

Nihilism and Crisis

The ontological approach of Ernesto de Martino

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Abstract: In this article I intend to examine the philosophical issues that can be drawn from Ernesto de Martino's Anthropology. Having been first a student of Macchiore and then of Croce, de Martino is a diligent scholar of philosophy, he is particularly interested in Heidegger, Jaspers and Husserl's philosophy, psychoanalysis, which he applies to his ethnographic research that will pave the way for Italian ethnopsychiatry. His philosophy is often relegated to the theoretical apparatus of his ethnology, but in this article, I intend to propose a reinterpretation of it in partial comparison with Emanuele Severino. Themes such as the becoming, technics, the anguish of nothingness, and being in relationship with the world were treated in a similar way by the two authors, who however did not know each other. Furthermore, the demartinian ontology proposes innovative solutions to some problems of modernity that deserve to be examined by philosophy.

Keywords: de Martino, ontology, Severino, anthropology, nihilism, presence, crisis

Riassunto: In questo articolo intendo esaminare le istanze filosofiche che è possibile trarre dall'Antropologia di Ernesto de Martino. Allievo di Macchiore e poi di Croce, de Martino è un diligente studioso di filosofia, si interessa in particolare di Heidegger, Jaspers e di psicoanalisi, che applica alle sue ricerche etnografiche che apriranno la strada all'etnopsichiatria italiana. La sua filosofia è spesso relegata ad apparato teoretico della sua pratica etnografica, ma in questo articolo intendo proporre una rilettura filosofica in parziale confronto con l'opera di Emanuele Severino. Tematiche come il divenire, la l'età della tecnica, l'angoscia del nulla, l'essere in rapporto col mondo sono state trattate in modo analogo dai due autori, seppur non si siano mai conosciuti di persona. L'ontologia demartiniana inoltre propone inoltre soluzioni innovative ad alcuni problemi della modernità che meritano di essere esaminate dalla filosofia.

Parole chiave: de Martino, ontologia, Severino, antropologia, nichilismo, presenza, crisi

The Being. There is always something. There is no absolute non-being. But if there was just the Being the action could never cross it to make it becoming; the only possible action would be the repetition of the same, that is, precisely, non-action. The mechanic. Non-being arises only from the controversy of the distinct, from the collision of values: it is the distinction that makes being not be, in the relative and polemical sense that has been said. But the root of the distinction is *presence*.¹

1. Introduction: Hypothesis for a systematization of a philosophical theory of Ernesto de Martino

Cultural anthropology is usually considered totally separate from philosophical anthropology, and due to the modern “ethnographic particularism”² adopted by the latter, it seems that those involved in culture are unable to contribute significantly to philosophical studies. However, in this article I intend to support the thesis that in a particular Italian author, such as Ernesto de Martino, a new conception of philosophy is reached as a necessary product of anthropological research, but also anthropology itself becomes applied philosophy, to the extent to which it is necessary to deal with the existential problems of the human being. Ernesto de Martino’s work is important since it dialogues equally with the history of religions, psychoanalysis, and philosophy, with Heidegger’s philosophy and existentialism in particular. With de Martino we come to a new conception of Being, to the point that it would not be audacious to speak of “demartinian ontology”. But this conception of Being and of being-there (*Dasein*) finds its reason in the concrete living of the human-being, in what the historian-ethnologist de Martino has concretely seen in the societies, cultures and history of “subalterns”, and that therefore it can contribute significantly to contemporary philosophy and to its turning point in terms of application.

A complete introduction to de Martino’s thought cannot be made here as this is not a historical essay. What we need to know for now is that de Martino’s philosophy has a historical basis, since he was born as a historian of religions, and that his main interest was to explain those phenomena of loss of the “private world”, which he defined as “cultural apocalypse” and “psychopathological apocalypses”. De Martino had a rich philosophical background built around a

1. Cfr. de Martino E., cited by Berardini S.F., *Ethos Presenza Storia. La ricerca filosofica di Ernesto de Martino.*, p. 225.

2. Brigati R., Gamberi V., *La Svolta ontologica in antropologia*, p. 226.

critique of Heidegger's thought, a critique motivated by his historical-anthropological training which led him to think that certain fundamental assumptions of Heidegger's philosophy were unsatisfactory.

Heidegger thinks that the name refers to *things* as they happen, but the name does not recall their occurrence, it isolates the beings (*die Seiendes*) and precisely in this it makes them *becoming*. They're not simple events (*Ereignis*) that appear as aspects of Being. Language is not the house of Being, but only that of the *human-being*. It is the language that appropriates (*zueignet*) the beings (*entities*) on behalf of man by entifying it and get holding (*vereignet*) the authentic being from the man. Thus, therefore, the human being, is made raw material (*Rohstoff*) of technics: from subject to object. The consumption (*Verbrauch*) of entities is similarly consumption of the human being by the technical apparatus (*Rüstung*).

This idea, which sees the system as composed of independent pieces, is incompatible with the Gestalt-holistic idea, which instead expects the Whole to be *more* than the mere sum of the parts that are identified in it for practical reasons. The decomposition is *subsequent* to perception, and this decomposition is exactly the power of *isolation* of the entities of which Severino speaks in his writings. In this context of *isolating cognitions*, human beings lead things to nothingness, because they conceive them as *separate* (isolated or isolable) from the Whole of which they are not mere "parts", but manifestations: *existents*.

This examination must also inevitably lead to the realization of an applied anthropology which, being aware of these cognitive processes, can also concretely overcome their limits, which does not mean acting without these perceptive means, but simply *understanding* the world without *subdoing it* to us, and which can only be such if we rely on the cognitive medium unaware of how it gives name and form to entities (isolating them) and consequently also isolating the human being from the Whole, objectifying the subject who objectifies the subjects that are others-from-himself. The mechanism of identification of ourselves, for which we need to "distinguish" ourselves from *others*, is an anthropological isolation of identities.

Then, in a world where each *-self* isolates all other "*-selves*" from itself, self-confines itself to self-isolation. Against a world in which beings are conceived only as members of categories, de Martino proposed an *anthropological* way that proceeds instead towards an integration of otherness and an acceptance of the true meaning of *being*.

The most important work of the anthropologist Ernesto de Martino is dedicated to the problem of cultural apocalypses, and is in fact properly entitled

“*The End of the World*”³. Ernesto de Martino’s work involves a profound philosophical elaboration on the problem of the “end of the world” that deals with topics of central importance such as psychology (through ethnopsychiatry and the analysis of the so-called “psychopathological apocalypses”), sociology (also in the relationship between anthropic and social constructions and destruction of the world), and of course cultural and religious anthropology (with the construction of cultural worlds and their constant risk of collapsing in a religious apocalypse or “collapse of civilization”). All these issues are interconnected by de Martino’s theoretical vision, which exposes it through a rich interdisciplinary dialogue which has the sole purpose of solving one of the fundamental problems of humanity. In the following pages I will analyze de Martino’s anthropological theory and conclude by illustrating the implications such a theory, still very current, has for modern sciences⁴.

Ernesto de Martino’s studies are placed in a very broad perspective that goes in the same direction as the Existential therapy hypothesized by Binswanger (*Daseinsanalyse* or in Italian “*Antropoanalisi*” which would correspond to the English “*Anthropoanalysis*”). His ethnographic experience in the lands of southern Italy in researches involving transcultural psychiatry, the history of religions and ethnology, led him to theorize the existence of a new anthropology that could unify the two disciplinary fields that study the human being⁵. His most popular study is obviously the one related to tarantism⁶, a curious phenomenon typical of the peasant world of southern Italy for which a woman (or in some cases even a man) suffered from a real sudden psychopathological crisis and erroneously attributed to the bite of a spider: the *tarantula*. The spider, as de Martino demonstrated, was instead a *symbol* of the traumatic manifestation. This fatal bite led to a madness that could only be exorcised through ritual dances with music performed by specific fellow villagers who staged a real musical exorcism for the occasion.

3. The original title in Italian is *La fine del Mondo* and it is actually a posthumously published text (with the first Italian edition in 1977) as the work was unfinished before the death of its author. Despite this, it remains one of the richest and most elaborate works of him. The anthropological work of Ernesto de Martino remains (to date) mainly unknown abroad, except for some articles published for international journals and for a relative success in France which led to the translation of the work in question with the title *La fin du monde. Essai sur les apocalypses culturelles* (Éditions de l’EHESS, 2016).

4. For the purpose of better understanding, except where otherwise specified referring to an officially published translation in English, all the citations that will be taken from de Martino’s original works will be translated by me into English and the reference to the original Italian paragraph will be reported in the note.

5. de Martino E., *La Fine del Mondo. Contributo all’analisi delle Apocalissi Culturali*, p. 200.

6. The English translation of these studies have been published in de Martino E., *The land of remorse: A study of southern Italian tarantism*.

For de Martino it is no longer possible to conceive psychiatry that deals with the sick mind as distinct from historical and ethnological studies that deal with the rest of the human aspects. Each reality is inserted in a historical-cultural context that is inextricably linked to all symbolic, religious, linguistic, ritualistic, and even pathological manifestations. In the end, the study of the phenomenon of tarantism itself proves to be a real *cultural-bound syndrome*, in this not dissimilar to the forms of hysteria that Freudian psychoanalysis detected in the Europe of his time. But beyond being pathologies linked to specific symptoms, the forms of anthropological discomfort change as the culture of the subject in which they manifest themselves varies. Thus, the Apulian tarantism and the ritualized forms of therapy that include dance, its ritual symbolism that condenses the outcome of the pathology in the spider's bite, are all culturally-linked aspects, but in itself the phenomenon of tarantism describes the same discomfort that the oppressed the subject of Freudian hysteria, suffocated by society and by a world that feels crumbling upon him or her, and which manifested itself in different ways because it emerged in different cultures⁷.

The entirety of de Martino's research is based on this common ground: there are certain cultural, social, individual conditions in which the human being experiences a feeling of profound loss or anguish, and which has also been well described in psychiatry in the form of the "experience of the end of the world" (*Weltuntergangserlebnis*). De Martino recognizes that this psychopathological phenomenon has its roots in a broader cultural problem, which includes the individual's relationship with society, religion and the outside world. The problem of the Apocalypse therefore does not concern only religious phenomena, but for de Martino is fundamentally anthropological and also, to a certain extent, ontological. In order to understand how he arrives at these conclusions and how they can be useful to us even for modern studies, we must briefly examine the beginning of his research.

Ernesto de Martino's work stands autonomously as a profound philosophical reflection, which is therefore endowed with its own independent system. One of the most interesting ways to trace the prodromes of Demartinian

7. Ernesto de Martino himself notes this similarity, to the point of describing precisely in the smallest details what he calls as "classical hysterical arc" (*ibid.*, p. 42) certain manifestations of women affected by tarantism that he has studied. For further information see also Ginzburg C., *On Ernesto de Martino's "The End of the World" and Its Genesis*, pp. 77-91 and Schäuble M., *Images of Ecstasy and Affliction: The Camera as Instrument for Researching and Reproducing Choreographies of Deviance in a Southern Italian Spider Possession Cult*, p. 2: "the tarantuled women (*tarantate*) in Apulia have directly drawn on the existing visual lexicon of hysterical postures". However, it should be remembered that despite the association between tarantism and hysteria, for de Martino we cannot speak of these phenomena as a disease, as his anthropological vision includes them as externalizations of a discomfort through protective "dispositives" that can include ritual actions or religious-ecstatic manifestations.

philosophy is to turn to his unpublished writings, the first edition of which was edited by Massenzio in 1995. De Martino's philosophy is a complex ontology that intertwines anthropological and historical issues, and cannot be reduced to a theory but it is applied to the practice of our daily life, it is interested in existential anguish and apocalyptic threats of living⁸.

