EMANUELE SEVERINO ON THE MEANING OF SCIENTIFIC SPECIALIZATION

AN INTRODUCTION

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ABSTRACT: To our contemporary eyes, science appears 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 relationship with being. Italian philosopher Emanuele Severino sees in scientific specialization the most coherent consequence of humanity's most ancestral interpretation of the world, which all human decisions and actions enact. To him, this coherency is what makes the dominance of scientific specialization on our time necessary. By focusing on one of Severino's major theoretical works (*Oltre il linguaggio*, 1992), and with reference to other key texts, this essay introduces international readers to a specific facet of Severino's discourse. In doing so, it translates passages of his works that have never appeared in English.

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

SCIENTIFIC SPECIALIZATION AND THE DISTANT PAST[1]

To our contemporary eyes, science appears as the most reliable guide to

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[1] Emanuele Severino (1929-) is a contemporary Italian philosopher. He wrote around eighty or more books. As of today, only one has been translated into English: *The Essence of Nihilism* (Verso Books, 2016). English readers can also find a collection of essays, edited by Nicoletta Cusano, entitled *Nihilism and Destiny* (2016). The present essay introduces English readers to only one facet

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 approaches to knowledge and action, each of which pursues (and achieves) ever higher intensities of specialization. Specialization thus belongs to the essence of science; it gives science its capacity to extend knowledge and control over the objects of its analysis: through specialization, science partitions reality into sets of discrete parts and analyzes them in isolation from the totality of their context.

Specialization is the spirit of our time. However, we possess little awareness as to what the proper meaning of specialization is, and this knowledge is indispensable if we are not to proceed mindlessly in our relationship with being. In *Beyond Language* (*Oltre il linguaggio*, 1992) – especially in the third chapter –, Emanuele Severino explores the sense and implications of scientific specialization. He accepts the common knowledge that specialization (1) belongs to the core of the scientific practice, and (2) is a fairly recent configuration of civilization, but he also explains why scientific specialization is the necessary and most coherent consequence of humanity's most ancestral interpretation of the world. In this sense, Severino offers an historical-philosophical explanation of *why* scientific specialization dominates our time:

> The specialized constitution of science belongs 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. This is a fairly recent circumstance in the history of our civilization. But the method by which scientific specialization

of Severino's discourse. N.B.: I translated all the titles and passages from Severino's work here cited. The Italian originals are always reported in parenthesis after the translation. The bibliography lists them in alphabetical order according to the original Italian title.

contemplates the world is far more ancient. It dates back to when man began to perceive himself as an autonomous center of action, capable of *decision*. Decision makes acting autonomous. To act without deciding is to depend on something other. The meaning of scientific specialization is essentially tied to the meaning of decision. But what does this mean, and how is this proposition justifiable? (*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 sentirti 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?*, OL 57).

CONTEXT AND ISOLATION

Severino points out that 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 is what lets itself be seen. And in turn, "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. In other words, the *species* must not confuse itself with its context: it must be separate from all other *species* and from the totality of all *species* to be seen, i.e., to be itself.

We interpret things as *species* and enact specialization, and *scientific* specialization is "the certainty of the *difference* between things" ("*la*

convinzione della differenza *tra le cose*," ibid.) put into practice in the most coherent and powerful manner: science "*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).

In *Philosophy from the Greeks to Our Time: Contemporary Philosophy* (*La filosofia dai greci al nostro tempo: la filosofia contemporanea*, 1996), Severino writes that while science does seek unification – see e.g. the *International Encyclopedia of Unified Science* –, nonetheless it aims to "unite dimensions that it conceives as originally separate, and thus destined to remain so and to render accidental, precarious, temporary, and contingent 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*," FGT 482).

Like scientific specialization, all human actions interpret things as *species*, i.e., as discrete, separate and isolated from one another. When we say "human life" we give voice to our belief in our power to exert agency over things and transform them. This belief entails the interpretation of things as *species* as the original necessary precondition for transformation: if things weren't *species*, transformation would be impossible. For agency to be conceivable, for decisions to be real, the "world" must be constituted by a series of isolated and isolatable things. We can observe, analyze, measure, control, desire, despise, save, and kill things only because of their original separateness. Humans can exist as the beings who organize means, realize ends, make decisions and transform the "world" only in virtue of the prior ontological isolation of all things.

