

Identity and difference: Severino and Heidegger

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The concept of identity represents one of the most significant concepts through which to measure the philosophies of Severino and Heidegger. For Severino, identity cannot be the identity of the different, because the identity of the different, or of the non-identical, is exactly the concept of becoming, which leads to the idea that wood becomes ash, and thus is ash, or, in general, that the subject is the predicate, that A is B, or not-A (which is a contradiction). Unlike Severino, Heidegger conceives of identity as a “synthesis of the different”, as is clear in his interpretation of Parmenides’ Fragment 3 in *Identity and Difference*: the same (*das Selbe*) is not the identical (*das Gleiche*). The problem of the relation between identity and difference can be traced back to the debate between Monists and Pluralists in Plato’s *Sophist*: this discussion will be the focus of the conclusion, where I try to show that the different (ἕτερον) is not the condition of the contradiction, but what prevents it.

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1.

The great theme of Severino's philosophy is identity: in relation to this concept, and indeed as a consequence of the way Severino *understands* it, all other issues in his work find their orbit – most notably, and *above all*, the issue of becoming. For Heidegger, in contrast, being is difference: the ontological difference means the original and transcendent condition of being; difference is indeed the very reason for this transcendental, i.e. the fact that being is *not* the entity. In what follows my focus will therefore be trained on these two statements – being as identity and being as difference – by taking into consideration the two most significant texts on this theme by these two authors: Severino's *Tautótēs*, published in 1995, and Heidegger's *Identity and Difference*, published in 1957.

2.

To *think* identity, for Severino, is properly to place oneself on a plane where there is no thought, but only being. This is clearly a Parmenidean theme, that of the αὐτό in the Fragment 3: τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ νοεῖν ἐστίν τε καὶ εἶναι. More radically than Parmenides, who by this αὐτό means the identity of being and thought, Severino places the question on an exclusively ontological plane. In fact, in so far as identity concerns a fact of thought, a νοήμα (Severino, 1995, p. 120), it is not possible to escape diversity, so that identity is inevitably compromised: between thought and being there is diversity, therefore on the plane of being alone one must trace what identity properly means.

Identity, in short, is constitutive of the concept of being, the true ontological *prius*, and this is not a logical fact. Being is identity, and identity is being. Therefore, identity cannot be in any way conceived as the identity

of the different, because the identity of the different, or of the non-identical, is the concept of becoming and therefore a contradiction, the impossible. Becoming is the relation between the subject and the predicate: “To think that wood becomes ashes is to think that this becoming produces a relation between wood and ashes, and not a generic relation, but a relation between subject and predicate” (Severino, 1995, p. 128). After all, as paradoxical as it may seem, it is on the level of language that becoming is produced, and not on the ontological level. Language, in fact, isolates the subject and the predicate, and as a consequence of this isolation their relationship is understood as a passage from one to the other, and therefore as the passage from what the one (the subject) is to what it is not (the predicate), or as a passage from being to non-being. Western thought remains entangled in this contradiction, which is the contradiction of becoming. In fact,

to set and *at the same time* not to set the relation between the something that becomes and its other (not to isolate and at the same time to isolate the something from its other) is a contradiction: the *contradiction* through which the thought that affirms becoming fails to see that becoming is the identification of the non-identical and thus the affirmation of the existence of becoming is the *contradiction* that poses, as existence, the absolute non-existence of becoming (Severino, 1995, p. 23).

The contradiction that is produced in this way is precisely a contradiction, something that happens at the level of saying. Becoming is produced at the level of language, because it is at the level of saying that difference is produced. This – the difference – cannot be, as Heidegger would claim, an *ontological* difference, but it is always and only a logical, linguistic difference.

Metaphysics has tried to propose various solutions to this contradiction, the most important of which are considered in *Tautótēs*; none of them, however, gets to the root of the problem, which is basically the question of the very way in which identity presents itself. These solutions are the Aristotelian one, with the concept of substance; the Hegelian one, with the concept of the speculative; and, we might say, the Kantian one, with the concept of synthesis.