In his writings, the Being is already presented as different from *consciousness*, whereas consciousness is for de Martino "immediate historical experience" not coinciding with "the Whole possible Being", therefore a part of Being not included in consciousness is inevitably left "beyond", and therefore, is beyond consciousness. Since consciousness is a part of being, but another part of being is 'left out of consciousness', then the conscious-cognitive relationship allows for a reflection of the being in itself through consciousness.

If the relationship between being and consciousness is not reflexive (as "the Being reflected in consciousness") then the immediate experience becomes a problem, and the Being that has "remained outside" consciousness and is reflected in the Being of consciousness, instead of constituting the immediate experience of the relationship between being and consciousness, it poses itself as the energy of *going beyond* the conscious being in the form of proto-culture (first cultural coherences that are structured). In this *going beyond*, "the being as existence emerges". Existence is the interpretation or the placing of being "as a historical center of objectification" that is, as valorization.

The Being, interpreted by culture as a value, is "*valorized*" in the form of *existence*. Valorizations are functional to the power of cultural organizations that lead to the technical domination of nature or, as de Martino wrote, "nature valorized through technics and science", and consequently, humanity is also founded in its socio-cultural organization through valorization, which is "the humanity valorized in the social and economic order"¹⁰. Such power can only be effective in *isolation*¹¹. The will to control Being implies the risk of its annihilation, while the will to transcend Being from its borders is for de Martino an ethical force (*ethos*)¹². The imposition of boundaries on Being and entities pass-

8. de Martino E., *Storia e Metastoria. I fondamenti di una teoria del sacro*.

9. *Op. cit.*, p. 99: *manuscript A₁*.

10. *Ibidem*.

11. de Martino E. confirms this in *A₆* (*op. cit.*, p. 105): "The presence that is lost is the presence that isolates itself, that loses its relationship with the tasks of universalization and valorization that establishes it as a presence: it is the regression from sociality and communicability towards the private, the encrypted, the incommunicable".

12. In *manuscript A₄* de Martino defines the *ethos* and transcendence as the overcoming of the situation through the valorization consistent with being. Each transcendence of the situation configures a new situation that lends itself to being transcended in turn. De Martino calls it "inexorable cultural destiny, which objectively makes death an appearance" (*op. cit.*, p. 102).

es through the attribution of an identity of nature, an “entity-in-itself” of things as independent and separate from each other, by laws of nature. However, the isolating will, which confines the entities within the limits of reason in order to control them, empties the nothingness of their own sense by separating them from their whole which is the totality of Being, of which entities are the possible determinations, not independent. Thus, it happens that

this presumed and claimed being-in-itself, as soon as it is isolated by the effort of the man who makes it be in some way, turns into nothing (into the nothing of human value and therefore into nothingness *tout court*, because no being can ever be reached outside of the valorizing reason): so when the existence that emerges from nothing and runs towards death is theorized, the risk is confused with the task, the trap with the goal, the abyss with the climber, the fatigue that makes us proceeded with the fetish of fatigue. In this way the go-ahead is given to nihilism, irrationalism, solipsism, or the opposite compensatory fetish of religious transcendence, as a meta-historical horizon for the resumption of current or possible alienations.¹³

These passages by de Martino are fundamental for a number of reasons: the first is the confirmation of nihilism as a mental construct, risk and anxiety derived as an implication of cultural living itself, and the second is the fact that de Martino considers arising from nothing as a *theorized* possibility, not as a reality, and in this it seems to take up the formulations of Parmenides: nothing can arise from nothing (*oydèn ex oydenós*), therefore what-is, and therefore the Being itself, did not arise from nothing, but has always been without the necessity to come into existence.

The only force capable of transcending the situation *in value* is *presence*. It should not be understood as the *Vorhandenheit* of Heideggerian ontology but as the capacity to be precisely inasmuch as “being in determinations”, being in context (which is the only possible way of being) and *not* in isolation, and therefore “being present [*farsi presente*] to the situation”¹⁴. While valorization claims to control determinations by isolating them, the “presentation” of being in the situation “means transcending it [the situation] *in value*, detaching itself as a presence through this valorization, to the extent that the valorizing transcendence takes place”. In other words, *presence* is the appearance of being as destiny (understood in Severinian terms of *destino*), that is, as a valorization of the valorization itself, unveiling of the contradiction of the valorizing force which, if it were to apply control through total isolation, would bring to nothingness. Another way to define presence in de Martino is “overcoming tension”. In this

13. *Op. cit.*, pp. 99-101.

14. *Op. cit.*, manuscript A₂.

sense, presence is also understood as “*being-there*”, the Heideggerian *Dasein* (Italian: *esserci*), to the extent that we understand it as “value when it is present in the decision that valorize the situation”. However, this juxtaposition is oscillating in the works of de Martino, who sometimes understands *Dasein* as a possibility of the *Presence*, and not as two synonyms. In fact, I prefer to refer to the last de Martino, in which the *Dasein* and the *Presence* are more distinct¹⁵.

Existence is presence or *Dasein* as transcending the situation into value, going beyond what passes by transforming it in cultural coherence¹⁶. From this Demartinian ontology, also taking into account the link with Heideggerian philosophy, we can draw the following scheme.

Presence	
<i>Es gibt</i> (“is given”)... if: “it decides by valorization” [it.: <i>decide valorizzando</i>]	Suffers Crisis ... if: “it gets stuck as a prisoner by a problematic situation”

With the dissolution of the *ethos* of transcendence, “the risk of losing one’s presence also appears”. To *bare life*, de Martino contrasts *economic life*¹⁷, as an initiative organically grafted into an intersubjective cooperative regime obedient to a production rule, existing both in primitive and capitalist society.

Existence is therefore a valorizing presentification in struggle with the risk of not being-there. [...] The dawn of presence in the situation, as emerging according to a value, is always oriented towards the inter-subjective, that is towards a decision that is valid for a society and a culture historically conditioned.¹⁸

15. We can understand *Dasein* as the determination of the *Presence* in the form of “I am”, an expression used by de Martino in A_2 to indicate the determination of the subjectivating valorization. In this way, *Dasein* is a condition of being, recollection and manifestation in the form of a “person”. A further clarification is given to us in manuscript A_6 in which de Martino tells us (*op. cit.*, p. 105) that “Being cannot be reduced into any being-there and no being-there can reduce the being: and this is because the being-there of being is tormented by the risk of not being there”.

16. *Op. cit.*, p. 101: *manuscript A_3*.

17. The *bare life* is for de Martino the “*mera vitalità*” exposed in A_6 and which is transcended by the social-economic horizon. The society and the institution of the economy are the transcendence of the bare life: a human “life” is always included in a “social and economic regulation of life” (*op. cit.*, p. 106). This distinction between bare life and economic life also seems to anticipate the dualism that Agamben traces between *zoē* (bare life, animal life) and *bios* (political life, economic life for de Martino).

18. *Op. cit.*, p. 101.

Therefore, since the ethological arises in the cultural horizon, there must be also a *primordial êthos* not yet defined. De Martino presents it as an *êthos* in tension between the *situation* and the *value*. This *êthos* is troubled by a series of oppositions to choose from: not being in the world or reintegrating into the world, passing or letting pass, immediately identifying with the situation or detaching¹⁹. Another fundamental aspect that emerges from de Martino's writings and which should be taken into consideration for this paper is the concept of *relationship*. Reflecting on the Heideggerian "being-in-the-world" (*in-der-Welt-sein*), de Martino understands that Being cannot be defined except through the relationship, that is, from *Dasein's da-* (in Italian: the *ci-* of *esserci*), which is a Being that is "particularized" as "being of myself" *together* with the "being of others"²⁰. Also, for this reason presence is described as the primordial human *êthos*, capable of transcending the situation *in* the value, emerging from the situation to establish it as situation of an operable world, open to the forms of cultural coherence²¹.

As the primordial essence of *êthos*, presence is constantly exposed to the risk of a "primordial guilt", which would prevent it from fulfilling its task of "being-there", and this risk corresponds to the experience of losing oneself, and, with oneself, losing the world. The presence "changes its sign" and suffers a *crisis of the negative*, letting the "experience of alienation" arise: the *êthos* is no longer a giver of meanings. When the historical world is "unmondanized" (*smondanizzato*) the *Weltuntergangserlebnis* comes²².

There is also the risk that presence is perceived as *absence*, and this is the prefiguration of an *inauthentic presence*, defined precisely in the modalities of absence (*assenza*). In this case, presence, instead of going beyond and emerging into the transcendent and through transcendence, becomes the past of itself, and in the past it "isolates itself", makes itself coincide with its past and allows itself to be surpassed²³. Anguish is the reaction that presence has in front of the risk of having to think of itself as absence, the risk of not-being-in-the-world. The possible configurations of anguish are for de Martino mainly seven²⁴, beside the general background for which anguish is always *anguish in history*, anguish can be interpreted as

19. *Op. cit.*, pp. 102-3.

20. *Op. cit.*, p. 103.

21. *Op. cit.*, manuscript A₅.

22. *Op. cit.*, p. 104. Another concept taken up by Heidegger is Throwness (*Geworfenheit*), the feeling of being thrown into the world, a risk that for de Martino troubles being-in-the-world.

23. *Op. cit.*, p. 107.

24. *Op. cit.*, pp. 110-111.

1. reaction to the risk of losing one's technical dominance on the world or ability to produce economic goods organizing social and political life;
2. reaction to the risk of not being able to go beyond one's psychic contents;
3. reaction to the risk of not being able to deploy one's own distinct operational powers;
4. reaction to an actual attack on *presence* which implies self-rejection, naturalization of the self or the need to become historical;
5. resistance to the risk of recession to a non-human world that does not require the *Dasein*;
6. the result of estrangement from the world or depersonalization;
7. crushing, atomization of human vitality.

When the institution descends on being and delimits its cultural boundaries, every moment of life is in the risk of crisis "since every moment is recognized as proper through an appropriating choice, and since every moment can be an opportunity to experience the powerlessness of this a qualifying choice, thus phagocytizing the presence and making it pass into the void of its impotence"²⁵.

Demartinian theory can be defined as an *anthropogenesis* that starts from the Heideggerian ontological conception reinterpreted in an anthropological key. De Martino seems to appreciate Jaspers' idea of an *Achsenzeit* (or aural thought in Heidegger), moved even further back in time, to a moment of which the "first beginning" (*ersten Anfang*) is nothing more than a series of dying residues. But de Martino is by no means a primitivist, on the contrary he criticizes primitivists for their conception of an *idealized past* that almost always leads to a new form of *religious mysticism*. At the dawn of society, the human being does not know the truth of *Being* (the "Whole possible Being" as defined in manuscript A₁, original: "*tutto l'essere possibile*"), whose boundaries are not definable. But in order to structure itself, society needs borders²⁶. The

25. *Op. cit.*, p. 112.

