

# Law and Chance

Emanuele  
Severino

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Translated by  
Damiano Sacco

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Edited by  
Giulio Goggi,  
Damiano Sacco,  
Ines Testoni



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*Emanuele Severino:  
Beyond the Alienated Soul  
of Tradition and  
Contemporary  
Philosophical Thought*

INES TESTONI & GIULIO GOGGI

**E**manuele Severino (Brescia, 26 February 1929 – Brescia, 17 January 2020) was one of the most important contemporary Italian philosophers. Because of his radical opposition to the idea that being is subject to the tyranny of time, he is commonly defined simultaneously as an anti-traditional and anti-contemporary thinker.

But who is Emanuele Severino, and what kind of challenge does he pose to Western thought? His enterprise first began with a substantial separation from historical metaphysics and traditional thought, but in his entire opera he also expounded his abysmal distancing from neo-idealism, phenomenology,

existentialism, logical empiricism, pragmatism, Marxism, any linguistic turn or any post-structuralist philosophy of the Anglophone, French and German schools. The first key concept of that incommensurable separation is the discourse that affirms that everything exists forever, and that everything is eternal in each moment. Every part of reality is, and is ad infinitum, since whatever is cannot come into being from nothingness, or cease to be by falling into nothingness; indeed, if the being of what is were generated or corrupted, it would not be – there would be a time when being is not. The scandal of becoming is this: that being is not! This means that every being – all people, animals, vegetables and atoms or all relationships, instants, experiences, states of consciousness and events – from the most irrelevant to the most significant, everything that ‘appears’ in any way is eternal. ‘Eternal’ means that it is necessary that each being be and be as it is. And it is impossible for any being not to be. Everything that is not nothing is a being. ‘Appearing’ means entering the horizon of experience.

The further key concept for which the distance from the entirety of philosophy becomes sidereal is the definition of ‘nihilism’ and of the ‘nihilistic folly’: any kind of reduction of being to a product of time is a nihilistic folly. Since nothing resides outside of being, beings cannot turn into nothingness, and nothing can really turn into being. Any faith that believes in the oscillation of beings between nothingness and being is a nihilistic folly. The history of thought, however, is nihilistic. The error lies in the claim that the appearing of ‘becoming’ in the world amounts to the appearing of the annihilation of beings

that become. What nihilism is unable to conceive is that nothing can be annihilated, and when something disappears (and it is also the very appearing of what enters the horizon of appearing that disappears), it means that it is going beyond, crossing the threshold of what presently appears, declining towards the invisible land of what does not appear here. The nihilistic folly that characterises the entire history of thought considers beings that appear in this world as destined to their annihilation. Indeed, nihilism is unable to admit that what no longer appears stays and appears eternally in a further dimension of being.

The third axis on which the sidereal distance distinguishes Severino, especially from other contemporary philosophers, is his organic, unitary and structurally coherent system of thought, whose intrinsic cogency derives from his radical redefinition of the concept of truth. Actually, if rigorous thinking may sometimes appear less than captivating, Severino's texts are an exception: the stricter they are, the more interesting the results, because his indication of 'eternity' is not rooted in any religious faith or poetic intuition, but in a rigorous foundation that is shown through irrefutable and radically integrated sentences. The concept of truth that Severino proposes refers precisely to *the incontrovertible* that shows the self-contradictory and self-negating nature of what intends to deny the originally true assertion.

When he was only twenty-two, Emanuele Severino obtained a lecturer position in theoretical philosophy, and soon became full professor in moral philosophy at the Catholic University of Milan, and later full professor of theoretical philosophy at the University of Venice. He was also a member of the prestigious

Accademia dei Lincei,<sup>1</sup> and he was nominated Cavaliere di Gran Croce by the president of the Italian Republic. The passage from the Catholic University to the University of Venice was due to the Former Saint Office's inquisition process that Severino underwent for his ideas on eternity, and for the confutation of any ontological difference, understood as the ontological dependence of the creature on the creator. Since the eternity of every being implies that everything that presently appears is a positivity included in the eternal totality of beings, the true ontological difference is the difference between being as it appears procedurally (and therefore does not appear in its being concretely enveloped by the Whole) and being as it appears in its concrete dwelling in the Whole – which implies that what presently appears (including the present appearing of being) is a moment of the immutable Whole. Precisely because of this foundation, his indication developed by deeply questioning the entire traditional and metaphysical meaning of knowledge and action. This reasoning recuperates the absolute primacy of philosophy, which cannot be made subordinate to any religion or be secondary to science. The concept of truth that Severino proposes refers precisely to the incontrovertible that shows the self-contradictory and self-negating nature of what intends to deny truth. What is incontrovertible is the appearing of the self-identical being (and therefore of the non-contradictory being) of any being, and it is this self-identical being of any being that implies the eternity of every being as being. The primacy of true philosophical discourse – over all the arguments that seek to impose a content on the basis of a faith by presenting it as true

