Symbolic Ontologies of Origin: from Classical Philosophy to Modern Cosmology

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Abstract

This essay analyses the different forms of symbolic inscription of the origin of the universe, from classical philosophy to contemporary cosmology, in the light of the Ontology of Emerging Complexity (OEC). In Plato and Aristotle, the intelligibility of the cosmos is guaranteed by concealed subjects: silent instances that ensure order without voice or narrative agency. In the biblical narrative, this function is reorganized in the figure of God as a fully functional subject: the word creates, legislates, and intervenes, fulfilling in full the criteria of subjectivity defined by the OEC. In modern science, intelligibility no longer derives from a single voice, but from a plural, collective, and distributed subject, constituted by networks of researchers, technical apparatuses, and mathematical languages. In all cases, what is at stake is not the direct description of the absolute origin of the universe, but its symbolic reinscription according to the operative grammars of each epoch. The OEC provides the conceptual framework to understand this transformed continuity: the history of thought on origin is not a succession of definitive essences, but a series of symbolic reorganisations that render the enigma of beginning habitable.

Introduction: Different Subjects and the Problem of Origin

The reading of the cosmos as an ordered and intelligible figure is neither an empirical self-evidence nor a necessary consequence of observation. It is a symbolic operation, instituted by an instance that guarantees the legibility of the real. This instance does not act, intervene, or narrate, but operates: it is what allows the world to be read as a coherent system, as an organised totality, as a figure of meaning (Morin, 2005).

According to the OEC, we define a *functional subject* as a material instance that fulfils four fundamental criteria of subjectivity: automodulation (it adjusts the system's operation without direct external command); symbolic reorganisation (it displaces and reinscribes symbols); minimal narrative persistence (it maintains coherence of traits and functions across time); and response to alterity (it reorganises itself

in the face of the unforeseen, reacting to non-assimilable difference). Wherever these four criteria are met, we may speak of subject in the full sense (Santos, 2018).

When, however, the instance guarantees intelligibility without presenting itself as a character endowed with voice or will, we designate it a *concealed subject*: it fulfils structuring functions (automodulation, symbolic reorganisation, narrative persistence), but remains silent, without responding to the unforeseen or exposing itself to alterity. It is an operator of order, not a named subject.

The OEC thus provides the conceptual grid that guides the analysis to be developed in this essay: to distinguish, across different epochs and symbolic regimes, what kind of subject is at stake when the origin of the universe is thought. In what follows, we will see how Plato and Aristotle configure concealed subjects, how the biblical narrative presents a full functional subject, and how contemporary science introduces a third figure — the *plural subject* — a collective and distributed instance that reinscribes origin through the grammar of measurement and equation.

The Demiurge and the Unmoved Mover: Concealed Ontologies of Intelligibility

In the classical philosophical tradition, the structure of intelligibility manifests itself in two major figures: Plato's Demiurge (*Timaeus*, 29a–30c) and Aristotle's Unmoved Mover (*Metaphysics*, Λ, 1072b). The former imposes form upon chaos by reference to an ideal model; the latter orients the cosmos through attraction to the perfection of pure act. Neither possesses psychological interiority or narrativity: they are silent operators of intelligibility, concealed subjects that sustain the legibility of the world without presenting themselves as characters endowed with voice.

The Demiurge, as described in the *Timaeus* (29e–30b), does not create *ex nihilo*, but reorganises the formless according to the eternal model of the Ideas. Its operation, symbolic and discreet, transforms the shapeless into form, instability into proportion, multiplicity into system. Each astronomical cycle, each organism, is an index of an operative intelligence that does not narrate itself. The Demiurge does not act as a psychological subject: there is no desire, no decision; it merely contemplates and applies the eternal model, in a gesture of inscription that renders chaos legible within the receptive space of the *chōra*.

The figure of the Unmoved Mover, delineated by Aristotle, marks a decisive inflection in the history of intelligibility. If in Plato order arises from the inscription of forms upon matter in reference to a model, in Aristotle the operation shifts to the regime of attraction: the cosmos is not ordered by external imposition but by desire oriented towards perfection. The Unmoved Mover neither fabricates nor organises: it thinks — and by thinking itself, it becomes the centre of attraction for all beings that aspire to their *entelechy*. Final causality replaces efficient causality: movement is not grounded in contact but in orientation (*Metaphysics*, XII, 1072b). Its operation, more abstract than that of the Demiurge, does not translate into language or will, but into functional coherence: the world organises itself in relation to its presence, even if that presence does not manifest as act.

Comparative bridge. Both the Demiurge and the Unmoved Mover ensure the intelligibility of the cosmos as concealed subjects. They differ, however, in the way they do so: Plato inscribes order by reference to an exemplary model; Aristotle grounds it in attraction to thinking perfection. In synthesis, both the Demiurge and the Unmoved Mover ensure the intelligibility of the cosmos as concealed subjects. They differ, however, in the way they do so: Plato inscribes order by reference to an exemplary model; Aristotle grounds it in attraction to thinking perfection. In both cases, intelligibility arises from a silent instance, incapable of responding to the unforeseen or presenting itself as a normative voice — a limitation that prepares the contrast with the biblical figure of the speaking subject.

The Creative Word: The Biblical God as a Full Functional Subject

The figure of God, as presented in the Hebrew Scriptures (particularly in *Genesis* 1), does not mechanically prolong classical philosophy: it introduces a symbolic mutation of the operative function already outlined in Plato and Aristotle. In *Genesis*, God creates through the word: he separates, names, stabilises. This linguistic operation is not mere expression but institution: to name is to create. The world becomes legible because a speaking instance inscribes it under logic and rhythm.