26. The being of human beings, the "presence", is initially so boundless, omnipresent, and capable of that performative efficacy which will later be remembered as *magical dispositive*, and subsequently will become institutionalized in the ritual and will be placed under the control of society in the *economic horizon* (the common management of individuals). When *presence* is perfectly defined by the *economy* within the confines/boundaries of being-there, magic continues to exist only in institutionalized form, as a form of knowledge or as magical-religious or mythical-ritual dispositive, whose controlled efficacy is exclusively used to control the boundaries of being-there, preventing society or the individual from collapsing. This technique is defined by de Martino as de-historification of the negative (if the risk is constituted by nihilistic anguish) or irrelative de-historification. As a fundamental technique and mother of all techniques, de Martino identifies at the dawn of society the

human *presence*, that is the way in which the human being “is” in the world, possesses the capacity of performative efficacy, of the “magic”, but this power is not placed under control, at least until the intervention of what de Martino defines as “economy” (*oikonomia*)²⁷.

“technique of *institutional de-historification*, that is, the resolution of becoming in the iteration of the identical” (*op. cit.*, p. 111). This reiteration of the identical is structured in the mythical-ritual dispositive as a process of *apparent becoming*, in which the totality of operations results in a zero, therefore “the identical always remains so in the proper sense of an $A = A$ ” (*op. cit.*, p. 165) even if, de Martino points out, this identity takes the form of A only as a meta-historical foundation of “a + a + a + a...” to infinity as a *re-actualization of meta-historical ceremonials*.

27. The economy (*oikonomia*) is the normative management (*némō*) of the common good (*oikos*). Normativity has to do with the Indo-European root **nem-* (“to assign”). With the assignment, the norm (*nómos*) and the law of names (*ónoma*) are established, and one passes from a fully existing presence in the world to a defined horizon: the cultural world and culturally constituted identities. Culture is established for de Martino as the limiting force that guarantees the boundaries of a society, but it is also the limitation of the Being, which in a sociological context can only be-there (*Dasein*) that is, to *present* oneself as a presence (*presenza*), that can *be-in-relation* to possible cultural worlds. If that way-of-being-present cannot be guaranteed, the presence collapse. The norm is relative and arbitrary, it is *culturally established*, so it does not tell the truth of being. Living in the cultural world, despite the advantage of social organization, implies the constant risk that this construction collapses, and there are many occasions in which the “world” risks to collapse, risks showing itself only for what it is, that is a constructed illusion from the community or in the belief that the rules are different, the world can stand up. If the norms turn out to be ephemeral, then the world collapses too, and this collapse (*Untergang*) of the world (*Welt*) is managed in different ways. By creating social boundaries and limiting being to the possibilities of being-there-in-the-world (*esserci-nel-mondo*), the presence be expressed only within cultural limits – with the risk of conviction for the presence of pathological moments in which it feels it cannot exist in any possible cultural world, experiencing this oppression as an authentic *crisis* – but it also creates an exclusion of a part of Being from itself, which has remained outside these borders, which constantly press on the world, threatening to make it collapse. Not being able to conceive any existence other than the culturally constituted one, the risk of the end of the world (*Weltuntergang*) is perceived as apocalyptic, as the end of everything, the advance of nothingness, annihilation. To protect itself from this eventuality, culture establishes a series of dispositives, which are precisely the ritual and the myth, institutionalized, controlled and technicized forms of magic. In the passage from the dawn of culture to its risk of sunset, magic becomes a technique of presence capable of symbolically reiterating the foundation of the world as a time that cyclically recurs: an eternal return of the *illud tempus* that serves to reconfirm the power of World. But sometimes the ritual and the mythical narration fail, and the crisis rages. The apocalypse can no longer be used as an excuse to generate fear in religious and obtain fidelity from them through the promise of a redemption and salvation from the imminent end. Then there are the individual apocalypses (*Weltuntergangserlebnis*), of which the cultural apocalypses are a collective echo. In fact, in psychopathology, de Martino notes an authentic “crisis of the presence” that can be explained through anthropological methods, understanding the importance of being and its protection from the risk of “not being able to be” in any cultural world.

2. *How to construct the world: the theory of the “presence” (Dasein)*

Presence is conceived both as the anthropological functionality that allows the human being to live in history and in society, and also as the ability to make use of things in the sense of their “usability” (*Zuhandenheit*) for the cultural man. A “World” of humans is therefore identified right from the beginnings of de Martino’s considerations. The human being is meaningless when separated from its context, but this context, which is history and culture, makes the human being a being-in-the-world. This world, in turn, is not necessarily separate from the humans who inhabit it. The human being is *in* the world, but the world is also *in* the human being, as individuals are those who make history and society, and these are interconnected with those who inhabit them, in turn influencing their fate. We must also familiarize ourselves with another fundamental concept for understanding de Martino’s philosophy, namely that of “dispositive” (*dispositivo*). Culture, ritual, tradition, are all *dispositives* that protect the *presence* of individuals. Dispositives of this kind are socially established, but de Martino also recognizes individual mechanisms.

Faced with the danger that subjectivity may fail, be overwhelmed by death, by insignificance, by oblivion, a *crisis of presence* is prefigured. Similarly, in the face of the oppression of subjectivity, an exasperation of the individual who is precluded from free expression, the world comes to fall apart.

If the *presence*, as we have seen, corresponds roughly to the *in-der-Welt-sein*, just as being-there is *Dasein* from a fully anthropological point of view, the crisis of presence is an *in-der-Nicht-sein*. De Martino himself defines the crisis of presence as a condition of “overpowering nothingness”²⁸.

It was Emanuele Severino the one who, more than others, has been able to describe the problem of nihilism after de Martino. Severino starts from the Parmenidean affirmation *ésti gár éinai mēdèn d’oyk éstin* “being is, nothingness is not” to carry on his discourse on Being²⁹.

The *crisis of presence* is the *fracture* of hopes and perspectives. The nihilistic threat, the prospect of a future dominated by nothingness, which will make everything cease, is such that it cannot feed back as a motivating force for the growth of that sprout, which sees only in its full realization the final goal of its struggle against everything and everyone. This is the great theme of the human condition, it is the *Lustprinzip* against the *Realitätsprinzip*, it is the world as will and representation that collides with the de-subjectivating and brutal force of the species, it is the threat of death that is reified as a disturbing perspective.

28. de Martino E., *La fine del Mondo*, p. 112.

29. Severino E., *Essenza del Nichilismo*, p. 20.

We cannot understand the crisis of presence if we do not first understand the collective introjection of the reified idea of nothingness. It is only in the *belief* that there is an annihilating threat that awaits every being that “permanent anthropological risk” creeps in, constantly hovering on the edge of existence, without realizing that that threat of destruction that so anguishes, is only possible in the absence of an awareness on its real origins. Being does not fear nothingness, only the ego can fear something that confuses disappearing with annihilation.

We can also understand Severino’s statements in this sense when he says that nothingness, when it goes beyond the sphere of metaphysical conceptualization and is culturally assimilated, becomes much more difficult to oppose. In this regard, it is worth quoting the author’s complete passage:

When nihilism is only a way of thinking (namely, it is metaphysics), the denial of nihilism consists in the denial that being is nothing. But when nihilism becomes praxis, then a civilization appears – which appears, precisely because praxis is dominated by the thought that being is nothing. Nihilism is now this civilization; and the denial of nihilism can no longer be accomplished through the simple recognition that this civilization is an identification of being as nothing.³⁰

Nothingness can be experienced, paradoxically, as an unexpected and surprising abolition of the norm. Cognition, which organizes the beings into the multiple, divides, segments, discerns, organizes a *world* structure in which everything has its identity, its role, its *place*, and follows certain *rules*: this is reduction of being in structures, a superimposed grid that filters reality and reduces it to an organized segment.

Let’s keep this aspect in mind as it will soon come in handy when we talk about the crowning of these studies through the work of de Martino, who recognizes the central role in human life in the dimension of subjectivity, and in what he calls *Crisis of presence*, madness or the return to the Sacred, the return to the dimension of the original total Otherness.

The encounter of truth with the Sacred is above all the relationship of truth with an ontologically ambiguous language, which is already prey to metaphysics, but can also become prey to truth. For this to happen, it must be torn from metaphysics, that is, it must be understood as a saying that speaks the language of the truth of being. Also, in this way violence is done to it because it is not found, but it is wanted to be together with the truth of being. If it is accompanied by metaphysics, it becomes an alienated language, but left to itself it returns to a position of

30. *Op. cit.*, p. 173.

equilibrium between truth and the denial of the truth of being, which therefore can only be mastered by force.³¹

Ernesto de Martino has dedicated years of his life to an unfinished study on cultural apocalypses, hypothesizing that the “end of the world” does not presage a catastrophic event, but rather refers to a condition of “permanent anthropological risk” (*rischio antropologico permanente*) inherent in every philosophical and religious thought. This refers to his anthropological theory on the structuring of cultural and religious thought, based in the first instance on the attempt to put a stop to the *nihilistic anguish* that seems to be characteristic of the human condition. In order to constitute a protective dispositif from what he calls a “crisis of presence”, religions institute rites and myths to enact a “irrelative de-historification” capable of constituting a temporary defense against nihilistic anguish and the fear of the annihilation of being, continually re-establishing an atemporal situation in which becoming (which implies the distressing prospect of becoming nothing) is opposed by a “time out of time”, a mythological time that founds reality or the world as it is. The world is in de Martino’s sense an anthropological world, a worldly reality expected by the cultural narrative that founds it.

To ensure that the dispositif is effective, however, it is necessary to keep in mind what is the constant anthropological threat from which one defends oneself: that is, the risk of “losing the world”. The apocalypse is, in this context, a condition predicted by every culture regarding the destruction of those same models of reference that found a world, and which constantly risk being destroyed if the dispositif of the ritual does not continually reiterate their presence in the minds of the social actors.

The experience of the end of the world is also recognized as a specific psychopathological condition and is referred to by phenomenological psychiatry as *Weltuntergangserlebnis*. It is characterized as a distressing experience, in which all the patient’s beliefs are destroyed. It is the sick person who uses the term “end of the world” or “apocalypse” to describe this condition, a situation in which the world seems to be sinking (*Welt-untergang*) because the cognitive references that found reality have *disappeared*: there is no longer a distinction between this and that, reality no longer has the connotations that linguistic-cultural education attributed to it.

In his work on *The End of the World* [original: *La fine del Mondo*], published posthumously, de Martino dedicates a large section to the analysis of psychopathological apocalypses, repeating however how these problems

31. *Op. cit.*, p. 160.

cannot be fully understood if they are not related to the presence preservation dispositives that anthropologists observe in cultural orders.

The experience of the end of the world could not be better rendered here as an experience of the loss of the intersubjectivity of values that make a world possible as a human world. The internal sign of worldliness, what constitutes its fundamental character of normality, is its projectable intersubjectivity, its belonging to a perspective of socially and culturally conditioned operability: and it is no coincidence that the most pertinent term to designate the normality of the world is drawn from associated life, so the normal world is “domestic”, “familiar”, “mine” insofar as it can be communicated to “others” [...].³²

De Martino’s speech is anything but a theoretical exercise detached from the current context. The End of the World is much more practical than any treatise on psychiatry, even more so today that, as we get closer and closer to the era of technoscience, we are definitively ushering in the age of nihilism in which subjectivity will be deprived of any value.

It is always the fear of “losing the world”, accompanied by anthropological ignorance, which is dragging humanity into a generalized technical dispositive for the preservation of presence, which however has already been overwhelmed by the *Heterogonie der Zwecke*. In an attempt to become over-human, superhuman, beyond humanity, so as to overcome the fear of the apocalypse, human beings have effectively called for the end of the world through the exhaustion of subjectivities.

