

EMANUELE SEVERINO ON THE MEANING OF SCIENTIFIC SPECIALIZATION AN INTRODUCTION

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ABSTRACT: Science appears, to the eyes of contemporary man, as the most reliable guide to the human enterprise. However, we possess little awareness as to what the proper meaning of scientific specialization is, and this knowledge is indispensable if we are not to proceed mindlessly in our relations to being. One of the most profound, coherent, and penetrating insights into this matter is constituted by the work of contemporary Italian philosopher Emanuele Severino, whose discourse demonstrates how scientific specialization is the most coherent consequence of humanity's most ancestral relationship to being, how every human decision enacts the essence of scientific specialization, and thus why all past and present denunciations of scientific specialization (i.e., all denunciations inscribed within the framework of humanity's most ancestral relationship to being) have fallen, and must continue to fall, unheeded, by necessity. Severino invites us to reframe the opposition between specialized and transdisciplinary work: we must comprehend the necessity of the dominance of scientific specialization on our time, and while this comprehension may prove scientific specialization to be just, it may also provide the requisite basis for the imperative re-structuring of arguments in favor of transdisciplinarity. By focusing on one of Severino's major theoretical works (*Oltre il linguaggio*, 1992) – but also with an eye to several other key texts –, this essay aims to introduce international readers to a specific facet of Severino's discourse, and in order to do so translates passages of his work that have never appeared in English.

KEYWORDS: Emanuele Severino; Scientific specialization; Species; Techne; Decision

I. SCIENTIFIC SPECIALIZATION AND THE DISTANT PAST

Science appears, to the eyes of contemporary man, as the most reliable guide to the human enterprise. It is our most efficient tool, it enables our understanding and resolution of more and more adversities. It is formed by a multiplicity of scientific approaches to knowledge and action, each of which pursues (and

achieves) ever higher intensities of specialization. Specialization gives science its capacity to indefinitely extend its knowledge and control over the objects of its analysis. For this reason, indeed, science establishes itself as and through specialization, and thus partitions reality into a set of discrete parts and analyzes them in isolation from the totality of the context in which they are originally found. The spirit of our time follows the lead of scientific specialization, and so do our actions. In this sense, our relation to the world and to ourselves has changed, and our present conception of the humanities is no more than a consequence of this vast transformation.

However, we possess little awareness as to what the proper meaning and implications of scientific specialization are, and this knowledge is indispensable if we are not to proceed mindlessly in our relations to being. One of the most profound, coherent, and penetrating studies to offer insight on these issues is Emanuele Severino's *Beyond Language* (*Oltre il linguaggio*, 1992), and especially its third chapter, "Scientific Specialization and Nothingness" ("*La specializzazione scientifica e il nulla*").¹ Our entire intellectual community concurs that specialization belongs to the core of the scientific practice and that specialization is a fairly recent event, when considered as the mode of configuration of our civilization. Severino accepts both claims, but his study testifies what has hardly been testified before when it explains why scientific specialization is the necessary and most coherent concrete consequence of our most ancestral relations to the world and to our thought, and thus how specialization has been inscribed in our conception of knowledge since the

¹ Emanuele Severino (1929-) is a contemporary Italian philosopher whose discourse is of a rigorousness and power as have rarely been witnessed. He has written around eighty or more books but, as of today, only one has been translated in English: *The Essence of Nihilism* (Verso Books, 2016) (readers of English can also find a collection of essays entitled *Nihilism and Destiny* (2016), edited by Nicoletta Cusano). This essay presents an introduction to only one facet of Severino's discourse. The hope is of doing service to the international community by providing a means of access to work that is, as of now, available only in Italian. I myself have translated all of the citations from Severino's work, and I have also translated the titles of his essays and books in order to favor reader-friendliness. The original passages and titles are always reported in parenthesis after the translation. In the 'works cited' list, Severino's works are listed in alphabetical order according to their original Italian title. Finally, the reader should know that an introduction is always an interpretation, and that an interpretation, in its essence, always does injustice to the original work. The entirety of human discourse is subject to the principle of indexicality, and thus nothing can truly speak of a work except for the work itself (these principles too belong to the core of the philosophy that appears in the writings of Emanuele Severino).

dawn of time. By attending to his study, then, one can begin to grasp the true constitutional meaning of scientific specialization, and thus why it dominates our relation to existence, and why the contemporary counter-cultural denunciations of its practice must, by necessity, fall unheeded:

The specialized constitution of science belongs by now to the essence of scientific research and practice. There is no science where there is no specialization; that is, the application of the experimental method to a particular field of objects. This is a fairly recent circumstance in the history of our civilization, but the method by which scientific specialization contemplates the world is far more ancient. It dates back to when man began to perceive himself as an autonomous center of action; that is, capable of *deciding*. Deciding makes acting autonomous. To act without deciding is to depend on something other. The meaning of scientific specialization, we say, is, in its essence, tied to the meaning of deciding. But what does this mean, and what makes this claim possible? (*Il carattere specialistico della scienza appartiene ormai all'essenza della ricerca e della prassi scientifica. Non c'è scienza dove non c'è specializzazione, ossia applicazione del metodo sperimentale a un campo particolare di oggetti. Si tratta di una circostanza piuttosto recente nella storia della nostra civiltà. Ma il modo di considerare il mondo, che viene messo in atto nella specializzazione scientifica, è molto più antico. Risale al tempo in cui l'uomo incomincia a sentirsi un centro autonomo di azione, cioè capace di decidere. Il decidere rende autonomo l'agire; se si agisce senza decidere, si dipende da altro. Il senso della specializzazione scientifica, diciamo, è essenzialmente legato al senso del decidere. Ma che senso ha, e come è possibile questa affermazione?*, 57).

