

The tragedy of the subject in the birth of the world-society. About Edgar Morin

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Abstract

In the important Morin's work *La Méthode*, the autonomy (*autos*) of the subject is constituted, in each living being, by a dialogic tension between opposite/complementary polarities: the anonymous *idem* and the singularity of *ipse*. In the human subject, this tension is "tragically" unfinished, and this implies the development of a very high creativity. The subject uninterruptedly re-generates himself, together with the relational, social and ecological contexts he is a part of, through a complex cooperation/opposition between the *sapiens* and *demens* components of his body-brain-mind. The challenge of the present time, characterized by the birth of an entirely new kind of socio-ecological context, the *world-society*, is the birth of a new kind of human subjectivity.

Keywords

Edgar Morin, Subject, Sapens/Demens, Complexity, World-Society

What is woven on the loom of fate
What is woven in the councils of princes
Is woven also in our veins, our brains, Is
woven like a pattern of living worms In
the guts of the women of Canterbury.
T.S. Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral*

How tragic is this life, in which the absolute nothing
inesorably responds to the self-affirmation of the Self!
Man acquires consciousness, and refuses to become
conscious of the tragedy, the comedy, the madness, the
derision, which constitute his destinee, as well as for
each living being, including the bacteria swarming by
the thousand in his guts.

Edgar Morin, *La vie de la vie*

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1. The adventure of the subject

The process of modern civilization has created the individual, as our western societies think of him, and has gradually burdened him with increasingly demanding tasks. These tasks had not been part of the common mindscape of the human animal for thousands of years in his past history. The heart of these tasks was, in a word, the utopia of self-determination. The individual subject, starting from the famous Cartesian *cogito*, would be the new beginning for the re-writing of the entire human adventure, it was thought: following its emancipation from a mythical-natural destiny, the adventure would gradually become the region of free choice – in short, the region of self-determination. Within the perimeter traced by the self, Kant claimed in *Critique of Pure Reason*, was found everything required to construct solid thinking, the self-sufficient basis for the search for truth. The old community codes, religious and familistic, would soon give way to morals, the new code of behaviour whose sole unit of account would be the self-determining individual.

In the course of the nineteenth century, consistent arguments questioned this nascent certainty. I am not here referring to the arguments advanced by the anti-moderns with their nostalgia for a hierarchical medieval order or for presumed idyllic communities of origin. Instead, I am referring to the arguments advanced by natural and social sciences, by the kind of knowledge which was an inextricable part of modern reason: sciences nurtured by systematic doubt. Knowledge based on suspect, as it has been called. In other words, knowledge which, by exploring the complexity of human experience, gradually accumulated doubts concerning the self-sufficiency, completeness and self-determinability of the individual self. Ethnology was underscoring the irreducibility of the collective *selves*; Marx, the occult link between the apparently rational ideas of the moderns and the material interests of the dominant class; Darwin, man's belonging to the animal reign; Nietzsche, the *involuntary* matrix of the will for power. Freud would soon bring to light the mysterious underworld of the unconscious, Weber and Durkheim the religious origins of even the most modern rational behaviour, Pareto and others the solid elitist roots of power.

But throughout the twentieth century it was mainly the great mass phenomena which accumulated mountains of suspicions regarding the presumed aptitude of the modern self to act as a new beginning of an age of emancipation of the individuals. When the gesture of an anarchist in Sarajevo suddenly sparked the first world war in history in the heart of the most modern societies, only a few decades had passed since Herbert Spencer's optimistic prophecy stating that the peaceful industrial society was about to replace the traditional authoritarian, militaristic societies, thanks to the individual's intrinsic virtues. The Great War was followed by mass support for totalitarian regimes, with the unspeakable horrors producing the Shoa; the second world war was followed by a third long, sluggish war, the Cold War; the resurgence of ethnic and religious belonging followed the fall of the Berlin wall as did the processes of globalization, and the recent barbarism of our time (Morin, 2005).

Meanwhile, each of us has become increasingly addicted to technological gadgets and consumer goods, causing Technology to turn into a sort of undisputed universal god to whom daily sacrifices are due, as in an immense and pervasive permanent *potlach*, in terms of vegetal, animal and human lives. All of this is, however, common knowledge and any averagely-informed reader can no doubt add numerous comments. The newborn modern self has already lost its way, it would seem (Manghi, 2005). But this conclusion might be too hasty, as regards many aspects. Not least: it cannot be taken for granted that the disorientation of our existences and co-existences is leading us to question ourselves once more on the nature of that self. In other words, that it is leading us to a radical re-thinking of the ways in which that self has been thought of, and the ways in which, by re-thinking it, it has been placed in this world, shaped and burdened with expectations. In spite of the growing mountains of reasonable suspects that great scholars and important historical events have brought to our doorstep, our present seems in many respects to be turning its gaze elsewhere.