Two antinomic terrors govern the epoch in which we live: that of “losing the world” and that of “being lost in the world”. On the one hand, there is a fear of losing, not so much with death but in the very course of existence, the splendor and joy of worldly life, the energy that pushes towards the community projects of civil life, towards technics and science, moral solidarity and social justice, poetry and philosophy; on the other hand, the world is considered as a danger that undermines the most authentic human destiny, and therefore as a temptation from which to be saved.³³

In this historical reality, many *dispositives* are desperately activated to protect against the imminent anthropological risk of the end of the world, and they are often drawn from traditions of the past, which one tries to re-legitimize on the basis of the modern doctrine of scientism. However, not only science proposes itself as a barrier to this risk.

32. de Martino E., *La fine del Mondo*, p. 101.

33. *Op. cit.*, p. 360.

As long as one observes the appearance of the Being it will not be able to understand what the Being “is”, but if the human-being limits its ability to see the Being, then the Being can be understood as opposed to Nothingness, which is a self-denial, but with the very creation of language the Being of Nothingness is prefigured, and its self-contradiction no longer appears so evident that one cannot imagine it. Being cannot become what it is not, and therefore Nothingness will never be, but this can only be understood when Being reappears in its totality.

Actually, the whole does not appear, because only the form of the whole appears, filled with a part of the concrete content of the whole. This contradiction – in which what is not the whole is signified as “the whole” – would be removed if the concrete whole appeared, that is, if in appearing truthful the content adapted the form and the truth became omniscience.³⁴

This can be explained through an inversion of Plato’s cave myth: whoever is born in the light and sees nothing but the appearance of light, will never be able to understand what the light is. But when the light *does not* appear, then whoever first saw the appearance of the light, and then saw it subtracted from appearing, experiences the *absence* of what was previously evident. Now the absence of light foreshadows the anguish of Nothingness, and the *crisis of presence* calls into question what previously seemed without the need for awareness.

The basic assumption is the following: the human being would constitute a society, and his own individual identity, as a form of protection from the dangers of the unknown, death and suffering of the world. To do this, however, it is not enough to have a narrative to protect from these fears, as the dangers persist as *permanent* risks that can destroy human convictions. Magic and religion intervene for de Martino as institutions to protect from this risk. The ritual dispositive is what is needed to periodically re-establish the foundations of the cultural world that stands out against the risk of nothingness.³⁵ Thus,

34. Severino E., *Essenza del Nichilismo*, p. 173.

35. The world for de Martino would therefore not be something external to man, as interiority and exteriority are a boundary that arises to contain and control. This brings us back to the well-known Parmenidean statements about being and not being: “being is, nothingness is not” (*ésti gár einai, mēdèn d’oik éstin*). This “nothingness” (*mēdèn*) which therefore stands out as an eternal and distressing threat for those who experience the crisis of non-being, is perhaps the key to understanding the most serious of human problems. It is therefore obvious that Parmenides wants to point out how the multiplicity of being that shows itself at appearing is determined by the totality of names (*pan’ónoma*), but this does not mean that their nominal existence is a non-existence, or an existence of inferior kind. Existence just ‘is’. Names are the designations of entities: the attribution of identity to things is used to organize, catalogue, establish orders and hierarchies. Thus, the world is founded through names. The world of names is the world that can be known, organized and made clear in the

therefore, the magician, the sorcerer or the primitive priest finds a world to counteract nothingness.

The anguish in front of the void of the disappeared presence, of the vanished world, pushes the sorcerer to venture into this nothingness, in a desperate battle. And in this risky adventure he doesn't find nothingness, but something, himself in a regulated relationship with auditory "spirits". This is his victory, this is his redemption. The magical techniques to weaken the unitary presence do not have the aim of totally suppressing the presence: although being-there may, in the condition of trance, recede, attenuate, and shrink, nevertheless there must be enough to maintain the trance without precipitating it into uncontrolled possession, and to adapt the activity of the "spirits" to the concrete contingencies that occur in the session.³⁶

While *presence* is the awareness of an individual in his being-in-the-world (*in-der-Welt-sein*), the crisis of *presence* arises in the condition in which it is impossible to be in any cultural world. This unites religious apocalypses with psychopathological apocalypses, in which, as de Martino points out, the subject lives a real experience of the end of the inner world, in which things are no longer as they appeared before, they lose their meaning, they become elusive, receding, inconceivable. The individual is crushed by the weight of a world that he is no longer able to know (or is no longer able to dominate with the certainties of his knowledge of it, given to him by the magical-religious ritual dispositive).

Magic is the technique that the individual acquires when he is able to tame his own lability. For de Martino, magic is a "technique of *presence*". There are different figures of those who, through knowledge, are able to transcend the *presence*, and thus also redeem that of others. The shaman lives in a liminal world, annihilates his presence to transcend the world of spirits from which he exercises his talent, and then there is the magician, who masters the arts

face of the risk of nothingness. However, this should lead us to a further analysis: the nothingness of which the human being is afraid, and which leads him to constitute a world, is not actually a real threat. Parmenides already recognized that 'what-is', is impossible that it is not (*hē mèn hōpōs éstin te kai hōs oúk ésti mē éinai*). Nothingness therefore simply 'is-not'. What therefore appears to us is not a nothingness, but the idea of 'nothing', the name, what we call "nothing", and which with mere name threatens us with an imminent apocalypse. The human being is simply oblivious to the reality of being, which has no identity, but is rather an "identical", in that it is itself and that is it, but unlike an identity that needs an identity to define itself by opposition (A is A because it is non-B and vice versa), being is an undivided totality, therefore it is an "identical". But this totality (the "Whole") is too much to be understood by humans, who therefore found an organized world on the basis of identities, which are a parody of the identical. Identity, says de Martino himself, is "nostalgia for the identical, returning to the indistinct origins, resisting the proliferation of historical evolution, the death instinct, disappearing into the situation in place of transcending it, the annihilation of being there in the world" (de Martino E., *La fine del Mondo*, p. 134).

36. Id., *Il Mondo Magico. Prolegomeni a una storia del magismo*, p. 92.

through which to dominate matter. All these figures are called by de Martino “heroes of presence”³⁷. Here de Martino, with his figure of the “Magic Christ” introduces the archetype of the doctor. Magic is the medicine that “recovers the world that is being lost for man.”

Some spells are culturally delimited, and serve to soothe the dramas that are experienced in the community, while others are intended more for the individual. In cultural cases, it is tradition that passes on the institution of magic. A potential danger is precisely that the magic, created to oppose the institution, becomes institutionalized in turn.

Religion is, like magic, a technique developed by humans to prevent the dispersion of presence. Religious practice, like the magic formula, claims to dominate the world by preventing it from confusing the presence of humans within itself, which thus, according to de Martino, allow the perseverance of their world, the cultural one.

For a presence that collapses without compensation, the magical world has not yet appeared; for a redeemed and consolidated presence that no longer feels the problem of its weakness, the magical world has already appeared. In the concrete relationship of the two moments, in the opposition and in the conflict that derives from it, it manifests itself as a movement and as a development, it unfolds in the variety of its cultural forms, it sees its day in human history.³⁸

The magic somehow serves to protect the crisis that lies beyond the cultural horizon of the known. Magic “recovers the world that is being lost”³⁹. For de Martino the World of Magic is “real” insofar as we understand that the distinction between reality and fantasy is just as arbitrary as the one we impose on meanings.

3. The first theory on Magic and the religious “dispositive” to prevent the “permanent Anthropological risk”: nihilism and the crisis of the presence

Magic, like religion, is for de Martino an effective dispositive for the protection of *presence*. While nihilistic terror is a constant anthropological risk

37. For de Martino “The magician is the one who knows how to *go beyond himself*, not in an ideal sense but precisely in an existential sense. The one for whom being is constituted as a problem, and who has the power to give himself his presence, it is not a presence among the other presences, but a being that can make itself present in all the others, and read their existential drama” (*op. cit.*, p. 99).

38. *Op. cit.*, p. 74.

39. *Op. cit.*, p. 123.

of losing the world, and therefore of losing the being-there, magic is that “system of rewards, compromises, guarantees” that, with concrete creative power (which is the task of the anthropologist to discover how it works), “arise to make it possible, in more or less mediated forms, the redemption of presence”⁴⁰.

The concept of crisis of the presence is the fundamental thesis of *Il Mondo Magico* [english: *The World of Magic*], an essay that de Martino writes rethinking the historicism of Benedetto Croce, but which has as its central theme the birth and use of the magical-religious dispositive. De Martino comes from historical studies, and for this reason he initially thinks of this dispositive as that which arises to protect specific crises in certain historical moments. The interpretative categories elaborated in the World of Magic then be applied by de Martino to the ethnographic studies carried out in Lucania starting from 1952, portraying a peasant world of southern Italy strongly linked to the magical-religious dimension and to the dispositive that was to protect the subject from the “crisis of presence”.

Here, the risk of losing presence takes the shape of the risk that the prospect of the negative installs itself in consciousness and becomes parasitic, where all the other contents of consciousness become allusive or symbolic with regard to the feared event. In particular, all behaviors take on a significance that prefigures that event, following analogies that are not at all coincidental.⁴¹

In the perspective of the isolated subject, whose world is an isolated land, is made up only of objects that can be isolated, manipulated and subjected to the will of technical power, a crisis of the subject appears – in which one suffers from one’s own isolation operated by the others – but also a crisis of the object, which consists in “the loss of the very possibility of constructing a world of objects, that is, of ordering the situation in a world of values”⁴². The crisis of de Martino’s presence is nothing more than the condition of isolation of the subject.

In this sense, is structured that ideology which Heidegger opposed, that conceives reasoning only as thinking through calculation (*denken als rechnen*). We find this idea in de Martino in what he calls “technical domination over nature”, and which for him is a consequence of those same dispositives that arise to protect the crisis of presence, but which inevitably end up aggravating it⁴³.

40. *Op. cit.*, p. 165.

41. *Id.*, *Magic: a theory from the South*, p. 106.

42. *Id.*, *La fine del Mondo*, p. 234.

43. The theme of technical domination has also had great response in other Italian academic circles, in particular the philosophy of Emanuele Severino who conceives technics (*tékhnē*) as that will to power (*Wille zur Macht*) that wants to impose its own dominion on Being (Cfr. Severino E.

De Martino will come finally, in his work on the end of the world, to argue against Heidegger's *Dasein*, reformulating it in an anthropological key. In fact, for the anthropological individual, *Dasein* is not so important as the duty of *sein-sollen*, the foundation of human existence is not "being-here" but "having-to-be", a "must-being" against the risk of being no more. The idea of Heidegger is different, according to which *Dasein* always and universally finds a stable object in front of it and anguish arises from the fear of losing the object, while de Martino already affirms in the World of Magic that presence is something uncertain, which must be continuously founded.

De Martino describes the "crisis of the presence" as an "overpowering of nothing(ness)"⁴⁴. This makes it a very different risk from mere existential anguish or fear of one's death. Nihilism is a complex phenomenon that has been described by Nietzsche in a philosophical key, but it lacked, before de Martino, an anthropological definition of its cultural consequences. Furthermore, de Martino demonstrated that nihilism does not arise with the "death of God" predicted by Nietzsche but is an intrinsic risk in the human being himself, who fights this terror with a series of cultural dispositives.

Moreover, it is certainly true that with the "death" of the magical-religious dispositive of "God" identified by Nietzsche, Western society has long fallen into a lasting crisis, but these same crises, have always existed even in the past, in individuals (in the form of the *Weltuntergangserlebnis*) as in society, which in fact constituted forms of protection from this crisis in various ways.

