby *impose* the property of being tasty on the piece of chocolate I am talking about. In ordinary cases like these, according to Ho, the sentence expresses that chocolate is tasty» (2020, p. 297, emphasis added).

that an object *o* is ineffable (*viz.* *o* defies any expression and conceptual grasp), then the relation of imposition does not truly hold because the word *w* ('ineffable') that expresses the concept *c* (the concept of ineffability) cannot be *imposed* on the ineffable object *o* in so far as the object *o* defies any expression.

The second step of Ho's solution consists in introducing the notion of *superimposition*:

The notion of superimposition comes to our aid when the semantic object of a word stands *apart* from its referent. In Bhart hari the notion means that a word correlated conceptual item (as the semantic object of a word) is intentionally placed (as the object meant as such) upon the thing (as the object to be meant) that one intends to refer to by the word concerned. Given the intentional, but not actual, closeness between this conceptual item and the thing, we may say that the item *presents* the thing as such and such; for example, unsayability *presents* the thing in question as unsayable. *The superimposition has the function of revealing, as it indirectly makes known the thing such that one knows the latter to be, say, ineffable. But it simultaneously performs the function of concealing, for it covers up the real form of the thing.* So, we need to negate what is imposed, taking it as just an imposition, whereas some dim, residual apprehension of the thing survives the negation. The point, then, is that *the imposition and its negation must go hand in hand: they are but two phases of the same event.* In the use of the word "unsayable" we become aware of the unsayable through the imposition on it of unsayability and the negation of this imposition. Without the imposition nothing about the unsayable would be intimated; without the negation the unsayable would erroneously become sayable. With the imposition the unsayability "of" the unsayable is comprehended; with the negation the unsayable is not taken as bearing such unsayability as meant by the word. This, let's say, *imposition-cum-negation* method is involved in the functioning of indication as construed here (2006, p. 415, some emphasis added).

The ineffable thing is sayable in so far as we *superimpose* the concept of unsayability on the ineffable object, but such an act does not make that object sayable, because the word 'unsayable', expressing the concept of unsayability, does not express what the ineffable object is. Rather, that word *says* only the unsayability of the ineffable object. That means that the superimposition «simultaneously performs the function of conceal-

ing» the ineffable object, precisely because what we are speaking about is not the ineffable object itself, but the unsayability of it:

Significantly, this unsayability is not an intrinsic feature or property of X [i.e., the ineffable object]. It is only provisionally conceived and does not really inhere in X. Yet, by being superimposed on X, it makes known that X is unsayable. (2016, p. 74).

Since the unsayability is not an intrinsic property of the ineffable object, then we need at the same time negate it. Saying that the ineffable object is unsayable allows us to acknowledge that there is such an object, although we are not experiencing it by words or concepts. So, how we are experiencing it? Below the last step of Ho's solution:

Can we say the unsayable? The answer is yes if by "say" we actually mean "indicate" or some other nondescriptive expressive mode. This, however, simply affirms that one can non-contradictorily gesture toward the ineffable. Indicatively or otherwise, the ineffable in itself remains beyond the reach of words (2006, p. 421).

As Gab (2020) notices about Ho's solution, «the ineffable God cannot be said, but can only be indicated» (p. 298). The same can be stated about another ineffable object, like the absolute nothingness (and Ho exactly accepts this extension: see 2006, p. 416). Ho can affirm this thesis because he assumes that there are expressive modes that do not need the use of words (or concepts), such as – exactly – *indication* or *gesturing toward*. The indication construed as an expressive device is to be understood as an *indirect mode of expression*. That means that we don't experience the ineffable "face to face". That's why the (super)imposition is at the same time a negation (*imposition-cum-negation*): the words and concepts we employ to speak about the ineffable are not properly and directly describing the ineffable, so they need to be negated. But at the same time those words and concepts are the *indirect* way to acknowledge the ineffable:

As far as I can tell, when an Eastern ineffabilist asserts that a certain item X is ineffable, he or she is mostly denying any conformity between words and X, but not X' s indirect expressibility too. [...] The words used are provisional, indirectly expressive, and to be negated if one takes them to represent the unspeakable as it is (Ho 2016, p. 73).

We can compare Ho's solution to the paradox of ineffability with Severino's solution to the aporia of nothingness, assuming that nothingness is the ineffable *par excellence* (as I noticed before). First, we can recognize a similarity between the *imposition-cum-negation* method by Ho and the twofold-structure of nothingness developed by Severino. The (*super*)*imposition* allows us to have some awareness of the (ineffable) *nihil absolutum*, as well as the "moment" (Nothingness<sub>-p</sub>) allows us to have some awareness of the absolute nothingness; the *negation* of that (*super*)*imposition* preserves us from making the ineffable something effable, as well as the "moment" (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>) preserves us from making nothingness an entity. Second, the imposition-cum-negation seems to be a contradictory act, as well as Severino's two-moments structure of nothingness is a contradictory structure. Using Ho's method, one (*super*)*imposes* the concept of unsayability (expressed by the word 'unsayable') on the ineffable, but simultaneously one revokes it, by negating such an imposition. Indeed, the imposition allows us to acknowledge that we cannot say anything about the ineffable, whilst the negation of that imposition prevents us from *describing* the ineffable: the ineffable *in itself* is neither unsayable, nor unthinkable because we cannot say *anything* about it (the unsayability is not a feature or an intrinsic property of the ineffable in itself: see above). Yet, the contradictory act, represented by the imposition-cum-negation, is not self-refuting: the imposition is the imposition, the negation of the imposition is the negation of the imposition<sup>55</sup>. Similarly, according to Severino's approach, there is a contradiction between the moment (Nothingness<sub>-p</sub>) and the moment (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>), but this contradiction does not undermine the *internal consistency* of each moment: (Nothingness<sub>-p</sub>) is (Nothingness<sub>-p</sub>), (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>) is (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>). Furthermore, just like in Ho's approach the ineffable *in itself* is not even unsayable (or unspeakable, unthinkable, etc.), in Severino's approach the *nullity* of nothingness, i.e., (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>), is not even nothingness or "empty" or "non-being" (see Severino, 2011b).

55 «[...] The ineffability thesis [...] when properly understood as I believe is the case with at least some ineffabilists, implies no self-contradiction. According to the thesis, some transcendental reality or experience cannot be expressed as it truly is by words. Our discussion reveals that the formulation of the thesis or any reference to the ineffable can be made consistently through the expressive mode of indication construed as involving the imposition-cum-negation method» (Ho, 2016, p. 421).

Both the imposition-cum-negation method employed by Ho, and the two-moments structure used by Severino allow us to speak about nothingness avoiding the aporetic outcome. But the account developed by Ho focuses on *indirect expressibility*. To be sure, also the two-moments structure of nothingness proposed by Severino seems to include a sort of indirect expressibility, insofar as *any* feature or property of nothingness – its nullity, its ineffability, its unspeakability and unthinkability, etc. – belong to the positive moment (Nothingness<sub>-p</sub>). Therefore, we may say that we cannot *directly* express the concept of nothingness as (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>), but we can only *indirectly* express it *by means* of (Nothingness<sub>-p</sub>). According to Severino, this situation is not a limit of our conceptual apparatus. Rather, it is precisely what we need to expect, since (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>) is not isolated or separated from (Nothingness<sub>-p</sub>). However, the fact that Severino seems to admit the possibility of an indirect expressibility of nothingness does not imply that he would acknowledge the *indication* (or *gesture toward*) as a right way to refer to nothingness. So, even if Severino’s account of nothingness represented an indirect expressibility mode, that account would not give rise to those kinds of expression which Ho deals with (*indication* or *gesture toward*).

