The Impossibility of Western Philosophy to Liberate Itself from Metaphysics

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Abstract

This essay critically examines the enduring foundational logic within Western philosophy, arguing that even its most radical critiques of metaphysics ultimately reinscribe a principle of grounding—whether through presence, absence, event, or structure. From Plato and Aristotle to Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida, and contemporary thinkers such as Deleuze, Foucault, Badiou, and Butler, the philosophical gesture remains tethered to a demand for origin and legitimacy. The essay proposes a symbolic alternative: the Ontology of Emerging Complexity. Drawing on Simondon's theory of individuation and Whitehead's processual metaphysics, it reframes philosophy as a gesture of symbolic reinscription rather than revelation. Thought is no longer the discovery of essence but the operative reorganization of unstable matter. Philosophy becomes a transductive operator, translating empirical flows into symbolic structures without recourse to final principles. In this framework, truth emerges not from correspondence but from symbolic operativity. The essay calls for a non-foundational philosophy that listens to the real rather than seeks to ground it.

From the origins of philosophical thought in the West, the relationship between reason and foundation has been marked by an irresolvable tension: the will to understand reality has invariably been articulated with the need for a final principle to guarantee it. Despite recurrent proclamations of metaphysics' overcoming, the deep structure of philosophical tradition has remained bound to the logic of grounding — ontologically, epistemologically, and ethically. This silent fidelity to an origin, to a guarantor principle, constitutes the unexamined core of Western reason. Every rupture was, in the end, a disguised reaffirmation. Every break, a camouflaged restart. This essay proposes a critical traversal of this heritage, tracing the history of philosophy from Greece to its contemporary manifestations, aiming to expose this persistent foundational structure.

The foundation of Western thought has, from the beginning, been under the sign of stability. In Plato, the sensible world is a realm of imperfection, of degraded copies. Truth resides in a superior, intelligible domain, accessible only to the soul that ascends to the eternal (Plato 1992). Here, the idea is not mere description: it is a founding structure. The symbolic is subordinated to presence; thought must point to an already-given order. This construction rests on a hierarchical distinction between the sensible and the intelligible, where the latter provides not only stability but ontological legitimacy. The empirical world is, therefore, always a degraded effect — and thinking is to remember this transcendent origin. Metaphysics thus emerges as a necessity to anchor the unstable in eternity and the multiple in unity.

Aristotle reformulates this architecture but does not break from it. He introduces the concept of substance, defines the unmoved mover, and organizes reality according to logical categories (Aristotle 1924). The logos becomes the path to being. Philosophy continues to

speak from and for a principle that legitimizes. Even language, as an expression of reason, is only a means to grasp a reality that precedes and sustains it. Though he relocates the world's intelligibility within the world — by rejecting Platonic dualism — Aristotle grounds intelligibility in the concept of essence. Each being has a proper form that determines its purpose. Final causality introduces an intrinsic orientation to matter, meaning that even becoming is justified by a telos — that is, by a prior organizing principle. Aristotelian ontology preserves the foundational structure by internalizing the principle within being itself.

With modernity, the structure shifts, but does not dissolve. Descartes installs the cogito as a new foundation: certainty emerges from the subject (Descartes 1996). Thought becomes the ultimate criterion of existence. This gesture inaugurates a metaphysics of subjectivity, where the thinking subject is simultaneously the starting point and validation of all knowledge. Even while breaking from dependence on sensory experience and tradition, the foundational structure remains: it is still about reaching an absolute, indubitable point that serves as the basis for science and morality. The cogito is this zero point: self-evident, self-justified. Metaphysics is here reconfigured as transcendental epistemology.

Kant transforms this certainty into structure: the subject not only knows but constitutes the phenomenon (Kant 1998). The world as we know it is, in part, constituted by the a priori forms of sensibility and the categories of understanding. Reason becomes the operator of the conditions of possibility of experience. However, the thing-in-itself remains as a limit: the real in itself escapes symbolic constitution. Metaphysics, far from being abolished, is reinscribed as a regulatory horizon. The subject no longer discovers truth but guarantees the formal validity of experience. The foundational gesture remains: now not in substance or essence, but in the transcendental structure of reason. Still, the thing-in-itself persists as an insurmountable limit. Metaphysics retreats but does not disappear — it becomes the formal condition of thought.

Hegel pushes the gesture to the extreme: reason is history knowing itself (Hegel 1977). Reality is conceived as a dialectical process, where each moment is overcome and preserved in the next, marching toward absolute knowledge. Thought does not merely accompany reality — it is reality itself in a process of self-knowledge. The separation between subject and object dissolves in the totality of Spirit. Metaphysics here assumes the form of a speculative logic of the real. Everything not included in this process is considered unfinished, pre-rational, or deficient. The foundation does not disappear — it is the very totality in becoming, the system as the self-legitimating real. Yet this history is totality — and thus, a new absolute. Reason becomes the self-consciousness of the real. Philosophy, thus, reinvents metaphysics as system.

Attempts at de-foundation in the 20th century do not fully escape the trap. Nietzsche denounces Platonism as a denial of life but introduces the will to power as a new interpretative key — a new principle (Nietzsche 1989). In effect, by proposing the will to power as the ultimate matrix of all interpretation, Nietzsche ends up reinscribing a totalizing structure. Even if transcendence is rejected, his ontology becomes monist, grounded in the immanence of conflict. The will to power is not just one possible force but the universal operator of intelligibility: everything that exists is an expression of this will. Thus, the critique of metaphysics paradoxically results in a new metaphysics — immanent, dynamic, but still unifying. The plurality Nietzsche claims is, at bottom, the unfolding of a single original force.

