

THE PHILOSOPHER OF COMPLEXITY

"Complexity is a challenge to knowledge, thought, action. Our reality - physical, biological and social - is an odd mix of order, disorder and organisation."

Telos: Instead of compartmentalised, simplistic knowledge, you propose complex knowledge that breaks down the traditional barriers between the disciplines and fills the black holes in our educational systems. What does teaching complexity mean?

Edgar Morin: Complexity is a challenge for knowledge, thought, action. Our reality, both physical, biological and social, is an odd mix of order, disorder and organisation.

By order I do not mean just determinism, but also stability, regularity; by disorder I do not mean just chance, but also decay, collusion; by organisation I mean all the systems on our planet that have been created, from atoms to the stars to the human species.

Knowledge - as it is taught today - is unable to convey, much less teach, complexity: either it separates data or it only sees confusion. Why does all this happen? Because knowledge is governed by the paradigm of disconnection, i.e. we want to understand a complex whole starting with its basic elements, separated from their environment and from the groups they are part of. For example, sociology does not take into account the individual, psychology does not take into account society, the dominant economy only takes into account information through calculations: growth, GDP, opinion polls, etc. But these calculations eliminate the flesh and only see a skeleton.

So they end up separating the cultural man from the biological man and impose a techno-economic vision that not only thinks it *knows* just through numbers, but dreams of the total *algorithmisation* of society and man. Algorithms allow us to predict the actions of a *simple* machine, one whose behaviour we can foresee as soon as we are informed of its programming criteria. Unfortunately, man, by his very nature, is not a simple machine, let alone predictable. The evolution of life is the fruit of metamorphosis, our life is made of a series of unexpected events, revelations and encounters that transform us.

This simplistic vision of man, society, life, is the source of the errors and illusions that have proliferated and are still proliferating.

It is this way of thinking, which separates and disconnects, that I contrast with complex knowledge, according to Pascal's principle that *"Since all things being caused and causing, assisted and assisting, mediate and immediate, and all of them joined by an intangible natural bond that connects the most distant and the most variant, I hold it impossible to know the parts without knowing the whole, or to know the whole without individually knowing the parts."*

This principle of Pascal was long ignored because we lived according to the Cartesian principles of dividing and separating to acquire knowledge. Cartesian principles were useful in the specialisation of knowledge, but prevented any overall vision, any global vision, any complex vision.

How does the theme of the 'seven lessons' fit into your vision?

All the sciences include, and are scattered with, elements that regard man and what is human, and for this reason, all the sciences, including philosophy, must be connected.

This is the reason why I argue that you can teach complexity: it is essential to train the mind to put all information and factual knowledge into context, to be able to integrate knowledge into the system you find yourself in and take part in.

So, methods need to be taught that enable the understanding of mutual relations and how the parts and the whole influence each other in a complex world. Minds that are eager to know always come up against ambivalence and contradiction.

True knowledge does not refuse them, because this would reduce and simplify, it faces them. We need to teach people to think that antagonisms can be complementary.

The fact that you have referred to one of my books, published by UNESCO in 1999, *Seven Complex Lessons in Education for the Future*, makes me very happy. In the book, I talk in particular about teaching the ethics for human genre, about human understanding, about facing uncertainties and about earth identity. Teaching the seven lessons allows both teachers and students to acquire a *culture*, i.e. something that goes beyond speciality. It is essential for literature and philosophy scholars to draw upon the tremendous achievements in the sciences, and likewise the sciences must reflect on their social and cultural implications. I would add that literature and poetry are not just things that give us wonderful feelings. They teach us what it means to be human, they teach us life. These are fundamental achievements. Therefore, anything that tends to reduce the human sciences to purely technical and specialised knowledge could be called *barbaric*. The key point of the teaching of the seven lessons is the human condition. Nowhere is it taught what we humans are. This is a huge black hole in our educational systems. In education, various disciplines have disintegrated the complex unity of human nature. Part of teaching complexity is restoring the unity of human nature so that everyone becomes aware and conscious both of their complex identity and of their common identity with all other humans.

You often talk about the need for a 'dialogue among civilisations.' What do you mean? And what does this concept of

‘civilisation’ mean, especially in relation to the concept of ‘culture’?

According to the classic distinction proposed in 19th century German sociology, we call culture whatever belongs to an ethnic group, a nation or community. In other words, its customs, beliefs, rituals, celebrations, gods and myths... While civilisation is whatever can be transmitted from one culture to another. For example, potato cultivation was transmitted from Andean America to Europe, then to the rest of the world. Like the plough started to be used in a corner of the world and then spread everywhere.