2. CONTEXT AND ISOLATION

Specialization begins when man begins to perceive himself as an autonomous center of action, capable of deciding. But man has always perceived himself as an autonomous center of action, and thus, according to Severino's discourse, specialization belongs to our contemplation of the world since the original appearance of human thought. Specialization means to look at the *species*. The original Latin meaning of *species* is "image," "appearance," "spectacle," "form." The related verb *specere* means "to observe," "to watch," "to look at," "in the strong sense of 'looking toward an object, a destination, a goal'" (*nel senso forte di 'guardare verso un oggetto, una meta, uno scopo,'* ibid.). The *species*, then, is that which lets itself be seen; it is that which is visible, and "it is by virtue of its

visibility that the *species* can be observed, analyzed, controlled, measured, desired, feared, refused, shunned” (“*la visibilità della species è ciò per cui quest’ultima può essere osservata, analizzata, controllata, misurata, desiderata, temuta, rifiutata, fuggita,*” *ibid.* 58). The visibility of the *species* is inversely proportional to its blending with its surroundings; the *species* is visible only if it is not confused with its context, and thus it must be separate from all other *species* and from the totality of all *species* in order to be visible, and thus to be itself. Specialization is the conduct toward things that results from the conceptualization of things as *species*, and thus *scientific* specialization is nothing but most coherent and powerful action that can result from such conceptualization. Scientific specialization is “the certainty of the *difference* between things” (“*la convinzione della differenza tra le cose,*” *ibid.*) put into practice; it “*isolates* a part (*species*) of reality; it separates it from the other parts in order to be able to observe [...] its configuration and behavior” (“*isola una parte (species) della realtà, la separa dalle altre per poterne osservare [...] la configurazione e il comportamento,*” *ibid.* 58-59). This isolation of the part is conducted in accordance with “the criterion of delimitation of the part” (“*il criterio della limitazione della parte,*” *ibid.*, 59), which is constructed on the “principle that delimitation has scientific value only if the exclusion of the context does not alter the resulting knowledge of the part and does not impede its use toward the ends of the research” (“*principio che la delimitazione ha valore scientifico solo se il prescindere dal contesto non altera la conoscenza della parte e non ne impedisce l’utilizzazione in vista dei fini che la ricerca si propone,*” *ibid.*). Of course, scientific specialization does not exclude, in principle, that a determined area of the context that was previously considered inessential to the knowledge of the isolated part may thereafter reveal itself as essential and thus non-excludable, “but the fundamental orientation of scientific development is to move toward the progressive expansion of the contexts that specialized research can exclude” (“*ma la direzione generale dello sviluppo della scienza è verso un progressivo allargamento dei contesti dai quali la ricerca specialistica può prescindere,*” *ibid.*).

Therefore—as Severino writes in the third volume of his history of philosophy, *Philosophy from the Greeks to Our Time: Contemporary Philosophy* (*La filosofia dai greci al nostro tempo: la filosofia contemporanea*, 1996)—, while the scientific stance intends to extend its domain to as many sectors of reality as possible and to connect its divergent analyses of the fragments of reality (every form of interdisciplinarity belongs to this intention), and while, for example, the publication of the *International Encyclopedia of Unified Science* was organized, from

1938 onward, “within neopositivistic-pragmatist culture” (“*all’interno della cultura di tipo neopositivistico-pragmatistico,*” 482), nonetheless, the unification that scientific specialization seeks “unites dimensions that it conceives as originally separate, and thus destined to remain so and to render accidental, precarious, temporary, contingent their every unification” (“*unisce dimensioni che essa concepisce come originariamente separate e quindi destinate a rimanere tali e a rendere dunque accidentale, precaria, provvisoria, contingente ogni loro unificazione,*” *ibid.*).

But if scientific specialization, observation, analysis, control, and measurement all depend on the original visibility of the *species*, which itself depends on the original discreteness of all *species*, *also*: all other forms of human action and feeling (desire, fear, refusal, shunning, etc.) depend on the original discreteness of all *species*; that is, on their separation and isolation from one another. Our belief in the existence of “man” and of “human life” is the belief in our power to transform things, to exert agency over them, and thus to relate to “things” as *species*. That things exist as “things” (i.e. as *species*: discrete, distinct, separate, and isolated from one another) is the original necessary precondition for the possibility of the existence of “man” and of “human life” as we know them. Otherwise, the transformation of being would be impossible. For a human being to transform something, for agency to be conceivable, for decisions to be *real*, the “world” must be constituted by a series of discrete, separate, isolated things. It is only because things are separate and isolated from one another that we can observe, analyze, measure, control, desire, despise, save, and kill them, and so it is only because of the prior ontological isolation of all things that “man” can exist as the being who can organize means, realize ends, transform things, exert agency, make decisions. The postulation of this fundamental belief in the original presence of “things” as *species*, then, constitutes the original prerequisite for our conceptions of “man” and “life” to become possible.

