NOTHING REALLY MATTERS TO ME
A critique of Emanuele Severino's Resolution of the Aporia of Nothingness[1]

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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.

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1. Introduction

In this paper I shall analyze and criticize Emanuele Severino's resolution to the *aporia* of nothingness[2]. 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'[3] and emerges as soon as Severino formulates the Principle of Non-Contradiction as the principle pertaining to the opposition between *being* and *not-being*[4]. 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[5].

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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 Orginaria*, 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)[6]. 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)[7].

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[8]. 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

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

8   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[9]. The two sentences may be (partially) formalized as

1') ~∃x(*x is some food* & *x is in the fridge*).
2') ~∃x(*x matters to me*)

The term 'nothing' has been translated by means of an existential quantifier (∃x) and a negation (~).

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')   ~∃x *Pegasize*(x)

where '*Pegasize(x)*' is an artificial predicate denoting a bunch of properties that the tradition ascribes to a mythological animal called Pegasus[10]. 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[11]), 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

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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 nonexistence 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[12] 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*[13]. 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 syncategorematic expressions that are usually linked with a name or a verb to form restricted quantifier phrases[14] 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-

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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 '$\sim\exists xOut(x)$': 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[15].

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 '$\sim\exists xOut(x)$'.

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 mention 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 is 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[16]; my favorite being an ex-

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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[17].

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-

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17 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[18]. 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

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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[19]; 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[20].

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:

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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.

$\iota y.\forall x\sim(x=y)^{21}$. 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 ∃-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[22].

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

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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 'ι' 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[23]. 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-

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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'[24].

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 intention 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') $\sim\exists x\ Pegasize(x)$

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 '~(*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 '~(*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)[25]. 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

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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 ~(*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[26]. Severino claims that such a position is 'isolating' such meanings (i.e. such notions) from their existence/being[27] (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[28]. 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-

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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)[29].

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: "~ (∃x). x is out-side 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 "~ (∃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 "~(∃x). x is outside the totality of the positive" the meaning "outside the totality of the positive" manifests itself.

In the sentence "~(∃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[30].

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[31].

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

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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[32]. 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 $\sim\exists x\ Pegasize(x)$ the concept *Pegasize(x)* does not refer to Pegagus, 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)*[33], and not that a particular object (the referent of the noun-phrase 'the absence of everything') has contradictory features.

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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: $\iota x.\forall x(x \neq x)$. 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[34].

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

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34 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[35]. 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[36]) 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-

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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 $\iota x.\forall x(x \neq x)$ 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[37]. 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[38] worth taking up. However, given the deep connection that

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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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