## 7. The twofold structure of the apophatic nothingness

In the previous sections (§§5-6) I supposed that the aporia of nothingness and the account by Severino (1981) might be rephrased within the “apophaticism”, therefore in terms of ineffability. In doing so, in §6 I pointed out a relevant affinity between the method of *imposition-cum-negation* by Ho and the twofold account of nothingness by Severino. Ho’s account opens up modes of indirect expressibility of nothingness such as indication or gesture toward (or other non-conceptual and non-linguistic kinds of expression), whilst Severino’s account does not appeal to those modes.<sup>56</sup> Yet, Severino also seems to appeal to a form of indirect expressibility: the nullity of nothingness, i.e. (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>), cannot be directly expressed, because any time we try to express the nullity of noth-

56 As far as I know, Severino does not appeal to modes of expression such as gesturing or other *non-conceptual* devices in his philosophical arguments, but he surely opens his arguments up to *non-linguistic* dimension (see Severino, 1992).

ingness, we directly refer to (Nothingness<sub>p</sub>). Therefore, both accounts seem to include the idea that nothingness as such (the nullity of nothingness) can be *only indirectly expressed*. As things stand, what is at stake is the fact that Severino does not account for the *indirect* relation between our capabilities of expression and the nullity of nothingness because he does not appeal to those non-conceptual or non-linguistic mode, such as indication or gesture toward, which Ho deals with. However, I think we can underpin Severino's account without appealing to non-conceptual or non-linguistic modes of expression. In doing so, I am going to leverage a suggestion proposed by Kukla (2005) within the question of ineffability.

The explicit assumption of Kukla's approach to the notion of ineffability is a «broadly Tarskian perspective» (2005, p. 10):

[...] a language [is] [...] an abstract system of syntactic and semantic rules that delimits a class *C* of sentences that are either true or false, and I assume that the semantic rules of the language associate a truth-condition *X* to each sentence *S* in *C* such that *S* is true in the language if and only if the condition *X* is satisfied. For example, the truth-condition for "Snow is white" in English is snow's being white. [...] A state of affairs *X* is *ineffable in language L* if *X* fails to be a truth-condition for any sentence of *L* (2005, pp. 10-11, emphasis added).

Kukla's suggestion is very simple, but effective: hw supposes that there might be an *entailment* relation between the mystic insight of an *ineffable* fact and some *effable* consequences of such an insight<sup>57</sup>:

Does it make any sense to talk about the effable consequences of an ineffable insight? At least with respect to the lower and weaker grades of ineffability, it surely does. Consider the lowest grade of ineffability: inexpressibility in a given language. It's clearly possible to take a language *L*, remove from it all sorts of expressive devices until we get a fragment of *L* – call it *L'* – such that there are propositions

57 To be fair, Kukla speaks about the ineffability *of the insight* experienced by the mystic (see 2005, p.108, e.g., «ineffable mystic insight»); but he also classifies ineffabilities in terms of facts (see 2005, p. 23 ff.). However, what matters for the sake of my argument is the general idea (based on Kukla's suggestion) that an ineffable notion might entail effable consequences, as I am going to show.

in  $L$  which are (1) not expressible in  $L'$ , but which (2) have consequences that are expressible in  $L'$ . Here's a concrete example: let  $L'$  be obtained from  $L$  by excizing all ways of negating sentences, and let  $(P \vee Q) \& \neg P$  be a sentence of  $L$ . This sentence is ineffable in  $L'$ , but it has consequences (e.g.,  $Q$ ) that may very well be expressible in  $L'$ . Of course, this rationale depends on there being a more expressive language in which the ineffable fact can be stated. (2005, pp. 109-110)

So, I would assume the following principle:

(E) An ineffable fact (in a given language) might entail some effable consequences (in the same language)

where the effable consequences may range over concepts, propositions, and so on; and the entailment relation should be intended not like a mere material conditional, but rather as the general idea of a consequence, broadly construed. Indeed, regardless the example in the Kukla's quote above (if  $(P \vee Q) \& \neg P$ , then  $Q$  in  $L$ ), he also seems to use 'entailment' in a wider sense<sup>58</sup>. Furthermore, for the sake of this paper, I assume that (E) can be used independently of the acknowledgment of the ineffable fact as the content of a (putative) *mystic* insight<sup>59</sup>.

Now, I would rephrase (E) in the light of Shaw (2013)'s account of ineffable concepts (see §5). Therefore,

(E\*) An ineffable concept (in a given language) might entail some effable consequences (in the same language)<sup>60</sup>

58 See, e.g., 2005, p. 109, emphasis added: «On this account, the mystic's monism, her optimism, and her view that eternity is timeless are all *entailed* by her ineffable insight».

59 However, I would invite the reader to see Mattiazzi (2016) about possible link between Severino's works and mysticism (broadly speaking).

60 The notion of entailment occurring in (E\*), as well as in (E) and in the rest of this work (e.g., in (E\*\*)), should be read in a wider sense than the material conditional, as I underlined before. I would say that the consequence relation among concepts might be read in a loose way, as well as A.W. Moore (1997, pp. 15-16) does (although in another context): «All I require is that there should be some non-trivial notion of consequence [...], for instance something that depends on a notion of supervenience».



Assuming that nothingness is an ineffable concept in our language, then we can affirm that (Nothingness-<sub>N</sub>) or the nullity of nothingness might entail some effable consequences in that language. Finally, I would propose to count (Nothingness-<sub>p</sub>) among the consequences of the ineffable (Nothingness-<sub>N</sub>). Therefore, given a language, we can claim that

(E\*\*) The *ineffable* moment (Nothingness-<sub>N</sub>) entails the *effable* moment (Nothingness-<sub>p</sub>)

where the moments are exactly the two moments that belong to the twofold concept of nothingness (i.e., the twofold structure of nothingness as in Severino's approach)<sup>61</sup>.

To sum up, my proposal mainly based on two tenets: (i) assuming Shaw (2013)'s account of ineffable concept (see §5), nothingness as such (the nullity of nothingness) is an ineffable conceptual moment; (ii) assuming Kukla (2005)'s suggestion, the *ineffable* moment of the concept of nothingness entails the *effable* moment of the concept of nothingness<sup>62</sup>. These assumptions allow us to underpin the account of nothingness by Severino. Indeed, adjusted with these assumptions, the twofold account of nothingness by Severino might be able to answer some, if not all, of the objections I recalled in §4, without appealing to non-conceptual indirect modes of expression (such as *indication* or *gesturing toward*). Let us call 'the twofold structure of the apophatic nothingness' the account of nothingness composed by:

61 In (E\*\*) the modal verb ('might') has been taken away. One could object it is not allowed to move from <it is possible that *p*> to <*p*>. However, I think we can overlook this issue. So much so that Kukla (2005)'s suggestion, represented by (E), is applied to historical facts of our *actual world*, e.g., some effable consequences coming from (putative) mystic insights of our world (see, e.g., 2005, p. 109).

62 I have already combined Kukla (2005)'s suggestion and the account of ineffable concept by Shaw (2013) in Simionato (2021) to propose a "modest" primitivist theory of truth, where the concept of truth is ineffable, whilst the so-called correspondence relation is the effable consequence of that ineffable concept of truth. Indeed, the question of nothingness and the question of truth might be closely related (they definitely are within Severino's ontology). Therefore, it is no coincidence that a similar account might be developed for both the concept of nothingness and the concept of truth.

