

# Why the “Spotlight” Moves. A Moving Spotlight Theory of Time Based on Emanuele Severino’s *La Gloria*

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The aim of this paper is to account for the (metaphorical) movement of the property of being present (or presentness) within the so-called Moving Spotlight Theory (MST). I will be leveraging the key argument by Emanuele Severino’s masterpiece, *La Gloria* (2001), according to which it is impossible that a (maximal consistent) state of affairs begins to appear and lasts forever in our experience. After a brief overview of the MST’s main tenets (§1.1), I argue that Severino’s ontology might be interpreted as a sort of MST (§1.2), following the hint by Federico Perelda (2017). Thereafter, I briefly recall Severino’s original argument in his own jargon, also proposing English lexical and conceptual translations of the main Italian phrases (§1.3). Then, I propose both a semi-formalization of Severino’s argument (§2.1) and a full formalization by means of temporal logic (§2.2). Finally, I assess all the three versions of the argument, concluding that my formalization might account for the movement of presentness in a non-metaphorical way (§2.3).

#### Keywords:

Moving Spotlight Theory, Emanuele Severino, Time, Becoming

## 1. Emanuele Severino's Ontology and the Moving Spotlight Theory

### 1.1 An Overview on the Moving Spotlight Theory

In the wide panorama of the theories of time,<sup>134</sup> the so-called *Moving Spotlight Theory* (hereinafter: MST) stands out at least for two general reasons. First, it might seem a *metaphorical view* to account for the passage of time, rather than a theory *stricto sensu*: what is the *spotlight* supposed to be? And what does it mean that the spotlight *moves*?<sup>135</sup> Secondly, the MST stands out as it combines the best of the A-theories and the B-theories of time: the typical A-theoretical idea that there is an objectively privileged present time that *constantly changes* (i.e., different items or different instants of time are *progressively* objectively present) with the typical B-theoretical idea that everything *tenselessly exists*, with no restrictions and regardless of its spatio-temporal location.<sup>136</sup> In a nutshell, the MST joins together a Heraclitean dynamic view of time (the *real* passage of time) with a Parmenidean static view of time (the *illusory* passage of time); in other words, the MST combines the Parmenidean “block-like eternal universe” (De Florio-Frigerio-Giordani 2020, p. 114) with the Heraclitean idea of a “moving” present instant (cf. *ivi*). Exactly because of this “hybrid” (and

<sup>134</sup> For an overview of the main contemporary theories of time, see Emery-Markosian-Sullivan (2020), especially for the typical relevant language, e.g., “A-theory”, “B-theory”, etc.

<sup>135</sup> Indeed, it is a well-known fact that the first thinker to use a formulation like “moving spotlight” to speak about the flow of time meant it as a metaphor: cf. Broad (1923, p. 59). However, Broad himself rejected the view, leaning towards some kind of Growing Block Theory.

<sup>136</sup> About the notion of *existence* in the MST, see, e.g., De Florio-Frigerio-Giordani (2020), who recap the concept as follows: “(*i*) [it] coincides with the concept of being, (*ii*) is not a concept concerning an activity, and (*iii*) is completely captured by the existential quantifier of first order logic” (p. 117 footnote #3).

thus appealing) nature of the MST, some scholars have recently done “an admirable job of making precise a debate that is often left as mere metaphor” (Sullivan 2016).<sup>137</sup>

Let us begin with Deasy’s (2015) definition of the MST, according to which the MST is the conjunction of: (i) *permanentism*, namely the thesis that “it is always the case that everything exists eternally” (2015, p. 2074,); and (ii) one of the key tenet of the A-theories family, namely that “some instant of time is absolutely, non-relatively present” (*ibidem*, p. 2073) – i.e., that there is an objective present. (ii) means that the *absolutely* (i.e., non-relatively) present instant is not merely present *relative to itself* (as in fact every instant is) but that it is present in a “privileged” way against the instants that are located *before* or *after* it. Note that which instant is the absolutely objective present changes: as the flow of time progresses, different instants acquire *progressively* the property of being absolutely present. Indeed, the state of the universe is fixed like a block (given the above-mentioned *permanentism* thesis) *except for* one thing: the property of presentness.<sup>138</sup> In a nutshell, the MST is a form of *dynamical eternalism*. If we speak in metaphorical terms, we might say that the presentness is the *spotlight* that progressively *moves, lighting up* one by one the eternally existing items of a block universe. This metaphor is intriguing but philosophically unsatisfactory.

An interesting and useful way to paraphrase the spotlight as such (and to minimize the metaphorical commitment as much as possible) is found in Spolaore-Torrenco’s (2021), where they introduce the intrinsic property of *brightness* and link it to the notion of *experiential availability*:

The time that is ‘under the spotlight’ possesses an *intrinsic* property that the other times lack. Let us label this property *brightness*. Brightness is an intrinsic feature of times (or, indirectly, of entities located at those times) that is directly tied to their metaphysical status. According to MS [i.e., the moving spotlight account], exactly one time is bright. This time is metaphysically *special* or *privileged* precisely because it is the unique time endowed with brightness. [...] [W]e assume that, if a (conscious) subject has some experience at a time *t*, and *t* is bright, then *t* is experientially available to the subject. In this weak sense, we can say that brightness entails experiential availability. (2021, pp. 2-3).

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<sup>137</sup> In a non-exhaustive manner, I would mention: Cameron (2015), Deasy (2015), Sider (2011, ch.11), Skow (2009; 2015), De-Florio-Frigerio-Giordani (2020), Marques (2020), Spolaore-Torrenco (2020), Correia-Rosenkranz (2020).

