

# Consciousness without Existence: Descartes, Severino and the Interpretation of Experience

Andrea Sangiacomo

**Abstract:** Consciousness is connected with the fact that a subject is aware and open to the manifestation of whatever appears. Existence, by contrast, is used to express the fact that something is given in experience, is present, or is real. Usually, the two notions are taken to be somehow related. This chapter suggests that existence is at best introduced as a metaphysical (or meta-experiential) concept that inevitably escapes the domain of conscious experience. In order to illustrate this claim, two case studies are considered. The first case is provided by Descartes's famous treatment of consciousness and existence in his *Meditations on First Philosophy*. The second case is meant to contrast the Cartesian approach by taking the opposite route, as delineated by Emanuele Severino (1929–2020) in his “fundamental ontology.”

**Keywords:** René Descartes, Emanuele Severino, consciousness, existence.

Aññathābhāvi bhavasatto loko,  
Bhavapareto bhavamevābhinandati;  
Yadabhinandati taṃ bhayaṃ,  
Yassa bhāyati taṃ dukkhaṃ;  
Bhavavippahānāya kho,  
Panidaṃ brahmacariyaṃ vussati.

From one existence to another, the  
world is attached to existence,  
oppressed by existence, and yet it seeks delight in existence.

For one who seeks delight, there is fear,  
for one who fears, there is suffering.  
It is indeed for abandoning existence,  
that this holy life is lived.

*Udāna* 3.10

τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ νοεῖν ἐστίν τε καὶ εἶναι.  
Indeed, knowing and being are the same.  
Parmenides, Fragment 5

## 1. Consciousness and Existence

Consciousness or awareness (taken here as synonyms) is usually connected with the ability to experiencing reality, or with the fact that a subject is aware and

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Referee List (DOI 10.36253/fup\_referee\_list)

FUP Best Practice in Scholarly Publishing (DOI 10.36253/fup\_best\_practice)

Andrea Sangiacomo, *Consciousness without Existence: Descartes, Severino and the Interpretation of Experience*, © Author(s), CC BY 4.0, DOI 10.36253/979-12-215-0169-8.10, in Andrea Strazzoni, Marco Sgarbi (edited by), *Reading Descartes. Consciousness, Body, and Reasoning*, pp. 169-198, 2023, published by Firenze University Press, ISBN 979-12-215-0169-8, DOI 10.36253/979-12-215-0169-8

open to the manifestation or “appearing”<sup>1</sup> of some content of experience. Existence, by contrast, is usually taken as a more objective notion, which is used to express the fact that something is given in experience, is present, or is real. Usually, the two notions are taken to be somehow related. If one takes consciousness as the starting point, then the problem becomes that of assessing whether, and to what extent, consciousness gives access to something that exists in its own right, independently of consciousness itself, and hence in the “external world.” If one takes existence as the starting point instead, then the issue is how to account for the role of consciousness in the conceptualization of existence, or whether and to what extent existence can be understood as independent from any form of consciousness. When consciousness is taken to have some sort of primacy over existence, the resulting philosophical position is a variety of idealism, while if it is existence that takes over, the result is a variety of realism.

In order to illustrate the way in which consciousness and existence can be related to one another, this chapter considers two case studies. The first case is provided by Descartes’s famous treatment of consciousness and existence in his *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Descartes’s case exemplifies a way in which, by taking conscious experience as one’s starting point, existence is eventually posited as a necessary inference, which points to both a ground of experience and yet reveals how this ground does not (and cannot) itself appear within that same experience. In this way, existence can be understood as “consciousness-independency” or as the way in which contents of consciousness can also have a form reality beyond and outside of conscious experience. Descartes’s discussion is relevant because it both attempts to define existence as “consciousness-independency” and shows that such a notion must fall entirely outside the scope of experience.

The second case is meant to contrast the Cartesian approach by taking the opposite route, as delineated by Emanuele Severino (1929–2020) in his “fundamental ontology,” which he conceived as an ontological discussion that can capture the structure of all reality.<sup>2</sup> Severino’s case provides a particularly inter-

<sup>1</sup> This less colloquial expression will be used in the remainder of this chapter in order to stress that whatever appears is not just a mere “appearance” (in the sense of being a “semblance,” somehow different from a more fundamental reality). The act of being manifest in experience is itself an act of “appearing” insofar as the reality of whatever is manifesting is fully expressed in its coming to manifestation (or by its becoming a *phenomenon*).

<sup>2</sup> Severino was a disciple of Gustavo Bontadini (1903–1990), who taught at the Catholic University in Milan and was a relevant voice of Italian neo-scholasticism. Severino himself began his academic career as a professor at the Catholic University. However, in 1970, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith established that Severino’s thesis that all beings are eternal (as already clearly expressed in some of Severino’s fundamental publications, like his paper “Ritornare a Parmenide” published in 1964 in the *Rivista di Filosofia Neoscolastica*, now in Severino 2016, 35–83), was incompatible with Christianity and the belief in a creator God. As a result, Severino had to leave the Catholic University. Despite this abrupt separation, Severino never ceased to reflect on notions, categories and themes derived from Christian theology, as exemplified in his reinvention of concepts like “Glory” (see Severino 2001) or his rethinking of a sort of eschatology in one of his last books (Severino 2011).

esting contrast to Descartes's discussion, since it is deliberately aimed at taking the notion of existence as the most fundamental one, even more fundamental than the notion of consciousness itself. In other words, Severino takes as its starting point the opposite of Descartes's subjectivist turn. In Severino's account, existence is defined as "non-contradictoriness" and it is seemingly released by any further reference to consciousness. In fact, (subjective, empirical) consciousness itself is treated as an entity among others, without any special status. Conceiving of existence as "non-contradictoriness" means that the sky, the buildings, the people, the trees, and even the consciousness that is aware of them all share the same property of not being a sheer nothingness. Hence, they all exist in this fundamental sense in the same way; all the remaining differences are just differences in *how* existing things exist.

To accomplish this move, Severino replaces the notion of consciousness with a notion of "appearing" (Italian *apparire*), which expresses the fact that there is some content of experience immediately and phenomenally available in the first place. The way in which existence and appearing are related is at the core of Severino's reflection. This reveals that his account, *mutatis mutandis*, is another way of reconceiving the connection between "consciousness" and "existence" in different terms, while avoiding Descartes's subjectivist stance and the problems that come with it. As it will become apparent, however, Severino encounters problems as well. In order to give full coherence to his account, he is forced to admit that the structure of existence is ultimately incapable of properly appearing within conscious experience, even when conscious experience is precisely about it (such as in the case of Severino's own attempt of theorizing the fundamental structure of reality).

Taken together, Descartes and Severino's positions describe two extremes of a potentially more complex spectrum of possible ways of conceiving of the relation between consciousness and existence. However, despite their differences, they uncover similar problems connected with how the two notions are supposed to work together. By reflecting on the issues that emerge from this comparison, it can be surmised that the notion of existence is parasitic over that of consciousness, in the sense that existence is at best introduced as a metaphysical (or meta-experiential) concept that inevitably escapes the domain of conscious experience. But since experience is by definition accessible and available only through consciousness, existence should be either deflated to anything that is given in consciousness, or it remains something entirely ungraspable. While this claim might have an idealist ring to it, it does not assert that existence *is* the fact that a certain content is given in consciousness, or that the being or reality of any entity depends on consciousness only. Rather, it asserts that the very conceptualization of existence as something above and beyond conscious experience is experientially unwarranted and conceptually problematic. The suggestion is that experience can be meaningfully analyzed and conceptualized by relying on the notion of consciousness alone, without any further need to connect it with existence. While existence without consciousness is problematic, consciousness without existence is not.

## 2. Descartes's Account of Consciousness and Existence

Descartes is one of the first who introduced an epistemic notion of consciousness into the Western philosophical debate. Stressing this historical circumstance is important to realize that the philosophical history of consciousness is not that long, after all. Before Descartes the term “consciousness” and its cognates had predominantly a moral meaning, referring to the “inner forum” within which one would be aware of good and evil, sin and responsibility, and so forth.<sup>3</sup> In order to carry out his plan of reforming sciences and philosophy, Descartes began to play with a different notion of consciousness, which he used to capture a form of self-transparency through which a thinking subject can be immediately aware and perceive its own thoughts. On this basis, Descartes discusses “existence” as “consciousness-independency” in order to reach out for some sort of reality that is different from the thinking subject itself. There is a subtle play of concepts here: the two notions are clearly dependent on one another, and yet the *meaning* of existence is ultimately taken to refer to something that is *ontologically independent* from consciousness itself. This notion of existence entails, for instance, that there are things that exist in their own way, outside of “my” consciousness of them.<sup>4</sup>

According to Descartes, experience can be analyzed using the following five-fold structure (which will be unpacked in the following discussion):

[Because of God]<sup>0</sup> [I am]<sup>1</sup>  
 [conscious of]<sup>2</sup> [an idea about]<sup>3</sup> [an object]<sup>4</sup>  
 [that exists in the world]<sup>5</sup>

Each of the five elements singled out here can be more or less problematic. In the *Meditations* (as spelled out below), the core of this structure is constituted by elements 2-3-4: consciousness of ideas about objects. Descartes's phrasing usually employs *thought* as more fundamental than consciousness, but this is more a terminological than a conceptual issue. Any thought, in order to be available to the subject and be part of experience, needs to be a conscious thought, and thought without consciousness would not be accessible even to the thinking subject.<sup>5</sup> The notion of consciousness is thus used to express the fact that

<sup>3</sup> For an historical sketch of the emergence of this notion in early modern Western philosophy, see Thiel 2011; Jorgensen 2020.