- the *ineffable* conceptual moment (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>)
- the *effable* conceptual moment (Nothingness<sub>-P</sub>)
- the relation of *entailment* that holds between them<sup>63</sup>.

## 8. The twofold structure of the apophatic nothingness and the objections against Severino's account of nothingness

Let's come back to the objection about relation (see §4):

(OR\*) There is no account of the relation between (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>) and (Nothingness<sub>-P</sub>)

I think that the twofold structure of the apophatic nothingness can respond to the objection (OR\*). Indeed, it provides an account of the relation between the two moments insofar as they are involved in an *entailment relation*: (Nothingness<sub>-P</sub>) is entailed by (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>), i.e., (Nothingness<sub>-P</sub>) is a *consequence* of (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>).

The twofold structure of the apophatic nothingness could also address the objection of indiscernibility:

(OI) There is no way of discerning (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>) from (Nothingness<sub>-P</sub>).

Now, through the “improved” account of nothingness, each moment has a *distinctive feature* with respect to the other moment: (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>) is *ineffable*, whilst (Nothingness<sub>-P</sub>) is *effable* (in the same given language). So, within the same language, we can *express* the «myriad aspects of the positive meaningfulness of nothingness»<sup>64</sup> because these aspects

63 Recalling the threefold classification of the account of nothingness (see §1), I would say that the twofold structure of the apophatic nothingness is a hybrid account of nothingness as well as the original account by Severino (1981). Indeed, what makes these accounts hybrid is the use of ‘nothingness’ as *both* a singular term that denotes something, i.e., (Nothingness-P); *and* a negative quantifier phrase, the negation of unrestrictedly all things, i.e., (Nothingness-N).

64 «La ricchezza del positivo significare del nulla» (translated by M. Simionato; see for example Severino, 2011a; 2013)

are effable in that language; but they are different from the nullity of nothingness insofar as this nullity is ineffable in that language.

Once we get the discernibility of the two moments of (the apophatic) nothingness, I think we might reply to the objection of internal contradiction

(OC) (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>) is self-contradictory

by restating Severino's strategy (see §3), according to which we can affirm that both (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>) and (Nothingness<sub>-P</sub>) are *internally* consistent, whilst the contradiction *externally* holds between the two moments. As I noticed in §4, using the original account of nothingness by Severino, this kind of reply would be undermined by the indiscernibility of the two moments. But now that we can appeal to the discernibility of the two moments in terms of ineffability/effability, we can reintroduce Severino's solution to that objection. Furthermore, if the objection (OR) is substantially reducible to objection (OC) – as I argued in §4 –, then the reply to (OC) might be a reply to (OR) as well.

Let's now pass to the fourth kind of objection (see §4):

(OD) There is no explanation about the difference between *discerning* and *separating*

The twofold structure of apophatic nothingness can provide such an explanation. It is *in virtue of the entailment relation* between the ineffable moment and the effable moment of nothingness that we cannot separate one moment from the other moment. (Nothingness<sub>-P</sub>) cannot be separated from (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>) because the former is the (effable) *consequence* of the latter. Therefore, in reply to (OD), we can say that the sense of the separability of (Nothingness<sub>-P</sub>) from (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>) – or vice versa – is *different* from the sense of discernibility of the two moments because the separability ranges over an entailment relation, whilst the discernibility ranges over an ineffable or an effable concept. Recalling the objection (OD), the issue was to understand how two discernible items can be acknowledged as such if they are not somehow separated. Now we have a reply: the two items at stake are discernible because one is *ineffable* and the other is *effable*; at the same time, the two items cannot be separated because they are *related*, precisely occurring in a relation of entailment.

To sum up, when compared to the original twofold account of nothingness by Severino (see §3), the twofold structure of apophatic nothingness (see §7) seems more suitable to reply to: objections about relation (in the version (OR\*)); objection about indiscernibility; and objection about the difference between *discerning* and *separating*. The objection about internal contradiction in the version (OC) and the objection about relation in the version (OR) can be handled by the original strategy that Severino proposed in his work (1981) as long as one assumes the validity of the replies that the apophatic account of nothingness provides to the other kinds of objections. Instead, the question remains open about the objection (OC\*), as I am going to show in the next section (together with some other unsolved issues).

## 9. Some unsolved issues

To understand the issues concerning the objection:

(OC\*) Nothingness is a self-contradictory *fully real* entity,

we need to compare again the *imposition-cum-negation* strategy by Ho to the account of nothingness by Severino. As we have seen previously, according to Ho, the imposition and its negation are «two phases of the same event» (2006, p.415). In §6 I pointed out a similarity between the “internal” consistency of both imposition *as such* and its negation *as such* and the “internal” consistency of both (Nothingness<sub>p</sub>) and (Nothingness<sub>N</sub>), respectively. What is unclear is whether an “external” contradiction holds between the phase of imposition and the phase of negation. Indeed, within Severino’s account, an “external” contradiction holds between (Nothingness<sub>p</sub>) and (Nothingness<sub>N</sub>) and that is exactly why the objection (OC\*) occurs (see §4). If a similar “external” contradiction held between imposition and its negation, then the apophatic nothingness would be undermined by the objection (OC\*)<sup>65</sup>. However, within

65 We cannot even count the apophatic nothingness among putative “contradictory” or “impossible” items: as I noticed before – following a Ho’s suggestion –, if nothingness is absolutely unthinkable and unspeakable, i.e., *ineffable*, then we cannot describe it in any way because it defies *any* determination or description at all.

the twofold structure of apophatic nothingness that I proposed in §7, the two moments of nothingness occur in a relation of entailment: the ineffable (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>) entails the effable (Nothingness<sub>-P</sub>). Therefore, *prima facie*, there is no contradiction within the whole structure of the apophatic nothingness. Rather, there is a consequence relation. Yet, I would leave the question open of whether this entailment relation between an ineffable item and an effable item leads to a contradiction.

Another open question concerns the separability/inseparability of the two moments of nothingness. In the previous section, I argued that the twofold structure of apophatic nothingness allows us to explain why the effable (Nothingness<sub>-P</sub>) cannot be separated from the ineffable (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>). However, I am not sure that the twofold structure is able to explain the converse, i.e., why the ineffable (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>) cannot be separated from (Nothingness<sub>-P</sub>). Indeed, since (Nothingness<sub>-N</sub>) is not a consequence of another conceptual moment, one might keep it isolated. Again, I would leave this question open.

Let us now consider the ineffability from Kukla (2005)'s standpoint to better understand his suggestion that the (mystic) insight of an *ineffable* fact might entail some *effable* consequences. As we have seen, this suggestion plays an important role in my development of the twofold structure of apophatic nothingness. In this regard, I would point out that Kukla recognizes five «grades of ineffability» according to five different orders of a given language, based on five different “modal” notions - as to say. Indeed, Kukla accounts for (five) different ways of understanding the possibility/impossibility of expressing something in language (see 2005, pp. 23 ff., some emphasis added)<sup>66</sup>:

- 1) **Weak ineffability:** A fact is *weakly ineffable* if there is no sentence for it in one or more of the languages which some human beings actually speak, or have spoken, or will speak;
- 2) **Human ineffability:** A fact is *humanly ineffable* if there is no sentence for it in any language that it's *nomologically possible* for

66 In what follows, Kukla uses the notion of fact as *obtaining state of affairs* (see 2005, pp. 10-11).

human beings to use, regardless of whether that language is ever actually spoken by human beings;

- 3) **Nomological ineffability:** A fact is *nomologically ineffable* if there is no sentence for it in any language that any *nomologically possible being* can use;
- 4) **Weak logical ineffability:** A fact is weakly logically ineffable if it can't be expressed in any language that can be used by *any logically possible being*, regardless of whether there are sentences for it in some logically possible languages;
- 5) **Logical ineffability (*tout court*):** A fact is *logically ineffable (tout court)* if there is no sentence for it in *any logically possible language*.