In other words, civilisation is technical and material: it is what can be transmitted. So, when we talk about a “dialogue between civilisations”, we mean a “dialogue between cultures”. When we talk about dialogue between civilisations in its current meaning, we think of Western civilisation, or Chinese, Islamic, Christian, Iranian, African and so on. Yet if I talk about Chinese civilisation, I could be talking about the Tao or Confucianism, and Islamic civilisation, for example, includes countries and populations that have different cultures. Basically, civilisation and culture are vague concepts and subject to uncertainty! However, we could remedy this uncertainty by saying that *“We are different, we have different beliefs and religions, but our particular characteristics should not prevent us from dialoguing.”* In my view, civilisations or cultures do not dialogue. Only individuals can dialogue, and there is only dialogue when each individual can express their thesis, produce their arguments and the other is not prevented from doing so.

Real dialogue is when you recognise the same dignity in others: no dialogue is possible between a master and his slave. It implies equality, which is a relatively new point of view in European culture! Western Europe has dominated and exploited the world starting with the conquering of America; it trafficked in slaves and practiced slavery; it perpetuated the longest and harshest dominations in history. Yet in that same Europe, and perhaps even since that conquest, illuminated minds have developed some key ideas that enable dialogue: it was Bartolomeo de Las Casa, a Spanish priest, who said that the American indigenous people were human beings just like everyone else. And it was Montaigne who wrote that *“Each man calls barbarism whatever is not his own practice; for indeed it seems we have no other test of truth and reason than the example and pattern of the opinions and customs of the country we live in. There is always the perfect religion, the perfect government, the perfect and accomplished manners in all things.”*

Montesquieu continued by imagining, in his epistolary novel *Persian Letters*, some Persian travellers who arrive in France and look at it as an anthropologist would. In other words, Western Europe is both the land of domination and of ideas about emancipation.

What is the difference between dialogue and negotiation?

Negotiating means contracting to reach an agreement. While genuine dialogue lies in understanding others.

To understand others, you first need to try and get to know them in their entirety, know their beliefs, customs, rituals, civilisation, which implies an erudition or a certain education.

We must understand that the Other is a subject like we are, an autonomous individual who deserves respect. At that point, the subjective impulse of interest and sympathy is indispensable. Without this, there is no understanding. Today we are experiencing a collective hysteria and Manichaeism that prevent solidarity and, hence, understanding.

We are going through a period when understanding is losing ground. How can we encourage greater understanding? Take France and Germany, which fought for a century and a half. In France, at school they taught that the Germans were *beasts* and, in Germany, that the French were useless. After World War II, they decided that the history books needed to be reviewed and that their socio-centric vision needed to be replaced with a broader point of view.

But, on the other hand, today in Western Europe, we continue to hide some parts of history when we study this continent. For example, we forget that the Ottoman Empire extended up to Hungary and the former Yugoslavia and played a civilising role for centuries. We need a historical education to sympathise with the Other. Many conditions must be met before engaging in dialogue. The first is mutual understanding.

Marco Sansini

Editorial

And they say *WhatsApp* is useless. However, this time it played a key role thanks to a WhatsApp message from my dear friend Andrea, who shared an interview in the Italian newspaper *Repubblica* called **“Edgar Morin: Culture Is Our Shared Destiny”**, which gave me an idea. Actually, when I thanked Andrea for this fascinating article, I wrote: “I just might ask him if he’d be willing to contribute to PRIMOPIANOSCALA**c**.”

In that interview, celebrating the 100th birthday of this great French philosopher and where Morin addresses *“the serious crisis we find ourselves in”* and indicates *“strengthening knowledge”* as the way out, what especially struck me was this statement: *“We are experiencing a frightening crisis of thought: even and especially those who seem like the keepers of objective truth, the economists and their calculations, do not realise that calculations are not enough to understand all the problems of humans. Calculations are a necessary auxiliary tool, like statistics, surveys and everything else.”* So, what do we need to understand human problems? *“It is this way of thinking, which separates and disconnects, that I contrast with complex knowledge,”* Morin argues. The issue of complexity is one of the topics of this issue of PRIMOPIANOSCALA**c**, and according to this philosopher, we need to learn to see complexity and find a compromise with it. One of the main ideas in his thought is that separating disciplines allows each discipline to progress but limits overall knowledge, which gets taken out of context.