<sup>4</sup> From a more historical point of view, Descartes's account has been subject to endless criticisms. It might seem that Descartes simply introduces the notion of consciousness without providing a full-blown analysis of it. This might be misleading, see discussion in Simmons 2012.

<sup>5</sup> See Descartes's *Second Replies*: “*Thought*. I use this term to include everything that is within us in such a way that we are immediately aware [*conscii*] of it. Thus, all the operations of the will, the intellect, the imagination and the senses are thoughts. I say ‘immediately’ so as to exclude the consequences of thoughts; a voluntary movement, for example, originates in a thought” (AT 7, 160; CSM 2, 113). In this passage, Descartes claims that *thought* is actually whatever is present in a thinking thing (a mind) as something of which that thing is conscious.

there is some experience, manifestation, appearing of something. This entails that there cannot be any experience without consciousness. All experience is conscious experience.

The implication of this remark is momentous: whatever is experienced is only (and could only) be experienced as a content of consciousness. It is impossible to “meet” an object “face-to-face” in a completely immediate and direct way. All that is experienced is experienced in consciousness; hence, all that is experienced are contents of consciousness. The very notion of “object” ends up signifying primarily “content of consciousness.” Descartes then speaks of “ideas” in order to stress this fact.<sup>6</sup> We do not see tables, hear music or touch water. Rather, we are conscious of ideas about tables, music and water. In this way, Descartes introduces what can be called “the veil of representation,” which is nothing but those ideas through which we can be aware of contents of experience. In fact, ideas *are* the only content of experience, since all that can be experienced is experienced in consciousness, and contents of consciousness are ideas.<sup>7</sup>

Ideas themselves are “representative beings,” they are like portraits or pictures that represent certain qualities, characteristics or other features of certain objects. Ideas are *about* something and they refer to this content as their object. The idea of me hearing music is different from the idea of me touching water. Because the contents of these ideas are different, these ideas represent (or have) different objects. Hence, not only is consciousness *about* ideas (consciousness is consciousness of ideas), but also ideas are *about* objects (ideas are ideas of certain objects). This *about*-ness is a way of expressing the fact that both consciousness and ideas are *intentional* entities. Intentionality here can be understood in the broadest sense of being the quality of pointing at something, or rather being able to discriminate between *this* and *that*, having a determinate content (“determinate” means that *this* is not *that*, or that there is a difference that makes *this* appearing as not-*that*). The Cartesian structure entails that intentionality shapes both consciousness and ideas, or that both these elements are based on the same intentional structure (they are “about something”).

Since ideas are based on consciousness and depend on it (just as anything else), Descartes considers them as “modes,” namely, as ways in which the activity of consciousness unfolds, and which in themselves depend on consciousness to be and be conceived. Hence, there is an ontological hierarchy between consciousness and ideas: there is no free-floating idea that is not underpinned by consciousness. Since ideas are themselves objects of consciousness, the fact that they are experienced presupposes that there is a consciousness that experiences them. However, consciousness itself is a phenomenon that is *somehow*

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Descartes's *Second Replies*: “*Idea*. I understand the term to mean the form of any given thought, immediate perception of which makes me aware [*consciuis*] of the thought” (AT 7, 160; CSM 2, 113).

<sup>7</sup> For further historical exploration of this notion of a “veil of representation,” see Nadler 1989; Adriaenssen 2017.

manifest (if it was absolutely unmanifest, no experience could be manifest at all, which does not seem to be the case); but consciousness as such cannot be an idea, nor be manifest as an idea, since consciousness is needed in the first place in order to have the experience of any idea at all. When one is conscious of a certain idea, one is conscious of *both* that idea and of the fact of being conscious of it. Hence, consciousness is manifest in experience, but not as the content of a particular idea; rather, consciousness is manifest as what allows any idea to be experienced. But if consciousness as such is radically different from any of its contents (ideas), then is consciousness even graspable at all? Anything we can say *about* consciousness will inevitably constitute an *idea* of consciousness, and hence something different from consciousness as such. But if we cannot experience consciousness through ideas, then how do we experience it?

Descartes's solution is well known: *I am* that consciousness that is aware of ideas. The fact that there are ideas entails that there is consciousness, and the fact that there is consciousness entails that *I am* that consciousness. This first-person phrasing means that there is an immediate access of the subject ("me") to its own consciousness, and this direct access is what accounts for the experience of consciousness that the subject has. In the Cartesian scheme, any experience of consciousness as such can only be the experience of a certain subject who is conscious of their own consciousness.

With his famous *Cogito, sum* Descartes introduces a further dimension in his account of the structure of experience: *existence*. The subject of consciousness is supposed to express the fact that consciousness itself is a manifest phenomenon, while at the same time preserving the intuition that consciousness is more fundamental than any idea, and hence it cannot be itself an idea (regardless of how many ideas *about* consciousness one can form). Existence ("I am") is thus a way of grounding consciousness into something else and more fundamental, which can in turn account for the fact that consciousness is present and manifests in the way in which it does (*sui generis*, namely, not through an idea of consciousness). While all contents of experience are available *in* consciousness, consciousness itself is available because *I exist* and *I am* (or *I have*) that consciousness.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> By contrast, according to Christofidou 2022, Descartes's *Cogito* does not introduce or demonstrate the existence of the subject. Rather, by taking it for granted, it is aimed at proving its *indubitability*. In the same paper, Christofidou also presents a case for the impossibility of any experience of consciousness that is not underpinned by a real existing self or subject. For present purposes, two remarks are in order. First, the investigation here focuses on the relation between conscious experience and existence. In order to ensure that existence is not reduced to just "being a content of consciousness," it must refer to something external to consciousness. If Descartes was merely assuming the existence of the subject and only demonstrating its indubitability, it would remain an open question whether this subject is itself just another (perhaps special) content of consciousness (in which case, "existence" would be reduced to conscious experience), or not (in which case, its existence must be external to conscious experience, hence not directly or immediately given, and therefore in need for some further inference or support). Second, the fact that conscious experience needs to be framed in a subject-object perspective does not entail that the subjective per-

Existence is both the assertion that there is a more fundamental subject of experience that underpins consciousness *and* that this subject is immediately in touch with consciousness, or better: consciousness is the consciousness owned by that subject. Existence thus entails both a form of appropriation (consciousness belongs to the subject who is aware and cannot be separated from it) and the assumption that there is something more fundamental than consciousness itself (namely, the existence of the subject of consciousness), which is also somehow external to it.

The element of appropriation is crucial to ensure that the experience of consciousness itself is accessible to whoever is actually reflecting upon it. In his *Meditations*, Descartes is not speculating about someone else's consciousness or about consciousness from a third-person perspective, but rather on that very phenomenon of consciousness that is immediately available to him while meditating. In order to account for this immediacy, Descartes concludes that this immediately available consciousness can be experienced in this unique way only because it is actually *his* own consciousness (Descartes's reasoning can be applied by whoever is currently going through these reflections). The appeal to subjectivity, introspection, or a first-person perspective are all just devices used to account for this immediacy.

The element of externality can be justified only by spelling out an implicit and seemingly commonsensical assumption, namely, the fact that consciousness is (or appears as) a *finite* consciousness, or the consciousness that I experience as a finite subject. This assumption comes together with the idea of appropriation just mentioned: by observing that *I am* this consciousness, I am also appropriating the experience of consciousness as something belonging to me as a finite subject.<sup>9</sup> Now, conceiving of existence (my existence) as external to consciousness is a way of ensuring that I am the ground of this finite consciousness or that consciousness belongs to this finite subject that I am. If existence was not external to consciousness in this sense, then it would be either a sheer idea or concept with no definite or added meaning (in such a way that saying "I am conscious of X" or "X exists" would be interchangeable expressions) or it would entail that consciousness is the ground of itself. But assuming that something is the ground of itself (or a *causa sui*) is problematic. Descartes himself is skeptical about the validity of self-grounding,<sup>10</sup> and if this notion was applied to consciousness, it would entail that consciousness would have properties such as eternity

spective must entail necessarily a real existing entity. A phenomenal subjective perspective might be just a constitutive quality of conscious experience, and this might be enough to account (by definition) for the subjective quality of conscious experience, without any further indication that such a perspective requires an underpinning entity in order to be established.

<sup>9</sup> The fact that the meditator is a finite subject is not proved in Descartes's discussion until the *Third Meditation*, but it is assumed as a commonsensical hypothesis since the start and it is implicitly at work in the *First* and *Second Meditations*.