Here, then, is the importance that de Martino reveals in the "language" of the schizophrenic: the patient with delirium understands without difficulty the 'literal' meaning of the words of that language he once knew, yet it seems in him or her that any meaning has been abolished or become metaphorical. This linguistic derailment corresponds to the disintegration of social and cultural values, denied for greater individual freedom. The schizophrenic abandons conventional social norms and adopts a new deconstructed language. A "private language" – as Wittgenstein would refer to – that could effectively communicate, if only someone knew how to translate it. And speaking of

"Technics, nihilism, truth", in *Annali d'Italianistica*, n. 29, 2011, pp. 107-122). This domination is structured as an isolation, a separating force which claims to isolate being from the network of totality which is the unity of a whole. Technics therefore isolates the being because it wants to dominate all of its aspects (the beings or entities), but in doing so it also generates nihilistic terror. In Greek thought the conflict that such a system could originate was already evident, but although we were aware of the danger of the technics, the Greeks were consoled in the knowledge that it could never overcome Destiny (*anánkē*), and in fact, Aeschylus makes say from Prometheus *tékhnē d'anánkes asthenéstera makrō*, "technics is far weaker than destiny".

44. de Martino E., *La fine del Mondo*, p. 112.

translations, de Martino is also interested in world crises as they are experienced by worlds far from ours.

When a Malaysian manifests *latab* he is expressing psychic exhaustion due to excessive social pressure, an annihilation of the individual through the imposition of identity agreed upon by cultural models. This annihilation translates into what we could define as an irony of the psyche. If the world wants annihilation, then the psyche becomes *con-fused* with the world. If a man suffering from *latab* sees branches moved by the wind, then he will behave in the same way: he too becomes the same branch moved by the wind. He will copy all the behaviors and movements of things or people that will attract his attention. We define this attitude as an *assimilation function* or *echolalia*. The behavior of the *olon*-sick Tungusis is quite similar. The presence is canceled and the presence of other subjects in the surroundings is assimilated. The sick person does not “imitate” the behavior of the tree moved by the wind: he himself becomes a projection of that same tree. The assimilation process is like an inevitable mixing of colors, and since there is no non-conceptual difference between the concepts themselves, there are no limits in this assimilation. Even words can be assimilated: “I don’t listen, but I become what I listened to”.

The assimilation function is, after all, a passive way of defending oneself from social disease. However, there are cases in which exhaustion leads to a violent reaction. The reaction in this case is the opposite: instead of annihilating oneself due to the pressures of the world, it is decided to annihilate the world that hosts these pressures. And since all cultural distinctions have fallen into oblivion, the *amok* sufferer among the Malays decides that he will wield a weapon and exterminate every person who comes within range, dominated by an uncontrollable anguish caused by the inability to transcend things of the world, which brings the transcendence of the individual to the things of the world. Instead of acting, one is acted out by illness, a condensation of the suffering of being⁴⁵.

We have said that the image of nothingness prefigures the anguish of nihilism in the human being: “we get anguished in front of *nothingness*. Thinking for the first time *nothing* as infinite opposition to *being* – and therefore thinking for the first time destruction as annihilation – Greek philosophy brings to light the typical form of Western anguish: anguish for one’s own annihilation”⁴⁶.

45. The *crisis of presence* is in Demartinian terms an obstruction of becoming, but to this category we must also add a crisis of absence, a suffocation of the free expression of inner language and essence. Presence is ‘being-here’, essence is just being: it is the linguistic and symbolic concert directed by the being of the subject.

46. Severino E., *Oltre il Linguaggio*, p. 35.

This anguish, however, is in a certain sense a self-destruction that we wanted to invoke: by summoning Nothingness, the end of the summoner is also prefigured. Thus comes the technics to the rescue, providing a mild palliative to the crisis of being-there that Nothingness anticipates. The technics proposes salvation from the nothingness of death, while it is said that becoming is a law of nature it is also accepted that the technics can overcome this nature and overcome Nothingness.

Although the being-there is understood as an “other”, and insofar as this “other consciousness” is perceived as a “guest”, the other is by no means irrelative, but a significant and functional new member of the historical magical world, an entity implanted in the network of relationships, in the cosmos of figurations, which form the cultural tradition.⁴⁷

As long as destruction is thought as annihilation, it is impossible to conceive that ‘destroyed’ things can return⁴⁸, and this constitutes a significant mental obstacle for those who are victims of the sense of nothingness.

It is amazing how humanity first equips itself with concepts that imprison it and then tries to use other concepts to free itself from the concepts previously created. First, the idea of nature is established, and then it is debated about the ethics of being against-nature or natural. But nature itself, where is it identified? Is there anything that says about itself to be “natural” which is not just the reified concept of “nature”? Can nature be evoked by something other than the word “nature” which carries with it centuries of idealizations on the concept in question? Even nature, like nothingness, is an objectified idea that is added to the list of mental ruminations made by a people who do not realize the damage caused by an incorrect use of language.

That is, if becoming is understood in terms of being and not being, then the ontological difference between becoming and the immutable (i.e. the affirmation of the existence of becoming beyond the existence of the immutable) certainly affirms the existence of a dimension of being dominated by the absurdity. Correctly interpreted, that introduction of ontological difference means instead that, since the whole being is immutable and since being becomes – *that is, it appears and disappears* – then being, insofar as it is subjected to the process of *appearing*, is *not* the being as it is in itself; that is, being as abstractly manifest is not being as being concretely enveloped by the whole.⁴⁹

47. de Martino E., *Il Mondo Magico*, p. 92.

48. Severino E., *Oltre il Linguaggio*, p. 38.

49. Id., *Essenza del Nichilismo*, p. 112.

Emanuele Severino points out that it is in the language and in the “ontological ambiguity of non-metaphysical language” that the problem of being and the foundation of the world arise. The philosopher wonders if in a primitive language there was an original meaning of “being” then lost following the interpretations of Western culture guided “by the non-truth of being”⁵⁰. What an anthropologist could define as the “performative power of language”, and which is well suited to the psychosemantic link between language and perception of the world, capable of evoking what is even just mentioned when mental perception appears, is understood in Severino as “evocative force of non-metaphysical language”⁵¹, which is moreover ambiguous.

But the “world” is the extreme alienation, that is, it is the infinitely distant from what it really is. The “world” *is not*; it is the content of a will destined to remain *intention*. But for the West this content has become the only reality and the only evidence. [...] In the psychological sciences, the persuasion that the entity is nothing is considered as one of the most characteristic traits of mental illness. For Freud, “repression” – which underlies the process of formation of neuroses and psychoses – is “expelling the patient from real life”, “making him extraneous to reality”. That is, the patient is persuaded that reality (that which for him is “unbearable”) is nothing.⁵²

The world is given only in its narratives, therefore as a historical world (*geschichtlich geworden*), and in this it is simply human. A non-human world can only be theorized, and it would fit within the historical narrative of that very human *geschichtlich geworden*. We tend to think that there is a reality that is distinct and independent of the cognitions of sentient beings. That is, that the inanimate occurs independently of the animate, is a scientific faith, but beyond its acceptance as a dogma it is not demonstrable. However, if one accepts by faith that humans can *dominate* what is believed to be separate from them, then one decides to accept the agonizing possibility that one can *kill the other*. This is the only premise on which the ideology of domination is founded. Indeed, if we do not live in the belief that things can be brought to their death, then we will not even think we can dominate them.

4. The Role of “history” and “de-storification”: *êthos, krisis and êskhaton*

In the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians (15:26), these powerful words, that probably many know even without being passionate about theology, are

50. *Op. cit.*, p. 152.

51. *Op. cit.*, p.154.

52. *Id.*, *Destino della Necessità. Κατὰ τὸ χρεῶν*, p. 37.

pronounced: “the last enemy that will be defeated is death” (*éskhatos ekhthròs katargeitai ho thánatos*). Religious sentiment is something that for de Martino is universal in the human being, and present outside of what we are used to calling “religion”. For this reason, de Martino prefers to use some concepts of his own invention, such as that of “êthos of transcendence” which is an equivalent of *Dasein-Sollen*: the disposition of human communities to transcend mere natural vitality to affirm that economic organization (in the etymological sense of *oikonomía* which indicates the administration of the common good) that allows it to exist. Other concepts of fundamental importance are obviously that of crisis (*krísis*) and salvation (*éskhaton*), which is another dispositive that religions or other systems of protection from the crisis of presence use as a double-edged sword: the guarantee of salvation is in fact also an instrument that power can use to manage and direct *oikonomía*.

Language, intersubjective communication, expressibility and making public the private sphere, incessant listening and internalization of the public, a valorizing choice that always goes beyond situations: all this is not added to the presence, but founds and maintains it and develops it, constituting its own “norm” which makes it “normal”. When, as in existential anguish, the word fails, communication is impossible, the private becomes ineffable, the relationship with the historical world is undermined at its root, and deciding according to intersubjective values is invested in a sort of deadly fatigue, then one experiences the loss of the “norm” of presence, the change of sign of presentification, and therefore the very presence is lost: one experiences the horror of nothingness, where, however, nothingness has the fundamental sense of ethically negative par excellence, that is, the sense of experience withdrawing and annihilating the primordial ethos of presentification and transcendence.⁵³

The name does not recall its corresponding events for de Martino, but isolates them and precisely in this it makes them *become*. So things nominated are and not mere events (*Ereignis*) that appear as aspects of Being. Names are those aspects of being that are *perceived* as isolate. Language is not the house of Being, but only that of the human-being. It is the language that appropriates (*zugeeignet*) the being to man, and transpropriates (*vereignet*) the authentic being from the human. Thus, therefore, the human-being, from subject to object, is made raw material (*Rohstoff*) of technics (*tékhnē*), and the consumption (*Verbrauch*) of entities is, similarly, the consumption of the human-being by the technical apparatus (*Rüstung*)⁵⁴. The *tékhnē* sustains itself on the deception of

53. de Martino E., *La fine del Mondo*, p. 535.

54. The foundation of semantics lies in seeing being as the copula of the entity. In other words, being

the éskhaton. There is no progressive disclosure of the truth. While the traditional religious view is based on the affirmation of the éskhaton (waiting the final revelation of the truth announced at the beginning), *tékhnē* is the only religion that replaces this vision with design rigor.

It is no coincidence that the risk of *apokálypsis* insinuates itself in history, that is, in the feeling that events become. Ernesto de Martino himself, uses the term *de-historification*⁵⁵ to indicate those ritualistic or magical processes operated by cultural and religious traditions to avert the risk of the crisis of presence, and to re-establish a time and a space that do not become, where everything is eternal and immutable: this is the condition of the *mýthos*, the story that founds the story, of timeless time, the *illud tempus*, but whose events narrated are placed *outside* of history, as they are perceived as always true, always eternal. The magical-ritual forms recall the time of myth in order to evoke that world which is freed from the conception of becoming: “the primordial event that happened once and for all, and which can be ritually repeated, manifests itself as the horizon of de-historification of the historical becoming”⁵⁶.