As one can see, they are ordered by the lowest to the highest level of ineffability, and – as highlighted by Kukla – «each grade of ineffability entails all the lower grades» (2005, p.81), but not *viceversa*.

Assuming this taxonomy, what about the apophatic nothingness, i.e., the absolute nothingness conceived as ineffable? What is at stake is the grade of ineffability of the nullity of nothingness. If one assumes that Kukla's taxonomy can be applied to ineffable *concepts*, then one might wonder which grade of ineffability fits with the conceptual moment (Nothingness<sub>N</sub>). *Prima facie*, I think Severino would choose the 5<sup>th</sup> grade: logical ineffability *tout court*. Be that as it may, for the sake of this paper, I just need to point out that in Kukla's intention, the possible entailment between an ineffable notion (broadly speaking) and its effable consequences does not work in the case of the 4<sup>th</sup> and the 5<sup>th</sup> grades of ineffability<sup>67</sup>. Therefore, we have at least two options, if we maintain the twofold structure of the apophatic nothingness, including the entailment relation between the two moments of nothingness. The first consists in extending the above-mentioned entailment to logical ineffability, main-

67 «The rationale won't work for the highest grade of ineffability—inexpressibility in all logically possible languages. I concede that, for all I know, the idea of there being effable consequences of truths that *are* ineffable in this very strong sense may be incoherent. In fact, I concede that the idea of logical ineffability itself may be incoherent.» (2005, p.110).

taining that the nullity of nothingness is *logically* ineffable. Furthermore, this option would be more aligned to the idea of nothingness as *essential* ineffability (see §5). The second option consists in maintaining the limit posed by Kukla, reshaping the nullity of nothingness in terms of *nomological or human or weak* ineffability. However, this option would lead us to come round to the idea of nothingness as *essential* ineffability. Maybe we should reshape the nullity of nothingness in terms of *removable* ineffability. The question is still open, at least in my view.

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# Nothing in particular

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In this paper, I introduce and discuss a paradox that I call “subtraction paradox”. The subtraction paradox has the same basic structure as many other puzzles involving the notion of nothingness. Roughly, the structure is this: sometimes we presuppose, when we speak, that “nothing” (“nothingness”) denotes something; however, if so, the thing denoted by “nothing”, viz., nothing, cannot be nothing (for no thing is nothing). It may be tempting to think that the subtraction paradox ultimately depends on the fact that the notion of nothingness is especially problematic. In this paper, I draw doubt on this view, showing that essentially the same paradox can be formulated with no appeal to the notion of nothingness. In the Appendix, I suggest that the paradox ultimately depends on a principle connecting facts and truths and on the possibility of (impredicative) quantification over facts. I also suggest that the paradox is a fact-based version of standard antinomies such as Cantor’s paradox.

**Keywords:**

**Nothingness, absence, paradox, facts**

Consider our universe and suppose to gradually subtract all the things that populate it (see Baldwin 1996). Now let us assume that this subtraction process has come to an end and ask: what is the result? The following answer sounds clearly correct:

(1) The result of the subtraction process is nothing (understood as nothingness, i.e., the absence of everything)<sup>1</sup>.

However, (1) is problematic. For if the term “nothing” denotes something in (1), then it denotes a thing<sup>2</sup>. Hence, the result of the process of subtraction is a thing (the thing denoted by “nothing”), and so the result is not, strictly speaking, the absence of everything. Therefore, if “nothing” denotes something, then (1) is false. If, on the other hand, “nothing” is empty (non denoting), on a par with “the round square”, then it is not true that the result of the process is nothing, for the same reason that no process can result in the round square (if a process resulted in the round square, then the round square would be a thing, and so “the round square” would be nonempty). Either way, we must give up the intuition that (1) is true.

Let us call this problem the *subtraction paradox*. The subtraction paradox is one of the *paradoxes of nothing* – a family of arguments sharing the

- 1 The view that “nothing”, in its ‘nothingness’ reading, means the same as “the absence of everything” is both plausible and common (see, e.g., Severino 2013: 107, Priest 2014: 55, Costantini 2020). Such ‘nothingness’ reading contrasts with the standard, quantificational reading of “nothing” (see, e.g., Priest 2014: 55–56, Spolaore and Sgaravatti 2018 for discussion). To illustrate, if “nothing” is understood quantificationally in (1), then (1) is equivalent to the claim that the subtraction process yields no result. I assume that this is *not* the intended reading of (1).
- 2 Here I am using “thing” as a transcendental expression, viz., in such a way that everything (every object or entity we can refer to) counts as a thing; see, e.g., Spolaore and Lando 2014.

same fundamental structure. Roughly, the structure is this: in many cases we presuppose, when we speak, that “nothing” denotes something (i.e., that we speak of something when we speak of nothing); but, if nothing is something, then it is not nothing.

The aim of this note is to argue that, plausibly, the subtraction paradox does not depend specifically on the notion of nothing (absence of everything), in the sense that perfectly analogous paradoxes can be formulated by using different notions and by considering subtraction processes that do not yield a null result.

Let us start by observing that the subtraction paradox depends on the following two theses:

- (A) When we count the things that survive to the subtraction process, then nothing (assuming “nothing” is non-empty) is a thing that contributes to the total count. Thus, if the result of the subtraction process is nothing, then the number of the resulting things is at least 1.
- (B) If  $X$  is an empty term, then the sentence  $\lceil$ The result of the subtraction process is  $X$  $\rceil$  is not true.

Now, it is easy to prove that, if we accept (A) and (B), along with a very plausible assumption, we can formulate a paradox analogous to the subtraction paradox for each finite number of things that might result from the subtraction process. This is the plausible assumption:

- (C) If (A) is true, viz., if nothing (the absence of everything) contributes to the total count of things, then also *relative* absences, like the absence of bread or the absence of Abel, contribute to the total count of things.

Here is a possible proof. Let us choose any finite number of things and ask: is it possible to get a smaller number of things by subtracting some of those things? It appears that the answer is *yes*. However, if we accept (A), given plausible assumption (C), the answer must be *no*. Let us assume, for instance, that the universe includes just two things, Cain and Abel, and suppose that Abel is erased. In this scenario, the following statement sounds true:

(2) The result of the subtraction process is the absence of Abel.

However, by (A) and (C), the absence of Abel is a thing that contributes to the number of things resulting from the subtraction process. Thus, the number of these things is 2 (Cain and the absence of Abel), that is, exactly the number we started with. And it is clear that no subtraction process can lead to a smaller number. The alternative is to reject (A), and to suppose that “the absence of Abel” is an empty description. But if so, by (B), we must give up the intuition that (2) is true.

This version of the paradox makes no appeal to nothingness (the absence of everything) but it still involves the notion of absence. However, given another very plausible assumption, we can provide a version of the paradox involving no absence either. This time, the plausible assumption is that, if absences are things that contribute to the total count of things, then the same holds for *presences*, viz., for things like the presence of something, the presence of bread etc. Keeping this assumption in mind, let us come back to the previous scenario (the one in which Cain is the unique thing left) and consider the following statement:

(3) The result of the subtraction process is the presence of a unique thing.