<sup>10</sup> See discussion in Carraud 2002, 167–293.

and infinity that would not belong to a finite subject. In other words, *assuming* that consciousness manifests as the consciousness of a finite subject, such a consciousness must then have a ground (since it cannot be self-grounding), and this ground must exist somehow externally to consciousness itself. Stating *Cogito, sum*, Descartes is thus moving from the domain of direct conscious experience (*Cogito*) to the ontological ground that underpins that experience (*sum*).<sup>11</sup>

The element of externality is crucial in order to ensure that existence (my existence) can ground consciousness. If my existence was not somehow external to consciousness, it would be just a content of consciousness. Hence, it would be an idea. But an idea cannot ground the phenomenon of consciousness because any idea requires that consciousness is already preliminarily established. Consciousness as such is a phenomenon (it appears), but it does *not* appear as an idea. Hence, it must be grounded in something else, something that in itself *is not* an idea of consciousness, something then *external* to both consciousness and its ideas.<sup>12</sup>

According to Descartes, the possibility that the condition for all experience (consciousness) is in itself ungrounded is simply absurd. Hence, there must be a ground for consciousness.<sup>13</sup> Since this ground cannot be consciousness itself, it has to be different from it. But given that all experience is the conscious experience of ideas, if existence is different from consciousness and ideas, then it needs to be located outside the veil of representation. In fact, external existence *cannot* be experienced directly (by definition), but its presence must be somehow

<sup>11</sup> The fact that the *Cogito* might be interpreted as an inference will be discussed briefly below. But Descartes's assumptions concerning the existence of a finite subject are far from obvious, as an even superficial comparison with ancient Indian philosophy would reveal. Since the *Upanishads*, Indian thinkers tended to acknowledge a certain form of universal consciousness as the foundation of all phenomenal experience, but this went together with the recognition that the true subject (or Self) of this universal consciousness could not be the finite self of ordinary life, which in fact needed to be transcended or somehow subsumed in universal consciousness. Diverging from this view, the early Buddhist tradition challenged even the idea that consciousness entails the *existence* of a Self, since the presence of a subjective perspective in first-person experience might be just an effect (hence, part of the *content*) of consciousness and of how it intentionally experiences any object, without this necessarily having any further ontological implications (see discussion in Ganeri 2007). In fact, since the early discourses of the Buddha, the notion of "existence" is regarded as problematic and best abandoned altogether (see on this point Sangiacomo 2022).

<sup>12</sup> One might object: if consciousness is only consciousness of ideas, how do we know that there is a consciousness beyond the sum or collection of all ideas? Doesn't this notion of "consciousness as such" entail some illicit form of abstraction or hypostatization of what is nothing but a common trait of all ideas? To this objection, Descartes would reply by pointing out that ideas could neither be, nor be conceived without referring to conscious thought, while conscious thought does not need any particular idea in order to be. Hence, conscious thought is more fundamental than (and different from) any idea.

<sup>13</sup> This assumption goes back to the widely accepted axiom according to which *actiones sunt suppositorum* (actions belong to their subjects). Interestingly, Descartes and Hobbes (who disagree sharply about the nature of what exists and whether thought can exist as an immaterial independent substance), *both* subscribe to this principle (cf. e.g. AT 7, 175; CSM 2, 123).



inferred from what is experienced directly. This provides a more precise definition of existence itself. Since existence cannot be just a content of consciousness but must refer to something outside of conscious experience, existence can be taken in a more proper sense to mean “consciousness-independency,” namely, anything that can be established or posited in such a way that its nature is not grounded in consciousness itself.

Once the notion of existence as something external to consciousness is introduced, Descartes can further expand the domain of objects to which this notion can apply, besides the thinking subject. Consider again the fact that all ideas have an object to which they refer. In a sense, objects in themselves are unproblematic since all ideas necessarily have objects. An idea without an object would not be *about something*; hence, it could not be an idea. For a similar reason, an object has to be always determinate to some degree (it must be *this* and not *that*); otherwise it could not be an intentional object.<sup>14</sup> From another point of view, however, objects are profoundly problematic, insofar as they seem to entail that what they represent exists in its own right outside of the idea itself. Notice that, without the previous reflection, one could simply dismiss this fact as being nothing but another object of an idea (the *idea of external existence*). However, since it has been established that some kind of external existence is more than a possible object of an idea, but rather the ground for any experience of any idea whatsoever, it becomes cogent to investigate whether external existence applies to more than just “me.”

Descartes is positive about the solution of this problem. He points out two main candidates for external existence: God and material objects. Descartes’s arguments for the existence of God are complex and controversial in their own right, but for present purposes it is enough to draw attention to just the following point. The existence of God is based on a quest for grounding that is similar to the quest that leads to establish the *Cogito*. This can be approached from two perspectives. From the point of view of “me” (*a posteriori* proof, *Third Meditation*), one can ask what is the ground that allows for the existence of this subject that “I am.” In order to prevent a regress (assuming that an existential regress is unacceptable), one needs to establish that there is at least one entity that is endowed with external existence in virtue of its own nature, and we call this entity “God” for short.<sup>15</sup> From the point of view of existence itself (*a priori* proof, *Fifth Meditation*), one can ask: what is the ground for the existence of existence, given that existence itself lies outside of the veil of representation, and hence we

<sup>14</sup> A non-determinate object could not be intentionally aimed at because it would not be possible to aim at it and make this act different from any other act *not* aiming at that same object.

<sup>15</sup> In the *Third Meditation*, Descartes first introduces considerations on the possibility of inferring external existence from the degree of reality represented by the objects of ideas. This principle will be crucial for his proof of the existence of an external material world in the *Sixth Meditation*. For present purposes, attention here is drawn to the set of reasonings that Descartes introduces in the second half of the *Third Meditation*, stressing the ontological dependence of any finite substance on an infinite substance, cf. AT 7, 46–52; CSM 2, 32–5.

do not have any direct or immediate experience of it? Again, assuming that one wants to avoid a regress, it will be necessary to assume that existence entails its own existence or is self-grounding. However, if existence entails its own existence, then it has to be perfect, infinite, eternal. Hence, it will be “God.” Whatever exists, then, is either God or something that existentially depends on God (in Descartes’s terminology: finite substances, like *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, created and constantly conserved by God).

If the *Cogito* provided a way to establish that there must be something beyond consciousness (namely, “me”), further reflection on the notion of existence entails that there is also necessarily something beyond the subject who is currently aware (namely, God). In the structure outlined at the beginning, God has to be positioned ahead of *I am*, since God’s existence is an ontological ground for “my” existence as well. The existence of God is deeply connected with the nature of external existence as such and with its conceptual implications. By itself, it does not seem to say anything about the existence of other finite objects beyond the veil of representation. And yet, once external existence has been extended to another entity different from “me,” Descartes can more easily prove that it can extend to even more entities, which together constitute the “world” of what there is. This last step is taken in the *Sixth Meditation* and in Descartes’s argument for proving the existence of material objects (AT 7, 77–80; CSM 2, 54–5).

Again, Descartes’s argument is complex and can be challenged on many fronts. For present purposes, it could be summarized as follows: since (i) there are objects of ideas that clearly and distinctly represent certain entities as material objects, which are genuinely different from the nature of consciousness and ideas themselves (*res extensa* appears to be genuinely different and irreducible to *res cogitans*); and given that (ii) the existence of God ensures that the objects of my clear and distinct ideas cannot be systematically misleading (God’s veracity is a guarantee of clear and distinct ideas); it follows that (iii) these entities must exist outside of my ideas in the way in which they are clearly and distinctly perceived through these ideas.

Notice that since external existence remains something beyond the veil of representation, demonstrating the existence of the material world does not entail that one’s experience of it will change or be affected in any way. The only way to experience the material world is still through ideas; hence, the only experience of the material world remains wholly confined within the realm of consciousness and ideas. And yet, one can *infer* that beyond these representations there is also a real world of real material things that exists in its own right.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> How material objects exist requires some qualification: they exist in the way in which they are *clearly and distinctly* represented, meaning that only insofar as external material objects are conceivable through the idea of extension (or through mathematics and geometry) can also be considered to have external existence (because God can guarantee only clear and distinct ideas, and only ideas of mathematics and geometry offer a clear and distinct representation of material and sensory objects). This further problem, though, concerns the degree of isomorphism (or lack thereof) between ideas and existing things, and can be set aside for present purposes.

Consider again Descartes's fivefold structure of experience. Its representation can now be further qualified by distinguishing between the domain of conscious experience and the domain of external existence as follows (Figure 1).

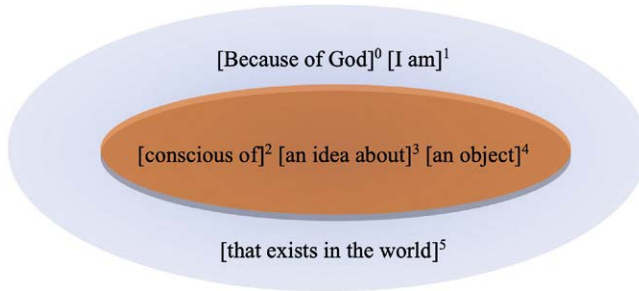


Figure 1 – The Cartesian Structure of Experience.

In this structure, all the elements (2-3-4) that fall into the inner space constitute the actual domain of conscious experience, while those that fall into the outer space (0-1 and 5) constitute the domain of external existence. In this sense, the fivefold structure can also be simplified into a twofold structure based on conscious experience and external existence. The space of conscious experience is circled by the veil of representation, meaning that whatever is placed beyond it is accessible only via inference, but it cannot be an immediate object of experience. One can form ideas about external existence, God and sensible objects, but one cannot experience them “face-to-face,” namely, without relying on an idea of them. Since whatever one experiences is consciousness of an idea (and not the immediate encounter with the object itself), the veil of representation is inescapable. And yet, inference might allow one to reach beyond that veil, based on what is manifest within the space of conscious experience.