– occurs through the *élenchos*, i.e. the argumentative dynamic that shows the self-negation of a faith, thereby showing the nothingness of the content which in that faith is (contradictorily) believed to be a non-nothingness. However, according to Severino, on this basis, it is necessary to affirm that the contents of science are also based on a faith. Certainly, the two faiths based on the content of religions and empirical experimentation, respectively, are distinguished from each other. It is possible, however, to say that they are both faiths because they share a common fundamental trait: the faith in becoming, that is, the belief (which the West has always regarded not as a faith but as the fundamental self-evidence itself) that the beings that inhabit experience oscillate between being and nothingness. One of Severino's most interesting contributions is precisely his ability to show how nihilism (the persuasion/belief that being is nothing) operates in both traditional and contemporary thought and science, highlighting the relationships between them.

The relationship between contemporary and traditional philosophy is the fourth significant trait of differentiation from any other thought. Taking an epistemological slant, *Law and Chance* is part of the critical analysis of this relationship. This volume was published in 1979 after works of fundamental importance – including *The Originary Structure* (*La struttura originaria*) and *The Essence of Nihilism* (*Essenza del nichilismo*) – had substantiated the foundation of Severino's discourse.<sup>2</sup> In this book, the reason for the domination of science and technology is considered and related to the whole history of philosophy, particularly the origin of Greek thought. The analysis

focuses on highlighting the weakness with which contemporary thought believes it can eliminate the traditional concept of truth. In fact, the decline of traditional thought was simply inevitable because it was nothing more than the becoming self-coherent of the basic error of all Western philosophy: the belief that beings can oscillate between being and nothingness. This becoming self-coherent consists of positing irrevocably that if something oscillates between being and nothing, then everything can oscillate, and no God (or immutable) is necessary to justify the becoming of the world. If philosophical thought, in its initial configuration, has thought of the immutable as the condition of possibility of the existence of the becoming of the world, in its most coherent development it has come to the conclusion that if becoming exists (that is, if things oscillate between being and non-being), then no immutable being can exist. The goal of *Law and Chance* is to identify the dynamics that produce the decline of traditional thought and of its willingness to define truth in an unconfutable way. The existence of every 'immutable being' negates becoming, and this is the reason for the rejection of traditional thought, which would have wanted to reduce the contingent world (as that which can indifferently occur or not occur) to such absolute norms. Contemporary criticism is based on the awareness that every eternal (absolute) being should want to impose itself on the totality of beings and therefore demand that everything be subjected to it. Severino emphasises that the basis of every theoretical disinterest is a practical interest: 'Pure seeing [which traditional philosophy has understood as disinterested knowledge] is praxis: in fact, the most powerful

form of praxis that can exist in the history of the West before the appearance of modern science' (*Law and Chance*). The incontrovertible truth evoked by the Greeks is in fact a form of absolute power on becoming, and the prediction of every possible happening: it is a prediction because there is nothing of the present, of the past and of the future that can escape to its legislation; but just because it reaches the present, the most distant past and the most distant future, it constitutes an infallible prediction and an absolute power on the becoming of the world. As absolute dominion over becoming, the *epistème* (as Greek thought calls the stable knowledge that cannot be disproved) annihilates not only any attempt to go beyond the limit imposed by any supreme legislation, but also the very becoming of the world. It is this essential feature of the *epistème* (its being a dominant and annihilating knowledge) that marks the passage from epistemic predictions to scientific ones, and to the experimental method. The epistemic legislation also reaches what, not having happened yet, is still nothing, anticipating its essential meaning by transforming what is still nothing into an already existing thing – thus cancelling all the unpredictability of becoming. In this way, the coming out from nothing is reduced to a mere appearance. But for the same *epistème* and for the West, becoming is what is not erasable, because the becoming of things is the *maximum evident*. Since the submission to an eternal being would cancel the contingent character of all events – that is, the possibility of understanding them as being nothing before they happen and after they have happened – any absolute (immutable) is critically rejected by the profound essence of contemporary

philosophy and epistemology: the decisive argument that swirls beneath the surface of the thought of our time is the faith in the becoming of things, a faith that is destined to sweep away any absolute truth that differs from that of which that faith is the full expression. Then, science and technique can explain everything without any hypostatization of absolute beings. This is the cornerstone of *Law and Chance*.

