



The Retrospective Illusion of Origin – Order as Post-Nomination

By David Cota, founder of the Ontology of Emerging Complexity

Abstract

This essay examines the retrospective illusion of origin: the historical tendency of Western philosophy to conceive order as a pre-existing foundation prior to its own naming. Readings such as Aristotelian teleology, Kantian transcendentalism, Hegelian dialectics, and Heideggerian ontology are critically assessed, arguing that order is a contingent and situated effect, not a primordial given. In the Ontology of Emerging Complexity, “ontological” designates an operative inscription that provisionally stabilizes a material instability. In dialogue with Foucault, Derrida, Butler, Simondon, Deleuze, and Prigogine, it is argued that all stabilization is local and provisional, the result of functional couplings between matter and symbolic inscription. Naming is understood not as a mere act of description, but as a material operation capable of reorganizing the field of the possible, creating conditions for certain forms to persist while excluding others. This shift reframes the ontological debate on an ethical-political plane: if order is invention, not destiny, its preservation or transformation is always a matter of decision and prospective responsibility—keeping the possible open. The essay concludes not with closure, but with a defence of an ethics of attentiveness and operative openness.

There is no origin except as a name: every foundation is an inscription. The act of naming does not reveal a primordial given; it stabilizes, *a posteriori*, a fragment of material instability, conferring upon it the status of order. Western philosophical tradition, however, insists on projecting to the beginning what can only emerge midway: order as principle and stability as starting point. This foundational reading obscures the operative nature of order by assimilating it to pre-existing forms, concealing the fact that it is always the effect of a symbolic gesture imposed upon a material occurrence that precedes it. The result is a retroactive ontological fiction: that which was instituted through inscription is presented as an original datum.

From this perspective, it is essential to situate order as symbolic stabilization rather than spontaneous material configuration. A configuration—the physical form resulting from material processes—exists prior to and independently of inscription. Order, by contrast, only comes into being when a symbolic system intervenes, selecting, suspending, and organizing that configuration in accordance with a regime of legibility and operativity. The difference is not ontological in the classical sense, but temporal and operative. Here, “ontological” does not refer to the possession of an immutable essence, but to the inscription of a function into the real; it does not designate a prior substance, but the capacity to intervene and reorganize. The Ontology of Emerging Complexity thus displaces the notion of ontology from the plane

of substantial determination to that of material operation, where being is conceived as the effect of couplings rather than as a fixed given.

The philosophical narrative that grants order the status of origin runs throughout the history of Western thought. In *Metaphysics* (1032b), Aristotle transforms the stability of a material configuration into a final cause, projecting into the beginning a function that can only be recognized after its occurrence. Kant prolongs this inversion by defining the categories of understanding as *a priori* conditions of experience (Kant 1998), granting them absolute anteriority with respect to the encounter with the real. Hegel converts order into the teleological culmination of spirit, attributing to it the necessary realization of reason in the real. Heidegger, in conceiving order as the unveiling of being in time, presupposes a prior structure that symbolic inscription would merely reveal.

In all these cases, order is displaced from its effective place—the place of operative posteriority—into an imaginary of foundational anteriority. What is instituted afterwards is projected as a ground, consolidating the retrospective illusion of origin.

The decisive point is to recognize that order is not discovered but instituted. It is always the product of a symbolic gesture that couples a representative organization to a pre-existing material configuration. Before inscription, there is instability or, at most, a material configuration without symbolic status; after inscription, there is a regime of legibility that enables operations upon what was previously inaccessible.

To say that “the word does not precede in the world” means that naming does not create the material occurrence but redefines its symbolic function. When an unstable set of natural forces is reinscribed as a “climate system,” one is not describing nature as it is, but establishing a framework that allows for prediction, intervention, modelling. Symbolic inscription does not translate—it transforms. It is an active intervention that converts matter into an operable object. In the OEC, this passage from description to operation is the critical point: an inscription becomes truly order only when it alters the capacity for action upon the phenomenon, creating new functional compatibilities. The criterion of symbolic operativity is thus its power to reorganize the relationship between matter and action, rather than any claim to correspondence with a pre-defined reality.

Within this logic, the *mark* is the material organization that becomes legible; the *symbol* is the reorganization that renders it functional. *Order* designates that provisional coherence between instability and inscription.

Biological taxonomy offers a clear example. By classifying organisms into kingdoms, phyla, classes, orders, and species, biology does not reveal natural ontological divisions but constructs a symbolic regime that imposes coherence upon a material continuum. The living world does not spontaneously organize itself into these categories; once instituted, however, they allow operations upon it: communication, comparison, investigation, prediction. The constructed nature of these categories is evidenced by their successive reformulations over time, determined by symbolic and epistemological requirements, not by equivalent transformations in nature itself.

Other examples reinforce the same logic:

- **Crystallization** (Prigogine 1997): physical stability that emerges locally becomes “order” only when inscribed within a regime of intelligibility.
- **Individuation** (Simondon 2005): being does not precede the process but is constituted by it; it is symbolic inscription that stabilizes that constitution as order.

- **Territorialization** (Deleuze & Guattari 1980): space is not given but produced by coding regimes that intervene after the material occurrence.

In all these cases, order is not prior but the effect of post-nomination.

If order is always instituted afterwards, then politics and ethics cannot be founded upon an origin. Any politics that presents itself as a return to a principle falls into the same retrospective illusion. An operative politics begins from instability as condition and from symbolic reorganization as task.

Foucault showed how genealogies retroactively reorganize the past according to the demands of the present; Butler revealed how naming is an operator of normativity, capable of fixing or displacing; Levinas proposed ethics as the encounter with the irreducible other. The ontology proposed here welcomes these contributions but shifts them: the other is not only human—it is any instance of instability requiring inscription. The ethics of complexity is post-anthropocentric: it assumes that every act of ordering is exclusionary and that every exclusion demands a response. Between politics and ethics, a regime of prospective responsibility is established, oriented toward maintaining openness rather than preserving a fixed principle. It is a matter of acting so as to prolong the viability of new inscriptions rather than protecting the integrity of an inherited order.

Responsibility is not fidelity to a norm but the capacity to respond to excess. The political gesture, like the ethical gesture, is always symbolic: it does not reveal the just, it institutes the possible.

Order is an operative pause in excess, a local compatibility between material flow and symbolic regime. There is no essence prior to it; no eternal truth guarantees it. There are only contingent stabilizations, instituted to operate upon what could not previously be operated upon. Origin, then, is the name given to the point where we decide not to continue thinking—and every thought that refuses origin reopens the possibility of reorganization.

References

- Aristotle. 1984. *The Complete Works of Aristotle*. Edited by Jonathan Barnes. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Butler, Judith. 1993. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. New York: Routledge.
- Deleuze, Gilles, & Félix Guattari. 1980. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1976. *Of Grammatology*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 1972. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Hegel, G. W. F. 1977. *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Translated by A. V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Heidegger, Martin. 1962. *Being and Time*. Translated by John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson. New York: Harper & Row.
- Kant, Immanuel. 1998. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated and edited by Paul Guyer & Allen W. Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Prigogine, Ilya, & Isabelle Stengers. 1984. *Order out of Chaos: Man's New Dialogue with Nature*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Simondon, Gilbert. 2005. *L'individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d'information*. Grenoble: Éditions Jérôme Millon.