In the relevant scenario, (3) rings (obviously) true. However, if “the presence of a unique thing” denotes a thing that contributes to the count of the things left, then the result of the process is the presence of *two* things (Cain and the presence of a unique thing), not just one. Thus, (3) is false. If, on the other hand, “the presence of a unique thing” is an empty description, then, by (B), we must still give up the intuition that (3) is true.

Plausibly, not all paradoxes of nothing depend on nothing in particular.

### **Appendix. Remarks on *Nothing in particular***

The guest editors for this Journal invited me to expand my note with some explanatory comments, and I am happy to comply.

In (2) and (3), the descriptions “the absence of Abel” and “the presence

of a unique object” can be replaced *salva significatione* with suitable that-clauses:

- (2') The result of the subtraction process is *that Abel is absent*.
- (3') The result of the subtraction process is *that a unique thing is present*.

In a similar vein, we can safely replace “nothing” in (1) with “that there isn't anything” (where “there isn't anything” receives a quantified reading, viz., it is equivalent to “it is not the case that there is something”):

- (1') The result of the subtraction process is that there isn't anything.

Now, *prima facie*, (1') looks less problematic than the original sentence (1). However, the impression is misleading, for at least two reasons. First, (1') still includes a definite description (“The result of the subtraction process”), and the subtraction paradox can be restated with reference to *that* description.<sup>3</sup> Second, many philosophers would agree that the clause “that there isn't anything” in (1') denotes a *fact* (or a true proposition). It is not by chance that (1') sounds like a mild variant of (1''):

- (1'') The result of the subtraction process is *the fact* that there isn't anything.

Assuming, plausibly enough, that nonempty descriptions beginning with “the fact that...” denote facts, the strict equivalence between (1), (1') and (1'') strongly suggests that “nothing”, if anything, denotes a fact in (1), namely, the fact that there isn't anything (in the relevant scenario).

If all that I have said thus far is correct, then the subtraction paradox has much more to do with the connection between facts and truths than it has with the notion of nothingness. At least *prima facie*, facts and truths are connected by the following schema (where P is any proposition):

- (D)  $\lceil P \text{ if, and only if, it is a fact that } P \rceil$  (e.g., “It rains if, and only if, it is a fact that it rains”).

3 Here is a possible formulation. If “the result of the subtraction process” denotes something in (1), then the result of the subtraction process is a thing, not (strictly speaking) nothing, and so (1) is false. If, on the other hand, the description is empty, then, by (B), (1) is not true.

If taken at face value, (D) entails that for any true proposition there exists a corresponding fact. Unsurprisingly, based on (D), we can immediately formulate fact-based variants of the subtraction paradox. Here is a possible formulation. Suppose all facts have been erased, so that there are no facts. By (D), it is a fact that there are no facts. But then it is not the case that there are no facts (for there is at least one fact, namely, the fact that there are no facts). Contradiction. And of course, similar impredicativity-based paradoxes can be produced for any finite number of facts that should result from the subtraction process. (In passing, let me observe that these fact-based variants make it apparent the connection between the subtraction paradox and classical antinomies such as Cantor's paradox.)

Should we conclude that absolute nothingness – the absence of all things, including facts – is impossible or even self-contradictory? This is a view that Severino (e.g., 1957: ch. 4 [partly translated in this Volume as Severino 2021: 21–32]), along with Parmenides (e.g., DK fr. 6), Priest (e.g., 2014: ch. 4) and others, subscribed to. However, for the reasons discussed in the note, this view can be used to (dis)solve the subtraction paradox only if joined with the view that, for any finite number  $n$ , absolute  $n$ -ness (the presence of exactly  $n$  things) is equally impossible.

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# The Nothingness of (the) Nothing

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In recent years, in the analytic philosophical community various people have focused their attention again on (the) Nothing, in order to say that, *pace* Carnap (1932/1959) and *pro* Heidegger (1929/1977), there are occurrences of the corresponding phrase “(the) Nothing” in which it works as a singular term, not as a quantified expression (e.g. Casati-Fujikawa 2015, 2019, Costantini 2020, Jacquette 2013, 2015, Oliver-Smiley 2013, Priest 2014a,b, Simionato 2017, Voltolini 2015). First of all, I will stress again that, *if* those occurrences are referentially successful, as most of the previous people proposes, they denote an object that is paradoxical. For it is inconsistent because of its contradictory behavior with respect to a certain universal first-order property, what I call the *genuine* existential property, i.e., Russell’s (1903) *being*. After reviewing and assessing such proposals, I will moreover try to show why the antecedent of the above conditional is false. In a nutshell, there cannot, even *impossibly*, be such a thing as (the) Nothing, not because this would make the overall totality of beings contradictory as well (by both including and not including (the) Nothing), but because (as Twardowski 1892/1977 somehow intuited) it would prevent that totality from being determined *at all* and (*pace* Costantini 2020) *once for all*. Finally, therefore, the only things that there legitimately are à propos of (the) Nothing are significant propositions, depending on the fact that the phrase “(the) Nothing” yields a contextually meaningful contribution to them *qua* Russellean definite description, even though it does not denote at all. Possibly, this position is similar to what Severino (1957, 2013) maintained on this subject.

**Keywords:**

**Nothing, *possibilia*, *impossibilia*, totality of beings, contradictory meaning**



## Introduction

In recent years, against the received view popularized by Carnap (1932/1959), various people have proposed that the phrase “(the) Nothing” may be used not only as a quantifier expression, but also as a (contextually meaningful) singular term (e.g. Casati-Fujikawa, 2015, 2019; Costantini, 2020; Jacquette, 2013, 2015; Oliver-Smiley, 2013; Priest, 2014a, b; Simionato, 2017; Voltolini, 2015)<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, not all occurrences of such phrase can be successfully paraphrased in quantifying terms. To stick to a case originally pointed out by Heidegger himself (1984, p. 3), if one truly says:

(1) Both Hegel and Heidegger thought about (the) Nothing

one can hardly read it as the false:

(1Q) There is nothing both Hegel and Heidegger thought about

that clearly has a different meaning<sup>2</sup>.

- 1 In order to dispense with this ambiguity, Oliver-Smiley (2013) coin the new term “zilch” and take it as an empty singular term that, if it denoted anything, it would denote the Nothing.
- 2 For this example, cf. Priest (2014a, p. 150). I take this example to be more convincing as other close examples, e.g., “the absence of all beings is (the) Nothing” and “God created the World out of (the) Nothing” (Priest 2014a, b). For such examples may be open to suitable paraphrases, e.g. “the absence of all beings is the fact that there is nothing” and “there is no thing and no time  $t'$  earlier than  $t$  out of which God creates the World at  $t$ ”. Since this latter sentence entails, just as the paraphrased one, “God created the World at some time”, its value as a paraphrase sounds to me better than the one Kroon (2018) proposes and justly reproaches because of the ambiguity between a monadic and a relational sense of “to create”, i.e., “God created the World and there is nothing out of which God created the World”. For further criticisms about the ‘reificationist’ reading of the ‘God’ sentence, cf. Sgaravatti-Spoloare (2018).