Heidegger	de Martino
DASEIN	“ESSERCI” [BEING-THERE]
“WORLDLINESS”	“WORLDLIZATION” / “MUNDANIZATION”
POSSIBILITY	TRANSCENDENCE (ΕHOS OF TRANSCENDENCE)

For de Martino, *presence* is the ability to bring together in the actuality of consciousness all the memories and experiences necessary to respond adequately to a specific historical situation, actively inserting oneself into it through personal initiative, and going beyond it through the action. But de Martino does not limit himself to “translating” Heidegger’s thought, since his anthropological background leads him to completely re-found it. For example, while for Heidegger *Dasein* is simple “being-in-the-world” (*in-der-Welt-sein*)

as a function that associates the entities (the nominal entity to the formal, signifier entity and signified entity) and which associates the associations of entities. In this mere copulative functionalism, we forget that being ‘is’ and that’s the whole, and therefore it shows itself in appearing, in revealing the truth, and not in imposing associations. For this reason, I do not even agree with Heidegger’s vision of being as an Event, that is, as what is given (*es gibt*) in language, without actually being neither language nor event. Certainly, Being is in every aspect of what it is, therefore in the Whole, but then it is superfluous to have to reduce its giving itself to the event as to the language.

55. It is quite complex in this context to translate the Italian term “*destorificazione*” as it is a neologism that currently has no parallel in English. Cfr. Forlenza R., *Magic, religion, and the South: notes on Ernesto de Martino*, pp. 137-155, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

56. de Martino E., *La fine del Mondo*, p. 151.

in the sense of self-planning or realizing oneself, for de Martino being-here (*esserci*) means becoming part of a concrete and historical cultural world that it is found as already given.

However, if humans do not participate in the cultural world that they find as already given (and, by participating, however, contribute to shape the world in turn, making it found as already given to others who will come) they risk the *crisis of presence*, not being able to be-here, or in the cultural world.

While de Martino's *esserci* is therefore active, Heidegger's *Dasein* is instead passive, it is "thrown into the world" (*Geworfenheit*) and inclined to suffer death. The Demartinian *presence* is defined only in relation to *cultural relativity*. It is in crisis, when the recognition of the "I am" of the subject is lost, that the psychic instance which constitutes itself through identifying appropriations (mirror copies of introjected external entities), and which as an identity instance requires re-cognition (which means: to be known again) by the other cultural subjects in order to subsist.

When the ethos of transcendence "changes its sign", that is, causes its momentum to fall in its totality, yielding to the radical risk of not being able to exist in any possible cultural world, the very world of the usable (of the "familiar") is struck by the crisis precisely because it constitutes the fundamental testimony of being-in-the-world: and here the pipe or the fork or the doorknob or the glass of beer become a problem, that is, they lose their meaning as cultural solutions of the usable, and they prostrate, so to speak, to "nothing".⁵⁷

This is essentially the *êthos* of transcendence: the conformation that human communities give to their sociocultural reality in order to attempt to transcend "natural vitality", seen as insufficient to affirm an organization of an economic type (in the etymological sense of *oikonomia*), seen as the only guarantee of existence. The *êthos* of transcendence is therefore, inevitably, a force that constantly risks the hypothesis of its own annihilation: "if the world is constituted, it maintains itself, it renews itself through a continuous transcendence of nothingness in the being of values, if this transcendence it is the primordial ethos of culture and history, the change in the sign of this ethos manifests itself as the configuration of nothingness"⁵⁸. But in this interpretation of Sartre, de Martino does not take into account a fundamental truth, committing the same Sartrian error, which has in itself the germ of nihilism (a germ which, precisely because it has not been removed, leads him to experience a nausea, a sort of "somatic

57. *Op. cit.*, p. 391.

58. *Op. cit.*, p. 389.

degradation of transcending into vomiting”)⁵⁹. This error is to believe that being comes into existence (that is, “it becomes itself”) from a previous nothingness.

The *oikonomia* is the social management of cultural life. For de Martino the “economic” form does not coincide with the presence, because the latter is “a synthetic power that conditions all the individual forms of cultural life”⁶⁰, while the force of the economic form “is a distinct power of doing, which involves the technical domination of nature”⁶¹.

Since the *êthos* of transcendence is a force that fortifies the being-there as a valorizing function of all other values, it cannot, for de Martino, be reduced to a particular value, much less to an economic one⁶². The economic model is the model that allows production, divides the work, and organizes society. It is the economic ratio that, for de Martino, underlies the social models that make humans associate with each other, but this ratio arises in the condition in which “suffering with its polarity of pleasure and pain, and with its reactions conform, is inserted into a rational plan, deliberately chosen and historically modifiable, of production of goods according to rules of action”, only in this way “vitality is resolved in the economy, and human civilization ‘begins’”⁶³. But precisely, the economy cannot be the ultimate key to understanding life. It is therefore necessary to go further, to go beyond the economic limits of cultural life. This sense of being on the limit is an integral part of the human need to reach that “beyondness” (which is the *other*) that cultural limitations preclude. The *other*, however, is as terrible as it is fascinating, so this place of the total other (*ganz andere*) is an attraction for the human who wants to free his being from the limitations of social convention, but at the same time he knows that to overcome these limitations it would be like dying. At least such is the immediate perception of such a possibility. Leaving one’s contextual, cultural and conventional identity to embrace a broader sense of one’s destiny, that is, the progressive unfolding of one’s essence, is not an easy task. This abandonment is seen as the death of old past values, and not – as it would happen if this transcendence were done with awareness – an unveiling, which does not kill what is in any case an indissoluble part of our aspects.

De Martino’s work does not simply analyze an idea or a personal experience. In fact, the apocalypse, born as a phenomenon of cultural disintegration is manifested in the psychopathological experience, but it is also applied to society and the planet. In his critique of ethnocentrism, de Martino argues not

59. *Ibidem*.

60. *Op. cit.*, p. 426.

61. *Op. cit.*, p. 477.

62. *Op. cit.*, p. 429.

63. de Martino E., *Morte e pianto rituale. Dal lamento funebre antico al pianto di Maria*, p. 18.

only against the traditional way of doing ethnology, but also against a social model that has now revealed all its contradictions and is leading humanity to a global realization of the apocalypses⁶⁴.

Here it seems to me that the scientific ideal of considering humans as ants is transformed into the prophetic message of a humanity that will inevitably be reduced to a sort of anthill; that is, in the mirage of a humanity that fatally advances towards an apocalypse, without eskhaton, of the worldly and of the human.⁶⁵

The technics prevents that there are sufficient forces to *react*, but the simple action is obviously always aimed at increasing the technics itself through the progressive and constant entrusting of the human-being to it. In this a progressive and “continuous evocation of mechanically performed technical gestures”⁶⁶ takes place, gestures that indeed represent the total enslavement of human’s free expression to the reductionist needs of technicism, but which can reiterate precisely because, as de Martino points out, “in this system of imperious fidelity there is always an appropriation of the human, a questioning of it, albeit in the form of readjustment to the situation of the individual”.

But the technics itself requires the negation of absolute. And here it opens the doors to the prospect of nothingness that advances: to go towards nothingness.

The *conscious* criticism that the civilization of technics addresses to the immutable ones of the West does not lead to their inevitable destruction; and yet the persuasion that *epistēmē*, entifying nothingness, makes the becoming impossible – the persuasion that makes the destruction of the immutable inevitable – is a trait that *belongs* to the nihilism of technical civilization and that tends to come out of the unconscious, towards the light of consciousness that this civilization has of itself – tends to transform itself from an “in itself” into a “for itself”.⁶⁷

Being in history for de Martino means being in the network of constant signification of the being. The human is in history to the extent that its *existence* is a progressive unveiling of Sense. History therefore *makes* sense to the extent that the existence of those who write it weighs in on meanings.

The event of the isolation of meaning is also the bearer of internal crises in the perception of the appearance of things. The loss of the semantics of things,

64. For more information on de Martino’s critical ethnocentrism see Saunders G., *Critical ethnocentrism and the ethnology of Ernesto de Martino*, pp. 875-893.

65. de Martino E., *La fine del Mondo*, p. 363.

66. *Op. cit.*, p. 387.

67. Severino E., *Destino della Necessità*, p. 55.

keeping the signifier alone intact, inevitably makes them perceive as dispossessed of existence. The signifier, which can no longer rely on a meaning (since this has been “isolated”) is just nothingness.

De Martino speaks of the perception of “inconsistency of objects”, defining it as a real “experience of semantic defect”⁶⁸. A defect that leads to a “lack of *beyondness*”, perceived as a “loss” of “operational planning”, but which in reality, is the loss of the possibility of *giving oneself* in the world, in any possible aspect: “The fall of the energy of presentification”⁶⁹ refers to a *beyond(ness)* which is simply the *reference to the meaning* that has been isolated, and which therefore leaves an immense void, because that reference was not simply the connection to a rigid semantic paradigm, but in turn it referred to an infinite system. Now that the relation to that sense that referred to infinity is *missing*, an *infinite nothingness* is perceived alongside the mere signifier of the thing, which precisely lies on the threshold of an unbridgeable void, something that can no longer be seen because it is “isolated”: one does not want to see it, and rather perceives a nothingness.

We, therefore, live constantly in the crisis. Of course, today more than ever, but precisely because the dispositives that once were a barrier against the risk of losing the world, today have been completely engulfed by nihilistic ideology. This was made possible because the nothingness-damaging dispositives have used the terror of nothingness to impose a legal order on societies, but when a dispositive stops strenuously opposing a threat, and uses that same threat to gain power, then the dispositive becomes dependent on that threat for its existence. Unintentionally, it feeds that same threat and over time ends up becoming a promoter of it. Thus, any legal force that uses technics today to promote its ideology is actually only promoting technics.

Perhaps we need to go back to the most ancient and primordial of these dispositives, that is, what de Martino identified with magic, which “goes up this slope and resolutely opposes the dissolving process. It leads to a series of institutes through which risk is reported and fought”⁷⁰.

Contemporary society applies the same devastating logic of use (*Nutzung*) and usury (*Vernutzung*) that technics applies from entities to human beings. Where, in fact, technics is no longer used by political and ideological forces, but subverts the order and imposes itself as an ideology to be promoted, it succeeds in objectifying the human being himself. In this context, where subjects are objects, the human has value only as a consumer and as consumed.

68. de Martino E., *La fine del Mondo*, p. 395.

69. *Ibidem*.

70. Id., *Il Mondo Magico*, p. 168.

In the nihilistic-relativist dimension that we adopt as a world view, de Martino says, we constantly witness ends and new beginnings. These ends of worlds, and beginnings of new ones, accompany every aspect of life, from growth, in which we abandon the world of childhood for that of adolescence, to social habits, such as leaving the school world for work, and so on.

We have said that the magical-ritual forms are technics which recall the time of myth to being in order to recall that world that the conception of becoming has forgotten: “the primordial event that happened once and for all, and which can be ritually repeated, manifests itself as the ‘horizon of destorification of historical becoming’”⁷¹. With this definition, Ernesto de Martino anticipates, without being fully aware of it, that it is the idea of Nothingness that fuels this process. He sees it clearly in the distressing externalizations, in which the prefiguration of an “end” of the world is transformed into a terrifying experience (*Weltuntergangserlebnis*). What prepares the “end” of the worlds is, first of all, the implicitly accepted premise that being can annihilate itself: de Martino says that “entities are troubled by a void”⁷². The experience of the end of the world as a *crisis of presence*, that is, a distressing experience that prefigures one’s own annihilation, the going into the nothingness of one’s being, is something that occurs when one fears the disappearance of the very possibility of making a world appear, and of emerge as a presence so that although we cannot concretely experience the “end” of the world, what anguishes us is the very idea of nothingness, its receding towards annihilation, its undoing which reflects the fall of the energy of presence as a “primordial ethos of globalization”⁷³. Those who live the crisis are unaware that disappearing, which they mistakenly experience as an *annihilation*, always precedes a new appearance. But if at the end of a world the rise of a new one is not *predicted*, then the *crisis* takes over, here is the sense of disorientation and *unheimlich*. The ritual dispositive is designed to prevent the anguish of nothingness since “ritualism contains in its germ a change of protective separation from the world, of an uplifting escape from becoming”⁷⁴.