This basic belief establishes the foundation for the conceptualization of “man” and “life” as we know them, *and* it entails specialization as the proper mode of being and relation to the world and hence *scientific* specialization as the most coherent and powerful actualization of the proper mode of being and relation to the world. Accordingly, scientific specialization belongs to the essence of man, and by virtue of this belonging, must be recognized as

righteous and just (and this must be said for *every* act that coheres with the essence of scientific specialization). By virtue of its consistency, scientific specialization must be recognized as the most powerful realization of man. When man feels, decides, and acts—i.e. when he *lives*—, he *isolates*, and thus controls the things that he conceives as originally isolated and hence as isolatable. When scientific specialization pursues its end through its means, it *isolates*, and thus develops man’s essence to its highest coherence, power, and justice. To reject scientific specialization is to reject man. But no one has ever rejected man, and in consequence, throughout history, every denunciation of specialization has been inherently, logically contradictory, and it is a consequence of logical necessity, then (not of contingency, history, or politics), that every denunciation of scientific specialization has fallen unheeded, and that the world moves toward the infinite increase of specialization and technology.

Severino explains what “man” has always meant in his “Ideological Man and Technological Man: Their Replaceability” (“*Uomo ideologico e uomo tecnico: la loro sostituibilità*”), in *Capitalism without Future* (*Capitalismo senza futuro*, 2012):

As to his fundamental meaning, the human being has always been understood, throughout his history, as a *technological being*; that is, as a force capable of organizing means toward the realization of goals; *as to his fundamental meaning*, we say, to indicate the common meaning that underlies all the different and contrasting meanings by which the human being has been interpreted throughout time (and which, at times, as in the case of the mystic man, *seem* irreducible to the technological man) (quanto al suo significato fondamentale *l’esser uomo è sempre stato inteso, lungo la sua storia, come un essere tecnico, ossia come una forza capace di predisporre mezzi per realizzare scopi*: quanto al suo significato fondamentale, *si sta dicendo, ossia quanto al significato comune che è sotteso ai diversi e anche contrastanti significati secondo i quali l’esser uomo è stato via via interpretato (e che a volte, come ad esempio nel caso dell’uomo mistico, sembrano irriducibili all’uomo tecnico)*, 85).

Since “man” is a force capable of organizing means toward the realization of goals, and since “things” are *species*: discrete, distinct, separate, and isolated from one another, then scientific specialization—which treats things as *species* in order to organize means toward the realization of the goals of man—is the practice that most coheres to our most basic beliefs about the nature of being. For human life to organize itself through scientific specialization, then, is only natural, righteous, and just. For this reason, if the present configuration of

scientific specialization is only a fairly recent circumstance in our history, we must recognize that the concepts of specialization and expertise have always laid the foundations of human civilizations (to give just one example, when Bertrand Russell writes about the Hellenistic age in his *History of Western Philosophy* (1946), he writes that “specialization characterized the age in all departments, not only in the world of learning” (260); examples of the kind could be extended all the way to the archaic man). In this sense, the power of man has always depended on the extent of man’s possession of specialized expertise.

As Severino writes in his *Téchne: The Roots of Violence* (*Téchne: Le radici della violenza*, 2002), this “is, no more no less, the self-conception that Western culture has always retained, and which has attained singular emphasis in bourgeois culture” (“è, né più né meno, il concetto che la cultura occidentale ha sempre avuto di se stessa e che ha trovato una particolare accentuazione nella cultura borghese,” 122). In the 17th century, science started to decisively separate itself from philosophy, and as a result modern science was born. For Severino, this process was inevitable, and so is the process whereby we today witness – as he writes in his *Contemporary Philosophy* – how “the methods of the natural and mathematical sciences come to be applied to the various aspects of human reality” (“i metodi delle scienze della natura e di quelle matematiche vengono applicati anche ai vari aspetti della realtà umana,” 481). Scientific specialization has invaded the humanities, and while philosophy has become the servant of science, literary studies try to become as “scientific” as possible to justify their survival. The course of our civilization, in this sense, proceeds according to necessity (and it is thus ineluctable), because the rise and expansion of scientific specialization institutes the progressive fulfilment of what have been our most basic beliefs about the nature of reality, man, and things, since the dawn of time. In this sense, throughout history, every denunciation of scientific specialization has established misunderstandings and misrepresentations, and has been inherently, logically contradictory by virtue of its sharing the same fundamental beliefs about being by which the justice and power of scientific specialization must be recognized as axiomatic. For this reason, all of these denunciations have then fallen unheeded by necessity, and every contemporary decrier of scientific specialization has accomplished nothing but (1) the demonstration of the contradictoriness of his own discourse,

(2) the reinforcement of the hegemony of scientific specialization through the display of the contradictoriness of his denunciation, and (3) the enhancement of the hegemony of scientific specialization through the display of a discourse whose essence—unknowingly—exhibits the same fundamental beliefs about the nature of reality, man, and things that render the justice and power of scientific specialization unquestionable. These beliefs comprise the theory of being that interprets reality as the place where the co-existence of things as isolated *species* and of “man” as a center of action occurs, where man is capable of deciding and organizing means toward the realization of ends, where “things” exist as *species* discrete, distinct, separate, and isolated from one another (and thus as separable and isolatable, analyzable and controllable), and where “life” is the occurrence of endless transformation.