This basic interpretation of reality establishes the foundation of our civilization. Accordingly, within the thought of our civilization, scientific

specialization belongs to the essence of humankind. This makes it not only powerful but also righteous and just: scientific specialization is the factual realization of humankind. When human beings live – i.e., when they feel, decide, and act –, they isolate. When scientific specialization pursues its ends, it isolates. Therefore, it develops human essence to its highest coherence and power. In this sense, to reject scientific specialization is to reject humanity. This is why our culture's denunciations of scientific specialization have been contradictory, why they had to fall unheeded by necessity, and why our civilization moves toward the age of technology. To believe that human beings transform the world and to criticize scientific specialization is contradictory. In *Capitalism without Future* (*Capitalismo senza futuro*, 2012), Severino explains why human beings are technological beings:

> *as to their fundamental meaning*, throughout history, human beings have always been described as *technological beings*; that is, as forces capable of organizing means toward the realization of ends. We say "*as to their fundamental meaning*" to indicate the common meaning that underlies all different, even contrasting, meanings imposed upon human beings through time (and which at times *seem* irreducible to the technological being, as, e.g., in the case of the mystic 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)*, *CSF* 85].

We interpret humans as beings capable of organizing means toward the realization of ends by treating things as *species*. This is how we define human beings as technological beings. This is what makes scientific specialization the practice that most coheres to our fundamental beliefs about our nature. The present technological configuration of our

civilization may be a recent historical circumstance, but its *Weltanschauung* is as ancient as humankind. In *Téchne: The Roots of Violence* (*Téchne: Le radici della violenza*, 2002), Severino writes that this "has always been the self-conception of Western culture, 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,*" *T* 122).[2]

In the seventeenth century, science began to separate itself from philosophy. This marked the birth of modern science through the same inevitable process whereby we today witness 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,*" *FGT* 481). There are no humanities free from scientific specialization anymore. Philosophy has become the servant of science. Literary studies try to be "scientific" to justify their survival. These are just symptoms of the rise and expansion of our technological ethos. In this sense, the course of our civilization proceeds according to necessity and is therefore ineluctable. We are witnessing the progressive fulfilment of our most fundamental and ancient technological beliefs.

SCIENCE AND MYTH

If scientific specialization is the most coherent fulfilment of our most

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[2] To give just one example: in *History of Western Philosophy* (1946), Bertrand Russell writes about the Hellenistic age that "specialization characterized the age in all departments, not only in the world of learning" (*HWP* 260). With due specifications, such statements can be extended all the way to archaic human beings.

ancestral interpretation of being, why is it such a recent configuration of human civilization, and why is it still being questioned? For Severino, the answers to these questions lie in the relationship between science and myth. On the one hand, science was born in opposition to myth. On the other, this opposition occurs within the deeper ambient sameness that traverses the history of humanity. Severino insists on two perspectives: *a*) tradition contained within itself the seeds of its self-destruction, of the death of god, of the elimination of all unified knowledge, and of the advent of specialization and technology; *b*) science is the necessary consequence of the original mythic attitude, and thus enacts and preserves the spirit of traditional mythology. To understand these claims, we must again turn to Severino's *Beyond Language* (*Oltre il linguaggio*, 1992).

Why was science born in opposition to myth? Severino answers that "human beings reject the guidance of myth when they begin to perceive themselves as centers 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," *OL* 59). The true difference between mythic and non-mythic existence resides in the meanings of "human" and "action." Most importantly, the non-mythic existence begins as human beings live more and more according to their belief in their ability to decide how to transform the world. In myth, human beings, "in their acting and deciding, perceive 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.). That is, they believe that "their acting is the acting of the Whole" ("*il suo agire è l'agire del Tutto*," ibid. 61). Therefore, "they perceive their acting as not theirs but as the acting of the Whole itself. As a result, when they act and decide, they do not feel separate and isolated from the Whole. Properly speaking, then, they do 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. 59).

In myth, human beings do not decide. A "decision" is an act freely chosen by an individual, and there can be no freedom for individual decision in myth, where every action is an Act of the Whole. The individual cannot be an autonomous center of action: one must enact the Will of the Whole and therefore one cannot decide. Properly speaking, one cannot even act if by "action" we mean an endeavor that was chosen and could have been otherwise because it originates within the autonomous force of an individual. "To decide" means "to make a choice from a number of alternatives" (OED). In myth, there are no alternatives and therefore no decisions. The Whole must be unchanging, unalterable, inflexible, and so human beings cannot do otherwise.

