

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 paradox¹:

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 employs¹. 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 things²—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 boundary³.

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 true⁴.

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 true⁵. 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 properties⁶.

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 fails⁷; as do all the others of which I know⁸. There are, in fact, many reasons why Principle itself fails⁹. Indeed, the paradox of **nothing** is one of these.

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

7 See Priest (2020).

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

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