Descartes uses existence as a conceptual tool to reach beyond the veil of representation by inferentially establishing the reality of a thinking substance, God, and the material world as given in their own right, more or less prior or independently from any conscious experience of them.<sup>17</sup> However, this structure tends to collapse under its own weight. As already mentioned, if existence was picking up merely the presence of any content within conscious experience, then it would become an idle notion. In order to do proper philosophical work, existence needs to entail a degree of externality with respect to consciousness, so that by stating the existence of something one can say more than just acknowl-

<sup>17</sup> While the thinking subject is not really distinguished from conscious experience (since consciousness belongs to thought and thought is an essential attribute of the thinking substance), the fact that thought is conceived as an attribute shows that it is ontologically subordinated to the notion of substance itself to which it belongs.

edging the conscious experience of it, and in fact point to some aspect of that experience that transcends consciousness and can be posited in its own right.

As mentioned, an important assumption behind Descartes's *Cogito* argument is that the thinking subject is a *finite* subject. Conceiving of the subject as finite, though, can occur only in the form of having an *idea* of the subject. When Descartes assumes the subject to be finite, he thus takes at face value a certain idea that he has of himself and backs it up by attributing existence to it. But since Descartes is not interested in producing just another set of ideas *about* consciousness, but rather in underscoring its fundamental ground, no matter how many valid ideas one might generate, they will do nothing to *show* the actual nature or ground of consciousness since consciousness as such and by itself (as discussed above) cannot appear through any idea. All that can be reasonably said is that, among those ideas that are present in consciousness, one might have the idea of a finite thinking subject and then conceive of that subject as the subject of conscious experience. But this is just a connection between ideas; it says nothing about the nature of consciousness within which those ideas appear. In other words, any conceptualization of the subject of consciousness can occur only as a modification of the thinking substance (namely, via ideas), and hence it depends on that subject, but does not necessarily reveal or entail anything about its nature in itself considered. This does not mean that conscious experience does not have a *subjective* aspect (expressed by the fact that conscious experience appears to occur from a certain perspective), but this observation says nothing about the nature of the subject of consciousness, and even less about its real existence as an entity given in its own right.

This problem somehow surfaces in Descartes's own discussion. Remember that external existence is introduced as something that accounts for the ground of consciousness. But since existence, in order to remain a meaningful notion, cannot *appear* as such in conscious experience, this entails that consciousness *must appear* to be groundless in itself (or that consciousness must appear while simultaneously the existing subject that grounds consciousness does not appear in it). If consciousness did not appear to be groundless, the rest of the argument would not be needed, nor would it follow. If consciousness appeared as self-grounded in itself *qua* consciousness, then Descartes would not have been entitled to claim that there must really be an existing subject that underpins it (consciousness itself would have been enough). But if one grants that the space of conscious experience *actually appears* to be groundless in itself (or not to be grounded by itself), then it should also be granted that *it is possible* for something groundless (such as consciousness) to appear and be experienced in its groundlessness. If this is possible, much of the pressure for actually finding a ground of conscious experience outside of it is taken away, since now a direct and manifest experiential evidence is provided of something that clearly and distinctly appears as groundless. The need for inferring the (non-experienceable) domain of external existence is entirely based on the need for grounding conscious experience; but this same reflection reveals that the need for grounding conscious experience presupposes that conscious experience clearly appears and is man-

ifest as groundless in itself. Hence, it is possible for conscious experience to appear *and* lack a ground. However, if conscious experience can appear without having a ground, why should it be necessary to infer a ground for it? To put it in other words: what is the fuss about groundlessness?

Of course, one could immediately point out that conscious experience can appear only because its ground (external existence) is already there, and this is what makes it possible for it to appear as it does. I can think about and doubt anything only because *I am*, and not because thinking and doubting are free-floating activities that can unfold without any ground at all. However, if the existence of the subject appears only as *an idea* in consciousness, then it can provide no ground to it, as already mentioned. If it does *not* appear in consciousness, then in order for this (non-experienceable) ground to be ascertained, the groundless nature of conscious experience should be manifest first. In order to infer that *I am* the one who thinks and doubts, it is necessary for the conscious activity of thinking and doubting to appear in their own right first, hence without necessarily entailing that *I am* their ground (since “I” could just be another object of thinking and doubting).

To recapitulate, in order for consciousness to appear since the beginning as something grounded in an existing subject, then the existing subject should be either (i) an *idea* in consciousness, or (ii) the subject should appear within consciousness itself, or (iii) it should be identical with it. Regarding the first option, it has already been discussed why no idea can provide a ground for consciousness. Regarding the second option, the subject of consciousness cannot appear within consciousness (while simultaneously not being an idea) and also be the ground of consciousness. Consciousness is not a physical space but an intentional structure *about* something, and what consciousness is about are ideas. Appearing within consciousness without being an idea means that something is not an intentional object of consciousness; hence, it does not actually appear in consciousness. Regarding the third option, if the subject was identical with consciousness, then either consciousness should appear as completely ungrounded and the subject would not be its ground (contrary to the hypothesis), or consciousness would appear as capable of grounding itself, but then it would not be necessary to speak meaningfully (or in a non-deflationary way) about a really existing subject of consciousness, since this would be indistinguishable (per hypothesis) from consciousness itself.

For Descartes’s argument to go through, it is essential that consciousness appears and is experienced as inherently groundless in itself. Descartes’s discussion indirectly establishes that there is an experience of groundless consciousness, and this seems to be perfectly fine from a phenomenological point of view. Groundlessness *can* appear; even more, *this* appearing of groundlessness is the necessary premise for Descartes’s own inference about the existence of an existential ground of consciousness. Yet, if this experience of the groundless nature of consciousness becomes evident and is even needed, it becomes unclear why there would be any conceptual need to *infer* the existence of a non-experienceable ground for consciousness in order to ground it.

Descartes could (and did) further push back this sort of criticism, by insisting that there is no *inference* from consciousness to existence. Despite the fame of *Cogito, ergo sum*, in the *Meditations* there is no *ergo*, meaning that the acknowledgment of the existence of a thinking subject is already immediately entailed within the experience of consciousness itself. The reason why this line of defense is philosophically unsatisfactory is that the sort of existence attributed to the thinking subject must be qualitatively different from the fact of “being present in consciousness” (like an idea is). If “existence” only meant the latter, then the *Cogito* could not go through, since all contents of consciousness are subject to the malicious demon hypothesis, and the existence of the subject (if taken as a mere content of consciousness) would fall within the scope of that hypothesis as well. It is vital for Descartes’s argument to assume that the existence of the subject is qualitatively something more, namely, it has to be “external” to consciousness itself (in the way described above). However, this externality comes at the price of not being immediately accessible to experience (by definition, what is outside the space of consciousness cannot be directly experienced, since all direct experience is conscious experience of ideas). Hence, an inference is needed in order to establish something not-experienceable on the basis of something that is actually experienced. In other words, the inference is needed (Descartes cannot avoid the *ergo*) because the sort of existence at stake in the statement “I am” is different from the sort of experience entailed by the statement “I think” alone: the former entails “more” than the latter, and this “more” is not immediately visible in the latter (by definition). Hence, it only can (and must) be inferred from it.<sup>18</sup>

This problem is not solved by trying to push Descartes’s account towards a realist or idealist solution. In either case, one would have to establish a certain form of priority or other hierarchy between the two notions of consciousness and existence. But here the problem is that these two notions do not have the same conceptual cogency, since existence turns out to be a purely metaphysical (or meta-experiential) concept constructed in order to justify certain assumptions about the experience of consciousness (the finitude of the subject or the need for consciousness to have an ontological ground), which are in themselves nothing but *ideas*, and hence naturally subject to the hyperbolic doubt raised by Descartes himself at the beginning of the *Meditations*. While Descartes is warranted to take conscious experience to be somehow resilient against this doubt (since doubting can occur only within consciousness, and hence wherever there is doubt, there is conscious experience), this does not involve the way in which the subject of consciousness is conceived, since any such conception is by definition just a content of consciousness, and moreover a content that pretends (via its external existence) to be posited in its own right in such a way that no experience of its inherent existence is directly verifiable.

<sup>18</sup> To use Kantian terminology, one might say that *Cogito, sum* is a synthetic judgment, not an analytical judgment, and hence it needs proper justification, since it does not assert a logical tautology.

We can derive from this short survey of Descartes's discussion that defining existence as "consciousness-independency" comes with serious problems. But one might perhaps think that these problems are due to the Cartesian approach of starting with consciousness itself, and it is only because of this approach that the notion of existence turns out to be problematic. What if we start instead from existence straight away?

### 3. Severino's Account of Appearing and Non-contradictoriness

The problems raised by the Cartesian approach can be addressed in many ways. One possible solution would be to go back to a more "classic" approach, as that which seemed to be favored among ancient Greek philosophers, in which the investigation of experience and reality started with an investigation of "being" or "existence." Severino's philosophy can be envisaged as an attempt to revive this classic approach and develop it with all the extra rigor and sensitivity that can be gained from a direct confrontation with the problems that emerged afterwards.<sup>19</sup> Severino's "returning to Parmenides" and to Greek ontology is a deliberate turning away from the subjectivist trend opened by Descartes. Severino's philosophy is built on the intuition that existence is the most general and fundamental notion that is necessarily required for anything else to make sense and appear. Hence, philosophical reflection on the nature of reality must take existence itself as its starting point. In this sense, Severino's approach presents itself as the most explicit and elaborated attempt at offering a diametrically opposite alternative to Descartes's subjectivist investigation. The fact that, despite this intention, Severino's system will run into problems not too dissimilar from those encountered by Descartes, makes the comparison between the two particularly interesting, not only from a historical point of view, but especially from a theoretical point of view.

