The World Unbound:
Rethinking Subjectivism in the Anthropocene

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Abstract

The Anthropocene does not only mark a transformation in the relationship between humanity and nature: it challenges the very foundations of modern subjectivism. Modernity has elevated the subject to an ordering principle, separating it from the world and marginalizing everything that exceeds consciousness. From Descartes to Husserl, the subject has stood as the guarantor of meaning, while science and technology have consolidated its power. Yet this pact today shows its fragility: the Anthropocene reveals that the claimed autonomy of the subject is an artifice, exposing the vulnerability hidden behind the illusion of mastery. In light of the current ecological crisis, the paper retraces the trajectory of modern subjectivism through the perspective of some eminent interpreters – from Weber to Latour – showing how the Anthropocene delivers an "unbound" world that compels us to rethink ontological categories beyond the nature/culture dichotomy.

Keywords**:** anthropocene, modern subjectivism, secularization, epistemological crisis, genealogy of modernity

1. Introduction

After nearly two decades of debates, assessments, and revisions, on March 20, 2024 the International Union of Geological Sciences (IUGS) published on its official website what seemed to be a conclusive statement: «a decisive rejection of the Anthropocene proposal: 4 votes in favour; 12 votes against; and 3 abstentions». Despite the efforts of the Anthropocene Working Group (AWG) and its former Chair, Jan Zalasiewicz, the scientific community thus denied the Anthropocene its geological "passport", reaffirming our belonging to the Holocene. Yet, in the closing lines of the document, one reads: «the Anthropocene as a concept will continue to be widely used not only by Earth and environmental scientists, but also by social scientists, politicians and economists, as well as by the public at large. As such, it will remain an invaluable descriptor in human-environment interactions. But it will not be recognised as a formal geological term but will more usefully be employed informally in future discussions of the anthropogenic impacts on Earth's climatic and environmental systems».[1]

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[1] International Union of Geological Sciences, and International Commission on Stratigraphy. 2024. "The Anthropocene: IUGS-ICS Statement." IUGS, March 21. https://www.iugs.org/post/the-anthropocene-iugs-ics-statement.

At first glance, the IUGS's point is fairly straightforward: the Anthropocene does not meet the formal criteria to be inscribed in the Geological Time Scale. At the same time, however, the concept remains extraordinarily useful as an analytical and descriptive tool, capable of circulating well beyond geology, into the social sciences, politics, and economics. Beyond the decision itself—fully legitimate in its own terms—what matters here is the tension it reveals between a formal rejection and a substantive recognition. This dual register confirms the relevance of the Anthropocene hypothesis and suggests that it concerns not only the objects of science, but also the subjects called upon to study them. In this sense, the IUGS's choice, while claiming neutrality, shows how disciplinary boundaries and logics of authority are being tested by the ongoing planetary transformations.

If the Anthropocene compels us to recognize the inextricable entanglement between natural processes and human activities, it becomes clear that no single discipline can claim exclusive interpretative legitimacy. Geology, chemistry, biology, physics, geography, and the human sciences must engage in an interdisciplinary chorus that reflects the complexity of the phenomena at stake. In this sense, the controversy over the formalization of the Anthropocene is not merely a geological debate, but the symptom of a broader crisis: that of modern subjectivism, of the very capacity to think and act as separate and autonomous subjects in a world that is now interconnected and hyper-complex.[2]

The IUGS decision thus provides an ideal occasion for interrogating the conceptual categories produced by modernity. When confronted with the challenges posed by the Anthropocene, these categories reveal their fragility—if not their outright unsustainability—insofar as they continue to presuppose a sovereign subject as the ultimate source of order and meaning. The paper therefore aims to reflect critically on the tensions and contradictions already operating at the very heart of modernity itself, ultimately leading to a historically and philosophically informed discussion of the problems that emerge with particular acuity in the condition of the Anthropocene.