<sup>138</sup> About the metaphysical status of this (putative) property, and related issues, see Cameron (2015). Due to space constraints, I will not deal with these issues in this article.

So, the fact that an instant of time  $t$ , and all the items located at  $t$ , are phenomenologically accessible to those conscious subjects that are located at  $t$  means that the instant  $t$  has the property of brightness. That is the intuitive idea that the experiences we live at the absolutely objective present (the “real”, non-relative *now*) are those experiences we are actually able to access.

Spolaore-Torrenco’s (2021) account of the spotlight, especially the entailment between the property of brightness and the notion of experiential availability, will be useful in §1.3 to understand Severino’s jargon, as well as in §2.2, where I will develop an argument about the spotlight’s movement argument based on Severino (2001).

But, first, I need to evaluate to which extent Severino’s ontology might be understood as a sort of MST, as indeed Perelda (2017) wisely suggests, with the caution befitting this kind of philosophical and exegetical comparison.

## 1.2 In which Sense Severino’s Ontology Might Be a Kind of Moving Spotlight Theory

Severino’s ontology might be interpreted as a MST if and only if his ontology satisfies (at least) three conditions:<sup>139</sup>

i) His ontology should affirm that, unrestrictedly, all past, present and future objects, properties, and events exist (namely, a sort of *permanentism*, cf. §1.1).

ii) His ontology should affirm that a *proper* subset of those objects, properties, and events, namely, *some but not all entities*, instantiates the (metaphysical or “robust”) property of *presentness* or *being present*.

iii) His ontology should affirm that the objects, properties, and events that instantiate the property of presentness *change*.

Condition (i) is quite easily met throughout almost all of Severino’s works, at least since *Essenza del Nichilismo* (1982; see also 2016), but already anticipated in his earlier works, e.g., *La metafisica classica e Aristotele* (1956) and mainly in *La struttura originaria* [1958](1981).<sup>140</sup> His permanentism

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<sup>139</sup> I adopt this hermeneutic approach following the definitions of standard MST proposed by Deasy (2015, §1) and Miller (2019, §1).

<sup>140</sup> A finer-grained version of Severino’s *permanentism* is in his (1964) and (1965) works, and fully developed in his (1980) book.

can be defined as the thesis according to which, unrestrictedly, each entity *qua talis* eternally and necessarily exists (where  $\langle x \text{ exists} \rangle$  is logically equivalent to  $\langle x \text{ is self-identical} \rangle$ ). So, unrestrictedly, for all  $x$ , necessarily, there is no instant of time at which  $x$  does not exist. In a nutshell, if there was an instant of time at which  $x$  does not exist, then there would be an instant of time at which  $x$  is not self-identical. Indeed, assuming the logical and metaphysical necessity of the law of identity ( $\Box \forall x(x=x)$ ),<sup>141</sup> and assuming that *existence* is logically equivalent to *self-identity*, then it is impossible that there is an instant of time at which  $x$  does not exist. We might say that Severino expresses this idea by speaking about the impossible time at which *being*, namely, each and every entity (a positive determination – *il positivo*), is not *itself*, namely, it is identical to *what it is not* or to *nothingness* (the negative – *il negativo*). Consider, e.g., the following excerpt:

The sunset of [the true meaning of] being befalls thus: endorsing a representation of time according to which being is not [itself], namely, allowing the perpetuation of that idea whereby the positive is [identical to] the negative, without even realizing (Severino 1982, p. 22, translation mine).<sup>142</sup>

The fact that Severino might be considered a permanentist does not entail that he is for the same reasons as other permanentists (like, e.g., Timothy Williamson 2013 – who coined the term) or other eternalists (cf. Emery-Markosian-Sullivan 2020, par. 6 for an overview). However, a comparison between Severino’s reason and other eternalists’ reasons to claim that – broadly speaking – everything is eternal is beyond the scope of this article.

Condition (ii) is quite easily met as well, especially by appealing to Severino’s conception of the so-called “Contradiction-C” (“*Contraddizione-C*”; cf. Severino [1958] 1981, ch. VIII; Id. 1980; and Goggi 2015, pp. 95-101). With this notion, he designates the difference between the *unrestricted* totality of what *exists*, regardless of their appearance to phenomenological experience, and the subset of entities that do *appear* in our experience:

The [unrestricted] totality [of what exists] [...] *does not appear all at once*, [...] rather, it steps into the light that makes entities appear [in our phenomenological experience]. While stepping into the light, that [unrestricted] totality remains the same, without any kind of change. [...] Only the light that makes entities appear can spotlight those entities without changing

<sup>141</sup> See Severino [1958](1981) and (1982).

<sup>142</sup> “Il tramonto dell’essere avviene dunque così: nel non avvedersi che, acconsentendo all’immagine di un tempo in cui l’essere non è, si acconsente all’idea che il positivo è il negativo.”

them, since it is [...] the *fact* that they appear as they are (Severino 1980, p. 127, translation mine, emphasis added).<sup>143</sup>

Making a moderate exegetical twist to Severino's lexicon, I assume that  $\langle x$  appears in our (phenomenological) experience  $\rangle$  is logically equivalent to  $\langle x$  instantiates the property of presentness  $\rangle$ . This is to say, following the evocative Spolaore-Torrenzo's (2021) lexicon,  $\langle x$  is located at a *bright* instant of time  $\rangle$  (cf. §1.1).<sup>144</sup> Therefore, the difference between the unrestricted totality of what exists and the subset of entities that appear in our experience is due to the fact that the latter are "under the spotlight", i.e., they are located at bright instant(s) of time.