Aristotle’s solution to avoid the identification of opposites consists in presupposing something permanent, a substratum, at the basis of becoming (Severino, 1995, p. 16). In this way, however, we do nothing but shift

the problem, since the transition from one term to another is understood as a passage from one determination of the substratum to another: the sky remains, while its being clear or cloudy expresses the transition from the identical to the different. This passage involves the annihilation of the relation between the substratum and a certain predicate, a certain form (being serene and being cloudy): the relation between the sky and its determinations is subject to change, and thus to annulment, in the passage from one to another determination, from being serene to being cloudy. The annulment of this relation – in the sense that, only by annulling itself, it allows the passage from one determination to another – results in the introduction of a diversity among the forms of the substratum. For Severino, even science adheres to this solution, since for science everything is transformed and, in the permanence of energy, everything takes on different energy forms: “the sky, which in the cloudiness of the sky is the permanent, corresponds to the amount of energy that, in the combustion of wood, is kept constant, transforming itself into a certain set of new forms of energy” (Severino 1995: 18). Even science, therefore, assumes this contradiction, implicit in the becoming of the world, as its own horizon of thought.

Contrary to the Aristotelian solution, which consists in moving becoming to the level of the determinations of the substance, the Hegelian solution makes becoming the very place of their dis-solution: Hegel in fact “not only does not affirm [the] inexistence [of becoming], that is the inexistence of becoming other, but rather affirms that becoming other, concretely thought, is the *overcoming* of the contradiction that is produced when becoming other is abstractly understood” (Severino, 1995, p. 29). There is undoubtedly merit in Hegel’s speculative solution: it shows that becoming is what takes away the isolation of terms – proper to the intellectualistic perspective of the finite –, and that the finite cannot but remove itself, because of its intrinsic self-contradiction. In short, there is becoming because there is isolation, and since there is contradiction as long as there is isolation, becoming, as sublating of isolation, can only be the sublating of contradiction. “In the Hegelian dialectic,” Severino in fact writes, “the contradiction is not produced because something becomes other than itself, *but because something* (a finite, a finite ‘determination’) is *isolated*, so that the finite determination, that is, ‘such a limited abstraction, is valid for the intellect as something that is and subsists for itself’ (*Encyclopedia*, §80), namely, because something is separated from its own other” (Severino, 1995:, p. 32). As sublating of isolation, becoming other is therefore no longer a contradiction. However, the fact remains that even

here there is a passage, that is, an annulment, the annulment of the finite, which allows us to inscribe Hegel within the thought of nihilism. The finite, in fact, is nothing: it is nothing originally, constitutively, and its original nothingness is no more than its being potentially its own self-annulment, its being in power infinite, non-finite. Whereas in Aristotle becoming was thought as a passage from a finite determination to another finite determination, from a predicate to another, from A to B, that is from A to non-A, in Hegel becoming is thought as a passage from a finite determination to the infinite, and therefore, again, from A to non-A. The speculative result of dialectics, which is not “the empty and abstract nothing”, but something positive, the rational positive, is affirmed, however, at the price of an annihilation, the annihilation of the finite. The determinate negation, namely, is negation of the determination, of its finite dimension: all categories, passing through dialectical becoming, cancel their one-sidedness; this becoming, binding them in the absolute system of their totality, cancels their isolation, and therefore condemns them to annihilation. This is the conclusion that Severino draws from his analysis of the dialectical method:

Hegel’s decisive thought is that where there is contradiction there is *no* becoming other – becoming other is not able to constitute itself – while where becoming is truly and concretely constituted, there the contradiction is *sublated*. Becoming other, in fact, is truly and concretely realized where the relationship between something and the other is constituted and manages to maintain itself. True becoming other, the positive result of dialectics, the relation and the sublation of contradiction are the same (Severino, 1995, p. 39).

3.