In 1917 the historian of religions Rudolf Otto published his essay on the sacred and on the irrational idea of the divine (*Das Heilige. Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen*), an essay that is destined to influence enormously religious anthropology.

Otto identifies precisely in the relationship with the sacred what we may call “religious sentiment”, which he considers a typically human mechanism. The relationship with total otherness (*ganz Andere*), which distinguishes the

71. Id., *La fine del Mondo*, p. 151.

72. *Op. cit.*, p. 214.

73. *Op. cit.*, p. 216.

74. *Op. cit.*, p. 237.

Mysteriosum aspect of religion, is a concept borrowed from Christian theology, and many of Otto's ideas are in fact biased towards a centrality of the Christian faith. Faced with moments of crisis, in which the world presents to us with the dissolution of all meaning, that is death, the presence must strive to fight this hypothesis, and contrasts it, creating dispositives of preservation capable of warding off the idea of death. Even religion collectively lends itself to founding a myth of victory over death. Christ emerges victorious from the clash with death, since he resurrects and promises eternal life to those who will follow him.

By taking upon himself the sins of mankind and atoning them for them, Christ also becomes the dying figure for all humanity, and his victory over death, which is the true enemy of humans, is a victory for all of humanity. humanity that through him has already lived the experience of death. At this point the funeral rites are further attempts to *de-historify* an event that falls upon our lives so abruptly and that would risk upsetting the integrity of the *presence*.

Science, therefore, wins where ancient Christianity failed, promising the immortality of bodies through technics. Thus, whereas Christianity had had to guarantee the ego an eternal life and a preservation from annihilation, the prospect of which is distressing and terrifying, saying that this would come after the death of the body, thus leaving the faithful always the repressed doubt about what would come later, science beats the religion stealing and gulping its own field, denying any form of soul, reconfirming that the personality is in the body, and guaranteeing this body eternal life thanks to the wonders of technics. The promise of Christianity and science remains the same: *éskhatos ekhthròs katargéitai ho thánatos*.

Finally, with de Martino, religion is conceived as a dispositive designed to stem the crisis of presence, a permanent anthropological risk and which, according to what we are arguing here, derives from the moment in which the idea of nothingness is founded and rooted in human thought. If the entity is always existent, it is not disputed between birth and death (*ekéinēs tēs oysías tēs aei aýsēs kai mē planōménēs ypò genéseōs kai phthorás*) as Severino reports citing the *Republic*⁷⁵. The *crisis* in which the order of meaning is lost arises therefore in this relationship with the *economic order*:

The crisis of the presence is to be traced back to the double face of the economy, which while on the one hand it is a positive among the positives and is exposed to the undue intrusion of the other positives in its sphere, that is, it can intrude unduly into the sphere of the other positives, on the other hand it ideally constitutes the inaugural positive, which detaches culture from nature and makes possible, with this detachment, the dialectic of forms of cultural coherence. This means that to

75. Severino E., *Destino della Necessità*, p. 21.

the extent that the detachment takes place in a relatively narrow way, the experience of a *becoming* that passes without and against us takes shape, a fatal dominion of the irrational, that is, of a “blind” running towards death.⁷⁶

Indeed, if history is reduced to *becoming* and not to *unveiling*, it follows in this becoming that it is a force that leads things to Nothingness, destroying them, and replacing them with others that manifest themselves, which, however, manifesting themselves would have done nothing but “arise” from Nothingness, thereby implying their generative dependence on that same nihilistic force which, inevitably, sooner or later will reclaim them, killing them. History is not seen, unlike *myth* (and in this lies the power of the latter), as the network of *entities* which simply, *inasmuch* as they *exist*, already *exist*, and which limit themselves to appearing in such a way as to lend themselves to human chronological interpretation, but if this correct vision of history were recovered, it is clear that it would no longer be a witness to nihilism, but rather the certainty that everything that unfolds before us is a progressive appearance of aspects of being already *destined* to appear, and that therefore they *are* simply (and if they *are*, they do not become), as they will continue to be when they disappear. The past is not “dead” and the future is not “yet to be born”, because everything is already foreseen in the network of Sense that history simply unravels. History, in our reading, is therefore a manifestation of Destiny, and there is an inevitable historical Destiny.

In Severino the myth has a function very similar to that it has for de Martino. In his book, not surprisingly entitled *Oltrepassare* (tr.: *Going Beyond*), Severino links the problem of death to mythological functions. Indeed, according to “the interpretation that guides the historical-anthropological sciences, man rejects death from the beginning. But he experiences it a little at a time, emerging from a torpor even more ancient than that beginning”⁷⁷. The problem is precisely this, that at a first interpretation death presents itself as nothing but “pain and anguish”⁷⁸, a sensation that is opposed by all means by the will to life, which does not conceive death as *end*. And yet, unfortunately, Severino also writes, “at a certain moment the will to live is convinced of its own failure. [...] When the will that the body does not die is convinced of its own failure, death, for it, is no longer the pain and anguish for the decay of the bodies with which one wants to live and of one’s own, but it is the inevitability of this decay – which is therefore rejected in a new way, that is, evoking another life”⁷⁹. At this point

76. de Martino E., *Morte e Pianto rituale*, p. 20, my italics.

77. Severino E., *Oltrepassare*, p. 30.

78. *Op. cit.*, p. 31.

79. *Op. cit.*, p. 32.

the religions, “which appear within the interpretation of human history, almost always express this double and progressive rejection of death”⁸⁰.

The myth has this fundamental purpose for Severino: man is anxious before the becoming of the world (becoming which, as we have said, is a *misunderstanding of history*). The purpose of the myth is, for Severino, to provide *comfort* against the *unpredictability* of the increasing Nothingness. This unpredictability that distresses the human being is made *predictable* (that is, reassuring) by the mythological narrative.

However, “philosophy, coming to light, places itself above myth – and at least in this sense it denies it. [...] This means that philosophy places itself above and denies the way in which myth rejects death and affirms a life after death”⁸¹. And this happens because for the philosopher, Severino says, “the inability of the myth to resist the nihilistic doubt” is more problematic than facing Nothingness directly, as the philosopher does, and demonstrates how

what-is is *not* in any nothingness – the nothingness that for the first time brings to light the *epistême* of truth in its being infinitely other than what-is; so that death begins to appear as the annulment of that being that is man, that is, as the taking into the infinite distance of nothingness, from which not only man, but everything destroyed cannot return.⁸²

When instead the power of the myth is monopolized by the institutions, which use it for the purposes of domination, then the institutions not only hold the constant threat of anxiety, but the very social equilibrium. Here the power of the de-historification of the negative becomes itself a threat, institutional de-historification, when the forces that hold it use it for control purposes. What de Martino calls in *Ritual Death and Crying* as “institutional de-historification of *becoming*” is the very meaning of madness, an *irrelative de-historification*. This is the risk of those who declaim the supposed “normality” at the expense of an “enemy” abnormality. The institutional forces do not have the idea of Nothingness as their real enemy, but abnormality, where this is defined as an obstacle to the affirmation of the supposed “normality” arbitrarily defined by the institutions in accordance with their needs for domination.

The foundation of cultural worlds, as well as individual ones, must necessarily be based on the desire to *transcend* Nothingness, as the idea of nothingness is in fact the main historical obstacle to the constitution of cultural worlds, but just as we must *transcend* nothingness as an obstacle, the human-being, as

80. *Ibidem*.

81. *Op. cit.*, p. 37.

82. *Op. cit.*, p. 38.

it is being-in-the-limit, has as its main need to transcend every obstacle. Thus, human life seeks the Sense not in everyday life, but in going beyond, in the totally different (*das ganz Andere*). Beyond all limits. The transcendence, as the fundamental essence of the human, is constituted in the *ganz andere*, in the overcoming of every limit, whether it is going beyond Nietzschean good and evil or even reaching the absolute which is truth behind the veil of apparent Severinian nothingness. We also find the *ganz andere* in the Buddhist objective: to reach the *nirvāṇa* which is “beyond” the *saṃsāric* cycle of reiteration⁸³.

5. Conclusions and final considerations: *Weltuntergangserlebnis* from Jaspers to de Martino

We have said that the *êthos of transcendence* is that force which constantly risks the hypothesis of its own annihilation and which in defense of this nihilistic risk lays the foundations for the foundation of cultural and individual worlds. The foundation of the cultural world is based on the transcendence of nothingness.

This transcendence lies in reaching that dimension that Rudolf Otto defined as “totally Other” (*ganz Anderes*), the place of the numinous and the sacred which is the source of all religious strength, but also reverential psychological terror (*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*). The key to understanding the nihilistic risk also lies in the study of this mystery which is far from unknowable.

Nihilism is not necessarily a Western product, unlike as Severino thought, it is inherent in human thought itself to perceive the “anthropological risk” of “nothingness” and annihilation. It was certainly characteristic of Western civilization, which today has established itself as global, that of becoming directed by nihilistic ideology, which has its peculiarity in the domain of technics. However, since the sliding of thought towards the nihilistic direction is a permanent anthropological risk, the anthropological way (of protection) must be a *real* guarantee (that is, justified and not a mere religious promise) against the ideological excessive power of nothingness.

In this article we have recognized a fundamental reasoning in nihilistic thought, which we can call the *isolation of the Sense*. Nihilism proceeds by progressive semantic isolations, which recall the total ambition of isolating

83. de Martino E., *La fine del Mondo*, pp. 142-143. For more insights into the relationship between Buddhism and nihilism cfr. Divino F., *Appearance and Momentariness: the Nature of Being between Nāgārjuna, the Sarvāstivādins and Neo-Parmenidism*, Article 4.

the authentic meaning of being. Thus, by isolating with separative rationality, nihilism empties the things of the world from time to time. Entities are now thought not as aspects of being but as separate, isolable, and manipulable things. Seeing things separated by the human being as isolable entities and at the service of the isolating power that imposes itself on them, the socio-economic model of setting that leads to the current disaster is also structured. The capitalist system, in addition to using technics and technoscience as it can impose its domination, is also the application of a social ideology that is already fully dominated by the belief that things are “usable”, “exploitable”, reducible by the will of power. The *tékhnē* sustains itself on the deception of the *éskhaton*. There is no progressive *disclosure* of the truth. While the traditional religious vision is based on the affirmation of the *éskhaton* (waiting for the final revelation of the truth announced at the beginning), technics is the only religion that replaces this vision with planning rigor. The only time that matters is not the time in which the truth is revealed, but rather the time in which a system is set up capable of obtaining the results one wants to achieve.

The reason that makes it necessary for the anthropologist to recover the ontological issues and vice versa, recognizing them as his skills and subsets of its discipline, is now evident, but this new anthropology lacks a practical direction. An active role of the anthropologist in the world is necessary, so much when the world is calm, so that the anthropologist keeps it in this peace, but also – and above all – in modernity, in which the world is in crisis.