The third condition (iii) is more troublesome than the other two because it appeals to the concept of change. *Prima facie*, Severino's ontology does not admit *any* kind of change (cf. 1980): given that *unrestrictedly everything* is *always* self-identical, it is impossible that an entity *ceases* to instantiate the property of presentness, or – conversely – *begins* to instantiate the property of presentness. Similarly, it is impossible that an instant of time begins to be bright or ceases to be bright. According to Severino, indeed, the notion of entity ranges over absolutely anything, including the instantiations or exemplifications of properties. Yet, as we have seen in the case of condition (ii), Severino himself admits that the totality of what exists does not completely appear in our own experience, thus leaving room for a *sui generis* sequentiality of what *progressively* appears to us.

So, it seems that, on the one hand, Severino is forced to concede at least that *something* changes, namely, the fact that some entities either begin or cease to instantiate the property of presentness. On the other hand, he does not allow *any* kind of change since his ontology assumes that *unrestrictedly everything* always exists, thereby meaning that everything is always self-identical, including the above-mentioned facts about the instantiation of presentness.<sup>145</sup>

This is a well-known puzzle of his ontology among Severino's critics, as already pointed out by Bontadini's (1964) objection. Severino did propose a solution to Bontadini's claim that his ontology actually admits a form of

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<sup>143</sup> "Il Tutto [...] non appare tutto insieme [...], ma si inoltra nella luce dell'apparire. Vi si inoltra rimanendo ciò che esso è, inalterabile e immutabile. [...] E solo la luce dell'apparire può posarsi sugli enti senza alterarli, giacché essa è [...] il loro mostrarsi come sono."

<sup>144</sup> Hereinafter, when I use 'experience', I shall mean 'phenomenological experience', namely, our experience considered from a phenomenological standpoint.

<sup>145</sup> Indeed, what Severino's ontology rules out is the possibility of *becoming*, included the possibility of beginning or ceasing to instantiate that peculiar property of presentness.

becoming in his (1965) article, which is further developed in his (1980) work. In a nutshell, he dispels the objection by highlighting that the fact *as such* that an entity begins or ceases to instantiate the property of presentness (in his jargon: “the beginning or ceasing to appear”, “*l’iniziare o il cessare di apparire*”) is in turn an entity; therefore, that fact *qua talis* is self-identical and always exists. In this way, Severino’s ontology at the same time keeps the eternal self-identity (or existence) of unrestrictedly everything *and* accounts for the phenomenological sequence of different items appearing in our experience. I think that Severino’s solution is quite controversial, but its full presentation and assessment is not the aim of this article. What I needed to show in this section is that condition (iii) is arguably met by Severino’s ontology, as long as we also understand the *change* or *becoming* of an entity exemplifying the property of presentness in that peculiar way according to which the fact *qua talis* of beginning or ceasing to be “under the spotlight” is itself an eternal entity.

To be clearer, we should also note that Severino does not rule out change or becoming *in any sense*. Rather, he rejects (as contradictory) change or becoming understood in the most traditional sense, namely, “becoming something other” (“*diventare altro*”). Yet, this is not the only meaning of change within the philosophical literature. We may speak of change in terms of mere (mind-independent) *sequentiality* (whereas the traditional concept of change as *becoming something other* would be merely mind-dependent). The so-called *R-theory* by Oaklander (2012), for example, fully accounts for (mind-independent) change only appealing to the Russellian primitive notion of temporal relations, like *earlier-than*, *later-than*, and *simultaneous with*: the whole series of entities (objects, properties, events) that unrestrictedly and tenselessly *is* or *exists* (and that we – mind-dependently – mark either as past, present, or future) is intrinsically dynamic *just because* the series we acknowledge is a *sequence* of different events (as Frishhut 2012, p. 18, correctly summarizes). In a nutshell, “For the Russellian [...] the dynamic aspect of time is grounded in a temporal succession or transition from earlier to later temporal items” (Oaklander 2012, p. 7). Here, the formulations “temporal succession” and “transition” do entail ontological commitments to *neither absolute becoming* (like beginning or ceasing to exist), *nor becoming something other* (like “donning and doffing” the properties of *being present*, *being past* or *being future*).

Oaklander’s R-theory might be a good candidate to account for Severino’s own idea of change or becoming, whereby the Italian philosopher replaces the concept of “becoming something other” (“*diventare altro*”)

with the concept of “passing by” (“*oltrepassare*”).<sup>146</sup> On the one hand, the concept of *becoming something other* is rejected as contradictory because the *terminus ad quem* (viz., the outcome of becoming) rules out the existence of the *terminus a quo* (the source of becoming), which negates the law of identity itself in its turn (cf. Severino 1995, p. 13). On the other hand, the concept of *passing by* would allow us to speak about change with no contradiction, provided the proposition  $\langle x \text{ becomes } y \rangle$  is understood as  $\langle x \text{ is passed by } y \rangle$ . This would formally amount to the following conjunction:  $\langle x \text{ (tenselessly) exists} \rangle \wedge \langle y \text{ (tenselessly) exists} \rangle \wedge \langle y \text{ is later than } x \rangle$ . However, here, my digression to Oaklander’s R-theory and its eventual relationship to Severino’s concept of *passing by* is merely functional to point out that there are more ways to understand the concept of change than the traditional *becoming something other*, thereby offsetting Bontadini’s classic objection.