As a sign of his departure from any subjectivist and even idealist account, Severino's terminology shifts from the notion of "consciousness" to the notion of "appearing" (Italian *apparire*). Appearing expresses and encompasses all that is immediately evident and manifest in experience. From a subjectivist point of view, appearing would be interpreted as whatever is given in consciousness. The term "appearing," though, is meant to be more general and broader in scope than "consciousness," since it does not immediately refer to a subject and its experience, but simply to the fact that there is some experience and that experience is available for scrutiny. As it will soon become clear, Severino does not take "existence" to mean "consciousness-independent external existence," but rather "non-contradictoriness." This understanding of existence is again more general and broader than the one discussed in dealing with Descartes, and it

<sup>19</sup> Since most of Severino's major works are still published only in Italian, the following account is a short summary and paraphrase of his main ideas. Footnotes provide references to the core texts in which these ideas are developed.

subsumes the more subjectivist notion of existence as one particular instance of “non-contradictoriness.”<sup>20</sup>

Severino’s approach is based on the interaction between two principles, which he calls “logical immediacy” (*immediatezza logica*, L-immediacy) and “phenomenological immediacy” (*immediatezza fenomenologica*, F-immediacy).<sup>21</sup> Logical immediacy states that anything, in order to be what it is, must not be identical with its negation. In other terms, logical immediacy regards the principles of identity and non-contradiction as two mutually entailing (and ultimately inseparable) principles, whose negation is self-refuting. L-immediacy is a form of *immediacy* because it does not depend on something more fundamental that could ground it, but it grounds itself in the fact that any attempt at refuting L-immediacy is self-refuting.<sup>22</sup> In other terms, L-immediacy states that whatever is considered has to be determinate (it is *this*, not *that*), and only what is determinate can be anything at all (because what is not determinate is something that violates the principle of identity-non contradiction and hence it would be self-refuting).

Phenomenological immediacy acknowledges that something appears in the field of experience or that there is an actual appearing. Again, F-immediacy is a form of *immediacy* because it cannot be grounded or derived from anything more fundamental. Also, F-immediacy entails in its own way that any denial of

<sup>20</sup> By taking non-contradictoriness as the meaning of existence, Severino has a way of defending the possibility of absolutely general quantification, by claiming that the fundamental structure of being that he is describing applies to absolutely all that there is. This is because Severino (unlike most of today’s analytic metaphysicians, see debate in Westerhoff 2020) does not engage with ontology understood as an attempt to describe or provide a list of “what there is,” nor as an attempt to establish what are some of the most fundamental relations among these things. He is rather interested in what he calls “fundamental ontology.” or a way of making apparent within language the fundamental structure that constitutes being or existence as such. Anything that is different from nothing is something. *This* “being-something-and-not-nothing” is the absolutely general meaning of “existence” or “being” that each and every thing different from a pure “nothing” should share. This account comes together with Severino’s way of dealing with contradictions (including the sheer assertion of “nothingness”) as semantic constructions that assert their content (such as “this is nothing”) only within a broader assertion that denies the truth of that content (such as “it is contradictory to say: this is nothing”). The alleged possibility of directly encountering contradictions or nothingness (or counting them as “things”) is just due to the epistemic fallacy of isolating a positive semantic parcel from the structure in which that parcel is necessarily entailed and within which it can only be found. On this latter point, see Severino 1981, chapter 4.

<sup>21</sup> Severino’s thought evolved over a long period, between the first edition of his *La struttura originaria* (1958) and his last substantial contribution, *La morte e la terra* (Severino 2011). For present purposes, this reconstruction of Severino’s thought will be based on key notions introduced in *La struttura originaria* (second, substantially revised edition 1981) and developed mostly in what is perhaps the pivotal work in his career, *Essenza del nichilismo* (1982, originally published in 1972, now available in English: Severino 2016).

<sup>22</sup> Severino discusses at length this property of L-immediacy by engaging with Aristotle’s *elenchos*, namely, his way of establishing the principle of non-contradiction in book 4 of the *Metaphysics*. See discussion in Severino 1981; Severino 1982; Severino 2005.



it would be self-refuting. Suppose that F-immediacy is false, and nothing actually appears. This fact should itself be either (i) some kind of experience of the absolute “non-appearing” of anything at all, or (ii) it should not appear at all itself. In the first case, the experience of the absolute “non-appearing” would be the appearing of *this* particular content. Hence, it would constitute the appearing of something (against what this experience is supposed to be). In the second case, there would be no experience of this absolute “non-appearing”; hence, it would be impossible to establish that *this* is part of experience or that it is phenomenologically immediately available.

Notice that both L-immediacy and F-immediacy remain extremely general and even vague in their reference. L-immediacy does not state what is the domain of objects to which it applies (really existing entities, ideas, phenomena, linguistic constructions, or anything else), and F-immediacy does not specify what exactly it is that appears or what this appearing is (be that a consciousness, mind, thought, or anything else). However, the fact that both principles necessarily hold (because their refutation is self-refuting) also entails that they both converge towards the same domain. If they did not apply to a particular domain, there would be a domain in which any of these principles is invalid, but this would constitute a refutation of that principle, which is impossible. Similarly, if L-immediacy and F-immediacy apply to entirely different domains respectively, then each of these domains would constitute a refutation of the other, which is again impossible. Hence, F-immediacy and L-immediacy simultaneously apply to at least one same domain or converge towards it.<sup>23</sup>

This entails that since the domain of what immediately appears (F-immediacy) is by definition immediately present to experience, this experience has to be determinate, namely, it has to be a domain shaped by L-immediacy. In this way, Severino establishes that L-immediacy cannot possibly be a purely theoretical or just linguistic domain, but it necessarily applies and informs the whole field of immediate phenomenological experience. In other words, it is impossible to experience reality without experiencing it as shaped by the principles of identity and non-contradiction.<sup>24</sup> In turn, being shaped by L-immediacy entails that whatever is, is not its own negation (A is not not-A), or it is determinate as the negation of its own negation (A is determinate as what is not-not-A). Hence, the convergence of L-immediacy and F-immediacy entails that whatever appears (F-immediacy) is determinate (L-immediacy).

On this basis, Severino defines existence as the fact that any content of F-immediacy is subject to the syntax of L-immediacy, namely, it is non-contradictory (because it is essentially the negation of its own negation). For something to exist

<sup>23</sup> Talking about “convergence” is a way of keeping some space to establish the possibility that while L-immediacy applies universally to all domains whatsoever, F-immediacy does not have exactly the same generality, as it will become clearer below.

<sup>24</sup> This point is one of the consequences of Severino’s discussion and reformulation of the principle of identity-and-non-contradiction, see Severino’s *Returning to Parmenides*, par. 6, in Severino 2016, 59–80.

it means *not to be* its own negation. It follows that the simultaneous appearing of content and of its negation is impossible (it cannot belong to F-immediacy). If a content appeared simultaneously with its annihilation, then the appearing of the content would be simultaneous with the negation of that appearing (since annihilation entails also the negation that something appears). But because the content that appears (whatever this might be) *is* actually appearing, it is impossible (due to L-immediacy) for that content to appear simultaneously with the appearing of its annihilation. Since this impossibility holds regardless of time or any other parameter, but just in virtue of the structure of L-immediacy applied to F-immediacy, it follows that the annihilation of anything that appears could *never* appear in F-immediacy, nor is it allowed by L-immediacy (since it would assert a contradiction). Hence, annihilation cannot be part of any possible experience. As a consequence, any phenomenon of becoming or changing cannot ever be interpreted or rightly understood as entailing any sort of annihilation of anything at all. In more positive terms, all that appears must be eternal in its own right and simply in virtue of being something rather than nothing. This brings the analysis to one of the most important tenets of Severino's philosophy: everything that is, has to be eternal (its being is such that it will never, nor could ever, cease to be). Since existence is non-contradictoriness, existence necessarily entails eternity and unchangeability, which in the domain of F-immediacy results in the fact everything that appears must appear eternally.