To this end, the argument unfolds across three closely interconnected moments. The opening section, drawing on Weber and Harari, examines a pivotal process of modernity: the transition from a religious, "enchanted" worldview to a rational and scientific one. The second step, informed by Latour, probes this process in greater depth and brings to light its internal tensions. It focuses in particular on the paradoxes underlying the ambitious, yet ultimately fragile, modern attempt to ground reality in the subject through a continuous practice

[2] One of the most lucid—and radical—analyses is that of Agostino Cera, who, referring to the IUGS statement, affirms: «Not only has it failed to scuttle the Anthropocene, but it is demonstrating in practice how it does not need geological-stratigraphic endorsement, even for its strictly scientific legitimacy. In other words, the ineffectiveness of that rejection functions as evidence not only of the hypothesis's distinctiveness but also of its epistemic robustness—something that, in its absence, would have been far less evident. As noted, the impression is that such a rejection says more about geology and its current internal tensions than about the Anthropocene» (Cera, 2025: 552). In this regard, the reflections of Håvard Kilhavn, Julie Shipp, and Anastasia Bertheusse are particularly insightful, as they approach the issue from the—privileged, in many respects—perspective of archaeology. In response to the IUGS decision, these archaeologists propose retaining the heuristic value of the Anthropocene hypothesis as a "tool for archaeological storytelling." (See Kilhavn, et al., 2024). See also the interview given by Jan Zalasiewicz to António Guerreiro for Electra Magazine (Guerreiro, 2024).

of separation between nature and culture. Finally, the third section turns to the Anthropocene condition and the ongoing ecological crisis in order to reveal the vulnerability of this conceptual framework, thereby underscoring the need for a profound philosophical rethinking of the ontological and epistemic categories inherited from the modern age.

1. Between Meaning and Power: The Rise of Subjectivity

One of the first insights of the Anthropocene concerns the overcoming of the fundamental dichotomies that for centuries have shaped our understanding of the world and humanity's place within it. To consider humanity as a genuine geological force, capable of acting on the planet in ways that alter its very composition, necessarily calls into question the typically modern distinction between nature and culture. The Anthropocene forces us to stop thinking of the planet as a stable backdrop, governed by fixed and immutable laws, on which we simply carry out our activities and, in effect, make *our* history.[3] History and nature, rather, intertwine in a complex web, where humans become natural agents and nature takes on a role within the theatre of history—whose very definition extends far beyond human boundaries. To begin exploring this *Terra Incognita*[4], it is useful to revisit some of the key stages that, at least since modernity, have shaped both the theoretical understanding and practical approach of humans toward the world.

The link between this transformation and the trajectory of modernity was already glimpsed a century ago by Max Weber. In *Wissenschaft als Beruf*, his famous lecture delivered in Munich and published in 1919, the German sociologist discussed the "disenchantment of the world" [*Entzauberung der Welt*] that science demanded as the price of its own assertion. Rationalization, he argued, assumes that «in principle […] we are not ruled by mysterious, unpredictable forces, but that, on the contrary, we can in principle *control everything by means of calculation*. That in turn means the disenchantment of the world» (Weber, 2004: 12-13). With remarkable clarity, Weber recognized the various implications inherent in this process of rationalization carried out by modern society. Among these, the most significant was certainly the sacrifice of meaning on the altar of science. Weber's analysis would find full confirmation throughout the twentieth century, marked by the progressive and constant specialization and fragmentation of knowledge. Yet his famous lecture concluded with an exhortation that, if not reassuring, at least balanced the discourse—which until then had been rather stark and bleak—regarding the practice of science as a *Beruf*. Rather than resigning themselves to the absence of

[3] Regarding this specific aspect of Anthropocene reflection—which, of course, lies beyond the scope of our discussion—see Chakrabarty, 2009, and Chakrabarty, 2023.

[4] This expression, already employed by Steffen, Crutzen, and McNeill to characterize the Anthropocene condition (see Steffen, Crutzen, McNeill 2007, 614), was later adopted by Agostino Cera as the subtitle of his monograph. The first part of that work, in addition to providing a careful reconstruction of the debate on the ontological and epistemological status of the Anthropocene, offers a significant reflection on the ambiguous nature of this "Threshold Concept," to which we refer for a more comprehensive account of the background against which the present paper is situated. (see Cera 2023)

meaning, emulating the sentinel of the book of Isaiah, young German university students at the start of the twentieth century were urged to roll up their sleeves: «From it we should draw the moral that longing and waiting is not enough and that we must act differently. We must go about our work and meet "the challenges of the day"—both in our human relations and our vocation. But that moral is simple and straightforward if each person finds and obeys the daemon that holds the threads of *his* life» (Weber, 2004: 31).[5]