### 1.3 The Main Argument of Severino’s book *La Gloria*: Preliminary Overview

In the previous subsection, I showed why Severino’s philosophical *pars construens* might be read as a MST. Before advancing a formalization of one of the main arguments of Severino’s ontology (cf. *infra* §§2.1-2.2), I need to paraphrase some key concepts and introduce, or recall, some conceptual translations among those that have partially already emerged. Those concepts occur in the main argument of Severino’s masterpiece *La Gloria* (2001). The conclusion of that argument is that, necessarily, any (maximal) consistent state of affairs (Severino would say: “any certain arrangement of entities”, “*una certa configurazione di essenti*”) is passed by (“*oltrepassato da*”) another (maximal) consistent state of affairs, namely: it is impossible (logically and metaphysically) that a certain (maximal) consistent state of affairs – say  $S_2$  – *begins* to appear *after* another (maximal) consistent state of affairs  $S_1$  *and* that both  $S_2$  and  $S_1$  endure forever.<sup>147</sup> In his original Italian text, the argument runs as follows (I shall provide an English translation below, after some unavoidable lexical and conceptual remarks):

Ciò che incomincia ad apparire non appartiene necessariamente alla dimen-

<sup>146</sup> Cf. especially Severino (2007), but also (1980) and (2001). The Italian verb is ‘*oltrepassare*’. Henceforward, I will use the English phrase ‘(to) pass by’ or its *ing*-form. Another translation might be the phrase ‘(to) be replaced by’.

<sup>147</sup> I will return to this relevant point in §2.2, where I propose a formalization of Severino’s argument using temporal logic with Prior’s temporal operators and an instant-based model of time. In the meantime, you can read the conclusion of the argument as follows:  $\forall \varphi \neg(H\neg\varphi \wedge \varphi \wedge G\varphi)$  – or the stronger:  $\neg\exists\varphi(H\neg\varphi \wedge \varphi \wedge G\varphi)$ .



sione senza di cui [...] non può apparire alcun essente. Tale dimensione è [...] lo “sfondo” [...] che accoglie tutto ciò che sopraggiunge e da cui si congeda tutto ciò che passa. [...] Ciò che incomincia ad apparire entra nell’orizzonte dello sfondo, e quindi non può appartenere necessariamente a tale orizzonte, ossia *non può essere* necessariamente unito ad esso *in quanto esso è*, appunto, lo sfondo. [...] Unione necessaria è [...] quella la cui negazione è qualcosa di contraddittorio. Ma allora è *contraddittorio che l’unione necessaria [...] incominci*, cioè sia preceduta da un tempo in cui essa non esiste. L’unione è necessaria proprio perché è qualcosa di contraddittorio una qualsiasi situazione in cui tale unione sia inesistente. [...] Se la determinazione che sopraggiunge è inoltrepassabile (cioè non consente il sopraggiungere di alcun’altra determinazione), essa incomincia ad essere connessa necessariamente allo sfondo e alla totalità di ciò che appare. Ma una connessione è necessaria proprio perché non è qualcosa di incominciante (2001, pp. 92-96).

In Severino’s (2007), for example, the conclusion of (2001)’s argument is summarized as follows:

[...] [*Un sopraggiungente inoltrepassabile è impossibile*, autocontraddittorio. Pertanto *ogni sopraggiungente è necessariamente oltrepassato* [...] (2007, p. 237, emphasis added)

First, consider the following chart: on the left column I recall Severino’s original Italian key terms; on the right column I propose my English translation of them. Below the chart, the reader can find some comments and remarks that try to justify my linguistic choices, as well as some useful paraphrases. Finally, you can read my English translation.

Severino’s lexicon	Proposal for an English translation
<i>Essente/Determinazione</i>	<i>Entity</i>
<i>Apparire</i>	<i>Appearing in our experience*</i>
<i>Sfondo [dell’apparire] / Orizzonte dello sfondo [di ciò che appare]</i>	<i>Horizon of that which (phenomenologically) appears</i>
<i>Determinazione sopraggiungente</i>	<i>Entity that begins to appear in our experience</i>
<i>Unione necessaria / Connessione necessaria</i>	<i>Necessary relation</i>
<i>Incominciare ad apparire</i>	<i>Beginning to appear in our experience</i>

\* Ines Testoni and Giulio Goggi read “appearing” (“*apparire*”) as “entering the horizon of experience” (see Severino 2023, p. IX). My own reading is in §1.2 of this article.

<i>Oltrepassato [da qualcos'altro]</i>	<i>Passed by [something else]</i>
<i>Inoltrepassabile [da qualcos'altro]</i>	<i>[Logically and ontologically] unable to be passed by [something else]</i>
<i>[Essente] inoltrepassabile</i>	<i>What defies to be passed by [something else]</i>

My translations of “*essente*” and “*apparire*” and their meanings are already exposed in §§1.1-1.2. I would recall, especially, that *appearing in our experience* is logically equivalent to *being located at a bright instant of time*. The meaning of “*oltrepassare*”, and therefore the past participle “*oltrepassato*”, already occurs in §1.2. Conversely, the meaning of “*inoltrepassabile*” is merely the *negation* of “*oltrepassabile*” (*in-oltrepassabile, non-oltrepassabile*), that is, the *negation of the possibility to be passed by something else*. The Italian terms “*incominciare ad apparire*” and “*determinazione sopraggiungente*” are already explained in the chart (notwithstanding that they will become clearer when I formalize Severino’s argument through temporal logic in §2.2). Instead, my translation of “*sfondo [dell’apparire]*” or “*orizzonte dello sfondo*” need to be paraphrased here, together with “*unione necessaria*”.