3. SCIENCE AND MYTH

Scientific specialization is the most coherent fulfilment of what have been our most basic beliefs about the nature of man, things, life, and reality since the original appearance of human thought. But so why is scientific specialization such a recent configuration in the history of human civilization, and why—by virtue of its being a configuration—must it fight all other configurations that claim the right to shape human civilization? One answer to these questions lies in the exploration of the relationship between science and myth and, most specifically, in the recognition of the ambivalence of this relationship: on the one hand, (a) science has constituted itself in opposition to myth, and as its eclipsing; on the other hand, (b) this opposition has occurred within the deeper ambient sameness that permeates the entire history of humanity and which, when understood, exhibits how the essence of scientific specialization was already contained within our traditions and thus how the opposition between tradition and specialization has always been both concrete (on the surface) and illusory (deep down). Through this understanding, then, and depending on the adopted perspective, (1) tradition can be seen to have always contained within itself the seeds of its self-destruction as it has occurred in the last two hundred years, through the death of all gods, the destruction of all unifying knowledges, and the advent of specialization and technology, (2) science can be understood as the necessary consequence of the original mythic attitude, and thus as enacting the preservation and perpetuation of myth. It is through this

perspective that one can apprehend why scientific specialization is the necessary and most coherent concrete consequence of our most ancestral relations to the world and thought, and why it has thus been inscribed in our conception of knowledge since the dawn of time.

To make sense of these claims we must again refer to Severino's "Scientific Specialization and Nothingness," in *Beyond Language*; and we shall start by trying to understand how and why (a) science has constituted itself in opposition to myth, and as its eclipsing, and how and why this opposition is, in essence, related to the history of our conception of the nature of reality. For Severino, "man rejects the guidance of myth when he begins to perceive himself as a center of action, capable of *deciding*" ("*l'uomo non si fa più guidare dal mito quando incomincia a sentirsi un centro di azione, capace di decidere,*" 59). "When, in the existence guided by myth, man perceives, in his acting and will, the acting and will of the Whole, his acting does not relate to the world by separating and isolating its parts; that is, his acting does not separate *from* the Whole, because his acting is the acting *of* the Whole" ("*quando nell'esistenza guidata dal mito l'uomo avverte, nel proprio agire e volere, l'azione e la volontà del Tutto, il suo agire non si rivolge al mondo separandone e isolandone le parti: il suo agire non separa dal Tutto, perché il suo agire è l'agire del Tutto,*" *ibid.* 61). In other words, in myth, man, "in his acting and deciding, perceives the presence of the Divine Forces that bear the weight of the universe" ("*nel proprio agire e decidere avverte la presenza delle Forze divine che reggono l'universo,*" *ibid.* 59), and therefore, "he perceives his acting as not *his*, but as the acting of the Whole itself. And thus, when he acts and decides, he does not feel separate and isolated from the Whole, *and in this sense, properly speaking, he does not 'decide'*" ("*egli avverte il suo agire non come suo, ma come l'agire stesso del Tutto. Proprio per questo, agendo e decidendo, non si sente separato e isolato dal Tutto; e in questo senso, propriamente, non 'decide,'*" *ibid.*, my emphasis).

In myth, "to act" and "to decide" cannot mean what *we* take them to mean, because in myth man cannot be an autonomous center of action and thus, properly speaking, he cannot decide. In myth, the meaning of actions and decisions is codified within the unifying structural meaningfulness of the Whole, and thus it is the Whole that acts, *not* any particular being. Within this unifying meaningfulness, no decision is available to particular beings and so, also, properly, no "*action*" is (if by "action" we intend an act pursued by a particular being and one which follows a particular decision and strives to achieve a

particular aim through even the lowest conceivable degree of autonomy). “To decide” means “to make a choice from a number of alternatives” (*OED*), and in myth there are no alternatives, and thus no decisions to be made. In myth, the Whole is the Meaning: unchanging, unalterable, inflexible. The Whole is the only force, man does not decide nor act (unless “to act” does *not* mean to exercise even the lowest conceivable degree of autonomy *nor* to transform the world), and therefore he is *not* “man.”

The mutual exclusion between “man” and the Whole is resolved, in myth, by the victory of the Whole.² But then man begins to become conscious of his being a center of action, and the history of humanity becomes the progressive enhancement of man’s conscious awareness of his ability to act and decide, followed by the progressive coherence between this conscious awareness and concrete action. Therefore, after myth “come the epochs when man no longer feels the Whole in his acting and begins to perceive himself as an autonomous center of action and will” (“*vengono le epoche in cui l’uomo non sente più il Tutto nel proprio agire, ma incomincia a percepirsi come centro autonomo di azione e di volontà,*” *ibid.*). In these epochs, man must come to see himself as separate and isolated from the things of the world, and things themselves must appear to him as *species*: discrete, distinct, separate, and isolated from one another. Man must come to this perception because such perception is necessary if man is to be “man,” and thus a force and a center of action capable of acting and deciding and of organizing means toward the pursuit of ends. This perception is the necessary precondition without which “man” and “human life” are impossible, and so for man to exist the Whole must become changeable, alterable, flexible. In short, for man to exist the Whole must fall. Only through the fall of myth can man’s power of initiative arise: “the more man feels autonomous, the more he perceives the Whole as separate from him; the more he feels author and master (and hence responsible) of his actions, the more his actions become decisions” (“*più l’uomo si sente autonomo, più sente il Tutto al di fuori di lui; più si sente*