In the desert of meaning, each individual is called to find «the daemon that hold the threads of his life». Weber provides an unmistakable testimony: modernity's antidote to the collapse of the great mytho-religious narratives was to seek refuge in individual interiority. Weber thus perfectly describes what a cultural historian like Harari calls «the modern covenant».[6] Indeed, in *Homo Deus*, Harari identifies the specific character of modernity, compared to previous historical eras, in the form of a covenant—what he describes as «surprisingly simple»—which can be summarized in this concise statement: «To give up meaning in exchange for power» (Harari, 2016: 199). Now, anyone with even a basic familiarity with the idea of secularization will have no difficulty linking these two terms to the delicate relationship between religion and science.[7] A defining feature of modernity, then—speaking once again in very general terms—was to have triggered the process of disintegration of the great premodern religious narratives, whose ultimate aim had been to provide meaning to events, both historical and natural, in favour of an increase in knowledge and, consequently, power. The price of this exchange, of course, is the acceptance of a blind world, «full of sound and fury but signifying nothing» (Harari, 2016: 200).

However, Harari continues, this covenant contains a true «escape clause» (Harari, 2016: 220). As Weber attests, it consists in the shift to the private sphere of that horizon of meaning which, in the public domain, has lost its force. Faced with the collapse of every higher order—whether a creator God or the eternal law of nature—the modern human finds within themselves the source of meaning, their own daemon to obey. What

[5] Many have already pointed this out, yet it bears repeating: what clearer testimony could there be to the secularization of that *Beruf*, which transforms from a genuine divine calling and religious vocation into obedience to one's own daemon? To a vocation toward one's profession?

[6] The decision to introduce Harari in this context is inspired by Pietropaoli's work, which—within a much broader discussion—devotes considerable attention to this author, highlighting the most relevant aspects of his thought specifically regarding the Anthropocene. (See Pietropaoli, 2025a: 93 ff). For a more focused discussion of the attempts to move beyond the "modern covenant" toward a recovery of meaning overpower, see Pietropaoli 2025b.

[7] Without claiming to provide an exhaustive definition of secularization—a notion that is extremely complex and marked by a long philosophical history—we will limit ourselves to clarifying the sense in which the term will be used in the following pages. While in everyday language "secularization" is often employed in a reductive manner to denote «the process whereby religious thinking, practices, and institutions lose social significance» (Wilson, 1966), in this context we instead refer to a notion of "transposition". Drawing on Karl Löwith's interpretation in *Meaning in History* (1949), which understands modernity as the transposition of Christian eschatology into modern philosophies of history (the Enlightenment, positivism, Marxism, etc.), we use "secularization" to designate the process through which certain patterns of thought, far from disappearing, are reworked and reinscribed within modern society in immanentized forms. The secularization at issue here therefore consists not in loss, but in transformation. As will become clearer below, this position will be further articulated through engagement with Bruno Latour's work. For a broader sociological reconstruction of the issue, see Glasner, 1977.

emerges is humanism, rooted in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Europe, yet evolving throughout modernity until it attains its clearest expression in the Short Twentieth Century.

> The antidote to a meaningless and lawless existence was provided by humanism, a revolutionary new creed that conquered the world during the last few centuries. The humanist religion worships humanity, and expects humanity to play the part that God played in Christianity and Islam, and that the laws of nature played in Buddhism and Daoism. Whereas traditionally the great cosmic plan gave meaning to the life of humans, humanism reverses the roles, and expects the experiences of humans to give meaning to the great cosmos. According to humanism, humans must draw from within their inner experiences not only the meaning of their own lives, but also the meaning of the entire universe. This is the primary commandment humanism has given us: create meaning for a meaningless world. (Harari, 2016: 221)

The surrender of meaning in exchange for power, then, does not happen in a straightforward or linear way. Indeed, only a retrospective—and somewhat naïve—view could readily accept such a simplification. Humanity, rather, strives to remain within a horizon of meaning while advancing in the acquisition of power, measured in terms of ever-increasing capacity to control and transform nature. Viewed from within its unfolding—and what perspective could be clearer than Weber's—the process of disenchantment is certainly bleak, yet the possibilities it opens up are worth the price, however high it may be.[8]

It is precisely within this process of *conserving* and *transposing* meaning that the problem we wish to examine emerges. It is easy, in fact, to observe that a transversal phenomenon such as humanism, which permeates all forms of human expression—from art to politics, from education to law—finds its distinctly philosophical counterpart in subjectivism. Far from being an accidental feature of modernity, subjectivism represents both its condition of possibility and its intrinsic limit: from this perspective, what appears as the