How should we think about the new world we are living in? What essential concepts should we ground our comprehension of the future on? What theoretical bases do we need to overcome daily challenges?

Morin responds to these questions with the seven fundamental lessons that education should teach in each society and culture.

In 1999 he dedicated a book to this called ***The Seven Complex Lessons in Education for the Future***.

The first is indeed to *know knowledge*, which he defines *“The blindness of knowledge: Detecting error and illusion”*. Then there is *“The principles of pertinent knowledge”*, i.e. promoting knowledge that can grasp global problems and objects in their

totality. The third lesson is “*Teaching the human condition*”, i.e. awareness of the complex nature of one’s own identity and the identity we share with all other humans. The fourth is “*Earth Identity*”: the destiny of the planet regards everyone; so, it is important to show how much education can contribute to the creation of an *earth citizenship*. The fifth is currently a hot-button issue, even more than the previous one, “*Confronting uncertainties*”. Morin writes: “*We need to learn to navigate on a sea of uncertainties, sailing in and around islands of uncertainty.*”, i.e. educating in order to prepare the mind to expect the unexpected is essential to face the risks that uncertainty entails. The sixth lesson “*Understanding Each Other*” argues that we have such a deep need for mutual understanding that we need to study misunderstanding. This is the only way we can understand the roots of racism, xenophobia, forms of discrimination and create a basis for the education-for-peace. The seventh and last lesson is “*Ethics for the Human Genre*”, where Morin creates a triangle that shows the ternary nature of the human condition: being an individual, a part of a species and, closely connected to this, an organizing agent of society. Call this anthropo-ethical awareness and the lesson to be learnt is how to maintain a dynamic balance between these three spheres – individual, species and society – all equally important. Morin provides such a deep and not simple contribution to contemporary thought that he has been called an “integral philosopher”. Thank you, Andrea!

New year, new cover: this January 2022 issue kicks off the new *graphic* series for the covers of PRIMOPIANOSCALA^c. With an almost dreamlike, pop look the covers will portray the face of our interviewee with a sort of head-covering containing all the distinguishing elements of their work, role, life and so on. Using the *collage* technique, it mixes illustrations, photographs and 3D images related to our interviewee (their work, passions, *etc.*), their home/city, peppered with images without conceptual links but that help tie the graphic image together. Like in a *collage*, the images are juxtaposed, without elaboration.

Mariella Palazzolo



Edgar Morin is a French sociologist, philosopher and essayist. Until 1989 he was the Director of the Centre for Mass Communication at the National Centre of Scientific Research in Paris and today he serves as its Director Emeritus. He is also the Co-Director of the Centre of Transdisciplinary Studies in Paris.

Since the start of his academic career, in 1968 at the University of Nanterre, his studies were focussed on *reforming thought*, a new knowledge that goes beyond the separation of knowledge to teach complex thought. He has written numerous books, many of which have been translated into Italian and English: *La Voie*, *Seven Complex Lessons in Education for the Future*, *The Cinema or the Imaginary Man*, *Une tête bien faite*, *La paradigme perdu*.

His last literary feat is *Leçons d'un siècle de vie*, a book that condenses the legacy of his complex thought into a series of short memento-aphorisms. A cinematography scholar, he is an adherent of Surrealism and wrote a book on the seventh art entitled *Le cinéma: Un art de la complexité*.

From 1954 to 1962 he was the director of Arguments, a journal inspired by the Italian literary review *Argomenti*. In 1961 he co-directed the film *Chronique d'un été*.

Over the course of his career, he has been given some important honours, such as Commander of the *Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* in France and Officier of the *Order of Civil Merit* in Spain. He has also received numerous honorary degrees, from the

University of Perugia, Valencia, Salonicco and so on.

He joined the French Resistance and took part in the liberation of Paris in August 1944. The following year, in Landau, he was made head of the propaganda office of the French military government. From 1942 to 1951 he was a member of the French Communist Party, which he was ousted from for decrying Stalin’s horrors.

He was born in Paris, and his official surname is Nahoum. His father was a Sephardi Jewish merchant from Salonicco and originally from Livorno. On 8 July 2021 he celebrated his 100th birthday. In addition to being a cinema enthusiast, Morin also has a passion for aviation and cycling. He defines himself as an opti-pessimist: “Optimism makes us blind to dangers; pessimism paralyses us and contributes to the worst. We need to think beyond optimism and pessimism.”

Marco Sonsini