To understand Severino’s (2001) core argument, we need to understand what the above-mentioned “horizon of that which appears” and “necessary relation” refer to.

The horizon is a set of predicates that inhere in each and every entity *qua talis*, e.g., “... *is part of absolutely everything*”, “... *is self-identical*”, “... *is different from nothingness*”, “...*is eternal*”, and so on.<sup>148</sup> According to Severino, this set of predicates is the ontological *sine qua non* condition that enables any entity to appear in our experience. Thus, without those (transcendental) predicates, nothing would appear at all.<sup>149</sup>

To understand what Severino means with “*unione necessaria*” or ‘necessary relation’, we can use a possible world semantics where a proposition

<sup>148</sup> Albeit with some differences, which I cannot deal with due to space constraints, those predicates might recall the scholastic *transcendentals* like *unum, verum, bonum*, which inhere in all and every entity *qua talis*. Furthermore, Severino’s above-mentioned horizon is not only the set of those predicates, but it is also the set of the meanings involved in those predicates, e.g., “(unrestrictedly) everything”, “entity as self-identical”, “nothingness”, etc. This distinction is too complex to be treated in this article. I leave it for possible future work.

<sup>149</sup> Cf. Severino [1958] (1981), (1980), and (2001). For a helpful and thorough handbook on the entire evolution of Severino’s philosophical endeavour, included the relationship between entities and their necessary predicates, cf. Goggi (2015, especially pp. 95-100).

like  $\langle \text{Necessarily}, \varphi \rangle$  is true if and only if  $\varphi$  is true in every possible world. The necessary relation is a relation  $R$  between two (or more) items that holds in every possible world or – we might say – at every possible (instant of) time.<sup>150</sup> According to Severino, the negation of a necessary relation  $R$  entails a contradiction (cf. 2001, *ibidem*). Given the possible world semantics I assumed before, this is very plausible, indeed: if  $R$  did not hold in some possible worlds or at some instants of time, then  $R$  would not be necessary. Therefore,  $R$  would be *and* would not be a necessary relation, namely,  $R$  would hold and would not hold in every possible world or at every instant of time. Since a necessary relation *always* holds, there is no instant of time at which  $R$  does not hold: necessarily,  $R$  always holds.<sup>151</sup>

With all this lexical and conceptual equipment, I can propose an English translation of Severino’s (2001) core argument, as well as its relevant conclusion (whilst my explanation of the full argument is in §2.1, my formalization with temporal logic is in §2.2, and my assessment of both is in §2.3):

What begins to appear [in our experience] does not necessarily belong to the set without which [...] no entity can appear at all. This set is [...] the “horizon” that embraces any entity that begins to appear [in our experience], as well as [the same “horizon”] from which any entity gets out of [*“si congeda”*]. [...] What begins to appear [in our experience] enters that horizon. Therefore, the former can not *necessarily* [emphasis added] belong to that horizon, namely, it *cannot be* necessarily related to that horizon [...]. The negation of a necessary relation [*unione necessaria*] [...] entails a contradiction. Therefore, *that a necessary relation [...] begins* [to obtain or hold], so that there is an [earlier] moment of time at which such a relation does not obtain, *is contradictory*. The relation is necessary exactly because any situation [viz., state of affairs] in which precisely that relation does not exist [viz., does not hold or does not obtain] is an inconsistent situation. [...] If an entity that begins to appear [in our experience] was logically and ontologically unable to be passed by something else (viz., if that entity makes some other entities unable to begin to appear), then that entity would begin to be necessarily related to the horizon and to the totality of what appears. But [that is not possible because] a relation is necessary exactly because it is not something that *begins* [to hold or obtain] (2001, pp. 92-96, translation mine, some emphasis added).

<sup>150</sup> Indeed, there is a tight connection and a strong similarity between time and modality. For example, cf. Priest (2008, §§ 3.6a-3.6b).

<sup>151</sup> Furthermore, given Severino’s *permanetism* (cf. §§1.1-1.2), the *relata* of  $R$  exist at every instant of time.

[...] [*A*]n entity that begins to appear and that defies to be passed by [something else] is a self-contradictory entity [or an impossible object]. Thus, necessarily, any entity is passed by [something else] [...] (2007, p. 237, emphasis added, translation mine).

I would prefer to speak in terms of states of affairs, or maximal consistent states of affairs, when I need to refer to that which is *passed by* or *defies the possibility to be passed by*. Whilst Severino seems conflate different ontological categories deliberately (events, facts, state of affairs, objects, properties, predicates, etc.) by including all of them under the umbrella term “entity” (“*essente*” or “*determinazione*”), I think that my focus on (maximal consistent) states of affairs is a good way to understand Severino’s (2001) use of “*configurazione della terra*” (see, e.g., p. 162), which might be read as: ‘a certain arrangement of entities that begin to appear in our experience’.

In the next section (§2.1) I summarize and explain Severino’s (2001) core argument, and then I propose my formalization using temporal logic (§§2.2-2.3).