[8] As has often been noted, it is quite impossible to provide a single, univocal definition of the term "humanism" (see Davies, 2001: 1 ff; Copson, 2015). Over the course of history, the term has assumed different meanings, serving distinct purposes and referring to diverse cultural expressions—from Renaissance humanism, to the historiographical interpretations of figures such as Burckhardt and Voigt, to the twentieth-century interest in the *condition humaine*. In the context of the present work, it will therefore be sufficient—following Harari's approach—to use the term to designate that modern process through which human beings turn back upon themselves in response to the collapse of higher orders, whether conceived as God or as the world. It is interesting to note, in this regard, how, by following the trajectory of the criticisms directed at Weber, one can trace some of the subgroups that developed within late-modern humanism according to Harari. If Weber might here be considered an exponent of a certain liberal humanism, the critiques he received from the Marxist side of the contemporary debate can, with all the necessary caveats and exceptions, be grouped under what could be called socialist humanism. Lukács offers a representative example in this respect. A critic of the irrational trajectory of modern thought, his defence of rationality moved toward a Hegelian-Marxist communism, severely critical of any form of liberalism; anchored in the worship of man and progress—as was Marx himself—his focus was not on the interiority of each individual, but rather on the material and economic conditions that govern historical and social processes. The other branch of humanism mentioned in Harari's taxonomy is the evolutionary one. Based on Darwinian theory, this form of humanism interprets the course of technical and cultural development through the lens of natural selection, exposing itself, evidently, to a high risk of relativism and to censure by the other currents. (See Harari, 2016: 246 ff).

emancipation of the subject—from the Cartesian cogito to Husserl's transcendental consciousness, passing through the Copernican-Kantian revolution—translates into a progressive marginalization of everything that exceeds individual consciousness. But what happens if this subject, which has upheld the scaffolding of modernity for centuries, proves to be an artifice? This is precisely the possibility the Anthropocene brings to light: the collapse of subjectivism, not as an accident, but as the result of an internal contradiction of modernity.

2. We Have Never (Truly) Been Subjects: The Paradoxical Constitution of Modernity

As anticipated, the Anthropocene does not merely mark a new phase in the history of human-nature relations: it exposes the crisis of the modern subject, constructed around the idea of an autonomous and separate consciousness, a secularized expression of the Christian duality of nature and spirit.[9] The split between subject and world, which has guided humanism and modernity, proves entirely inadequate today as an interpretive framework. By revealing the irreversible interdependence between human action and geological processes, the Anthropocene demands a complete rethinking of the ontological horizon produced by modernity. One of the most insightful analyses in this regard is found in *We Have Never Been Modern* by Bruno Latour. According to the French author, the current condition represents nothing more than the emergence of the contradictions that characterize the very essence of modernity.

> Modernity is often defined in terms of humanism, either as a way of saluting the birth of 'man' or as a way of announcing his death. But this habit itself is modern, because it remains asymmetrical. It overlooks the simultaneous birth of 'nonhumanity'—things, or objects, or beasts—and the equally strange beginning of a crossed-out God, relegated to the sidelines. Modernity arises first from the conjoined creation of those three entities, and then from the masking of the conjoined birth and the separate treatment of the three communities while, underneath, hybrids continue to multiply as an effect of this separate treatment. The double separation is what we have to reconstruct: the separation between humans and nonhumans on the one hand, and between what happens 'above' and what happens 'below' on the other. (Latour, 1993: 13)

For Latour, then, a constitutive element of modern subjectivism is the recognition—through negation—of the "nonhuman", whose "birth certificate" is complementary to humanism. Modernity both creates and simultaneously conceals these three «communities»: the human, the nonhuman, and the crossed-out God. These

[9] This is a generalization that—much like the notion of secularization—rests on Löwith's interpretation of the transition from the Christian era to the modern and contemporary one (see Löwith 1948; Löwith 1955). For an introductory yet rigorous reconstruction of these issues, one that accounts for the specificities and internal oscillations in the development of these debates—consider, for example, Thomism, which constitutes a significant exception to this interpretation—see Galluzzo, 2012.

three communities, in turn, are arranged within a symbolic space defined by an «above» (the transcendent orders, the God acknowledged precisely through negation) and a «below» (the mundane, secular realm, we might say), itself divided into what is human and what is not.