The fifth axis, which entirely involves the scientific observation of phenomena, is inherent in the way we observe any facts and interpret them. *Law and Chance* also includes the 'Introduction' to Severino's translation<sup>3</sup> of Carnap's *Der Logische Aufbau der Welt* and the discussion of Carnap's philosophy. The strict analysis of the logic-positivistic position inherent to what appears is also a significant task, which Severino undertakes precisely in order to analyse one of the most coherent manifestations of contemporary philosophy's subordination to science. This analysis, however, shows how the concept of 'appearing' in Severino's thought is radical but also so cogent that it could also be assumed by even the most rigorous neo-positivist thinkers. Actually, the rigorous observation of what appears permits us to say that it is impossible to say that we can observe an act of creation and an act of annihilation. It is absolutely impossible to say that 'nothingness' appears. Severino shows that, contrary to what Western philosophy assumes, no becoming appears in the sense of the appearing of the annihilation or of the becoming *ex nihilo* of beings. It is thus incorrect to say that Severino's perspective denies experience, and that claiming the eternity of every being amounts to denying the manifold display of what appears. On the contrary,

Severino contends that the content that actually appears does not testify to the annihilation and creation of beings in any way. Appearing and experience cannot attest to what no longer belongs or to what does not yet belong to experience, has become nothing or is still nothing. To consider the 'becoming' testified by experience as a coming from or returning to nothingness is thus only the content of a 'faith.' The different forms in which this faith in the fundamental error is manifested compete with each other. Throughout history, the winning manifestation of the different expressions of faith has unfolded. Today, the dominant faith in the evidence of becoming demands that the only possible science is scientific theory understood as hypothetical anticipation of events. *Law and Chance* discusses this specific form of scientific faith and its power. What clearly emerges is the essential meaning of the 'destruction' of the immutables of the epistemic tradition by contemporary thought. The 'event' comes from its own nothingness, and therefore it is 'chance': it is becoming understood as the sphere in which things come out of nothingness and return to nothingness. It is exactly this (Greek) understanding of the becoming that is at the basis of modern science and constitution of the same experimental method. In fact, if in the process of experience things come out from nothing and they return to nothing, such a process cannot be anticipated if not in a hypothetical form. And the experimental method assumes that any scientific theory or model may be changeable because of the unpredictability of chance. Well, if in the process of experience things come out from nothing and they return to nothing, such a process cannot be anticipated if not in a hypothetical form. The

Greek sense of becoming necessarily brings to an end every metaphysical-philosophical conception of theory and imposes as the only possible form of 'theory' the one that is constituted not as an incontrovertible rule of the event, but as an open hypothesis: 'In this respect, every scientific law (be that causal or probabilistic) is a law of chance' (*Law and Chance*). What escapes the self-consciousness of scientific knowledge, remaining trapped in the unconscious of the process in which modern science itself consists, is the Greek soul of its own essence: 'Contemporary culture has, by now, acquired a thorough awareness of the hypothetical character of science, as well as of its extreme possibilities of domination. What, instead, keeps being overlooked is that modern science is the most powerful form of domination because it is the one that best conforms to the Greek meaning of becoming' (*Law and Chance*). By ignoring this hidden essence, scientific knowledge cannot prevent the epistemic attitude that introduces immutable forms (e.g. determinism in the theory of relativity) from reappearing in it (in the most diverse forms), which are nevertheless objectively overcome. But in its deepest essence, the philosophy of our time shows the inevitability of the death of absolute metaphysical-epistemic truth: it brings to coherence the fundamental principle of Western thought, namely the persuasion that the becoming of the world is the supreme self-evidence, thereby peremptorily denying that there can be an eternal reality that regulates this oscillation. (Thinkers such as Giacomo Leopardi, Friedrich Nietzsche and Giovanni Gentile, to whom Severino has dedicated important studies, would come to this mature awareness.) The extreme fidelity to the (presumed)

original self-evidence of the 'event' (i.e., of becoming) brings to an end every metaphysical-epistemic conception of theory, and opens the space in which techno-science can exercise its dominion over things.