Our society is in crisis: one world shows signs of falling apart, another announces itself. Of course, as happens in times of crisis, hopes are posed in various ways and the *quid maius* that is about to be born is configured in various ways. However, one thing is certain: everyone must choose their fighting post and assume their responsibilities. It may be lawful to err in judgment: *not to judge is not lawful*. It may be lawful to act badly: *not to act is not lawful*.⁸⁴

It is our philosophical duty, therefore, to accept this warning and actively work to ensure that anthropology can become the discipline that actively preserves the human-being.

The direction is already partially mapped out. If there had not been the ontological turning point, and anthropology had not at the same time already begun to detach itself from nihilistic scientism, this text would not have been possible today. But today we must also go beyond the ontological turn. The task of the

84. de Martino E., *Naturalismo e Storicismo nell'Etnologia*, p. 57, my italics.

anthropological path proposed by de Martino is to conclude this transformative parable by bringing anthropology to be a true discourse on the human.

The deadly disease begins to be discovered. But who cares? The West is a sinking ship, where everyone ignores the leak and works diligently to make navigation more and more comfortable, and where, therefore, we only want to discuss immediate problems, and where we recognize a meaning to the problems only if we already see the technical specifications for solving. But how will, true health come, unless we can discover the true sickness?⁸⁵

Now the time is come to draw conclusions. The human being can live in a society as such only thanks to the protection dispositive that can act against what de Martino calls the “crisis of presence” (anthropological condition in which the human being sees his *Dasein*, his presence in the world, disappear), religions institute rites and myths (and even science to some extent)⁸⁶ to implement an “irrelative de-historification” capable of establishing a temporary defense from nihilistic anguish and fear of the annihilation of being, continually re-establishing an atemporal situation in which becoming is opposed by a “time out of time”, a mythological time that founds reality or “the world” as it is. The world is, in de Martino’s sense, an anthropological world, a worldly reality foreseen by the cultural narrative that founds it.

This structuring and organization constitutes the “world”, that is, the house, the dwelling, the known space against the unknown of the unorganized. It is therefore predictable how, whoever lives an experience of crisis, describes the end of their world with these words: *die Menschen sind nicht mehr zu Hause* (people are no longer in their home)⁸⁷, and wish as a return to normalcy, a restored order *wenn sie wieder daheim sind am richtigen Ort* (when things are back “to the right place”), i.e. *wenn ich wieder daheim bin* (when I am back home). With these words of a schizophrenic patient from Bern opens the masterful work of de Martino, who therefore immediately make us understand the importance of certain issues. The patient “had never felt entirely at ease in the world”⁸⁸, we would say, that he had not found a way to express his subjectivity. What should have been a welcoming world of free expression became a sterile

85. Severino E., *Essenza del Nichilismo*, p. 263.

86. De Martino openly criticizes the scientific vision, suggesting that it is proposed as a technical substitute for religion which, however, risks leading humanity to hyper-rationalism, a vision that, he says, tends to consider humans as ants and humanity as inevitably reduced to a sort of anthill; that is, in the mirage of a humanity that fatally advances towards an apocalypse, “without éskhaton”, of the worldly and of the human. Cfr. de Martino E., *La fine del Mondo*, p. 363.

87. *Op. cit.*, p. 99.

88. *Op. cit.*, p. 100.

and oppressive ground in which his seed could not germinate. Beaten by his alcoholic mother, isolated and unable to find comfort in others, the poor farmer from Bern takes refuge in nature, the only comfort. His peasant world becomes his home, whose center, the *axis mundi*, is made up of a mighty oak in which the peasant had invested his affection. Then when this tree is cut down by his father to be sold, the crisis sets in: the world has lost its pillar, the world is finished, it has collapsed (*Untergang*). The empty space left by the pillar of the world

was sinking as if it had become cavernous far and wide: and in this underground space, represented as the kingdom of the dead, the living was falling, in search of firm ground under their feet and instead always more sinking into the void. The uprooting of the oak had also altered the order of the waters and from the pit left by the uprooted oak, waters flowed that corroded the soil and made it less and less stable and were digging an ever-deeper abyss⁸⁹.

This was the devastating prospect of world *annihilation* that was left thinkable. Every *Weltuntergangserlebnis* is, in this sense, also and always a *Weltvernichtungserlebnis*.

In these clarifying words, de Martino summarizes the sense of the end of the world as “experiencing the loss of the intersubjectivity of the values that make a world possible as a human world”⁹⁰. This “madness” which should be the delusional and psychotic experience (in its forms of schizophrenia, paranoia and melancholy) it is identified by the community as a “disease”, an evil, a danger. It is here, therefore, that the notion of disease collides with the cultural reality, the social structure and the complicated condition of existence of individuals. This is the ethnopsychiatric border area where anthropologists and psychiatrists begin to dialogue⁹¹.

To ensure that the dispositive is effective, however, it is necessary to keep in mind what is the constant anthropological threat from which one is defended: that is, the risk of “losing the world”. The apocalypse is, in this context, a condition foreseen by every culture regarding the destruction of those models of reference that found a world, and which constantly risk being destroyed if the device of the rite does not continually reiterate their presence in the minds of social

89. *Op. cit.*, p. 98.

90. *Op. cit.*, p. 101.

91. The so-called transcultural psychiatry or modern ethnopsychiatry today owes much to de Martino's studies, also internationally recognized as pioneering the dialogue between anthropology and psychiatry, especially through the psychoanalysis that de Martino appreciated and knew deeply. See also Bartocci G. e Prince R. (1998).

actors. This condition was described by Jaspers⁹², but de Martino also found that such individual conditions mirror collective crises of heralded apocalypse.

An apparently casual episode in the life of Ernesto de Martino, and reported by him in his notes on *The End of the World*, actually constitutes a fundamental contribution to the studies on the *Weltuntergang* experience, a story that tells us something fundamental about the human being, and gives us also a measure of what the sense of annihilation and the “End of the World” actually is in an anthropological perspective.

Lost in Calabria near Marcellinara, de Martino asks for help from a local farmer, who, however, is unable to provide him with satisfactory information on how to find the way. The anthropologist thus kindly asks the farmer to get in the car with him and accompany him “to the right fork”. After some diffidence, the farmer agrees, but as the journey took him away from the starting point, a “real anguish grew more and more, because now from the window he always looked at, he had lost the familiar sight of the bell tower of Marcellinara, point reference point of his tiny existential space”⁹³. This apparently trivial episode is actually of fundamental importance not only for de Martino’s work on the apocalypse, but also because it is directly linked to the question we are facing: the world, cognition and the idea of nothingness. The poor farmer was not simply bewildered by the loss of the point of reference. That bell tower, like an *axis mundi*, represented the central pillar of his world. His disappearance from the visible field actually corresponds, in the experience of the old peasant, to a lived experience of annihilation, in which his own being-there comes to waver together with the idea of the world to which he had joined, and of which his own identity is nurtured. When the subject is in front of the world (*Welt*) it can no longer be conceived as a passive object that undergoes the impersonal laws of worldliness, but as a world that places itself in and in the world, since each subject is an inner world (*Umwelt*) which is related to the external world. But the subjective spheres of the inner worlds are not separate from the outer

92. Jaspers K., *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*. The union of Jaspersian-style phenomenology and psychiatry moves medicine in the field of humanities, and in fact Binswanger, just like anthropologists, was radically opposed to the objectivist nosography adopted by Kraepelin-type psychiatry. Among the names that Binswanger used to refer to his phenomenological psychiatry are those of ‘anthropoanalysis’, phenomenological anthropology or existential anthropology. In German we can also refer to it as *Daseinsanalyse*, or analysis of *Dasein*, which literally indicates being-there, a central concept in phenomenology and taken up by Ernesto de Martino in the form of presence (*presenza*). However, de Martino had greatly criticized anthropoanalysis as the *Daseinsanalyse*, considering it incapable of including the essential socio-cultural sphere, and therefore more limiting than ethnopsychiatry.

93. de Martino E., *La fine del Mondo*, p. 364.

world, as they are not separate from each other, and this persuasion of independent identity underlies human pain.

The missing tower represents such a symbol of the power of nihilism in our society, a mechanism that our traditions of thought have not been able to eradicate, that can also be used as a philosophical tool to understand that process that pertains to the inexorable dispossession of oneself directed by nihilistic terror.

The end of the existing world order can be considered in two distinct ways, namely as a *historically determined cultural theme*, and as a *permanent anthropological risk*. [...] As a permanent anthropological risk, *ending* is simply the risk of not being able to exist in any possible cultural world, the loss of the possibility of being operationally present in the world, the shrinking – to the point of annihilation – of any horizon of worldly operability, the catastrophe of any community planning according to values. Human culture in general is the solemn exorcism against this radical risk, whatever – so to speak – the exorcistic technique adopted; and if the cultural theme of the end of a certain existing world order constitutes one of the historical methods of recovery and redemption with respect to this risk even where this theme is absent, or irrelevant, the corresponding risk is always present and culture is precisely constituted in facing it and in controlling it, whatever the modality in which the dramatic story is reflected in the historically determined cultural awareness. [...] Having to be in the cultural world, the risk of not being able to exist in any possible cultural world: the primordial *ethos* of presentification lives in this tension.⁹⁴

We could say that within every subjectivity there is the sign of a tower, as an *axis* that supports the structured world, and which risks at every moment of failing, of disappearing, and with this of dragging the whole world into the distressing nihilistic eventuality.

The problem is not a real (and unattainable) risk that the impossible annihilation of being is realized, but rather that the disturbing idea of a “negative of existence” is presented, and therefore it exists, but only in its presentation, that scares us. Each magical-ritual or mythological dispositive is focused on stemming the advance of this negative of existence. Such is the de-historification of the negative. The myth is de-historified because the negative data that would activate the crisis are cognitively placed in an atemporal dimension (*illud tempus*) in which the problem is resolved ideally “forever”, abstracted from the historical becoming that would make it disappear. The purpose of the rite is to reiterate the mythological non-historicity. The nihilistic dangers pointed out by de Martino are expressed as the lack of adequate cultural tools capable of

94. *Op. cit.*, pp. 128-129.

facing the “gloomy envy of nothingness” that for some time “is rampant in the modern world”, or, to paraphrase Camus, the “aspiration to nothingness”⁹⁵.

We therefore live constantly in the crisis. Of course, today more than ever, but precisely because the dispositives that once were a barrier against the risk of losing the world, today have been completely engulfed by the nihilistic ideology that leads to the end of the world. This was made possible because the dispositives of protection from nothingness have used the terror of nothingness to impose a legal order on societies, but when a dispositive ceases its strenuous opposition of any threat, and uses that same threat to gain power, then the dispositive becomes dependent on that threat for its subsistence. Unintentionally, it feeds the very same threat over time ends up becoming a promoter of it. So, any force that uses technics today to promote its ideology is actually only promoting technics.

Contemporary society applies the same devastating logic of use (*Nutzung*) and usury (*Vernutzung*) that technics applies from entities to human beings.

In conclusion, de Martino’s work proves to be of central importance for a philosophy of Being that also wants to study the implications that the relationship with the idea of Being implies in human societies and in culture. In the age of technics that Heidegger and Severino spoke of, de Martino’s work proves to be an excellent examination of the consequences of a world dominated by the nihilistic terror of going towards nothingness. Finally, I would like to point out how de Martino’s work, after so many years of forgetfulness, is starting to become known also on the international scene, in particular thanks to the work of Geisshuesler which represents the first published monograph entirely dedicated to de Martino’s work in English⁹⁶.

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95. *Op. cit.*, p. 400.

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