What is at stake in this speculative movement is the way of conceiving identity: that is, it is the fact that becoming is conceived – both in Aristotle and in Hegel – as *identification*, i.e. as a process. Or, said in another way: the fact that identity is conceived as the result of a becoming. It is in fact as a process that becoming *identifies* – transitively, then – the different. Severino’s move is therefore to subtract identity from this processuality: it is, in fact, identity, not identification. A step in this direction is taken by what Severino calls the “non-dialectical *episteme* [which] conceives of iden-

tity as the original condition of becoming other, or even as independent of it” (Severino, 1995, p. 47). It is the Aristotelian solution, or the Cartesian one, in which the wood, or the wax – the substance – remains identical, even as its determinations change. But, as we have seen, even this solution is insufficient for Severino: above all because at bottom we are dealing here with *episteme*, that is, a subjective position, and where there is thought – as in every *episteme* – there is still becoming. For this *episteme*, substance, the permanent, is then, as it is for Kant, only a *requirement* of reason, a principle of the pure intellect (as the first analogy in the *Critique of Pure Reason* states), and not a true ontological determination. Removed from processuality identity lies on a terrain that is not, necessarily, the one of *episteme*, and ultimately, not the one from which we grasp the succession of finite determinations; it must be, rather, the one of eternity. Since the relation between the various determinations is finite, i.e. destined to annulment, be they between substance and accidents or between accidents, in order to avoid this annulment this relation must be thought as eternal. *Identity is the eternal being of the relation*, which Western thought, according to Severino, is unable to think, since it reduces it to an impossible contradiction (Severino, 1995, p. 109), to a logical, and therefore ideal principle. Identity is instead a real, and therefore eternal relationship. Every isolation of entities is the cause of contradiction: consequently, identity constitutes every entity originally, that is ontologically, in its relationship with all the others, in their totality. Not only are the entities thus rescued from isolation, but so too are their determinations, i.e. their predicates: the identity of the sky implies that it cannot be different from what it is, and therefore that each of its predicates – for example, *light* – is an essential, and therefore necessary and eternal, part of its appearance.

The appearance of being is the appearance of the identity of being. In other words, only if A, of which B (and A) is affirmed, is not an A closed in its own isolation, but is and appears as A in relation to B – that is, is and appears as A-that-is-B and B is in turn in relation to A – that is, is and appears as B-of-A -, so that, by affirming that A is B, the *identity* of the relation with itself is affirmed; only thus the affirmation, that is, the appearing that something is something, is not affirming that something is other than what it is. (Severino, 1995, p. 121).

This is what Severino calls a *non-alienated concept of identity*, that is, a concept of identity that is not identification of different, that does not in-

volve otherness, and therefore is not the impossible contradiction, thus necessarily non-existent. Because the condition of existence, it is now clear, can only be identity. And since becoming is instead the identification of the different, what is identical can only be subtracted from becoming and is therefore eternal. There is no process, therefore, no identification: identity is the ontological character of what appears, of what insofar as it appears is identical and eternal.

4.

The ontological scope of Severino's thought depends entirely, therefore, on his conception of identity: it is a real relationship, and indeed is being itself in its appearance, therefore inseparable – not isolable – from its appearance. In this appearance, identity, which is not therefore identification, appears. On the contrary, Western thought always thinks of identity not as an original structure, but as a result, and, as a result, not as an ontological structure, but as a *noema*, as a knowledge. This is the peculiar trait of transcendentalism, and of all Western thought since at least Socrates, the philosopher of “know yourself.” At this point, therefore, it is time to examine the other side of this gigantomachy around being, which is the side, precisely, of the other, of diversity.

In *The Principle of Identity* Heidegger asks what the αὐτό of Parmenides' Fragment 3 means: τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ νοεῖν ἐστὶν τε καὶ εἶναι. Parmenides in fact left the meaning of this αὐτό in obscurity. The formula usually employed to represent the principle of identity, $A = A$, which this αὐτό would mean, says the equality of A and A, that is, that identical, in Latin *idem*, which we also express by means of a tautology, e.g. “the plant is a plant” (Heidegger, 1969:, p. 23). This abstract, and merely tautological, conception of identity would be, however, according to Heidegger, overcome by German idealism, which would have highlighted how in every identity, understood not as *Gleichheit* (*idem*) but as *Selbigkeit* (*ipsum*), is implicit a mediation, a “with”, that is, a synthesis.