² Human history has witnessed the perpetuity of giant myths—perhaps, Christianity and Islam above all—that claim to allow the coexistence of “man” as an autonomous center of action and of the Whole as the Principle of Meaning. The proper critique that these giant myths deserve cannot be attempted in this study, but the reader should know that the philosophy of Emanuele Severino establishes that the mutual exclusion (and thus the impossibility of coexistence) of “man” and the Meaning of the Whole constitutes one of the fundamental principles of being.

autore e padrone (e quindi responsabile) delle azioni che compie, più il suo agire diventa un decidere," *ibid.*, 62). When actions become decisions, man becomes an autonomous force, and when man becomes an autonomous force, the things of the world appear as *species*, and myth and the Meaning of the Whole fall. After this fall, man is born, and so the ontological isolation of all things is affirmed. From this original severance, the world of scientific specialization and technology follows by necessity, and thus must be appraised as natural, righteous, and just.

So Severino answers the questions of how and why (a) science has constituted itself in opposition to myth, and as its eclipsing, and how and why this opposition is, in essence, related to the history of our conception of the nature of reality. His answer unearths the most essential, and so presents an understanding of the historical opposition between scientific specialization and myth that is far more insightful than the myopic interpretation whereby contemporary secularism supports its delusion of realizing truth and rationality (science) over falsehood and irrationality (myth). Severino's answer retraces the advent of science to our original conception of reality, and thus can account for the logic of our entire history without issuing gratuitous value-judgments in favor or against any of the configurations by which humanity has organized itself in time. However, when we interpret our history as the history of the opposition between science and myth, we only see the first side of the ambivalent relationship between these two epochs of humanity. We only see, properly, the *surface* of this ambivalence, and it is only from this viewpoint that what has just been said may appear contradictory. We have said, namely, that scientific specialization is the ineluctable, most coherent, concrete fulfilment of what have always been our most basic beliefs about the nature of reality: our belief that man is a center of action, capable of deciding and transforming and thus of organizing means toward the realization of goals, and our belief that the things of the world exist as *species*, distinct, discrete, separate, and isolated, and thus as observable, analyzable, measurable, controllable, transformable. Then, we have said that these beliefs arose as man separated himself from myth, and thus only after, and as a result of, the fall of myth. This seems a contradiction, but the appearance of this contradiction is illusory, and it is due to our lingering over the surface side of the ambivalent relationship between scientific

specialization and myth. The contradiction is resolved by exploring how and why (*b*) the opposition between scientific specialization and myth has occurred within the deeper ambient sameness that permeates the entire history of humanity and which exhibits how the essence of scientific specialization was already contained within myth and thus how myth itself contained the seeds of its own self-destruction—and so how, properly speaking, the opposition between myth and scientific specialization is (deep down) illusory, and how scientific specialization is the necessary consequence of the original mythic attitude, thus enacting the preservation and perpetuation of myth. Through this deeper investigation one can see how scientific specialization is the ineluctable, most coherent, and concrete fulfilment of what have always been our most basic beliefs.

For Severino, since the original appearance of human thought, myth has structured itself as a contradiction, and it is this contradiction within myth that contains the seeds of myth's own self-destruction and of all the transformations that human thought has gone through in history, leading to scientific specialization. By means of this contradiction, the process whereby man begins to perceive himself as an autonomous center of action, and so begins to separate himself from myth, "is a process that begins precisely within the existence governed by myth itself" ("*è un processo che incomincia all'interno stesso dell'esistenza regolata dal mito,*" *ibid.*, 61). It is *within* myth that man begins to doubt "that *every* action, even the most irrelevant and banal, is the acting of the Whole" ("*che ogni agire, anche il più irrilevante e banale, sia l'agire del Tutto,*" *ibid.*). Hence man begins to doubt myth from within myth, and since the very inception of myth. From the start, the mythic meaning of the world begins to seem impossible to man *because* it denies man as an autonomous center of action. It seems impossible to man that every action in the world is the acting of the Whole. Man doubts the Whole as soon as he conceives it, and he doubts it because he feels he *must* be a center of action. Thus, man begins to perceive himself as a center of action since the very inception of myth, and since the inception of myth equates the appearance of human thought, therefore, man begins to perceive himself as a center of action since the very appearance of human thought.

In this sense, myth contains within itself, and since its very inception, the

seed of its own self-destruction. This seed is the idea that man is a center of action. This idea belongs to the very appearance of human thought; it is at the root of the set of most basic and fundamental beliefs about the nature of reality that leads, by necessity, to the dominance, righteousness, and justice of scientific specialization (it *necessitates* that the things of the world appear as *species*). Therefore, scientific specialization is the necessary and most coherent concrete consequence of the very first appearance of human thought. This idea—the idea that man is a center of action and that things are *species*—must appear with the inception of myth and configure the contradiction of myth because myth is, from the start, incapable of sustaining the Meaning of the Whole that it seeks to affirm. This becomes clear, by way of example, when man reflects on transgression. A transgression is an act that *differs* from the Act that coheres with the Meaning that a society has agreed is established by the Law of the Whole, and thus by the Divine Forces that govern existence. Since the inception of myth, man *believes* he witnesses transgression, and as soon as man believes in the reality of transgression, the Whole is broken, and man has flexed the inflexible, altered the unalterable. If man can transgress (if transgression is real; if only the worst possible act is to be deemed transgression), then man can act as an autonomous center of action: he can decide, in accordance with his own will. Thus, if man can transgress, the Law of the Whole is immediately shattered, and so reality must be constituted by a multitude of *species*, separate and isolated from one another, moving autonomously, in accordance with their own particular wills. If the Law of the Whole truly were the foundation of reality, and thus if all action were the Act of the Whole, then *no* act would institute transgression: transgression would be impossible. But since the dawn of time man believes he can transgress, and thus the Meaning of the Whole is flexed and shattered since its very inception. This is the contradiction of myth, which myth has always institutionalized in its postulation of the opposition between the “sacred” and the “profane.” The “sacred” acts in accordance with the Whole; the “profane” does not. Thus, the profane acts autonomously, and so it shatters the Law of the Whole. But it is not the profane alone that shatters the Law of the Whole. It is the entirety of myth that shatters itself because, through the institutionalization of the opposition between the sacred and the profane, myth postulates that existence