## 2. Why the “Spotlight” Moves: A Formalization of Severino’s Main Argument of *La Gloria*

### 2.1 A Semi-Formalization of Severino’s Argument

The main argument of *La Gloria* works as a *reductio ad absurdum*, and it might be represented as follows (the steps that are not clear here, i.e., in my semi-formalization, will become clearer in my formalization in §2.2):

(A1) There is a state of affairs or a maximal consistent state of affairs, *M* that (i) *begins* to appear *now* in our experience, and that (ii) *defies to be passed by* another different state of affairs or another different maximal consistent state of affairs. [Assumption]

(A1.1) At every instant of time earlier than now, *M* does not appear in our experience. [By (A1)]

(A2) Necessarily, there is a set of predicates, *Q*, that inhere in each and every state of affairs *qua talis*. [Assumption]

(A3) Necessarily, if a state of affairs or a maximal consistent state of affairs appears in our experience, then  $Q$  appears in our experience. [Assumption]

(A4) Necessarily, if some states of affairs appear in our experience, then the predicates belonging to  $Q$  inhere in the components of those states of affairs, as well as in those states of affairs *qua talis*. [By (A2) and (A3)]

(A5) A relation  $R$  is necessary if and only if  $R$  holds in every possible world and at every instant of time. [By a certain definition of *necessity*]

(A6) If  $M$  defies to be passed by another different state of affairs or another different maximal consistent state of affairs, then  $M$  begins to be necessarily related (in the form of  $R$ ) to (unrestrictedly) each and every state of affairs.

(A7)  $M$  begins to be necessarily related (in the form of  $R$ ) to (unrestrictedly) each and every state of affairs. [By (A1) and (A6)]

(A8) If  $M$  begins to be necessarily related (in the form of  $R$ ) to (unrestrictedly) each and every state of affairs, then there is a *new* predicate, "... is necessarily related (in the form of  $R$ ) to  $M$ ", that belongs to the set  $Q$ . [By (A2) and (A6)]

(A9)  $Q$  is not  $Q$ . [By (A8) and the Zermelo-Fraenkel Set Theory's axiom of extensionality]

Therefore, (A1) is false because it leads to contradiction (A9) [*reductio ad absurdum*].

The first assumption is what is rejected by the *reductio's* strategy. Assumptions (A2) and (A3) are mainly based on Severino's masterpiece *La struttura originaria* ([1958] 1981),<sup>152</sup> but here I need to merely assume them due to limited space for the sake of brevity. (A5) is based on the definition of necessity in terms of possible worlds, combined with Severino's permanentism (cf. §§1.1-1.2) according to which (unrestrictedly) everything always exists, including the *relata* of  $R$ . In my opinion, proposition (A6) is one of the most controversial of the original argument by Severino. Due to limits of space, I cannot assess it here, but I will return to that issue in §§2.2-2.3.

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<sup>152</sup> But see also Severino (1982).

The above semi-formalization of Severino's argument can lead to at least another contradiction, (A11), also used by Severino himself to reject the first assumption:

(A10) There is no instant of time at which  $M$  does not appear in our experience. [By (A3) and (A8)]

(A11) At every instant of time earlier than now  $M$  does not appear in our experience *and* there is no instant of time at which  $M$  does not appear in our experience. [Conjunction Introduction, (A1.1), (A10)]

Therefore, we get another contradiction, (A11), such that  $M$  *always and not always* appears in our experience.

Since the assumption of (A1) leads to at least two contradictions (A9, A11), Severino's line rejects that assumption, concluding that it is impossible that a (maximal consistent) state of affairs *begins* to appear *now*, and *defies* to be passed by another different (maximal consistent) state of affairs.

Now, we can either rely on Severino's jargon and his non-formalized argument (cf. *supra* the relevant excerpt) or rely on my just outlined semi-formalized argument. In both cases, there are unclear steps or inferences that might not be valid. I think that a full formalization with temporal logic will help us to adjust our precise assessment of Severino's (2001) argument, as well as provide a contribute to the contemporary discussion about the Moving Spotlight Theory.

## 2.2 A Formalization of Severino's Argument within an Instant-Based Model of Time

In this subsection, I propose a formalization of Severino's (2001) main argument, appealing to temporal logic.<sup>153</sup> I will deploy the so-called *Tense Logic* system developed by Arthur Prior (cf., e.g., 1957). Whilst the core of Severino's intuition about time is preserved in my proposal, there are relevant differences between my formalization and the original argument. These differences will be considered in §2.3.

Before exposing the formal argument, I briefly introduce the logical devices I need to build the argument itself. First, we need Prior's temporal operators:

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<sup>153</sup> For an overview of temporal logic, see Priest (2008, pp. 49-56), and Goranko-Rumberg (2022).

**P**: ‘It has at some time been the case that...’

**F**: ‘It will at some time be the case that...’

**H**: ‘It has always been the case that...’

**G**: ‘It will always be the case that...’

For example,  $P\varphi$  should be read as: ‘It has at some time been the case that  $\varphi$ ’, where  $\varphi$  is any formula. Past and future operators are interdefinable:

$$P\varphi \leftrightarrow \neg H\neg\varphi$$

$$H\varphi \leftrightarrow \neg P\neg\varphi$$

$$F\varphi \leftrightarrow \neg G\neg\varphi$$

$$G\varphi \leftrightarrow \neg F\neg\varphi$$

We also need an instant-based model of time such that

[T]he primitive temporal entities are points in time, *viz.* *time instants*, and the basic relationship between them (besides equality) is *temporal precedence*. Thus, the flow of time is represented by a non-empty set of time instants  $T$  with a binary relation of precedence on it [...] (Goranko-Rumberg 2022, par. 2.1).