Western thought required more than two thousand years. For it is only the philosophy of speculative Idealism, prepared by Leibniz and Kant, that through Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel established an abode for the essence, in itself synthetic, of identity. This abode cannot be demonstrated here. Just one thing we must keep in

mind: since the era of speculative Idealism, it is no longer possible for thinking to represent the unity of identity as mere absence of difference (*Einerlei*), and to disregard the mediation that prevails in unity. Wherever this is done, identity is represented only in an abstract manner (Heidegger, 1969, p. 25, modified).

It is on the basis of this understanding proper to German classical idealism that Heidegger then interprets the saying of Parmenides. The αὐτό of Parmenides' saying in fact claims, according to Heidegger, the co-belonging of being and thought, or that particular form of synthesis through which idealism defines, not the abstract identity, but the identity of consciousness, of what we designate with the term *Selbst*, the Self, the I. The "identity" to which speculative thought refers, which would more correctly be called sameness, is that of the I. The identical and the same, the *idem* and the *ipsum*, in short, *are not the same*. So writes Heidegger, commenting on Hegel: "But the same [*das Selbe*] is not the merely identical [*das Gleiche*]. In the merely identical, the difference disappears. In the same difference appears" (Heidegger, 1969, p. 45). So if it is true, as Severino writes, that Hegel would represent the most radical effort in Western thought "to think the 'identical – the *tautón*'" (Severino, 1995, p. 47), this ταὐτόν should not be understood as *idem*, as *identity*, but as *ipsum*, sameness. Severino, however, captures this point well, observing that Hegel "identifies becoming other with the production of the 'other of another', that is, with the production of the 'same', of being for itself" (Severino, 1995, p. 47). If the identity is the *in itself*, the same is the *for itself*, whose structure is that of infinity, or life.

To speak here of life means that the same – which is the speculative – is not abstract identity, the " $A = A$," but concrete identity. As concreteness, the speculative is the production of truth as the unity of the process with its result, namely, unity of being and knowing. This final ταὐτόν is *more than what it was*: it is not the mere development, immanent and mechanical, of a monadic essence, but signifies an increasing, and in this sense it is something concrete. *Concretum* derives in fact from *cum-crescere*, a growth-with, a development that is at the same time an increase, an immanent synthesis. It is not difficult to see in this logical structure a form of "autopoiesis", and in fact here it is a matter, as Severino writes, of a "self-production" of identity and truth. The Self is not mere being: it is no longer pure being, as we find in fact at the beginning of the *Science of Logic*, but it is a *known* being. It is substance that has become subject. The concrete is

the result of a reflexive act – of an autopoiesis, we said – and that is, of a knowing. There is no doubt that this introduces an epistemic moment within ontology, but this is, after all, the characterizing feature of the transcendental logic, from which Hegel is inspired, continuing and radicalizing Kant, to the point of making knowledge, not a moment extrinsic to being, but the very heart of being, its beating heart, we could say, if it is true that it constitutes the intimate movement of reality. With this, Hegel merely takes up Plato's remark when, in the *Sophist*, he seems to rethink critically his own doctrine of ideas, that is when, in the γιγαντομαχία περὶ τῆς οὐσίας, he addresses himself to the “friends of forms.”

are we going to be convinced that it's true that change, life, soul, and intelligence are not present in that which wholly (παντελῶς) is, and that it neither lives nor thinks, but stays changeless, solemn, and holy, without any understanding? (Plato 1997: *Soph.* 248e-249a)

Absolute, fully achieved, being cannot be conceived as something immobile. Plato does not justify this statement, which seems to be more a *desideratum* than a philosophical thesis, but the whole argumentation makes clear his reason: it is to avoid the separation – that is the isolation – between the ideal world and the sensible world, a world of motionless forms and a world of moving entities, that is to avoid dualism, but without falling into monism and its aporias.