The obvious problem is that F-immediacy *does not seem* to show the appearing of eternal contents, but rather provides evidence of the fact that *change* in what appears is immediately manifest. The problem of finding a suitable account for becoming thus takes center stage in Severino's thought. He rejects any attempt to account for becoming in ontological terms, as the arising out of nothing of some being, and the return into nothingness of what was previously existing. According to Severino, this way of interpreting becoming is just an interpretation of F-immediacy, which is however at odds with L-immediacy, and hence it is ultimately self-refuting. Severino *denies* that F-immediacy can ever attest or manifest that *a being* comes out of nothing or returns into nothingness.<sup>25</sup> All that F-immediacy can attest is that the contents of appearing are not always present,

<sup>25</sup> Severino discusses at great length, from both a historical and a theoretical point of view, various standard accounts of "ontological becoming" (a conception of becoming in which "something" arises or return to nothingness). His general criticism of any of these attempts is that they inevitably have to grant that some element or component of experience, which is identified as something that is different from a sheer nothingness, at some point will have to arise out of nothing or return into nothing, and *that* is impossible; hence, believing it would be a folly (cf. Severino 2005; Severino 2007; Severino 2016). Of course, one can push Severino further by asking whether the appearing itself of some content that is present for a certain duration and then drops out of appearing would not amount to an annihilation of *that appearing* as such. Severino's general reply is that, on the one hand, appearing cannot be isolated from the content that appears, and that appearing itself has to be broader than any finite circle of appearing; see *Postscript in Returning to Parmenides* (in Severino 2016, 85–145) and further discussion here below.

but some content begins to appear at some point and ceases to appear at some later point. Becoming can only be phenomenological, not ontological. Understood in this latter way, becoming is *not* at odds with the eternity of beings, since becoming is no longer interpreted in terms of annihilation or creation of being. Nonetheless, this is not yet the solution to the problem, but simply the way in which Severino allows the problem to be formulated in a more meaningful and consistent way, given the universal validity of L-immediacy. The issue becomes to account for the fact that the overlap between L-immediacy and F-immediacy entails that all that is included in F-immediacy should be eternally appearing, while F-immediacy seems also to attest that contents arise and fade away from appearing. Why is it so?

Severino's solution consists in discerning between two main layers of reality: (i) a foreground, finite layer in which F-immediacy attests the arising and fading away of the appearing of some contents; and (ii) a background, infinite layer in which *all* contents are eternally appearing. F-immediacy can cover only the first layer, while the existence of the second layer must be based on a necessary inference, since the eternity of *all* contents is *not* what is immediately attested in any finite experience, and yet it is necessary to establish it based on the universal validity of L-immediacy.

F-immediacy is necessarily a *finite* domain, in the sense that it does not (and it cannot) encompass the whole of appearing. As mentioned previously, the fact that L-immediacy applies to F-immediacy entails that all contents of F-immediacy are determinate in themselves. Since F-immediacy as such is also a content of appearing, and L-immediacy must apply to this content as well, F-immediacy as such must also be determinate (F-immediacy not only appears as the appearing of all immediately appearing contents, but F-immediacy also appears as *this* particular content and not something else). Now, "being determinate" means *not being* its own negation. The negation of F-immediacy can encompass either (i) a space in which nothing at all appears, or (ii) a space in which something else from what is currently in F-immediacy appears. The first option is immediately self-refuting while the second is *indirectly* attested by F-immediacy itself, because the contents in F-immediacy are immediately manifesting as *changing*, and since this change cannot be an arising out of nothing or a returning into nothing, those contents that appear as changing must exist and appear also somewhere else than in F-immediacy.<sup>26</sup> This is so because if they had a being or existence that absolutely did not appear at all, this being or existence would be identical to the appearing of their non-being or annihilation, and hence they could not be determinate, or simply this would be a contradiction. As a result, there must be a space that is *not* F-immediacy, and this space is a negation of F-immediacy,

<sup>26</sup> In this way, the definition of "determination" or "non-contradictoriness" can be used to establish a real difference between two equally existing domains, which nonetheless entail one another in their structure, since one is *not* its other. This mutual entailment between different entities is *not* a mutual negation of them, insofar as it is simply used to establish the being of both as mutually different and irreducible.

but it is not a pure contradiction or a sheer nothingness.<sup>27</sup> It follows that F-immediacy is essentially defined as the negation of that broader space in which contents are and appear (eternally) even when they are no longer manifest in F-immediacy. Since this dichotomy between *two* spaces of appearing entails that they are both domains of existence, and that the space of F-immediacy is more limited than its other, F-immediacy is necessarily a *finite* space, while the other has to be infinite (or not-finite).

The inference that grounds the existence of this broader space of appearing beyond F-immediacy shares the same necessity that underpins the simpler assertion of both F-immediacy and L-immediacy, since rejecting the twofold structure resulting from this argument would entail a denial of one or both of these principles, which in turn is impossible because self-refuting. This twofold structure (and its further complex articulations) is what Severino calls “the fundamental structure” (Italian *la struttura originaria*), which ultimately spells out what is the meaning of existence when existence is primarily conceived as non-contradictoriness.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Assuming that there is *more* appearing than what is manifest in F-immediacy is not self-refuting in the way in which assuming that there is *no appearing* at all would be. In the latter case, the assertion that there is no appearing should immediately appear, and hence the negation of F-immediacy entails its affirmation (it is self-refuting). In the former case, though, the assertion of something *beyond* F-immediacy entails that appearing is not exhausted by F-immediacy, but it does not deny that F-immediacy appears. In lack of further argument, this is just a possibility or a hypothesis, not a refutation of F-immediacy as such.

<sup>28</sup> The notion of “fundamental structure” is perhaps the most important theoretical core of the whole of Severino’s philosophy. Although it cannot be deepened here, it might be worth stressing that it entails that both truth and being are essentially relational, or rather based on a necessary structure. This starts from the seemingly most basic principles, identity and non-contradiction, by showing that they do not stand on their own and they are indeed self-refuting if they are posited in isolation from one another. However, Severino expands this intuition so to encompass all factors that contribute to shape any experience in general. Every element that contributes to spell out and qualify the meaning of existence, its non-contradictoriness, and its universal applicability is part and parcel of the fundamental structure. Finite entities themselves emerge from this structure and are entirely grounded in it. Since the fundamental structure is itself the basis of the whole of reality, Severino’s ontology should qualify as “non-foundational,” because it does not allow for any ultimate brute facts or simple atomic elements from which all other facts, truths and aspects about reality can be derived (for a contextualization of this view in the perspective offered by today’s debates in analytical metaphysics, see Westerhoff 2020, 152–266). This point is important to keep in mind since Severino’s characterization of the fundamental structure presents it as absolutely necessary (irrefutable, in the sense that its refutation would be a self-refutation) and he rejects the very notion of a “possibility” or “contingency.” In short, Severino is a strict necessitarian (see also Severino 2019). This point, though, concerns the logical modality through which the fundamental structure is articulated (necessity instead of contingency), and then the logical modality of the “grounding” of everything (everything is necessarily and not contingently grounded in the fundamental structure). When it comes to spell out what is the necessary “ground” of everything, Severino’s answer does not point to any simple entity or fact, but only to a self-constituting complex and articulated structure.

At this point, an incumbent task for Severino is that of explaining *why* there is a manifest arising and fading away of contents in F-immediacy while at the same time L-immediacy would directly entail that all contents should be eternally and unchangeably present. Why could the domain of appearing not have been just the infinite appearing of unchangeable eternal contents? Why is there a need for splitting the domain of appearing between F-immediacy and something beyond it? So far, it has been shown only why F-immediacy must necessarily be finite, but even this proof relies on the immediate manifestation of *change* in F-immediacy, hence it presupposes change itself as a given or as a fact. But why do we face this fact? Is it a brute fact or is there a reason for it?

In a nutshell, Severino's solution consists in showing that the structure of L-immediacy entails the necessity of fully spelling out an *infinity* of determinations in order for any determinate content to be concretely and fully established in its difference from its non-being. For instance, this particular *red* is what it is because it is not green, not blue, not yellow, but also not a car, not a cow, not a cat, and even more, it is not the red it was yesterday, or the red that will appear tomorrow, and so on *ad infinitum*. While it is possible to state *in abstracto* that this red is what it is because it is not the whole of "not-red," this statement remains only abstract until the whole of "not-red" is spelled out in detail. This is partially a semantic issue, but it is not *just* a matter of semantics.

From a semantic point of view, the term "not-red" is essential for the definition of *red* insofar as *red* is what is not "not-red." If one takes "not-red" away, then the meaning of *red* is destroyed as well. However, "not-red" in itself has only a vague and general reference, since it encompasses the whole of reality that is not *red*, but it does not specify what actually belongs to this whole. Depending on what enters this whole, the meaning of "not-red" might change. Consider a world in which *red* is the only color that appears. In that world, "not-red" would entail cows, cats, trees and so on, but it would not entail "blue" or "yellow," because in that world, these contents do not appear. Hence, in that world, "not-red" would mean something different from what it means in our current world. Since *red* means what is not "not-red," if the meaning of "not-red" changes, then also the meaning of *red* changes. This is the semantic reason why "not-red" must be spelled out in order for *red* to be fully meaningful.<sup>29</sup>

However, Severino goes beyond this semantic reason. "Not-red" is a placeholder for the appearing of those other beings or entities that are actually not *red*. If these other entities do not appear, then "not-red" does not actually ap-

<sup>29</sup> This point emerges since Severino's early works (see Severino 1981) and creates a strong (albeit arguably unintended) parallel between Severino's approach and the Buddhist's epistemological theory of *apoha*, developed by Dignāga and Dharmakīrti around the fifth century of the common era. In short, *apoha* is a way of accommodating a thorough nominalism with the possibility of universal predication, by assuming that what makes all individuals belong to a certain kind is the fact that they are similarly different to all other individuals of other kinds. See discussion in Siderits, Tillemans, and Chakrabarti 2011. For a further discussion and problematization of this issue in Severino's thought, see Sangiacomo 2020.