Furthermore, we need to appeal especially to one among the possible properties of an instant-based model of time,<sup>154</sup> i.e., *reflexivity*:  $\forall x(x < x)$ . As Priest (2008) correctly highlights, *reflexivity* has “little plausibility” (p. 52) because “[it] says that every point in time is later than itself” (*ivi*), or – conversely – that every point in time is earlier than itself (since it is the same point,  $x$ , that occurs on the left or the right side of the temporal relation). I will return to this issue in §2.3. So far, I need to combine the principle of reflexivity with Prior’s temporal operators, obtaining the following (cf. Goranko-Rumberg 2022, parr. 3.2 and 3.6):

(REF) any of  $G\varphi \rightarrow \varphi$ ,  $H\varphi \rightarrow \varphi$ ,  $\varphi \rightarrow F\varphi$ , or  $\varphi \rightarrow P\varphi$

(Informally: if it will always be the case that  $\varphi$ , then it is the case that  $\varphi$ ; if it has always been the case that  $\varphi$ , then it is the case that  $\varphi$ ; if it is the case that  $\varphi$ , then it will at some (instant of) time be the case that  $\varphi$ ; or if it is the case that  $\varphi$ , then it has at some (instant of) time been the case that  $\varphi$ .)

Finally, we can introduce the proposition  $q$ , according to which a certain state of affairs or a maximal consistent state of affairs,  $S$ , obtains at a bright instant of time:

$q$ :  $\langle S$  obtains at a bright instant of time  $\rangle$ ,

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<sup>154</sup> Cf. Goranko-Rumberg (2022, par. 2.1) for all possible properties of an instant-based model of time.

where the property of *brightness* has been explained in §1.1. As we have seen, the aim of Severino's (2001) argument is to show that it is (logically) impossible (viz., it is contradictory) that a certain arrangement of entities *begins* to appear *and*, thereafter, appears *forever*. In my reading by means of temporal logic, I would paraphrase the content of such (logical) impossibility as follows: a certain state of affairs or maximal consistent state of affairs, *S*, such that (i) *S* obtains now (where "now" denotes the absolute, objective present, bright instant of time), *and* (ii) *S* does not obtain at all earlier (than now) instants of time, *and* (iii) *S* does obtain at all later (than now) instants of time. This idea might be formalized as:

$$(1) \mathbf{H}\neg q \wedge q \wedge \mathbf{G}q$$

Given all these preliminary steps, my formalization of Severino's (2001) main argument – let us call it the "Spotlight Movement Argument" (hereinafter: SMA) – runs as follows:

#### SPOTLIGHT MOVEMENT ARGUMENT (SMA)

- 1)  $\mathbf{H}\neg q \wedge q \wedge \mathbf{G}q$  [Ass.]
- 2)  $\mathbf{G}q$  [1, Conjunction Elimination]
- 3)  $\mathbf{G}q \rightarrow q$  [2, Reflexivity (REF)]
- 4)  $q$  [2, 3, *Modus Ponens*]
- 5)  $q \rightarrow \mathbf{P}q$  [4, Reflexivity (REF)]
- 6)  $\mathbf{P}q$  [4, 5, *Modus Ponens*]
- 7)  $\mathbf{H}\neg q$  [1, Conjunction Elimination]
- 8)  $\mathbf{H}\neg q \leftrightarrow \neg\mathbf{P}q$  [by 7, due to interdefinability between *P* and *H*]
- 9)  $\mathbf{H}\neg q \rightarrow \neg\mathbf{P}q$  [by 8]
- 10)  $\neg\mathbf{P}q$  [7, 9, *Modus Ponens*].
- 11)  $\mathbf{P}q \wedge \neg\mathbf{P}q$  [6, 10, Conjunction Introduction]

Since our assumption (1) leads to contradiction (11), namely, *that* it has at some time been the case that *q* *and* it has not at some time been the case that *q*, assumption (1) should be rejected by *reductio ad absurdum*. Given what *q* affirms (cf. *supra*), (11) affirms that it has at some time been the case that the state of affairs *S* obtains at a bright instant of time, *and* it has not at some time been the case that the state of affairs *S* obtains at a bright instant of time. Therefore, the assumption (1) is false, *quod erat demonstrandum*.



### 2.3 Assessment of SMA and Comparison with the Original Argument by Severino

In this subsection, I am going to briefly assess Severino's (2001) original argument and my semi-formalization of it in §2.1, together with my SMA proposal.

First, I would highlight that both Severino's argument and my SMA begin with the same step: the logical point that a certain arrangement of entities (*something*, broadly speaking), which has *never* appeared in our experience, appears *now*, and will thereafter appear *forever*. In Severino's jargon, both arguments start with the hypothesis of an entity or an arrangement of entities that is a "*determinazione sopraggiungente inoltrepasabile*" (cf. 1.3, especially the chart). Moreover, both Severino's argument and the SMA are forms of *reductio ad absurdum*, because they both show that the above-mentioned starting point leads to a contradiction. Finally, both arguments explain *why the spotlight moves*, and just do it by means of logic: Severino's argument accounts for the *sequentiality* of what (progressively) appears by showing that *it is contradictory* to affirm that there might be something that begins to appear *and* last forever in our experience; the SMA accounts for the metaphor of the moving spotlight by showing that assuming that there is *now* an obtaining state of affairs, *S*, that has never obtained in a bright instant of time *earlier* than now, *and* will obtain at all bright instants of time *later* than now, *leads to a contradiction*. Therefore, it is (logically or metaphysically) *impossible* that a state of affairs *begins* to appear *now* (for the first time), whilst *being unable to be passed by* other states of affairs, namely – in my SMA formalization – whilst *obtaining at every instant of time later than now*.

I think that all of these similarities between the two arguments are enough to say that SMA might be a good interpretation of the core of Severino's (2001) original argument.