is *not* governed by the Law of the Whole, but by the expression of the acts of autonomous, separate, and isolated wills. From the postulation of “transgression” and “profanity,” man is only one short and necessary step away from becoming conscious of the fact that even the “sacred” is an act that, if it accords with the Law of the Whole, it does so only by virtue of the autonomous decision of the particular will of the individual who could have acted otherwise. Consequently, the profane act must be punished in accordance with its profanity, and the sacred act must be honored in accordance with its sanctity. This entails that, even within myth, the most fundamental belief that man considers as the original unquestionable evidence of reality that must be held as prior to all other considerations is the belief that *man is a technological being*, capable of decision (action, transformation, organization, etc.)—and so that the things of the world exist as *species*, separate and isolated from one another.

Thus, if myth postulates that reality is the Meaning, Act, and Law of the Whole; it also postulates—and at the most fundamental level—that it is *not*. In other words, myth postulates, on the one hand, that all occurrences result from the single Act of the Law of the Whole and, on the other and more profound hand, that all occurrences result from the autonomous will of particular actors who can decide whether to act in accordance with the Law (and so perform “sacred” acts) or against it (and so perform “profane” acts). This inherent contradiction drives the erosion of myth throughout history until the advent of the non-mythic sense of the world and, after that, of scientific specialization (and still after, for Severino, of the age of technology). This process demands the recognition that, since the original appearance of human thought, man has always been conceived as a technological being, capable of organizing means toward the realization of ends, and hence of deciding, acting, transforming, analyzing, measuring, controlling, dominating etc. Man has thus always believed in the existence of things as *species*, separate and isolated from one another: these beliefs have always constituted what man has always regarded as the unquestionable evidence of reality. For this reason—and since scientific specialization is nothing but most coherent and powerful action that can result from the conceptualization of man as technological being and of things as *species*—we must recognize, with Severino, that scientific specialization is the necessary and most coherent concrete consequence of our most ancestral

relations to the world and to thought, and that it has thus been inscribed in our conception of knowledge and action since the dawn of time.

Thus, since the appearance of thought, man's most fundamental theory of being has conceived the nature of reality as comprised by the existence of man as a technological being (capable of deciding) and of things as *species*. This idea has resided in the foundations, first, of the mythic sense of the world (which contradicted itself by, on the one hand, affirming this belief as fundamental and unquestionable and, on the other hand, denying it by asserting the Meaning of the Whole), and then of the non-mythic sense of the world, which is the sense of our time, when humanity is starting to free itself from the contradiction of myth so that its most fundamental idea about the nature of reality—its belief in the unquestionable evidence of the technological nature of man and of the existence of things as *species*—can reign freely, and so that man's action can truly begin to cohere with man's most fundamental belief (the time of true coherence between this thought and action will be the age of technology). As a result, properly seen, scientific specialization has not established itself in opposition to myth but is the necessary consequence of the original mythic attitude, and thus enacts the preservation and perpetuation of myth by freeing myth of its own inherent contradiction. It is in this sense, then, scientific specialization is the ineluctable, most coherent, concrete fulfilment of what have always been man's most fundamental beliefs about the nature of reality.

These matters, and their analysis by Emanuele Severino, are far vaster and more complex than they appear here. This essay merely delineates the basic structure of the argument, and in so doing hopes to manage to *suggest* the answers to the questions it raises. On the one hand, the key to understanding why scientific specialization is such a recent configuration in the history of human civilization resides in the recognition of the historical dominance of myth and, specifically, of the contradictory side that negated man's most fundamental belief in himself as a technological being and in things as *species*. Likewise, the key to understanding why scientific specialization must still fight all other configurations of human civilization that claim the right to shape human civilization resides in the recognition that myth is not quite dead yet, and inhabits the heart of all still-alive traditions (myth and tradition are one and the same in their essence, which is their belief in the Absolute) that, today,

keep fighting scientific specialization for the right to shape human civilization (Religions, of course, are a great form of tradition, but so are all the variations of the *epistème* and, for example, Capitalism and Communism—besides all the undeniable infinite divergences between the different forms of tradition). On the other hand, the key to understanding why scientific specialization has gradually come to dominate our civilization (and the process is not over) resides in the recognition that the world of scientific specialization and technology follows by necessity from man's most ancestral, basic, and unquestioned belief in man as a technological being and things as *species*. Scientific specialization is the most coherent and powerful action that can result from such conceptualization of reality, and thus it must be appraised as natural, righteous, and just. The philosophy of Emanuele Severino and its interpretation of human history can account for all the different nuances of this process while doing them full justice and explaining their driving force. In addition, his philosophy explains why all denunciations of scientific specialization throughout history have fallen unheeded by showing the inevitability of this fall. Finally, it explains why the questioning of scientific specialization may occur only as the result of the questioning of what has always been unquestionable.