Human freedom and the Whole are mutually exclusive. In myth, the opposition resolves in the victory of the Whole. In science, human freedom wins.[3] Scientific specialization is what happens when belief in human freedom becomes concrete action. The history of humanity is the process of becoming ever more coherent with our original belief in human freedom. Thus, after myth "come the epochs when human beings no longer feel the Whole in their acting and begin to perceive themselves as autonomous centers 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, human beings begin to feel themselves as separate and isolated from the things of the

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[3] Human history is pervaded by giant myths, Christianity and Islam above all, that claim to allow the coexistence of human beings and the Whole. We cannot describe the critique that these myths deserve here. But we can mention the reasoning that points to the solution. Can God be surprised by human actions? No, or He wouldn't be omnipotent. But if God cannot be surprised, then there can there be no space for human freedom.

world, which themselves become species.

These epochs were the dawn of freedom for "human beings" as we know them. We could now decide and act, organize means and realize ends. We had to destroy the mythic Whole to exist. For human life to be possible, being must become changeable, alterable, flexible. Only through the fall of myth could human power of initiative arise: "the more human beings feel autonomous, the more they perceive the Whole as separate from them; the more they feel author and master (and hence responsible) of their actions, the more their actions become decisions" ("*più l'uomo si sente autonomo, più sente il Tutto al di fuori di lui; più si sente autore e padrone (e quindi responsabile) delle azioni che compie, più il suo agire diventa un decidere*," ibid., 62).

From this original ontological severance of the things of the world, scientific specialization and the age of technology follow by necessity. Science opposes myth by constituting itself as the concretization of human freedom. Yet, science is also the realization of myth and, in this sense, the popular secularism of today, which opposes science and myth as if they meant truth-rationality and falsehood-irrationality, is simply myopic. The seeds of scientific specialization were already contained in myth, and thus myth brought forth its own self-destruction. Specifically, these seeds of self-destruction dwelled within the original contradiction of myth: the contradiction of affirming both Fate and human freedom. Human beings doubted the Whole within myth itself. That is, they doubted "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.). By doubting itself, myth began to destroy its Whole, ever since its beginning. This doubting was necessary, though, because human beings could never truly believe that no action depended on them as autonomous centers of action. The seeds of the age of technology and

of myth's self-destruction have always resided in this idea that human beings are centers of action, who therefore must be autonomous and free.

This belief in our freedom to decide and transform appeared at the dawn of human thought. It belongs among our most fundamental beliefs about the nature of reality. It entails that everything exists as *species*, separate and isolated from everything else. It entails the necessity and justice of scientific specialization and the age of technology. Myth's incapability of sustaining the Meaning of the Whole becomes clear, by way of example, when one reflects on transgression. Since the beginning of myth, human beings believe they witness transgressions. But belief in transgression destroys the Whole, because transgressions *differ* from the Will of the Whole and thus manifest the impossibility of Fate. If human beings can transgress, then they are autonomous centers of action, i.e., they freely decide in accordance with their own will, and therefore the Whole must be a false illusion. If the Law of the Whole were true, all actions would cohere with its Act, and so no action would be transgressive. No action could be punished because no action would be "profane." Therefore, "profanity" is the original affirmation of the freedom of human beings. By believing in profanity, myth destroyed itself and affirmed the fundamental truth of human free will. Even within myth, then, the most fundamental belief has always been that *human beings are technological beings*.

This fundamental belief in the autonomous will of individuals drives the erosion of myth throughout history, in a process that culminates in the future advent of the age of technology. The technological interpretation of the world is the ambient sameness that unifies the history of humanity. This interpretation makes the future age of technology the true realization of our most ancestral beliefs, and scientific specialization is the means whereby this realization occurs, it is

the means whereby myth frees itself from its contradictions. This is the sense in which our civilization develops according to necessity.

Scientific specialization is a recent configuration of human civilization because of the historical dominance of myth. In other words: it takes a long time for myth to free itself from its contradictions. Today, scientific specialization must fight other ideologies that claim the right to shape human civilization because myth isn't quite dead yet. The traditions of the West still live, but they *are* dying (religions and all other forms of the *epistéme*: capitalism, communism, politics, ethics, etc. – these are our myths and traditions). Scientific specialization is uncontainable and destined to bring about the age of technology *because* every ideology, even myths and traditions, believes in humans as technological beings: that is, every ideology, even those who seem to oppose science, believes in the same fundamental and ancestral ideas about the nature of reality that make scientific specialization the most coherent concrete realization of the unquestionable evidence of being.