pear either. For instance, consider someone building a mechanical clock in the early eighteenth century. Today, we could say that such a mechanical clock is not an electronic clock and that being a mechanical clock is not being an electronic clock. However, this understanding would have been impossible in the early eighteenth century, and not just for semantic reasons, but also because at that time no electronic clock appeared at all; hence, “not-electronic” could not appear either. But if “not-electronic” does not appear, then “mechanical clock” cannot appear as the negation of “not-electronic,” because there is nothing that appears as “electronic” to negate. Generalizing this point, it can be said that in order for any determinate content to appear as *that* content (which is the negation of all that is “not-*that*”) all the other contents that fall within such a negation must also appear themselves, concretely, “in flesh and bones” so to say. This is not *just* because they are needed in order to make the linguistic expression “not-*that*” meaningful from a semantic point of view, but also (and more fundamentally) because without their appearing, “not-*that*” cannot appear within the fundamental structure of reality itself, and without the appearing of “not-*that*,” *that* cannot appear as the negation of “not-*that*.”<sup>30</sup>

Notice that this problem uncovers a tension between L-immediacy and F-immediacy. L-immediacy already entails that any content (*that*, or *red*, or whatever) is not its own negation (it is not “not-*that*” or “not-*red*”). However, F-immediacy is finite, and it does not allow for the full appearing of all those entities that together make up the appearing of what any determinate entity denies as its own concrete negation (meaning, all that belongs to “not-*that*”).<sup>31</sup> There is then

<sup>30</sup> Generalizing this reasoning, one might say that “being” is the negation of “not-being,” but then this entails that “not-being” should appear in order for “being” to appear as its negation. However, “not-being” cannot appear without contradiction since only being is capable of appearing. Severino solves this aporia by showing that “not-being” is never something that could be posited in its own right, but only something that belongs to a more complex structure that actually denies it. “Not-being” is the target aimed at in the assertion “not-being is not.” The denial of this assertion is “not-being is.” Hence, “being” is not just the denial of “not-being” *tout court*, but rather the denial of the assertion “not-being is,” and *this* assertion needs to appear in order for “being” to appear. However, the assertion “not-being is,” is *not* a sheer nothingness, but rather the assertion that “not-being is.” Hence, it appears in the way a contradictory assertion appears, and this appearing is a *positive* appearing (the positive appearing of a contradiction). Contradictions can appear without problems, although what contradictions wants to say cannot appear at all. Since “being” is the denial of the positive appearing of a contradiction, “being” means “not-being the contradiction that asserts: not-being is.” *This* latter positive appearing of the contradiction is indeed necessary for “being” to appear as well, although this appearing can only appear within the apophantic structure that exhibit it as a positive contradiction. The fact that “being” requires the appearing of the contradiction that it denies allows Severino to build his whole philosophy of history as the necessary appearing of “nihilism” (the intention of denying that being is) as the landmark in the history of the West, but also as something that is not a pure contingency, but it remains deeply rooted in the “destiny of necessity.”

<sup>31</sup> By definition, if F-immediacy is finite, then there remain other beings that exist and appear beyond F-immediacy and that should be included in the “not-*that*” component that constitutes the determinate and concrete essence of each and every being. Hence, the finitude of F-immediacy makes it unable to fully account for that component.

a dyscrasia between what L-immediacy demands and what F-immediacy can deliver. This entails a peculiar paradox. On the one hand, it would be self-refuting to deny what L-immediacy demands; hence, it is necessary to maintain that any determinate content is the negation of its own concrete negation. On the other hand, though, F-immediacy does not allow for the full appearing of this concrete negation that any determination must deny in order for it to be determinate; hence, no content in F-immediacy can be genuinely *fully* determinate as L-immediacy demands. Severino phrases this point by stating that the determination that appears in F-immediacy is only *formal* or *abstract* (it abides by the rules of L-immediacy, but it does not fully implement them), and yet it is necessary (in order to avoid a self-refutation) to have a *concrete* determination as well. Now, if F-immediacy cannot structurally bear it (because F-immediacy is structurally finite), that concrete determination must appear somewhere beyond F-immediacy. In fact, since it is necessary that F-immediacy is finite, and it is also necessary that all determinations must appear as *concrete*, it is necessary that there must be an infinite appearing unfolding beyond F-immediacy.

The space of F-immediacy is not disconnected from the space beyond F-immediacy in which determinations appear in their infinite concreteness. Each and every determination in F-immediacy entails the necessity of the appearing of their own infinite concreteness beyond F-immediacy. This has two connected implications. The first implication is that any configuration of F-immediacy (the interconnected appearing of all determinations currently appearing in F-immediacy) cannot be the *first* configuration of F-immediacy. Firstness can be understood in three ways: (i) something before which nothing else appears; or (ii) the most fundamental configuration from which all other configurations derive; or (iii) an unchanging configuration that is not followed by any other configuration. The first meaning is self-refuting because it presupposes that there is a moment in which F-immediacy appears as empty or nothing appears. The second option is impossible because in order to be “fundamental” in this sense, a configuration should be *concrete* because whatever is not concrete is also not fundamental, since its appearing and being relies on the appearing and being of something else that does not yet simultaneously appear with it. However, since any configuration in F-immediacy is necessarily *not* concrete in this sense, no configuration of F-immediacy can be fundamental. The third option also requires that a configuration should be concrete because only then no further appearing would be needed for that configuration to fully and properly be established. For as long as a configuration remains abstract to some extent, to that extent more appearing is needed in order to make it concrete; hence, that configuration cannot be unchanging.

This brings us to the second implication, namely, no configuration of F-immediacy can remain unchanged, but it has to be overcome by other configurations. This movement of “overcoming” (Italian *oltrepassare*) is necessary because any configuration in F-immediacy is abstract to some extent, and that entails with necessity the need for that configuration to be asserted more concretely through the appearing of what does not yet appear. Hence, F-immediacy is the space of

an endless (phenomenological) becoming in which each and every configuration is progressively overcome by the next. Since this process applies to (and is multiplied for) any and each determination that appears, F-immediacy is in fact infinitely refracted and multiplied in an infinite constellation of “finite circles of appearing” (*cerchi finiti dell'apparire*) in which an infinite process of unfolding and overcoming takes place.

The phenomenon of *change* is not a brute fact, but it is the symptom of how the fundamental structure of being works. In order for the concrete assertion of the non-contradictoriness of all beings to become manifest, appearing must be the appearing of an infinite (and infinitely dense) unfolding process in which infinitely many configurations overcome one another, in a progressive saturation of the whole space of being (namely, in the process of making the appearing of all beings fully concrete).<sup>32</sup>

#### 4. Severino and Descartes

Consider how Severino’s account shapes the structure of experience, as illustrated below (Figure 2).

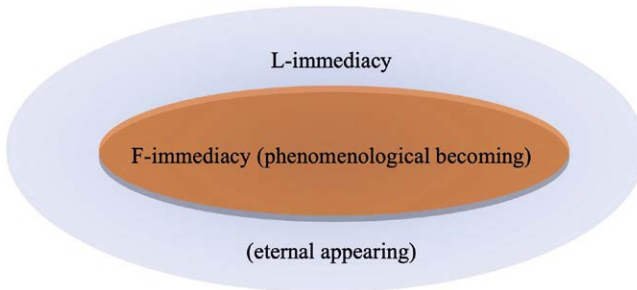


Figure 2 – The Structure of Experience according to Severino.

In this structure, existence means the same thing across all layers. Existence is always and only non-contradictoriness, or not-being one’s own negation. This is a consequence of the absolutely universal scope of L-immediacy. However, existence manifests in two essentially different ways. In the space of F-imme-

<sup>32</sup> The argument for this claim is fully developed in Severino 2001; Severino 2007. For present purposes, notice that this solution is deeply different from the more traditional solution of the problem of becoming found in classical metaphysics. Instead of moving from the acknowledgment of becoming in the world to the inference that there must be some eternal principle (God) that grounds such becoming, Severino shows that each determination is *already* God in itself (in the sense that it shares the features of eternity and unchangeability usually attributed to God only), and yet it needs to appear within an infinite unfolding process in order for these qualities to be fully established. See further discussions of these points in Sangiacomo 2022.



diacy, entities appear as arising and fading away (from that space) *because* the full and concrete establishment of the existence of those same entities cannot be confined within any finite space of appearing. The space of L-immediacy thus entails the presence of a broader domain of appearing (another F-space), which is however *not* immediately accessible from within F-immediacy, but only in virtue of an inference made on the basis of F-immediacy and L-immediacy. L-immediacy itself is appearing within F-immediacy (otherwise, existence could not have a unique and consistent meaning in all layers), *but* its appearing cannot be confined to what appears within F-immediacy. Hence, the complete appearing of L-immediacy itself transcends the appearing that is manifest in F-immediacy.

In this way, Severino does grant a space for a sort of transcendence of L-immediacy with respect to F-immediacy, but this transcendence concerns only the *contents* of appearing (or better, the concreteness with which they are determined), and not the *meaning* of existence (or its syntax, its structure). Unlike Descartes, Severino does not posit any “external existence” outside the space of immediate experience (F-immediacy). His account rather entails that the genuine divide is between finite appearing (F-immediacy) and infinite appearing (which might be called *F-mediacy*, since it is established by inference), which are *both* underpinned by the same structure of existence. Also, unlike Descartes, Severino is forced to allow for the fact that there must be a space of reality that is currently *not* appearing within what is immediately appearing (F-immediacy), and which then requires a sort of “transcendental subject” (which is structurally different from any empirical, finite subject) to whom this show is already present and always manifest.<sup>33</sup> However, this space of F-mediacy cannot possibly appear within any space of F-immediacy, and since F-immediacy is the immediate manifestation of appearing, F-mediacy *cannot* be a possible content of any finite experience. In other words, Severino needs to allow for the *existence* of an appearing that does not immediately appear (while Descartes was forced to allow for the presence of an external existence that does not appear).