4. SCIENCE AND DECISION

In “Scientific Specialization and Nothingness,” Severino also elaborates a less theoretical, more tangible exemplification of why man has always considered himself as a technological being and things as *species*, and of why this basic belief demands the advent of scientific specialization. This exemplification requires reflection on the act of decision. As Severino states: “who decides—be it the simplest or most complex thing—is convinced of being and having *all* that is needed for the realization of what he decides” (“*chi decide la cosa più semplice o più complessa è convinto di essere e avere tutto ciò che è richiesto per la realizzazione di ciò che egli decide,*” *ibid.*, 62). Let us consider the simplest of decisions by way of example. When I take an object, I am not deciding the existence of the object nor of my hand, but I am deciding to change the location of the object from its original position onto my hand. Even this simplest of decisions is possible only because, on the one hand, I am convinced that I am a center of action who can autonomously decide how to transform the world (if I weren't so convinced I would never even conceive of the possibility of changing the location of the

object; the idea of “decision” would never even come to my mind) and, on the other hand, I am convinced that the object exists as a “thing,” a *species* that is separate and isolated—and thus separable and isolatable—from all other things: that is, I am convinced that the object is not inextricably tied to where I find it (again, if I were convinced of the object’s inextricability, then I could never even conceive of deciding whether to leave it there or take it into my hand, and thus separate it, isolate it from there).

Therefore: I decide to take an object in hand *only* if I am convinced that the status of the object (for example, its being placed on a table) is not tied to the rest of the world by an inextricable tie; and therefore *only* if I am convinced that said status is separate and isolated (or separable and isolatable) from the context in which it is situated. No matter how copious may be the bonds that tie the object on the table to the rest of the world, I decide to take the object *only if I am convinced* that those bonds can *all* be broken by the motion of my hand that takes the object. I decide to take the object because I am convinced that, *as to its being in my hand*, the object is separate and isolated from the rest of the world and thus depends only on me (*Dunque: decido di prendere in mano un oggetto solo se sono convinto che lo stato in cui esso si trova (ad esempio il suo essere depresso sul tavolo) non è unito al resto del mondo da un legame indissolubile, e dunque solo se sono convinto che tale stato è separato e isolato (o separabile e isolabile) dal contesto in cui si trova. Per quanto numerosi possano essere i legami che uniscono l’oggetto posto sul tavolo al resto del mondo, decido di afferrare l’oggetto soltanto se sono convinto che quei legami possono essere tutti sciolti dal gesto della mia mano che afferra l’oggetto. Decido di afferrare l’oggetto, perché sono convinto che, quanto al suo stare nella mia mano, esso è separato e isolato dal resto del mondo e dipende unicamente da me, ibid. 63).*

For exactly the same reasons, I do not ever conceive of deciding whether or not to take the sun, and therefore I never strive to stretch my arms as far out as I can in order to do so. The decision never presents itself to me, either because I do not think that I am an autonomous force powerful enough to do so, or because I do not think that the sun will let itself be taken, or both—and the “insane” person who strives mightily to stretch as far out as she can in order to take the sun does not strive so while believing that she’s not powerful enough to do so, or that the sun won’t let itself be taken; she strives so because she believes that she is powerful enough to take the sun and that the sun will let itself be taken, and *this* is the condition of her “insanity.”

But this counter-example is misleading, because man's inability to take the sun may be contingent, and a future when we may have to "decide" whether or not to take the sun is not impossible. The point of the counter-example is: what does it mean to take an object? If the action of taking an object entails a *decision*, then this action entails—by necessity—the beliefs in man as a technological being and in things as *species* (while if the action of taking an object does not entail a decision, then the meaning of "action" must be truly re-thought for the first time in history), and action has meant decision all throughout human history. When I change the location of an object and assign to this action the meaning of decision—that is, when I believe that "I" have changed the location of the object through the exercise of "my" decision over the location of the object—, I am by necessity defining this action as "my" action and "my" decision, and therefore I am believing in myself as a technological being (an autonomous center of action, capable of decision), and in things as *species* (separate and isolated, and hence separable and isolatable, from one another). "To decide is to separate the part from the Whole" ("*decidere è separare la parte dal Tutto,*" *ibid.*), and thus, again, it is to believe in oneself as a technological being and in things as *species* (it is also to believe in *oneself* as *species*, because the precondition of autonomy, force, and action is *one's own* separation and isolation from other things, otherwise decision, action, power, etc. would be impossible), and therefore in one's ability to analyze, measure, control, transform, and dominate the things of the world. "To decide is to be convinced of embodying an autonomous center of action, on which both the decision and what is burdened by the decision entirely depend" ("*decidere è essere convinti di costituire un centro autonomo di azione, unicamente dal quale dipendono ciò che viene deciso e la cosa che viene investita dalla decisione,*" *ibid.*, 63-64). To decide is, therefore, to enact the essence of scientific specialization, because to practice scientific specialization is to relate to things as *species* while believing in oneself as a center of action and so act accordingly. Even in our simplest and smallest decisions and actions, we enact the mode of being that ineluctably leads to scientific specialization as the most coherent, concrete, natural, powerful, and just human practice in relation to existence: when you take a glass of water you enact the essence of scientific specialization; when you take a glass of water and then decry scientific specialization you are in contradiction.