If this is the idealistic solution to the Parmenidean problem, to attribute such an understanding of the αὐτό as *Selbst*, sameness or co-belonging, to Parmenides, as Heidegger does, seems rather anachronistic and questionable. In the αὐτό of Parmenides' saying, being and thought co-belong in an original way, but it is not taken for granted that they are so according to that particular unifying structure, which is proper rather to the Kantian a priori synthesis: a synthesis which holds together what is at the same time differentiated, being and thought. If, as Heidegger writes, “Thinking has needed more than two thousand years really to understand such a simple relation as that of the mediation within identity” (Heidegger, 1969, p. 41), it is therefore doubtful that this is what Parmenides – however implicitly – meant. And the doubt is confirmed by the fact that those who have discussed his theses, *primarily* Plato and Aristotle, when they refer to what Parmenides meant, do make explicit their content in terms of *idem* identity, and not *ipsum*.

5.

At the beginning of *Tautótēs* Severino quotes a passage from Plato's *Theaetetus*: Not even in a dream and not even in madness, says Plato, can one think that “one is the other” (τὸ ἕτερον ἐστίν, Plato 1997: *Theaet.* 190c), for example, that “the beautiful is ugly”, “the ox is the horse”, “the wood is the ashes” (Heidegger, 1969, p. 14). The *fundamentum inconcussum* of ontology, the non-contradiction, cannot be violated even in a dream. All that leads to believe that the fact that different can be identified – and this is the concept of becoming, or of the a priori synthesis, or of the Self as the unity of the manifold of experience – is therefore less than a dream, is nothing, is the very principle of nihilism. Only identity, as the true ontological *prius*, makes it possible to avoid this nihilistic destruction.

However, I would like to attempt a different reading of this problem, starting from the following question: what if the contradiction were avoided, not in virtue of a tautological, symmetrical relation, but in virtue of a heterological, i.e. asymmetrical, relation? My reading takes its cue from the sentence of Plato quoted above, and in particular from what Plato says in the lines immediately preceding those quoted by Severino, where what cannot be believed even in a dream is expressed in an even more general way:

Now try to think if you have ever said to yourself “Surely the beautiful is ugly,” or “The unjust is certainly just.” Or – to put it in the most general terms – have you ever tried to persuade yourself that “Surely one thing is another?” Wouldn't the very opposite of this be the truth? Wouldn't the truth be that not even in your sleep have you ever gone so far as to say to yourself “No doubt the odd is even,” or anything of that kind? (Plato 1997: *Theaet.* 190b).

It is impossible for the even to be odd, or, said otherwise, for the two to be one. Such a conclusion, however, is according to Plato exactly that to which all the philosophies which preceded him lead, and which, according to Plato, are proper to those who spoke “with numerical precision (*diakribologouménous*, *Soph.* 245d),” namely, by identifying being with one or many principles. Of them Plato says, with the Visitor's words: “Parmenides' way of talking to us has been rather easygoing, it seems to me” (Plato 1997: *Soph.* 242c). In all these philosophies the same aporia is produced: if in fact the being is one, then we must admit that in fact there are

two principles, the being and the one, where there should be only one reality, a paradox that recalls the first deduction of the *Parmenides* (*Parm.* 142b ff.): the one that is, absolutely identical and without differences or determinations, is split internally in the one and in the being; to name it as being and as one introduces necessarily a duality. The consequence is then that the one is equal to the two. For thus Plato writes: “Surely it’s absurd for someone to agree that there are two names when he maintains that there’s only one thing...” (Plato 1997: *Soph.* 244c). The same conclusion is reached if one thinks that the principles are more than one (e.g. cold and heat), because, since both *are being*, they would return to be one, so once again two would be one. “But—we’ll say—if you did that, friends, you’d also be saying very clearly that the two are one” (Plato 1997: *Soph.* 244a). Even more, if one thinks that being is a whole composed of parts, that is, fractioned, each part would be in turn a whole, so that the one would be at the same time one and identical with the multiplicity of its parts. “You’re right. If it has the characteristic of somehow being one, it won’t appear to be the same as the one. Moreover, everything will then be more than one” (Plato 1997: *Soph.* 245b), which, equivalently to the previous conclusions, is to say that the one is two.