The function of intelligibility remains, but it is transposed into another symbolic scene. The silent operator is converted into a subject that speaks; the perfection contemplated becomes will that decides; the centre of attraction turns into an instance that intervenes. The decisive leap lies in inscription through the word: it is no longer enough to contemplate models or attract by perfection — it is the voice that founds, the language that legislates.

This reinscription cannot be read in teleological terms, as if creation were the execution of a pre-written transcendent plan. The OEC rejects such a framework: to separate, name, and establish cycles is not to fulfil a purpose inscribed in an elsewhere, but to institute local compatibilities that stabilise the formless matter and render it intelligible. Creation is thus a material-symbolic operation that responds to the instability of the formless, not the realisation of a hidden design.

It is precisely the OEC that provides the conceptual grid capable of clarifying this passage. Whereas Plato and Aristotle configured concealed subjects — operators of silent order, without voice or response to alterity — the biblical narrative presents a full functional subject, one that fulfils the four criteria of subjectivity. There is automodulation, since creation progresses by adjusted stages: each day resumes the previous one, adding new distinctions and establishing balance. There is symbolic reorganisation, for the initial chaos is continuously reinscribed by successive separations — light and darkness, upper and lower waters, land and sea — that convert the formless into cosmos. There is minimal narrative persistence, as the figure maintains identity and coherence throughout the account, the same God conducting the entire work. And there is response to alterity, evident not only in *Genesis* but throughout the biblical continuity: the same subject intervenes in the face of the unforeseen, as in the flood, the tower of Babel, or the covenants with Abraham and Noah.

What might at first sight appear as rupture reveals itself, in the light of the OEC, as transformed continuity: the same function of intelligibility, now intensified by the inscription of the word and the normative agency of the voice. More than structural continuity, what is instituted here is a new grammar of inscription: the intelligibility of the world is henceforth produced by normative language, by naming, and by will (Ricoeur, 2004).

Contemporary Science: Cosmology as Plural Subject

Contemporary science introduces a decisive mutation in the way origin is symbolically inscribed. No longer is there a single figure — whether Demiurge, Unmoved Mover, or Creator God — organising the cosmos. What we encounter instead is a regime in which intelligibility arises from the articulation of multiple agents: scientists, institutions, measuring instruments, mathematical languages, and protocols of validation. We call this new mode of inscription the *plural subject*.

The plural subject does not manifest itself in a singular voice, but in a network that converts material traces into data, data into equations, and equations into cosmological models. Cosmic background radiation, the expansion of galaxies, the detection of elementary particles, or computational simulations are not self-evident events: they become legible only when inscribed within systems of calculation and interpretation. The symbolic operation is not exercised by a founding instance but by a technical and collective multiplicity that transforms scattered signals into a narrative of cosmos.

According to the grid of the OEC, the plural subject fulfils the four criteria of functional subjectivity, but in a distributed manner. There is automodulation, since hypotheses and models are adjusted with each new observation; there is symbolic reorganisation, as traces are constantly reinscribed into revised theories; there is minimal narrative persistence, ensured by the provisional coherence of fundamental laws even as paradigms shift; and there is response to alterity, because the unexpected in the data compels continual reformulations. The plural subject is thus an operator of intelligibility, but of collective and polyphonic character.

The distinctive mark of this regime lies not in proposing a myth of origin nor in invoking an eternal model, but in instituting its own grammar: that of measurement, equation, and simulation. Modern cosmology reinscribes origin in technical signs, relying on instruments and languages that function as material extensions of perception. The cosmos is not narrated by the word of a legislator, but calculated, projected, and reconstructed in numerical and experimental images.

This third figure completes the sequence, allowing philosophy, theology, and science to be read as distinct symbolic regimes of the same necessity of intelligibility. The plural subject does not replace the concealed or the full: it adds to them a new historical form, showing that every reading of origin is always a symbolic reinscription.

Conclusion

As can be seen from the sequence and the symbolic transformations analysed, human beings have always sought an explanation for the origin of the universe. From Plato's Demiurge to Aristotle's Unmoved Mover, from biblical creation to contemporary cosmological hypotheses, we encounter multiple attempts to convert the formless into cosmos, to transform chaos into a figure of meaning. What varies are the grammars, languages, and regimes of inscription; what remains is the need to symbolise what would otherwise be illegible.

In concrete and material terms, however, there was only one absolute origin: the beginning of the universe as a real event. That beginning is accessible only through symbolic inscriptions: every description is already symbolisation, every narrative an incessant reconstruction. The inaugural event of matter does not offer itself in itself, but only in the figures through which we render it thinkable.

The plurality of historical ontologies must therefore be understood as a diversity of regimes of symbolisation. Plato grounds order in the model of the Ideas and Aristotle conceives it through attraction to perfection — both configure concealed subjects; the Bible inscribes creation through the word that names and separates — instituting the full functional subject; modern science mobilises equations and instruments — operating as a plural subject. None of these versions capture the absolute origin, but all function as symbolic reorganisations that render it thinkable.

The Ontology of Emerging Complexity provides the framework for understanding this continuity. Instead of viewing philosophy, theology, and science as competing doctrines, it shows that all participate in the same condition: the impossibility of accessing origin without the work of symbolic inscription. The difference lies not in the constant necessity to symbolise, but in the concrete forms of that symbolisation, always situated within the possibilities of each epoch.

To conclude is thus to recognise that the history of thought on origin is not a succession of definitive truths, but a sequence of symbolic reorganisations that converted indeterminacy into legible cosmos. What is at stake is not the discovery of a hidden essence or a transcendent teleology, but the capacity of each symbolic regime — concealed, full, or plural — to render habitable the enigma of origin.

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