In *To Caesar and to God (A Cesare e a Dio*, 1983), Severino writes:

If one were convinced that things are tied to one another by an inseparable tie, so

as to form an unbreakable web, then one could never decide to take even the lightest and easiest-to-take object in hand: the attempt would involve the entire web to which the object is inseparably tied. Moving the smallest thing would equate moving the entire universe. One thinks he can modify reality – and technology establishes itself through its conviction of being the power that can transform reality most effectively – only if one thinks he is looking at a world where things are *separate*, not tied by a web” (“*se si fosse persuasi che le cose sono legate tra di loro e legate con un legame inscindibile, in modo da formare una rete che non può essere spezzata, allora non ci si deciderebbe nemmeno a prendere in mano il più leggero e afferrabile degli oggetti: il tentativo coinvolgerebbe tutta la rete in cui l’oggetto sarebbe inserito. Smuovere la cosa più piccola equivarrebbe a smuovere l’intero universo. Si crede di poter modificare la realtà – e la tecnica si costituisce attraverso la convinzione di essere la potenza che trasforma la realtà nel modo più efficace – solo se ci si tiene dinanzi un mondo in cui le cose sono separate, non sono legate da una rete, 147*).

Thus, the original belief in human action as decision—the belief in man as technological being and things as *species*—separates the part from the Whole and so shatters the inextricable tie that constitutes the Meaning and the Law of the Whole that is affirmed by myth since its inception (if I were convinced that the Law of the Whole inextricably ties the universe into its Meaning, the possibility of decision would never present itself to me). Since the dawn of time, man acts and decides: he thus destroys myth and enacts the essence of scientific specialization. From the simplest action (taking a glass of water) to the most complex action (establishing the dominance of the scientific apparatus on earth and beyond), man enacts his belief in his power to transform the things of the world, and thus his belief in himself as a technological being and in things as *species*. The simplest of human actions (taking a glass of water) postulates that man is an autonomous center of action and that things are separate and isolated, and thus separable and isolatable from one another. These beliefs are the essence of decision and, likewise, of scientific specialization, as Severino explains, once again, in *Beyond Language*: “scientific specialization isolates the *species* from the context and establishes the knowledge of the *species* as independent from the knowledge of the context, [...] it thus considers itself capable of untying all the bonds that factually unite the part to the context” (“*la specializzazione scientifica isola la species dal contesto e pone la conoscenza della species come indipendente dalla conoscenza del contesto, [...] cioè si considera capace di sciogliere tutti i legami che di fatto uniscono la parte al contesto,*” 64). In this sense, scientific specialization is nothing but the most powerful actualization of human decision

and is fully coherent with the theory of being that decision presupposes, and Severino illustrates this through another concrete example:

even before constructing a hydroelectric power plant that separates the water of a river or lake from its original status of unity with the rest of the world, the *decision* to construct a power plant *assumes* that water is something that is originally separate from its context; that is, something that can be known and used independently of all the infinite dimensions of the universe that do not belong to the *finite* set of factors that the available scientific knowledge considers to be relevant to the construction of a hydroelectric power plant (“*prima ancora di costruire una centrale idroelettrica, che separa l’acqua di un fiume o di un lago dallo stato in cui essa si trova originariamente, unita al resto del mondo, la decisione stessa di costruire una centrale assume l’acqua come qualcosa di originariamente separato dal proprio contesto, cioè come qualcosa che può essere conosciuto e utilizzato indipendentemente da tutte le infinite dimensioni dell’universo che non rientrano nell’insieme finito di fattori che le conoscenze scientifiche a disposizione ritengono connessi alla costruzione di una centrale idroelettrica,*” *ibid.*, 63).

Thus, scientific specialization does nothing more than make decisions. Its distinctive quality is its being the most coherent, radical, effective, powerful actualization of human decision and thus action. Therefore, *scientific specialization is the concrete realization of the essence of man*. If man is a technological being, then the infinite strengthening of scientific specialization and the advent of the age of technology represent the fullest realization of what it means to be human, and thus they also represent humanity’s utmost moral obligation. *Everyone*, today, agrees that the most unquestionable evidence of existence is that man is a center of action, capable of deciding, and that things exist as *species*, and are thus dominatable (even scientific determinism does). This agreement entails, despite the contradictory voices of those who claim otherwise, that scientific specialization is the most coherent, most powerful, righteous, and just configuration of human civilization on earth. The advent of the age of technology is the realization of true humanism, and scientific specialization is the engine of its coming. All these consequences are unavoidable, according to Severino, once one postulates that man is a technological being and that things exist as *species*. If this theory of reality is true, then scientific specialization (its most coherent consequence) is righteous and just, and as long as humanity regards this theory as true, scientific specialization will justly dominate the configuration of humanity, and it will do

so by necessity, toward the age of technology.

The proper questioning of scientific specialization may come only as a result of the questioning of this theory of reality—the theory of reality that constitutes humanity’s most ancestral relationship to being. For Severino, this theory constitutes the greatest folly. It is the essence of nihilism and of all violence ever since the original appearance of man.

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