The problem with these paradoxes is, in my opinion, that they are all based on a *numerical* solution to the problem of being, providing one or more principles: that is, making the principle something numerable, or discrete, “isolated”, in Severino’s terms. In all these cases, *one ends up being equal to two* or, equivalently, two is one. I would like to take this conclusion as a trace for a different solution to the ontological problem, which avoids the paradoxes of monist and pluralist theories: a solution that I would say is not *numerical* in the Greek sense of the term “number”, that is, not *arithmetical*.

This untenable conclusion, which cannot be believed even in a dream, namely that one is equal to two, or that even numbers are equal to odd numbers, is exactly the conclusion reached in the case of one of the most shocking discoveries of ancient mathematics, the discovery of incommensurable magnitudes. In the demonstration *ad absurdum* of the incommensurability of the diagonal to the side of the square, in fact, we come to the conclusion that, if they were commensurable, one would be equal to two, and the even numbers would be equal to the odd numbers. This means that to prevent this from happening – to avoid this absolute contradiction – we must say that the diagonal is incommensurable with the side, and therefore that *there is the incommensurable*. Namely: that there is some-

thing, an ἕτερον, which is completely different from one and two. This ἕτερον introduces, in the discrete and absolutely positive arithmetic of early Pythagoreanism, a new dimension. Theaetetus, the theorist of these magnitudes in the ancient world, called them, as we know from the famous mathematical lecture contained in the dialogue dedicated to him, probably not by chance, δυνάμεις. The δύναμις represents not only a “new number”, the true ἕτερον of ancient mathematics, but also a new ontological dimension: that of being able to be other, which is already, in itself, a form of non-being. Even the non-being, Aristotle says in fact, is said in many ways, and among them, there is the power, the δύναμις. What I mean is that, far from introducing contradiction in the world of numbers, *the incommensurable avoids it*, because, if the diagonal were commensurable with the side, one would be equal to two. The so-called “irrational” (as unfortunately, for historical reasons, these magnitudes have been called) is not something contrary to reason, but what makes it consistent and saves it from contradiction. The incommensurable, in short, is not a problem, but the solution of a problem. The “transcendental” difference that it represents – in which the sense of the Heideggerian ontological difference is enclosed – is the condition of possibility of every ontic difference, and above all of the identity of the entity, which avoids the ontological collapse – a real *Big Crunch* – that results in the identification of the one with the two. In short, there is non-contradiction because there is the incommensurable, the δύναμις, the ἕτερον, which is not the simple ἄλλο of the purely arithmetic, numerical multiplicity. This ἕτερον, which is neither one nor two, is not representable as something, as an entity. It answers the question that Plato poses in the course of his examination of monist and pluralist philosophies:

Listen, you people who say that all things are just some two things, hot and cold or some such pair. What are you saying about them both when you say that they both are and each one is? What shall we take this being to be? Is it a third thing alongside those two beings, so that according to you everything is no longer two but three? Surely in calling one or the other of the two of them being, you aren't saying that they both are, since then in either case they'd be one and not two (*Soph.* 243d-e).

The case of the diagonal shows, in conclusion, that in order to avoid contradiction, that is, the identification of the one with the two – which

cannot be believed even in a dream – it is necessary to postulate an ἔτερον with respect to the one and the two. It does not appear – in fact, it is not seen, as no one has ever seen the $\sqrt{2}$ –, it remains asymmetrical in relation to what appears. Such is, in my view, the meaning of Heideggerian ontological difference: a difference that makes every ontic difference possible, but which is not resolved – it is not commensurable and therefore does not give rise to a relation of identity – in any ontic difference. Only thanks to this "transcendental difference", to this incommensurability, is contradiction really avoided.

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