For such coexistence to be possible, a constant twofold operation is required: in order to keep the spheres separate, an activity of «purification» must be carried out, aimed at producing «two entirely distinct ontological zones: that of human beings on the one hand; that of nonhumans on the other». Yet this practice must always be accompanied by an exercise of «translation» —which Latour also defines as «hybridization»—, from which emerge «new types of beings, hybrids of nature and culture» (Latour, 1993: 10-11). A defining feature of modernity, according to Latour, is its firm adherence to the principle of distinction produced by purification. Put differently, modernity—while ignoring the paradox that constitutes it—rests on the separation between nature and culture, even though it is in fact populated by hybrids.

> So long as we consider these two practices of translation and purification separately, we are truly modern—that is, we willingly subscribe to the critical project, even though that project is developed only through the proliferation of hybrids down below. As soon as we direct our attention simultaneously to the work of purification and the work of hybridization, we immediately stop being wholly modern, and our future begins to change. (Latour, 1993: 11)

We have never been modern, then, because even in the modern era the processes of hybridization and purification occurred simultaneously and, above all, complementarily. At least, this is Latour's hypothesis.

Rather than testing this hypothesis, our concern is to examine its premises in order to move in a specific direction: the question we want to raise is whether or not we *have ever truly been subjects*. To frame this issue, however, it is necessary to understand what Latour actually means when he speaks of hybrids.

The clearest example is the now-classic confrontation between Hobbes and Boyle, which Latour develops on the basis of Shapin and Schaffer's research and which we, in turn, will briefly retrace. In *Leviathan and the Air-Pump* (1985), the authors analyse how two central figures of the seventeenth century embodied two different ways of conceiving the production of knowledge: on the one hand, the experimental method, which presented itself as an objective and impartial procedure for establishing facts; on the other, the philosophical-political reasoning that emphasized the role of authority and order. Their investigation thus focuses on the different devices—technical, rhetorical, and institutional—deployed to determine what should count as a *matter of fact*.

Even today, Robert Boyle's name is associated with the invention of the air pump, developed together with Robert Hooke to investigate phenomena related to atmospheric pressure. However, the novelty lay not only in the invention itself but, above all, in the method by which experiments were made public: Boyle described them with great precision, accompanied by illustrations and detailed accounts, so that they could be replicated and

verified by other members of the Royal Society. In this way, an experience limited to a few direct witnesses was transformed into a fact recognized as valid by the scientific community. Faced with this approach, Hobbes proposed an opposite path. In *Leviathan*, written against the backdrop of the English Civil Wars, he conceived knowledge and political order as inseparable: for him, knowledge could not rely on fallible instruments or the shifting consensus of a community, but had to be grounded in rational, deductive principles. From this perspective, the experiment appeared as a fragile contrivance, incapable of guaranteeing universal truths and likely to replace the force of reason with the authority of consensus.

The aim of the book, then, is to determine whether Boyle truly succeeded, through the invention of the experiment, in giving nature a voice or whether, as Hobbes maintained, he did nothing more than obscure, without breaking, the inseparable link between power and knowledge. After reconstructing and thoroughly examining the episode, the authors deliver a striking verdict:

> We have written about a period in which the nature of knowledge, the nature of the polity, and the nature of the relationships between them were matters for wide-ranging and practical debate. A new social order emerged together with the rejection of an old intellectual order. In the late twentieth century that settlement is, in turn, being called into serious question. Neither our scientific knowledge, nor the constitution of our society, nor traditional statements about the connections between our society and our knowledge are taken for granted any longer. As we come to recognize the conventional and artifactual status of our forms of knowing, we put ourselves in a position to realize that it is ourselves and not reality that is responsible for what we know. Knowledge, as much as the state, is the product of human actions. Hobbes was right. (Shapin & Schaffer, 1985: 344)

This is where Latour's contribution comes in. «No, Hobbes was wrong», he provocatively asserts. Or rather, he was both right and wrong. Certainly, «'knowledge, as much as the State, is the product of human actions', but that is precisely why Boyle's political invention is much more refined than Hobbes's sociology of science» (Latour, 1993: 26). Shapin and Shaffer's analysis is very careful in weighing the judgment regarding the scientific side of the matter, grounding their discussion and language in the historical-political context from which it arises. But the same is not done for Hobbes. Words like "power," "interest," and "politics" are used unproblematically, as if they were not themselves historically and politically situated conventions, just like "scientific fact" or "demonstration". The symmetry must be carried through to the end, and Latour does not hesitate to expose the paradox—perhaps difficult to grasp, but impossible to ignore once revealed:

> Is 'force' less problematic than the air's spring? […] If nature and epistemology are not made up of transhistoric entities, then neither are history and sociology—unless one adopts some authors' asymmetrical posture and agrees to be simultaneously constructivist where nature is concerned and realist where society

> is concerned! But it is not very probable that the air's spring has a more political basis than English society itself... (Latour, 1993: 27).