I refer to the phrase “(the) Nothing” not only because it is the literal translation of the German “das Nichts” used by Carnap’s polemical focus, i.e. Heidegger (1929/1977), but also in order not to take stand, for the time being, on whether, so used, that phrase counts as a proper name (“Nothing”) or as a, possibly nominal, definite description (“the Nothing”). For the majority of such people, in that use the phrase is also referentially successful, in that it denotes an, admittedly zany, item. In this paper, first, I want to assess such proposals in order to see their pros and their cons. Second, I want to put forward an argument that purportedly shows that one is not ontologically committed to the Nothing in its best metaphysical account; namely, *qua* inconsistent paradoxical item. As a result, third, I will defend the idea that in the relevant use, “(the) Nothing” is a merely contextually meaningful singular term, notably, a Russellian definite description, which does not denote anything, not even an inconsistent paradoxical item. Finally, I will try to see whether my account is similar to the one that Severino (1957, 2013) defended.

The architecture of this paper is the following. In Section 1, I assess the ontologically committal positions on the Nothing, while showing why the best of such positions make one ontologically commit to an inconsistent paradoxical item. In Section 2, I try to show why such a commitment fails. In Section 3, I compare my own treatment of “(the) Nothing” as a contextually meaningful yet non-denoting singular term with Severino’s understanding of it.

## 1. “(The) Nothing” As a (Contextually Meaningful) Denoting Singular Term

Those who think that “(the) Nothing” has a use in which it works as a (contextually meaningful) singular term are primarily divided in two main camps: those who take that in that use, the phrase denotes an item (e.g. Casati-Fujikawa, 2015, 2019; Costantini, 2020; Jacqueline, 2013, 2015; Priest, 2014a, b; Simionato, 2017) and those who take that in that use, the phrase counts as an empty singular term (e.g. Oliver-Smilely, 2013; Voltolini, 2015). The first camp further divides into two subgroups: those who think that the phrase denotes a consistent entity (Jacquette, 2013, 2015) and those who think, in the wake of Heidegger, that the phrase denotes an inconsistent item (Casati-Fujikawa, 2015, 2019; Priest 2014a, b; Simionato, 2017).

As Casati-Fujikawa (2019) already underline, the first option is rather implausible. In Jacqueline's (2013) account, the Nothing is a Meinongian non-existent object that has as its only constitutive property, in Meinong's (1972) and Parsons' (1980) terms of a property that constitute the object's core, the property of *being N*. In its turn, *being N* is spelled out as "being nothing other than itself", or more extensively, "being the only intendable object whose intensional identity involves nothing beyond its self-identity" (2013, p. 110). Even if one buys the disputable distinction between constitutive and extraconstitutive properties, it is unclear to me why the above object should be the Nothing. Having *nothing* but one constitutive property, in particular the property of self-identity, does not single out the Nothing among other such more plausible candidates of Meinongian non-existent objects that have just one constitutive property. For example, consider the Meinongian non-existent object that has as its only constitutive property the (second-order) property of *having no properties*<sup>3</sup>. In my opinion, this object is closer to our intuitive pretheoretical idea of the Nothing. For on the one hand, it has the extraconstitutive second-order property of *having a property*: this latter property is the second-order property of *having no properties* it constitutively has. Yet on the other hand, it also fails to have that extraconstitutive property. For failing to have that extraconstitutive property accounts for the idea that such an object has no properties, since it instead has as a constitutive property, the second-order property of *having no properties*<sup>4</sup>.

Clearly enough, the above reflections point out that our intuitive pretheoretical idea of the Nothing conceives it as an inconsistent item, since the Meinongian object that has the constitutive property of *having no properties* both has and fails to have the extraconstitutive property of *having a property*. This idea is espoused by the other subcamp. Yet one may go even further and defend the claim that the Nothing is not only an in-

3 This object is closer to, but does not coincide with, Parsons' *null object* (1980, p. 19), i.e., the object that has no constitutive property at all. For this object does have a constitutive property; namely, the (second-order) property of *having no property*.

4 As regards intuitions, things would fare no better if *being N* were equated, as Jacqueline (2015, p. 211) does, with "the property of not existing and having only whatever extra-ontic (constitutive) properties are properties of every possibly intended (existent or nonexistent) object of thought". For further problems with this proposal, cf. Casati-Fujikawa (2019, pp. 3743-5).

consistent object, like, say, the round square and the wooden cannon made of steel (this example comes from Twardowski 1892/1977), but also a *paradoxical* object, since it both possesses and fail to possess a *universal* first-order property; namely, a property that *all* entities in the overall ontological domain have. So, for Priest, the Nothing is, in a Heideggerian vein, both something, i.e., an object, and fails to be so (2014a), or analogously, is both self-identical and fails to be so (2014b). Both *being something* and *being self-identical* are universal first-order properties<sup>5</sup>.

The first account – being something and not being such – seems to me worse than the second – being self-identical and not being such. For holding that the Nothing is something depends on an intentionality thesis (IT: Jacquette, 2015) that, *pace* Priest, has in itself a mere phenomenological and not an ontological import. According to IT, *as it seems* to any subject, any thought is about an intentional object (*intentionale*), i.e., for any thought there is an *intentionale*, independently of whether it exists<sup>6</sup>. Now by itself, this phenomenological thesis does not ontologically commit one to *intentionalia*. For in itself, an *intentionale* is just a *schematic* object; namely, something that, *qua* object of thought, has no metaphysical nature (Crane, 2001, 2013). If it has such a nature, an *intentionale* has it only independently of its being thought (ib.). As a result, in order for one to be ontologically committed to an *intentionale*, one must be independently committed to the objects that have the same metaphysical nature as that *intentionale* has outside phenomenology (Voltolini, 2013)<sup>7</sup>. For example, one may think about Graham Priest. *Qua* object of thought, Priest is an *intentionale* just as any other. Yet independently of its being thought of,

5 It is precisely because the Nothing is such, or, in analogous formulation, is both identical with something and fails to be so, that Oliver-Smiley (2013) and Voltolini (2015) respectively take “(the) Nothing” to have no denotation. More on this later.

6 Priest would rebut that for him, the somethingness of the Nothing only depends from particularly generalizing from sentences like (1) (personal communication). Yet it seems to me that such a particular generalization and IT stand together. If it is only phenomenologically the case that for any thought there is an *intentionale*, independently of whether it exists, then it is also only phenomenologically the case that there is something – i.e., (the) Nothing – both Hegel and Heidegger thought about, and *vice versa*.

7 For Crane (2001, 2013), these are just all existent *intentionalia*. Yet he admits not also that, however spelled out in first-order terms, *existence* is not a metaphysically relevant property, but also that nonexistent *intentionalia* have different metaphysical natures.

Priest is metaphysically a *concretum*; namely, an object that may have causal powers (for this definition of *concreteness*, cf. Cocchiarella, 1982 and Priest himself, 2016). Now, one is ontologically committed to *concreta*. Hence, one is ontologically committed to Priest as well. Now, apply this reasoning to the Nothing. *Phenomenologically* speaking, one may well think of the Nothing. This is what (1) above testifies. Yet in itself, this does not mean that the Nothing is something; namely, something that is allowed in the overall *ontological* domain. For in order for it to be so allowed, one must prove that one is ontologically committed to an item that has the paradoxical nature that both is and is not something. But this must be independently proved.

Granted, Priest may reply by saying that being a paradoxical object in the above sense – being something and failing to be so – does not qualify the metaphysical nature of the Nothing. For its nature instead consists in its being the absence of all beings (see also Simionato, 2017), what was there before that God created the World. Moreover, this nature may be further spelled out in mereological terms. As he (2014a, b) says, the Nothing is the fusion of no thing, the sum that has nothing as its parts.