Having said that, let us see the specific pros and cons of both arguments, as partially anticipated before. Severino's (2001) original argument (cf. §1.3), as well as its semi-formalization (cf. §2.1) have the following disadvantages. First, the original jargon by Severino, as it is, uses several metaphorical phrases that may be obscure to the newcoming reader. Therefore, an attempt to unpack the metaphor of the moving spotlight by appealing to Severino's jargon could be unsuccessful as far as Severino's jargon is more metaphorical than the MST itself (just think of terms like "*orizzonte dell'apparire*", "*sfondo dell'apparire*", "*sopraggiungente inoltrepasabile*", etc., which, without my previous conceptual translation work, would literally have to be rendered as "horizon of appearing", "background

of appearing”, “the overtaking which overcomes”, etc.). However, in all fairness to Severino and his commendable philosophical endeavour, we should also notice that all his metaphors are grounded in (partially) non-metaphorical concepts that the experienced connoisseur of his work can easily recognize.<sup>155</sup> Indeed, following the Italian philosopher’s explanations, it is possible to (partially) paraphrase his metaphors within a non-metaphorical language.<sup>156</sup> That is exactly what I tried to do in §1.3 and in §2.1. Yet, what has emerged is some metaphysical and logical issues, like a certain category confusion among different ontological concepts due to an unchecked use of “entity”. Moreover, some logical inferences are not clear [e.g., the inference of (A6)].

Above all, I find that the main conceptual confusion latent in Severino’s argument (metaphors aside) is the following. It seems, on the one hand, that the set of predicates *Q qua talis* necessary relates to each and every state of affairs (that appear in our experience). On the other hand, it seems that *the elements* of *Q*, i.e., the specific predicates that apply to all entities (say, the “transcendentals” of Severino’s ontology), necessary relate to each and every state of affairs (that appear in our experience) as well. This leads me to claim a certain amount of confusion between the “horizon of that which appears” *as a set*, and the “horizon” as a term to refer *to the members* of that set.

Finally, what might be the one heavy disadvantage of Severino’s argument per se is the strong theoretical commitment (ontological or ideological) to the “horizon of that which appears” itself. My SMA gets away without postulating a set of predicates that inhere in each and every entity.

On the contrary, my SMA appeals to reflexivity, as opposed to Severino’s original argument, which, as we have seen, is usually taken to be controversial in the literature. Indeed, in an instant-based model of time, this principle may be taken to affirm that every point in time is later than itself, or – conversely – that every point in time is earlier than itself. How to make sense of this idea? An option could be a sort of Nietzschean “eternal recurrence of the same”, or, better, a view of time as a recurring process or a circular time model where also transitivity holds.<sup>157</sup> However, this option does not look like a good representation of either Severino’s ontology of

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<sup>155</sup> Usually, the main baseline of Severino’s technicism is his early masterpiece *La struttura originaria*, [1958] 1981).

<sup>156</sup> However, no language can completely avoid metaphors, even the most formalized languages, and even more so as translations across different languages are involved.

<sup>157</sup> According to transitivity,  $\forall x \forall y \forall z (x < y \wedge y < z \rightarrow x < z)$ . Cf., e.g., Goranko-Rumberg (2022, par.2.1).

time or any MST in general. In fact, both proposals are more committed to the idea of a linear conception of time rather than a circular one.<sup>158</sup> By this consideration, what I did in my SMA is to rephrase the principle of reflexivity in terms of Prior's temporal operators, in the effort to generate the principle (REF). In fact, although (REF) does not affirm self-evident truths, its conditionals seem at least less controversial than the mere idea that an instant of time is earlier (or later) than itself.

By way of conclusion, I would highlight that the main contribution of this article is twofold. First, the paper argues why Emanuele Severino's ontology might be interpreted as a Moving Spotlight Theory (see §§1.1-1.3). Second, and consequently, the paper explains why the spotlight moves (see §2.1-2.3), based on the key argument of Severino's (2001) masterpiece *La Gloria*. (In doing so, I have also proposed a paraphrase of Severino's original jargon through temporal logic). As far as I know, in the contemporary literature about the philosophy of time, there are mainly two works that *explicitly* account for the metaphorical movement of the spotlight, namely, the movement of – broadly speaking – objective presentness, in the most non-metaphorical way possible. The first such contribution is Correia-Rosenkranz (2020): given some plausible tenets, they argue, it would be contradictory to claim that there is a time that is always *objectively* present (cf. *ibidem*, par. 2). The second contribution is Marques (2020), who accounts for the movement of the spotlight in terms of the *flow of our awareness* of our mental states. Both Correia-Rosenkranz's (2020) and Marques' (2020) thesis can potentially be compared to Severino's (2001) argument and to my SMA, given the strong similarities that I cannot assess here, due to space constraints. I hope to get the chance to go on this path in my future work.

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<sup>158</sup> To be fair, Severino's ontology of time involves the concept of "appearing again" ("*riapparire*") as a consequence of the core thesis of *La Gloria*. In a nutshell, if no entity that *begins* to appear in our experience will last forever (in our experience), then even those entities that are nothing but the *absence* of something that earlier has appeared will not last forever *qua* absence. That is, all absences will eventually be passed by as a necessity. Since the absence of *x* ceases to appear (viz., we cease to experience the absence of *x*) once that *x* appears *again*, then – according to Severino – everything will necessarily appear again. For the detailed argument, cf. Severino (2001) and (2007), as well as Goggi (2015, pp. 333-335) for a helpful explanation. A full assessment of this very significant thesis is beyond the scope of this article, but I hope to discuss it elsewhere in the next future.

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