The inherently paradoxical nature of modernity now becomes fully evident. The inventions of Hobbes and Boyle—the *Leviathan* and the air pump, respectively—belong only superficially to two distinct and rigidly separate ontologies. The reality is far more complex: «Boyle is creating a political discourse from which politics is to be excluded, while Hobbes is imagining a scientific politics from which experimental science has to be excluded» (Latour, 1993: 27). This is also the clearest example of the parallel processes of purification and hybridization:

> Boyle and his descendants are not simply saying that the Laws of Nature escape our grasp; they are also fabricating these laws in the laboratory. Despite their artificial construction inside the vacuum pump (such is the phase of mediation or translation), the facts completely escape all human fabrication (such is the phase of purification). Hobbes and his descendants are not declaring simply that men make their own society by sheer force, but that the Leviathan is durable and solid, massive and powerful; that it mobilizes commerce, inventions, and the arts; and that the Sovereign holds the well-tempered steel sword and the golden sceptre in his hand. […] Yet despite the solidity procured by the mobilization of things (as revealed by the work of mediation), we alone are the ones who constitute it freely by the sheer force of our reasoning—we poor, naked, unarmed citizens (as demonstrated by the work of purification). (Latour, 1993: 31)

To complete the puzzle of modernity, only one piece remains: God, of course. Consistent with what has been said so far, even the relationship with divine transcendence carries ambiguity for Latour. According to his analysis, God's role is to maintain the balance in the ongoing dialectic of mutual purification and hybridization between nature and culture, acting as an arbiter while remaining bound by the rules of the game. Neither present nor absent, «God becomes the crossed-out God of metaphysics» (Latour, 1993: 33). In this way, the splitting applied to nature and society is extended to God as well. Torn from the heavens and brought into each individual's heart, God is at once infinitely transcendent—so as not to enter either parliament or laboratory—and always available, to be invoked in cases of conflict between the two perhaps overly symmetrical spheres of nature and culture.

In this way, Latour also illuminates the deeper significance of the turn inward that we discussed in connection with Harari and Weber. Put differently, Latour enables us to probe more deeply into the logic of the «modern covenant» described by Harari (see section 1). In line with the specific understanding of secularization at issue here—as a process of *transposition* rather than mere loss—God is not removed from the modern framework, but instead undergoes a sophisticated and decisive process of *relocation*.

> By playing three times in a row on the same alternation between transcendence and immanence, the moderns can mobilize Nature, objectify the social, and feel the spiritual presence of God, even while firmly maintaining that Nature escapes us, that Society is our own work, and that God no longer intervenes. Who could have resisted such a construction? Truly exceptional events must have weakened this powerful mechanism for me to be able to describe it today with an ethnologist's detachment for a world that is in the process of disappearing. (Latour, 1993: 34)

3. Hybrid Equilibria

It is now time to bring together our reflections. At the heart of the discussion lies the status of modernity, which shapes how we understand secularization and, in turn, subjectivity. As we saw at the outset through Weber and Harari, modernity—speaking in general terms—undertook a sweeping process of rationalization, demystifying the classical world and secularizing the Christian one. Latour, however, urges us to look more closely at the complex mechanisms through which the modern era achieved this, while simultaneously concealing its internal contradictions. For Latour, being modern means precisely this: never revealing that every act of «purification» necessarily relies on a corresponding «hybridization», and vice versa.

The alternation between immanence and transcendence, multiplied across each of the three terms at stake—namely, God, humanity, and the world, the three elements of special metaphysics in the philosophical tradition—oils the gears of this great machine so well that it becomes virtually unstoppable. The machine, of course, is the human activity of self-preservation and reproduction through the transformation of the world. Moderns rendered themselves «invincible» because, even while producing a vastly greater mixture of human and nonhuman entities than so-called "premodern" cultures, they could never become fully conscious of it.[10] Mediation, the true engine of modern development, has always been overshadowed by purification, in which moderns placed their unquestioning faith.