Severino’s definition of existence is broader than Descartes’s definition, since non-contradictoriness encompasses *all* possible contents and entities, including “consciousness-independency.” In order for the Cartesian notion to establish itself, it should first of all *be* a notion, namely, it needs to be posited as something different from a sheer nothing. In this basic sense, the Cartesian notion already presupposes non-contradictoriness at its bottom. Nevertheless, the Cartesian notion allows for a separation between existence and appearing that is not acceptable in Severino’s framework. According to Descartes, it is possible (even

<sup>33</sup> In this way, Severino can take into account one of the major developments that occurred after Descartes, especially between Kant and Husserl: the differentiation between an empirical subject and a transcendental subject. While the empirical subject is itself a content of experience, the transcendental subject is an epistemic structure that necessarily makes that experience possible. However, from Kant to Husserl, this transcendental subject always remained a matter of inference, as it was the notion of external existence for Descartes.

necessary) for some things to exist regardless of how or whether they appear, since existence itself is “external existence” (external with respect to a perceiving consciousness). Severino cannot maintain this possibility because all that *is* (L-immediacy) has to appear somewhere and somehow (in F-immediacy or F-mediacy). Otherwise, being and nothing would have the same (non-)manifestation, which would be contradictory. And yet, even Severino has to grant that not everything that appears can *immediately* appear (not all appearing is included in F-immediacy). Since Severino’s notion of existence is broader, though, he can make room for a number of differences in the way in which things actually appear, and he can consider the appearing in consciousness (even in an individual human empirical consciousness) as just *one* particular way for contents to appear, but neither the only nor the most fundamental one.

Despite these differences, both Descartes and Severino share at least three basic commitments about the way in which they discuss the relationship between existence and appearing. First, appearing is always the appearing of something that *exists*; there would be no appearing if there was nothing existing. In this sense, they both maintain that being or existence is the ground for appearing. Second, appearing is immediately manifest, but it needs *interpretation*, which is provided through logical reasoning and philosophical analysis (in the case of Descartes this leads to establish the existence of real entities, like “me,” God and material objects; in the case of Severino this leads to reject ontological becoming and establish the domain of F-mediacy). Third, a thorough analysis of the domain of appearing reveals the need to infer the existence of a domain that does not appear *in* it, but that must necessarily be posited in order for what appears to make sense. This domain beyond appearing is (and could be) established only through inference; it is not accessible to direct experience.

## 5. Problems with Severino’s Account

Consider again the fact that F-immediacy can provide only an abstract and inadequate appearing of the reality of what exists. This entails that F-immediacy, considered alone and in its own right only, *potentially contradicts* L-immediacy (since it fails to show the concrete determination of what appears; hence, the concrete way in which what appears is not its negation). Severino calls this potential contradiction “c-contradiction” (Italian *contraddizione-c*) and much of the argument used to show that there must be a space of F-mediacy in which an infinite appearing unfolds is used to provide a solution to this c-contradiction (the solution is asserting the necessity of an infinite unfolding process through which all determinations can appear in their full concreteness).

However, if the space of F-immediacy is the space in which c-contradiction is *not* yet removed, and in fact appears as such, then the space of F-immediacy is the space in which it is impossible to establish the *true* appearing of what exists, free from any contradiction whatsoever. This true appearing appears only in F-mediacy. But how do we know about F-mediacy? Severino claims that we need to infer its existence based on the fact that L-immediacy cannot be denied,

and not allowing for F-mediacy (namely, restricting appearing to F-immediacy only) would amount to such a negation. But then, Severino must grant that F-immediacy, considered in its own right, does entail a negation of L-immediacy after all. This negation can be taken away only outside of the space of F-immediacy, which entails that the taking away of this negation cannot be a content of immediate appearing. For as long as one experiences immediate appearing (F-immediacy), one will never see or encounter the taking away of the negation of L-immediacy. The space of F-immediacy is thus structurally doomed to remain a negation of L-immediacy and to appear as such.

This issue takes almost an eschatological dimension in Severino's later thought. On the one hand, he contends that since any space of F-immediacy is defined by the appearing of a human will or consciousness (an empirical subject), then c-contradiction can be fully overcome only when the last human will or consciousness will appear as "dead" (namely, "finished," "perfected," subject to no further appearing). Only when the whole of humanity will be gone (dead), the infinite and fully concrete appearing of being will shine.<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, this means that *within* the space of any finite appearing (F-immediacy, consciousness), it is structurally impossible for any true concrete appearing to be genuinely and fully manifest. Even if Severino's own thought aims at being a witness of the fundamental structure of being and appearing, this witnessing remains enveloped in a form of inevitable folly and error, since it partakes in c-contradiction to some extent. Partaking in a contradiction is a form of folly. Partaking in a folly to some extent means to be mad to that same extent. Severino himself acknowledges this conclusion as a necessary result of his analysis of existence and appearing.<sup>35</sup>

The implications of this point are momentous. Anything built entirely and exclusively on the domain of F-immediacy (anything pertaining to finite and empirical consciousness) is structurally unreliable and doomed to be inadequate. Hence, F-immediacy as such cannot ground any proper or ultimately valid explanation of reality, since it is essentially affected by c-contradiction, which endows it with a certain degree of folly (as any attitude that would believe to some degree that some truth can be derived from contradictions; dialetheists aside). This entails that even any form of F-immediacy lacks any genuine explanatory validity. Perhaps F-mediacy might remedy this shortcoming, but unfortunately it is structurally impossible to have an immediate access to it, and one will have to wait until the extermination of the whole of humanity for the actual appearing of F-mediacy, which makes the use of the notion of (empirical) consciousness quite pointless for the purposes of human inquiry into reality.

Severino's thought is entirely built on the assumption that it is possible to provide a full-blown and coherent account of reality, where the validity of L-immediacy is established without limits. The result of this investigation is that

<sup>34</sup> This point is developed at length in Severino 2011.

<sup>35</sup> See his last book, *Testimoniando il destino* (Severino 2018).

whatever will be part of any immediate experience (F-immediacy) will also be necessarily a sort of folly or madness, inevitably colored by the inadequacy of c-contradiction. If one takes F-immediacy to stand for “consciousness,” this means that in Severino’s account not only consciousness appears as ultimately “ungrounded” (not fully justified, which in Severino’s view amounts to be subject to c-contradiction), but also as intrinsically unreliable, because inevitably abstract, incomplete, lacking.<sup>36</sup>

However, since the whole structure of existence and of its unfolding are based on an inference rooted in F-immediacy, one might wonder what the validity of this inference can be. Surely, Severino contends that regardless of the inadequacy of F-immediacy, it is necessary to allow for the inference that brings to F-mediality, since not allowing that would contradict L-immediacy, which would be self-refuting. Yet, Severino has also to grant that a partial (at least) refutation of L-immediacy is *already* glaringly appearing in F-immediacy, insofar as its immediate appearing let shine the purely abstract and not yet fully concrete appearing of any determination (hence witnessing that no determination that is immediately appearing is actually fully determined, pace L-immediacy). Allowing for the inference from F-immediacy to F-mediality in order to resolve this c-contradiction presupposes that it would be self-refuting for F-immediacy to appear in such a way as to refute L-immediacy; but this is precisely what *is* actually appearing (and this is in fact all that immediately appears), and hence it is unclear why allowing that inference should be more than a brute fact or an act of faith. In other words, a puzzling consequence of Severino’s conceptualization of existence is that precisely that domain of F-immediacy that should provide the most immediate access to the appearing of what exists and of its fundamental structure shows itself to be an unreliable basis for drawing any inferences since it is constitutively affected by a form of contradiction; or else, it shows that all that appears as existing is in fact affected by an irreducible contradictoriness, which in Severino’s terminology is the same as saying that it amounts to non-being. In both cases, Severino’s analogous of (finite) consciousness shows that existence can manifest only as a riddle, as a metaphysical dream, or as a form of folly.

Despite having turned the Cartesian picture upside down, Severino seems in the end forced to wrestle with problems analogous to those evoked by Descartes. One might perhaps wonder whether some malicious demon is not involved with this curious fate. Perhaps the problem is with Severino’s own account, or rather with Descartes’s account instead. But these two accounts offer different and almost symmetrically opposite ways of articulating how consciousness and existence might relate to one another (one starting from consciousness, the other

<sup>36</sup> At some point in his career, Severino introduced the expression “the isolation of the earth” (Italian *l’isolamento della terra*) to express the fact that F-immediacy can only disclose a finite parcel of the infinite appearing, and, being thus limited, what it discloses is inevitably isolated from the infinite vastness of the concrete appearing of being. This phenomenon of isolation is necessarily entailed by the fundamental structure, and yet it makes F-immediacy structurally limited and ultimately unreliable.

from existence). As mentioned, no plausible interpretation of experience can dispense with consciousness entirely. It should then be seriously considered whether the problem is not with the notion of existence itself. Even more interestingly, one might start wondering how a rigorous interpretation of experience might be articulated by postulating only consciousness without existence.

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