First of all, I wonder whether conceiving the Nothing as a mereological sum satisfies our intuitive conception of it. For it is unclear to me whether when we pretheoretically think of the Nothing, we take it to be an entity of such a kind<sup>8</sup>. More problematically, moreover, a sum of no parts is hard to swallow. For a mereological sum is an entity whose being, in some way or other, depends on its parts: in order for a sum to be, its parts (whether existent or not)<sup>9</sup> must be as well. Yet if there are no parts, it is unclear how their sum can be there as well.

Priest might respond by saying that this is not particularly problematic. For one is also ontologically committed to the empty set, i.e., the set that has no members, although it cannot be there as well, since a set also depends on its members.

Yet at most this response shows that the Nothing is nothing, but then again, one must show what makes it the case that the Nothing is also something, since the above thesis IT does not prove it.

8 Similar doubts arise towards Casati-Fujikawa's (2019) idea of the Nothing as the complement of the totality of all beings. This idea raises a further problem, as we will see later.

9 For this specification, cf. Casati-Fujikawa (2019).

Perhaps a better move is to say that there is no real distinction between the first and the second account. For we are just looking for a universal first-order property that the Nothing simultaneously has and fails to have, and all the above descriptions – being something, being an object, being self-identical, being identical with something – are just *conceptually different* characterizations of *one and the same* universal first-order property. However one conceives it<sup>10</sup>, this is the property that, perhaps trivially, all members of the overall ontological domain possess: what originally Russell (1903) labeled *being*<sup>11</sup>, in order to distinguish it from *existence*, i.e., a property that only some entities in that ontological domain possess (Voltolini 2018). Let me call this universal first-order property the *genuine* existential property.

But if this is the case, namely, if the Nothing simultaneously has and fails to have that very universal first-order property, then a further problem arises. As we will see in the next Section, this problem prevents “(the) Nothing” from being a successfully referential term, even from being a term that refers to an inconsistent paradoxical item.

## 2. The Totality Problem

Let me start from the fact that possessing a property (or satisfying a predicate, if one wants to put thing in nominalist terms) is the condition for fixing the extension of a set. Trivially, for example, the set of Italians is the set of the all and only individuals that are Italian. Thus, this condition also works for adequately restricting the scope of a quantifier. In order to truly saying e.g.:

(2) Everyone gesticulates

one must restrict the scope of the universal quantifier to the set of the Italians. Yet this condition not only works for domain *restriction*, but also for domain *determination*. The set of absolutely all entities yields the overall ontological domain, the totality of all beings, whose extension is given

10 A further characterization is Williamson’s (2002) *existence in a logical sense*.

11 Pace Priest (2014a, p. 150), who erroneously conflates *being* with *subsistence*, i.e., the non-universal property of *non-spatiotemporal existence*.

by the possession of the universal first-order property I talked about at the end of the previous Section, the genuine existential property<sup>12</sup>.

Suppose, however, that there were an item that simultaneously possessed and failed to possess this property. If this were the case, it would be impossible to determine the totality of all beings, the overall ontological domain. For the property in question would simultaneously be both universal (for it includes the Nothing among its possessors) and non-universal (for it fails to include it).

First, this problem is stronger than the problem that a certain domain of entities is simultaneously both the overall ontological domain (for the Nothing belongs to it) and fails to be such (for the Nothing does not belong to it), or in other terms, that it both is and is not the totality of all beings<sup>13</sup>. For this would simply show that such a domain has a contradictory feature. But here the problem is that such a domain cannot even be determined. Rather than a contradictory domain, there cannot even be such a domain at all.

Second, this problem arises only with respect to the special totality of all beings that is the overall ontological domain. For in itself, as regards an ordinary totality, there is no problem as regards the fact that the relevant condition fixing it is both satisfied and not satisfied by a certain entity. For that totality is subordinated to a larger totality that includes both its members and the members of its complement. Thus, it may well be the case that, by both satisfying and not satisfying that condition, an entity both belongs to that totality and does not belong to it, i.e., belongs to its complement. For it does belong to that superordinate larger totality. For example, the ordinal of all ordinals may both be and fail to be an ordinal, thereby belonging both to the set of ordinals and not belonging to it, thereby also belonging to its complement<sup>14</sup>. For the totality of ordinals is subordinated to the larger totality of numbers, to which the ordinal of all ordinals anyway belongs. Yet once one focuses on the totality of all beings, there is by definition no larger totality to which this totality is subordinated, so

12 The overall ontological domain is absolutely narrower or larger, depending on whether the genuine existential property is equated or not with a substantial existential property. Cf. Voltolini, 2018.

13 Cf. Casati-Fujikawa, 2019, p. 3758.

14 I owe this example to Graham Priest. Of course, more mundane examples may be conceived: transsexuals both are and are not women, insofar as they are all human beings.



that an item may both belong to this totality and fail to belong to it, i.e., belong also to its complement, thereby belonging to that larger totality<sup>15</sup>.

In this vein, the problem refers to the problem Twardowski (1892/1977, pp. 19-20) raised. In order for the complement of a set to be successfully conceived, one must have a superordinate concept under which both the members of that set and the members of that set's complement fall. For example, Greeks (i.e., individuals falling under the concept of being Greek) and non-Greeks (i.e., individuals falling under the opposite concept of being non-Greek) are both human beings (i.e., individuals falling under the superordinate concept of being a human being). Yet one cannot have a superordinate concept under which both the somethings, i.e., the inhabitants of the overall ontological domain of beings, the totality of all beings, and the non-somethings fall. For that concept would be both superordinate to the somethings and coordinated with it, something again. Hence, the overall ontological domain could not be determined.

At this point, one may think that the determination problem I raised may be circumvented by postulating an indefinite plurality of totalities of all beings, each of which is larger than the previous one insofar as it includes the Nothing the previous totality excluded, yet it excludes a further fine-grained Nothing, so that in the end one comes up with an indefinite series of Nothings as well (Costantini, 2020).

The solution is ingenious, for it simultaneously removes the weaker problem of ascribing to the overall ontological domain a contradictory feature and the stronger problem of that very domain being unable to be determined. For at each step of the procedure, we have a Nothing that is not a something of a certain domain, yet it is a something of a larger domain that has another more fine-grained Nothing out of it. Yet another problem arises; namely, we fail to have properties that are able to respectively determine the progressive domains. The first alleged totality is provisionally the totality of all beings. But so is the second alleged larger totality, and so on *ad infinitum*. Yet, how can one select all such totalities? Indeed, how can the first universal first-order property be distinct from the second similar property if not in an *ad hoc* manner – to be the property of *being except all*

15 As a result, the Nothing cannot be satisfactorily conceived even as the impossible complement of the totality of all beings, as Casati-Fujikawa (2019) maintain. For since that totality cannot be determined, also the impossible complement of that totality cannot be determined.



*Nothings* vs. to be the property of *being except all minus one Nothing*, and so on?

In the end, therefore, it seems that it is better not to have at one's disposal an inconsistent paradoxical object (or an indefinite list of them), but to dispense with it at all. Or in other words, it is better to take "(the) Nothing" in its use as a singular term to be a non-denoting expression. As I said, this is the position that both Oliver-Smiley (2013) and Voltolini (2015) defend.

### 3. "(The) Nothing" As a Merely Contextually Meaningful Singular Term

In defending the idea that "(the) Nothing" counts as an empty singular term, one may take it either as an empty genuine singular term or as a denotationless merely apparent singular term that is explained away by the appropriate paraphrase of the sentence in which it occurs, *qua* definite description *à la* Russell. Since when one utters sentences like (1) above one is under the impression that one has uttered something meaningful, the first strategy is notoriously hard. For it is hard to provide a convincing account according to which the above sentence is meaningful if genuine singular terms are expressions that exhaust their meaning in their referents, i.e., in the entities they stand for, as Millian sustainers of direct reference theories traditionally hold. If a genuine singular term is empty and having meaning for that term is exhausted by its having a certain referent, it is hard to see how can it be meaningful<sup>16</sup>.