> Solidly grounded in the transcendental certainty of nature's laws, the modern man or woman can criticize and unveil, denounce and express indignation at irrational beliefs and unjustified dominations. Solidly grounded in the certainty that humans make their own destiny, the modern man or woman can criticize and unveil, express indignation at and denounce irrational beliefs, the biases of ideologies, and the unjustified domination of the experts who claim to have staked out the limits of action and freedom. (Latour, 1993: 36)

[10] One point needs to be made, however obvious it may seem: as Latour insists, «modernity is not the false consciousness of moderns» (Latour, 1993: 40). Its paradoxical character cannot be reduced to the formula "they thought x, but in fact y". Modernity is not a mistake to be corrected but a structural condition, defined by the tension between purification and mediation.

What, then, are those «truly exceptional events»—to recall the conclusion of the previous paragraph—that have torn the veil, allowing us today to glimpse what once remained invisible?

It is clear that what has torn the veil are none other than the hybrids themselves (Boyle's laboratory and Hobbes's Leviathan are striking examples), which have proliferated to the point that they can no longer be absorbed into either nature or society, nor referred back to the «crossed-out God». It is the ecological, technological, and social transformations of the present (environmental crises, global risks, the increasingly evident entanglement of human and nonhuman) that have made it impossible to go on believing in a sharp opposition between nature and culture. In light of this trajectory, the IUGS decision which we discussed in the introduction also comes into sharper focus: the formal rejection of the Anthropocene does not deny its actual significance but rather exemplifies the intrinsic difficulty we face whenever we attempt to translate transformations that escape the classical distinctions between nature and culture into institutional categories. In this sense, it is an *eminently modern* gesture.[11]

What we are witnessing is in fact a veritable explosion of subjectivism, one that closely concerns philosophy in its most traditional sense. The multiplication of agencies—long concealed by modernity—can no longer be denied. All the devices put in place by the modern tradition to dominate the world, materially but above all symbolically, are now in a state of full-blown crisis.[12] Faced with this scenario, however, it is natural to ask whether it really makes sense to think in radically horizontal terms—as Latour himself seems to suggest (See Latour, 1988)—about the relationships between different agencies. Should human activity be considered on the same level as that of a river or a virus? It is difficult to conceive of ecological issues from a perspective completely external to an anthropocentric horizon, even if one intends to minimize the normative scope of that term. In a worst-case scenario—all too real, unfortunately—where the planet's limits are systematically exceeded, the issue is one that humanity must confront primarily in its own interest, given our central role in shaping and transforming the Earth system.[13] The irreversible degradation of ecosystems, the disruption of biogeochemical cycles, massive biodiversity loss, and the triggering of non-linear climatic processes would not only constitute damage "for nature itself", but would above all create a global context marked by famine, resource conflicts, and deep social inequalities. In this sense, even the most radical attempt to deconstruct anthropocentrism must contend with the fact that the stakes of the ecological crisis are, first and foremost, the possibility of a dignified life for human communities.

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[11] After all, although he could not have known the commission's decision, Latour had already highlighted this problem in 2015. (See Latour, 2017: 111 ff).

[12] Consider, in this regard, the attempts put forward by the theorists of the so-called 'Good Anthropocene', who secularize modern conceptual devices in order to preserve a form of 'providence'. (See Hamilton, 2015).

[13] At the same time, however, attempts to address the climate crisis without calling into question a radically anthropocentric perspective almost inevitably lead to what Cera describes as the "pet-ification of nature". Such approaches remain fully embedded in the subjectivist tradition and, for this reason, are unable to address the problem at its most fundamental level: «They are, as a result, all woven into the very fabric of modernity». (See, Cera 2023: 102 ff).

The Anthropocene, moreover, seems to reveal an even more radical problem: if, as Harari observes, modernity traded meaning for technical power, we must ask whether this gamble has truly succeeded. The present suggests the opposite: on the one hand, technical-scientific power, far from ensuring stability, becomes a source of vulnerability itself; on the other, the modern subject proves to be an illusion. Put bluntly: we tried to safeguard both meaning and power and ended up with neither. Hence the urgency of rethinking these categories in a way that goes beyond anthropocentrism and modern subjectivism.[14]