Scientific specialization is the most coherent and powerful action that results from our conceptualization of reality. For this reason, it is natural, righteous, and just. Emanuele Severino argues that technology can be questioned only if, before, one questions the fundamental beliefs that everyone shares about reality and the meaning of human life.

SCIENCE AND DECISION

A tangible exemplification of the necessary connection between human self-definition and the advent of the age of technology requires reflection on the meaning of "decision." Let us consider even the simplest decision. When I take an object in hand, my decision is possible only because I am convinced that I am an autonomous center of action capable of transforming the world, and that the object that I take is a species and is

therefore separable and isolatable from its context. Severino writes in *Beyond Language* that:

> 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 (separable and isolatable) from its context. 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 in hand only *if I am convinced* that those bonds can *all* be broken by the motion of my hand. That is, 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 upon my decision (*decido di prendere in mano un oggetto* solo *se sono convinto che lo stato in cui esso si trova (ad esempio il suo essere deposto 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, OL* 63).

I do not ever consider whether or not to take the sun in hand. The decision never presents itself to me because I do not think that I am an autonomous force powerful enough to do so, and because I do not think that the sun will let itself be taken. Yet, tomorrow this too could become a decision, if scientific specialization will allow it. The very idea that we make decisions and act freely entails that we are technological beings in a universe of *species*, and that the only limitations to our power are limitations within it (these could thus be overcome, and so the ethos of technology becomes infinite power).

Technology also entails belief that *oneself* is a *species*: the necessary

precondition for autonomy, force, and action is one's own separation and isolation from all other things, otherwise decision, action, and power would be impossible. Our belief in our ability to analyze, measure, control, transform, and dominate things thus entails that we ourselves are things and that so are other people (why should one not treat oneself and others as things, then?). Even in our simplest and smallest decisions and actions, we enact the essence of scientific specialization: the interpretation of being that justifies our domination of the world. Therefore, we always enact our belief that we and others are things, and that the fundamental ethos of humanity must be the indefinite increase of power. If you think you decide and then decry scientific specialization, you are in contradiction. In *To Caesar and to God* (*A Cesare e a Dio*, 1983), Severino writes that

> if one were convinced that things are tied to one another by an inseparable tie, so as to form an unbreakable web, then one would never decide to take even the lightest and easiest-to-take object in hand, because the attempt would involve the entire web to which the object is inseparably tied. Moving the smallest thing would equal moving the entire universe. One thinks one can modify reality – and technology establishes itself by the conviction that it is the most effective power that can transform reality – only if one thinks one 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,*" *CD* 147).

If you believe you decide, you believe in technology. The belief in human

decision shatters all traditional and religious beliefs in absolute truths: we are free to decide, therefore, we are technological beings in a world of juxtaposed contingent fragments (*species*).

Since the dawn of time, human beings believe they decide. In believing they decide, they act as if they had the power to transform the world. In so doing, they enact the ideology of technology. Everyone who believes in decision must affirm the justice and power of scientific specialization. There is no difference between drinking a glass of water and constructing a hydroelectric power plant. Both decisions enact the same technological interpretation of the world:

> 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).

And so does the decision to drink a glass of water. Scientific specialization does nothing more than make decisions. Its distinctive quality is its being the most coherent, radical, effective, powerful actualization of decisions. If humans are beings who make decisions, then scientific specialization is the concrete means of realization of humankind. If humans are technological beings, then the advent of the age of technology will be the

true realization of what it means to be human. Within this interpretation of reality, scientific specialization and technology must be humanity's true moral obligation, and humanity should do away with all hindrances to the development of its power. Today, everyone agrees that humans are technological beings, capable of decision, in a world of things that exist as *species*. This world demands the recognition that only the commitment to infinite power represents true humanism. These consequences are unavoidable if we agree that we are capable of transforming the world. As long as humanity believes this theory to be true, scientific specialization and technology will dominate the configuration of human civilization ever more, and all ethical boundaries to the exercise of power will decay.