The metaphysics of Being is replaced by a metaphysics of Conflict, and ultimate truth gives way to an absolute principle of interpretation, reiterating, in new form, the same foundational gesture it sought to overcome.

Heidegger excavates the history of being to expose its forgetting but preserves listening as an origi

nary event. His critique of metaphysics denounces the reduction of being to presence and objectivity, proposing instead an originary opening — the Ereignis — where being gives itself as an event (Heidegger 1962). This opening is, according to some readings, an attempt to free thought from the need for a classical foundation. However, by referring the meaning of being to a dimension that precedes language, even if manifest in it, Heidegger preserves a sacred or originary background that remains unreachable. Dasein becomes the one who listens to the call of being, but being continues to be that which 'gives itself', like a donation escaping symbolic construction. Metaphysics is deconstructed, but not dethroned: it is reconfigured as a pathos of revelation — not as a principle, but as an event still guided by a logic of unthematized anteriority.

Derrida deconstructs the metaphysics of presence but reinscribes a structuring absence: the différance. By showing that every meaning is deferred and that no term can be fully present, Derrida subverts logocentrism. However, the différance itself — this ceaseless movement of postponement and displacement of meaning — becomes the new ontological operator (Derrida 1978). There is no final term, but there is an operative structure that ensures postponement. Absence replaces presence as a negative foundation. The gesture of de-founding is also, paradoxically, a gesture of reinscription: even the unsayable is named, and the impossibility of meaning becomes the new grammar of the real. The symbol is always already an escape route, but never full emancipation. In all these, foundation returns — not as affirmed presence, but as regulatory absence. Critique of metaphysics often reproduces its logic — now disguised as the unsayable, the unattainable, the event.

Phenomenology reinforces this tendency by privileging experience as the original donor of meaning. Even when embodied, as in Merleau-Ponty, consciousness is seen as a pre-symbolic field. Experience is treated as the ground of meaning. But this foundation of experience escapes symbolic critique. Against this, it is necessary to affirm: there is no meaning outside symbolic inscription. Experience is not prior to symbol — it is already symbolically organized matter. Meaning does not preexist: it emerges from the operative material reorganization that the symbol performs. Every phenomenology of presence remains, therefore, within the circle of the metaphysics of consciousness.

In contemporary thought, the refusal of foundation is often merely formal. Deleuze thinks difference as a process of individuation but maintains an expressive background by conceiving the virtual as an ontological reserve that actualizes the real — an ontology still marked by an unthematized interiority (Deleuze 1994). Foucault reveals the episteme as a regime of truth but does not abandon the foundational structure between knowledge and power: power institutes knowledge, but that bond remains structural, even when historicized (Foucault 1972). Badiou reinscribes the miracle of the event as genesis of subject: the event, thought mathematically as a rupture of being by pure multiplicity, is still a founding moment that escapes historical intelligibility (Badiou 2005). Agamben transforms the exception into an onto-theological operator, reactivating political theology as a central structure of legal and

political thought (Agamben 1998). Butler reveals performativity as a production of subjectivity but resorts to iterative repetition as a founding matrix of discursive acts — thereby reinscribing a structural logic even in the critique of identity (Butler 1990). Multiplicity is conceived, but still in function of a structuring absence or an inaugural gesture. The foundation remains, even when denied.

From this journey emerges a realization: Western philosophy has not, to this day, succeeded in liberating itself from the demand for a final principle. Everything happens as if reason could only operate from a ground — even if that ground is absence, void, language, or difference. Thought thus remains prisoner to a foundational logic that limits its reorganizing potency.

At this point, it becomes possible to sketch a turning point. It is not about proposing a new metaphysics, nor about replacing the lost foundation with another disguised one. Rather, it is about recognizing that the very demand for foundation results from a specific symbolic gesture that presents itself as universal but is merely historical and operative. Against this demand emerges the Ontology of Emerging Complexity: not as a systematic doctrine, but as a symbolic practice that accepts the real as continuous variation of matter. Inspired by Simondon, it proposes an ontogenesis without essence: being is always a process of individuation, not substance (Simondon 2005). Stability is local, not structural. With Whitehead, it integrates the idea of operative nexuses that produce unstable legibility: reality is not given but composed in flows of relation and mediation (Whitehead 1978).

Thought does not reveal; it reinscribes. Language does not point to hidden truth but symbolically reorganizes what is known of matter. The symbol does not represent the absent: it produces an operative relationship with the real. Value emerges from operativity, not from correspondence with a final meaning. Philosophy here is not doctrine but gesture: symbolic reinscription of complex matter. There is no essence, only reorganization.

This gesture is called transduction. Philosophy becomes a symbolic operator that translates empirical knowledge into concepts with reorganizing function. It does not interpret the real: it reinscribes it. It does not impose itself as the measure of the world: it listens to it. The human is not the centre but one of the possible expressions of organized matter. The universe, symbolizing itself through the human, becomes capable of reorganizing itself at secondary levels. Philosophy is thus the place where matter reinscribes itself in symbolic form — not to found, but to continue its infinite process of reorganization.

To think, then, is to reorganize. There is no origin, no end. There is only emergence, inscription, operativity. Truth is not what is to be discovered, but what emerges from symbolic relation with the real. Philosophy does not walk on ground — it is the very gesture of founding the possible, without ground or promise.

"The universe needs no conductor. Philosophy is the guardian of the silence between the chords."

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