In light of the evidence discussed, it becomes clear that merely recording the "explosion of subjectivism" as if it were a sudden, unprecedented phenomenon is not enough. Rather, it is necessary to recognize that this crisis exposes the internal fragilities of the modern covenant. Just as the Anthropocene cannot be said to have simply "appeared", but results from a specific way of understanding the human–world relationship in modernity, subjectivism too did not emerge *ex nihilo*.[15] As Latour teaches, it is the outcome of a constitutive act of concealment: modernity advanced through a continuous interplay of hybridization and purification, yet always at the cost of keeping this mechanism invisible. Its strength was, at the same time, its weakness. Alongside historical awareness, ontological sensitivity also plays a decisive role. In the Anthropocene, hybrids are no longer mere side effects of modernity: we ourselves have become hybrids, inextricable entanglements of the human and nonhuman, the technical and the biological, the social and the natural.[16] Faced with this situation, the traditional categories of classical ontology—nature, society, subject, object—prove insufficient. Continuing to use them without revision risks repeating the same gesture carried out by the IUGS: confining the Anthropocene within an overly narrow framework and attempting to measure it with obsolete tools.

The philosophical challenge we face today is not merely to rethink subjectivism, but to develop new categories capable of thinking an "unbound" world: a world that can no longer be reduced to a unifying constraint—neither religious nor human—and that demands to be understood in its full plurality.[17] These issues

[14] For a broader overview of the many ways in which the relationship between subjectivity and the Anthropocene is articulated, see Hamilton, 2019; Kidner, 2021. Also of interest is De Preester's reflection, which links the discussion of subjectivity in the Anthropocene to the classical problem of the disconnect between knowledge and behaviour. See De Preester, 2022.

[15] The debate underlying this issue is extensive and cannot be addressed here in its entirety. We therefore confine ourselves to a few considerations. As should be clear from the preceding discussion, we largely endorse Hamilton's view that the Anthropocene exhibits features of genuine *uniqueness*, such that «established environmental sciences remain just as relevant to the old objects; but they can shed only limited light on the new object and the questions it throws up» (Hamilton, 2016: 103). At the same time, however, it is important to emphasize—following Cera—that «While this paradigm certainly displays distinctive features, its status as a historical singularity does not imply a complete break with the past. As I will argue in the next chapter, in discussing Hamilton's Hard Anthropocene, a 'rupture' is not a *creatio ex nihilo*». (see Cera 2023: 106 ff.)

[16] The literature on the status of human beings in the Anthropocene, and more generally regarding the hybridization of nature and culture facilitated by technology, is vast. We limit ourselves here to mentioning a few particularly instructive works: Herbrechter, 2013; Van Den Eede, 2015; Susen, 2022; Basak, & Saha, 2023. In Italian, see Allegra, 2017.

[17] The reference, of course, is to one of the most widely accepted etymologies of the term "religion", from the Latin *religare*: to bind, to hold together, to order.

are, of course, progressively gaining recognition within the global debate, and a wide variety of possible solutions have been proposed in response.[18] On the one hand, proposals have emerged aimed at expanding and pluralizing entities, thereby granting hybrids a third, autonomous ontological status, distinct from both natural and artificial entities (see Hoły-Łuczaj and Blok, 2019). On the other hand, there are also numerous attempts at ontological "reduction", as exemplified by New Materialism and the critique of human exceptionalism (see Benson, 2019). It should also be acknowledged that these issues intersect with an ongoing philosophical discussion on the ontological status *of technology itself*. In this context—without any claim to exhaustiveness—the debate contrasts theorists of the "empirical turn" (see Achterhuis, 1977) with approaches that aim to rethink technology at a more fundamental ontological or transcendental level (Lemmens, 2021; Cera, 2021; Blok, 2022).

Rather than debating the complexities of each individual position—whose nuances could hardly be captured in a simple schematic—it may be more significant that the sheer diversity of approaches, sometimes conflicting, sometimes complementary, attests to a profound and shared recognition: the Anthropocene forces us to confront the inadequacy of inherited categories and demands a radical rethinking of our conceptual frameworks to account for agency, responsibility, and the very constitution of the world. In this sense, the multiplicity of proposals is itself a symptom of the ongoing epochal transformation, compelling philosophy to move beyond abstraction and engage with the tangible complexities of a world that can no longer be contained within classical distinctions.

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[18] Paolo Vidali, recognizing—and at the same time promoting—the need for a shift «from the subject to the system», identifies three fundamental transformations to move beyond the subjectivist framework of modern thought. The first is ontological: a shift from a world of things to a world of relations. The second is epistemological: scaling back the centrality of causality to make room for the concept of equilibrium. The third is anthropological and moral: understanding that our responsibility toward the Earth system is inseparable from an awareness of our belonging to the ecosystem (See Vidali 2025: 39 ff.)

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