Granted, there are notorious ways in which sustainers of direct reference theories may circumvent this problem, by suitably weakening their adherence to Millianism<sup>17</sup>. Yet since a simpler alternative is at one's dispos-

16 The main proposals in the direct reference camp have notorious problems. Metalinguistic accounts *à la* Donnellan (1974) or fictionalist accounts *à la* Walton (1990) and Everett (2013) hardly give convincing truthconditional accounts of sentences like (1). 'Gappist' accounts *à la* Braun (1993) or presuppositionalist accounts *à la* Sainsbury (2009) fail to provide a convincing account of the truthconditional difference between (1) and the intuitively true "Both Hegel and Heidegger thought about Santa Claus" or between (1) and the intuitively false "Both Hegel and Heidegger thought about Harry Potter". For more on this, cf. Kroon-Voltolini, 2018.

al, i.e., to take “(the) Nothing” as a Russellean denotationless definite description, thereby removing the brackets that in it surround the definite article, better to stick to it. Voltolini (2015) proposes that sentences containing the phrase “(the) Nothing” in its use as a singular term, i.e., sentences of the form “(the) Nothing is  $F$ ”, must be read as sentences containing the definite description “the thing that is identical with nothing”, or more explicitly “the thing that is such that it is not the case that something is identical with it”,<sup>18</sup> so as to count as sentences of the kind “the thing that is identical with nothing  $F$ s”. This description is moreover to be understood *à la* Russell, by being contextually defined as Russell recommends, i.e. by suitably paraphrasing the sentences containing it in terms of sentences merely containing quantifying and predicative expressions, e.g., sentences of the kind “there is only one thing that is identical with nothing, and this thing  $F$ s”. Now, since the sentence in question is such that the existence condition it states is unsatisfied, for as I said in the previous Section there is no inconsistent paradoxical object that is both identical with nothing and fails to be such, that sentence is meaningful but typically false. Notable exceptions are sentences like (1), which are both meaningful and true. For there the description takes narrow scope, thereby failing to claim any ontological commitment to any item whatsoever. So read, (1) indeed amounts to the true:

(1R) Both Hegel and Heidegger thought that there is only one thing that is identical with nothing<sup>19</sup>.

17 One way of doing this is by splitting the overall meaningfulness of an empty singular term from its direct truthconditional contribution, e.g. by taking proper names as a sort of indexicals, having a linguistic meaning over and above their contextual reference. Cf. Voltolini, 2014.

18 Likewise, Oliver-Smiley say that “zilch” must be defined “via description – the thing that is nothing, the non-existent thing, the thing that is  $F$  and not  $F$ ; they are all logically equivalent” (2013, p. 602).

19 For a similar treatment, see Sgaravatti-Spolaore (2018, p. 133fn.1). This true paraphrase strengthens the idea I defended before that (1) is one of the best examples in which “(the) Nothing” is used as a singular term. Incidentally, note that I does not propose this kind of *de dicto* reading for *any* sentence of the same grammatical form as (1), but only for those sentences of that form whose phenomenological content does not match their real content, since one is not ontologically committed to the *intentionalia* they involve (see Section 1). Priest (2021) would certainly reply that this account does not explain the fact that other sentences involving “(the) Nothing” are

Now, it is quite possible that this account aligns with that originally provided by Severino (1957/2021, 2013/2021). According to Severino:

(3) The meaning ‘nothing’ is a self-contradictory meaning, which is to say a contradiction (1957/2021, p. 35).

In (3), the subject term expresses a self-contradictory meaning – I take that this amounts to what Severino calls the first moment of the Nothing (2013/2021, p. 35), aka “the positive meaningfulness” of the Nothing. In turn, what the predicate predicates of that meaning is what testifies to the nothingness of the Nothing, since there is no such thing; namely, the element of self-contradictoriness – I take that this amounts to what Severino calls the second moment of the Nothing (ib.), aka “the absolute nothingness and meaninglessness” of the Nothing. As a result, (3) states a certain propositional contradiction, which as such well figures in the overall ontological domain – it states that a certain contradiction is, in Severino’s own terms (ibid.)<sup>20</sup>. As stating a proposition *about a meaning*, (3) provides the true counterpart of what would be false if it were expressed not in semantical but in purportedly ontological terms, by taking the Nothing as what is other than being (ib, p. 33):

(4) What is other than being, i.e., the being that is other than being, is self-contradictory.

(4) contains a definite description “the being that is other than being” very similar to Voltolini’s (2015) original description, “the thing that is identical with nothing”. Moreover, it is meaningful in its predicating the

true, yet that are such that the description cannot be given narrow scope, such as e.g. “(the) Nothing is (the) Nothing”. Dead right, for this is a consequence of the Russellian account of denotationless definite descriptions. To be sure, if one wanted to give to “(the) Nothing is (the) Nothing” a true reading, one should read the relevant predicate “being identical with nothing” as involving an *internal*, not an external, predication of the property it expresses, along the lines of Castañeda (1989). But then the description would denote a Meinongian object that is a correlate of the set whose only member is that property. Cf. Voltolini, 2006. Yet this object would no longer be the inconsistent paradoxical object a defender of the Nothing looks for.

20 Unlike other propositions, this propositional contradiction necessarily subsists. As Severino puts thusly: “*it is the meaning nothing which is a contradiction – a necessary contradiction*” (2013/2021, p. 36).

self-contradictoriness of the thing that simultaneously is both a being and not a being. Yet since the description is denotationless for there is no such a thing, (4) is false. Just as the Heideggerian:

(5) The Nothing nothings

is in Voltolini's (2015) reconstruction.

Note however that, on behalf of Severino's himself, this semantical interpretation of Severino's position takes what he says *à propos* of meaning in non-Severinian terms. For it takes the meaning (3) talks about as the *semantic content* of the expression "nothing" in it, not as what "the meaning 'nothing'" stands for in it, as Severino instead does in a sort of directly referential mood *à la* early Russell (1903). For if this were the case, then in (3) "the meaning 'nothing'" would refer to *a sui generis* item, say the absence of any significance, in order to predicate of this very item its being self-contradictory, for the absence of any significance *is* anyway significant. But this would amount to take that item as an object that is not an object, precisely as the sort of paradoxical impossible object that Priest (and Heidegger himself before him) is looking for. Doubtlessly, this result would lead Severino towards a direction he wanted to avoid.

## Conclusions

Let me sum up. It is correct to say that there is a use in which the phrase "(the) Nothing" works as a contextually meaningful singular term rather than as a quantifying expression. Yet in that use that phrase counts as a denotationless Russellean definite description. For it cannot denote what it would plausibly denote if it could denote anything; namely, a paradoxical object, i.e., an item that is inconsistent since it would simultaneously have and fail to have the universal first-order property, i.e., the genuine existential property of *being*. Possibly, in holding that the only thing that there is *à propos* of the Nothing is a certain contradictory meaning of the corresponding linguistic expression, Severino would have agreed with these claims<sup>21</sup>.

21 I am very much to indebted to Franz Berto, Fred Kroon, Federico Perelda, Matteo Plebani and Graham Priest for their comments on this paper and the nice discussions had with them on this subject.

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