*Law and Chance*, however, should be collocated in the entire path of Severino's discourse, which, while pointing at the extreme error, also shows its recognisability through its relation with the 'non-error' – that is, what he calls the 'originary structure' (*struttura originaria*) and later the 'originary structure of the destiny of truth'<sup>4</sup>: the undeniable appearing of every being's self-being as that whose negation is self-negation. To deny that being is not non-being (i.e. for the opposition of the positive and the negative to be *effectively* denied), it is necessary for the difference between being and non-being to appear as affirmed, otherwise we would not be dealing with a denial of the identity/non-contradiction of being:

In order to have a real negation of the opposition (and not merely an apparent one), it is necessary that the positive and the negative should first be posited as different (and so as opposites), and that one then posit the identity of the differents, i.e., that the differents *qua* differents are identical. As long as the differents are not seen as different, they must unquestionably be said to be identical; but if they are seen as different, and if, indeed, they must be held fast as different, in order that the affirmation of their identity may be negation of the opposition of the positive and the negative, then this negation is grounded upon the affirmation of what it denies.<sup>5</sup>

It follows that the denial of the difference (of the positive and the negative) by denying its own foundation, denies itself. Nihilism, as the alienation of authentic truth, is self-negating, and thus, starting from the destiny of truth, both epistemic metaphysics and contemporary thought are forms of the alienation of truth. The impossibility of the existence of a time in which beings that appear are 'not yet' or 'no longer' founds the impossibility of any creation and annihilation. And 'it is impossible' means that the claim that 'a being is not' is the negation of the originary structure, and more specifically, it is the negation of the opposition of the positive and the negative; it is the claim that being is other than itself. This means that they negate the fundamental principles of any logical assertion: the principle of identity, the principle of non-contradiction and the principle of the third excluded. This implicit negation is the basis of the self-negation that the *élenchos* makes explicit.

Severino reaches this conclusion after identifying the most ancient origin of the process, which started with the 'path of night', that consists in the extreme alienation of thought, which has always been opposed by a different path, the 'path of day'. Western philosophy achieves full coherence by denying the traditional way of defining truth, but in this way, it expresses its most profound alienation. In *Law and Chance*, Severino illustrates the reasons why the strongest power today is technology, guided by modern science, and why the planet is destined to the civilization of technology (which, however, is in turn destined to a time in which this technological paradise will decline). In *Law and Chance*, Severino analyses, in particular,

neo-positivism in its transition from its semantic phase (early Wittgenstein, Schlick, early Carnap) – where the validity of scientific language was placed in its reference to ‘facts’, and where propositions expressing the immediate contents of experience are posited as indubitable truth – to the syntactic approach (Neurath, the second Carnap, Popper), in which the objectivity of scientific language is not understood as the absolute truth of the propositions of science, but as their intersubjectivity, in the conviction that authentic knowledge can be nothing other than intersubjective knowledge. In fact, it is the coherent development of the will to power that destroys everything that would nullify that becoming of the world that, for Western civilisation, is instead valid as the original self-evidence. What the critical self-consciousness of science fails to perceive, however, is that the same ‘inclusion of the datum in the context of an intersubjective consensus, or lack thereof – the inclusion with which the datum obtains a scientific value – is an interpretation’ (*Law and Chance*). And it is precisely on the theme of the intersubjectivity of scientific knowledge that, in *Law and Chance*, Severino examines the last great project for a unitary arrangement of culture: Carnap’s system of constitution – in which the unifying and subordinating principle is no longer a philosophical-metaphysical-theological horizon, but a scientific one, and where it is precisely the instance of intersubjectivity ‘comes in this way to be fully accountable for the rejection of metaphysics’ (*Law and Chance*). The history of the West is the history of the will to power that frees itself of everything that would frustrate its effective exercise. Thus, linguistic mediation presents itself as the

concrete place of becoming within which things are continually produced and transformed. For Severino, this is the history of the essential alienation of a thought that, in wanting things to become something else, wants, in its unconscious, things to be nothing – wants the impossible.

Finally, it is important to revisit the final specific feature of Severino's indication, which lies beyond the present clash between tradition and the civilisation of techno-science, both driven by the same persuasion that things oscillate between being and non-being. Please note: the content indicated by Emanuele Severino's writings is certainly the negation of the error and the erring in which that persuasion consists, but it does not annul the error – which in itself is nothing – nor does it annul the erring, but sees the nullity of the content of the erring and the essential self-supersession of the erring. (In this sense, it is not even correct to say that Severino's discourse is anti-traditional, and anti-contemporary. It is not correct to the extent that the prefix 'anti' indicates some will to annul what is denied). If the coming from and the return to nothingness cannot appear, this means that the variations in the world are the appearing and disappearing of beings, and this appears incontrovertibly. Thus, it must be the case that every variation in the world is the beginning of the appearing of the eternal beings that did not appear before, or the no-longer-appearing of the eternal beings that appeared before; beginning and ceasing to appear do not mean beginning and ceasing to be, but entering and leaving the horizon of appearing.