GLOTTOLOGY AND THE MEANING OF DECISION

Our belief in our ability to make decisions belongs to the essence of technology, and if it is true that "language reveals the meaning that human beings confer to the world" ("*il linguaggio rivela il senso che l'uomo attribuisce al mondo,*" *OL* 59), then to dwell upon the meaning of "decision" is to reveal something fundamental about how we interpret existence.

In *Téchne: The Roots of Violence* (*Téchne: Le radici della violenza,* 2002), Severino writes that every decision entails a goal, and that "to reach this goal, one must separate, isolate, tear off the dominatable from the whole" ("*Se si vuole raggiungere questo risultato si deve separare, isolare, strappare il dominabile al tutto,*" *T* 283). Every decision is the separation and isolation of something from its context, and the goal is "to control it and dominate it" ("*controllare e dominare*" ibid.). You separate the glass of water from the table in order to use it according to your will. These are the dynamics of every decision, and they have profound existential consequences. Without the interpretation of things as available to domination, decision

would be impossible. To make a decision is to believe in one's ability to dominate a region of Being. Therefore, as Severino writes in *Around the Meaning of Nothingness* (*Intorno al senso del nulla*, 2013), "decision is separation" ("*la decisione è separazione*," *ISN* 51).

Glottology teaches us that "to decide" has always meant to "tear off of," "to cut away from." *Beyond Language* describes how "decide" comes from the Latin "*de-caedo*, which means 'I strike, in order to *separate* the stricken *from* that with which it was united,'" ("de-caedo, *che significa 'colpisco, in modo da* separare *il colpito* da *ciò a cui era unito,*'" *OL* 59-60). *Téchne: The Roots of Violence* tells us that *de-caedo* means "undoing, tearing to pieces, cutting, breaking, separating" ("*disfare, fare a pezzi, tagliare, rompere, separare*," *T* 282). "To decide" derives from *de-caedo* not only in English but also in Italian ("*decidere*") and French ("*décider*"). Even the German "*Entscheiden* (to decide) is formed on the preposition *ent* (which indicates the idea of separation) and on *scheiden* (which means indeed to separate)" ("Entscheiden *(decidere) è formato dalla preposizione* ent *(che indica l'idea della separazione) e da* scheiden *(che, appunto, significa separare)*," ibid. 282-3). Finally, decision as separation can be found in Ancient Greek too. Another Latin word for *de-caedere* is *de-cernere*, and "*cernere* corresponds to the Greek *kríno* (of which it is metathesis), and *kríno* means *I decide* but also, and fundamentally, *I separate*" ("cernere, *poi, corrisponde al greco* kríno *(di cui è metatesi) e* kríno *significa* decido, *ma significa anche, e fondamentalmente,* separo," ibid. 282).

Glottology thus shows that, in the languages of the West, who decides separates, and separation is violent. The *Oxford Latin Dictionary* tells us that the Latin *caedo* has two primary meanings: "to separate" and "to kill." The meanings of "*caedo, ~dere*" are "to strike, beat"; "to strike with the sword"; "To kill, slay, murder"; "to attack, cut down, inflict casualties on"; "to defeat (usu. w. heavy casualties)"; "to slaughter (victims)"; "to

crack, smash, break”; “To use up, consume, destroy”; “to devour” (*OLD* 275).

In the original meaning of decision, then, separation and killing are united as the essence of technology. In meaning “I kill,” *caedo* also relates to “the Latin *oc-cido*” (“*dal latino* oc-cido,” *OL* 60), and again: “*occido, ~dere*” means “to cause the death of, kill, slaughter”; “To involve in disaster or failure, bring about the ruin of, do for”; “To cut up, break up, crush to pieces”; “To fall or collapse in the way”; “To die (esp. by violent means, in battle, etc.), be struck down, fall”; “To sink into nothingness, pass away”; etc. (*OLD* 1356-7).

Here, Severino insists on the equivalence between *occido* and *ob-caedo*: *ob-* indicates that against which *caedere* is implemented. *Occidere* (to kill) means to implement separation, breaking, undoing, tearing to pieces and dismembering against someone or something. *Occidere* and *decidere* indicate two closely related actions: to kill and to decide. Killing is the most extreme decision: the decision to *separate* a thing from Being. Further glottological proof comes from the meaning of the original Latin “*decido, ~dere*”: “to fall down”; “To fall in ruin, collapse”; “To die”; “To fall or lapse from a better into a worse or less elevated condition”; “(of things) to fail, go wrong”; “To detach by cutting, cut off, cut out”; etc. (ibid. 538).

Originally, then, “decision” itself explicitly indicates violent separation, destruction, death, and killing. Today, the indication has become implicit. In our contemporary languages, we split off these meanings into different terms, but the graphic and auditory vicinity of decision and killing remains. English maintains the essential sameness of decision and killing in the use of the combining form “-cide,” which “denotes a person or substance that kills” and “an act of killing” (*OED*)— and which itself derives from the Latin *caedere* (*OED*). Thus, English says

"decide," and with the combining form "-cide," it builds all verbs and nouns related to killing: "homicide," "patricide," "matricide," "suicide," "ecocide," "genocide," "biocide," "deicide," etc. Relatedly, the term "kill" sounds and looks different, because it is "probably of Germanic origin" (*OED*), but the conceptual sameness is not lost: "kill originally denoted a stroke or blow […], in the sense of 'strike,' 'beat,' and also 'put to death'" (*OED*), just as the Latin *decido* and *occido* did.

This essential sameness of decision, separation, and killing appears in our languages from their origins. And if language reveals the meaning human beings confer to the world, then the meaning of decision betrays how we relate to our own existence: in every decision, we must feel the killing of infinite lives. Severino writes that "to say that deciding kills the life that one could have lived is not an exaggeration" ("*dire che il decidere uccide la vita che si sarebbe potuto vivere non è una esagerazione*," *OL* 60). We think of life as an infinity of possibilities within which we decide what will be and what will not be. We think we decide the configuration of the world. We think of ourselves as the "I" that chooses what possibility must be and what other infinite possibilities "I" must condemn to nothingness. This must be our self-definition in technology, and this must mean that every instant of our lives feels like an absolute infinity of abortions and murders, of our own selves and of others as well (whether we are conscious of this or not).

Every decision (even the smallest of decisions) comes forth as the eternal killing of infinite possibilities in order to let only one possibility be. In every instant, we must decide to murder infinities into absolute nothingness in order to let be the one configuration of the world we want to be. In so believing we decide, we think that Being is subject to our will. In this interpretation of existence, every moment becomes not only a decision that is the killing of an infinity of possible selves and of possible

others. Also, every decision becomes the killing of our present self and of all present others. In every moment and in every decision, "I" and all others are killed, forever lost into nothingness, and they will never be recovered. In light of this extreme violence, paralysis in front of decision seems rational. Decision now appears to entail unbearable isolation, loneliness, solipsism, suffering, despair, and violence. It now also appears as an unbearable burden: the burden of being fully responsible for the violence of infinite killing in each moment, without the possibility of ever going back. How can one rationally ever forgive oneself for making the wrong decision? How can one rationally ever avoid being crushed by the awareness that every moment is a decision that entails this infinite responsibility none can bear?

Ours is the civilization of technology and therefore of extreme decision. For Severino, this entails extreme suffering and violence. The West is the "Occident," which too derives from the Latin "*occidens, ~entis*," which itself derives from *occido*. *Occidens* is *occid-ens*. *Occido* means killing and *ens* is the present participle of *sum*, "to be," "being," "that which is." Therefore, *occidens* is "the violent being that kills, slaughters, causes disaster, brings to ruins"; "the being that decides, separates, isolates, kills." Not coincidentally, the English word "Occident" contains the combining form "-cide." *Occidens* is the West, the affirmation and actualization of our unquestionable belief in technology, our ability to decide and dominate. We are our interpretation of things as "accidental" and "incidental," words that themselves contain the combining form "-cide" because this interpretation of things allows us to "-cide" them.

We are the Occidens, the West. We pray at the altar of individual freedom, elevating our belief in our power to be technological beings to the ultimate truth. Severino reminds us that technology is a theory, not the absolute truth, and as such is not unquestionable. He invites us to

consider that there may be good reason to doubt what we take for granted. Only through an interpretation of reality entirely *other* could one question the ethos of technology (the ethos of power). Only if the technological interpretation of reality is wrong, the ethos of power could and should be questioned. Throughout his works, Severino argues precisely that the technological interpretation of reality constitutes the greatest folly, that it belongs to the essence of nihilism and that it is the origin of every form of violence ever since the original appearance of human thought. This is the heart of the matter, but it shall be discussed elsewhere.

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