There are many ways to turn one's gaze elsewhere, but I believe they may by and large be grouped in two large, variegated families, to be taken as two polarities in tension in a single unitary field: the abrogative one, which considers the idea of the individual subject largely as a brief parenthesis in human history which is over; the celebratory one, which considers the

idea of the individual subject as alive and healthy, and hindered “from the outside” in its self-assertion by old structures and inert, obsolete collectivistic ideologies.

This is not the right place to examine this distinction further, or the vast issues raised by research in the past thirty years on the themes of subjectivity and personal identity. Suffice it to remember, of the various “abrogative” tendencies, the influential structuralist and post-structuralist theses on the so-called “death of the subject”, which are often associated to the “post-modern” underscoring of the fluid, indeterminate character given to our interactions by their intensification and hyper-mediatisation. In the “post-modern” interaction, as K. J. Gergen wrote, “the self vanishes” (Gergen, 1991, p. 140), and the time has come “to bid final adieu to the concrete entity of the self” (ivi).

On the other hand, of the various celebrative tendencies it is sufficient to remember the thesis of the so-called “methodological individualism”, which assumes the individual subject as the actual “ultimate unity” of the relational and social architecture (Boudon, 1977, Harsanyi, 1977, Antiseri, Pellicani, 2005). In the contemporary common sense, this “individualistic” assumption is widespread, albeit in implicit ways which are not filtered by scientific reflections, “ideological” ways in the broad sense of the term. Consider the idea that we are each forging our own destiny, for good or for bad; the idea that external, social and ideological influences can be dominated and kept under control by our self. Margaret Thatcher’s famous statement, “Society does not exist”, summed up these ideas and made them radical, implying that “society” is simply the result “downstream” of what is being done “upstream” by the only entities that truly “exist”, i.e. the individuals. But apart from Mrs Thatcher’s claim, these ideas are widespread in a vast contemporary common sense, which expects each of us to act by appealing to our own will, to keep ourselves positive, healthy, not-unemployed, creative, flexible, and so on: in short, to keep *fit*. As the German sociologist Ulrich Beck (1986) effectively wrote: biographical solutions for problems of a systemic nature.

Certifying the disappearance of the modern subject, on the one hand, and reasserting his pre-eminence, on the other, are two opposing but converging ways to abolish the issue of the

subject: abolishing it, in fact, as an *issue*. As the core of radical questioning, the core which cannot be thought of as clear, as understood, as foregone. On the contrary, my aim in these notes is to assume that problematic core as an important issue, as an issue that is crucial to our present age. An issue which needs to be profoundly re-considered with reference to how it has prevalently been considered so far, in light of that modernity which Zygmunt Bauman has termed “solid” (Bauman, 2000), since the tendential “liquefaction” of that modernity requires a completely new sociological imagination. Without, however, necessarily leaving the self, or what we have called subject, to its mere destiny of “liquefaction”.

Of the attempts that have assumed as pertinent and crucial the issue of the subject in the whirlwind turn of the century and millennium, whilst trying at the same time to radically re-define our present-day coordinates, I believe that Edgar Morin’s attempt is one of the most ambitious, vast and complex – perhaps *the* most ambitious, given the vast interweaving of biological, anthropological, psycho-neurological, linguistic, philosophical, historical and social knowledge that comes into play. Indeed, dealing with it in a short essay means necessarily being ungenerous. Thus, I apologise beforehand for the limits of these notes of mine, which can be attributed to the writer rather than to the object of the writing; I do, nevertheless, wish to briefly sum up Morin’s idea of the subject in order to underscore the vocation to respond to the urgent demands of an existential, social and ecological nature emerging from the society of our time. In short, recalling Bauman’s image, to the challenges of the liquid modernity in which each self, like Alice in Wonderland, has the growing feeling that the rules of the game that is being played are changing constantly and without any forewarning.

The argumentation will be fourfold: the subjectivity that is intrinsic to each *biological* organism, the *cognitive* character of the living, the *sapiens/demens* peculiarity of the human subject, the challenges of the human subject in our present, in which Morin invites us to see the emerging of an unprecedented form of society: the birth – *tragic*, like all births – of the *world-society*.

2. Autos: the biological subject

The issue of the subject runs through Edgar Morin's entire, vast oeuvre, starting with *L'homme et la mort* (1951), and *Le cinéma ou l'homme imaginaire* (1956). But it becomes the object of methodical, systematic reflection towards the end of the 60s, with the maturation of the clear-cut epistemological turning point that was to lead him to a radical re-thinking of the entire system of anthropological-social knowledge, which had been referred to until then as belonging to a wider system of naturalistic knowledge (Manghi, 2009, ch. I). The latter system, however, was not provided by the better consolidated naturalistic knowledge but emerged from the new languages and new reflections of physics, biology and neurosciences, and involved a "re-organization of the very structure of knowledge" as Morin was later to write:

I am increasingly convinced that the anthropo-social science needs to be articulated in the science of nature, and that this articulation requires a re-organization of the very structure of knowledge" (1977, p. 9).

The re-organization of the structure of knowledge which Morin calls for would gradually and effectively focus on the key-notion of *complexity*. The science of nature Morin had in mind was not, in fact, the historically accredited one, long shaped to fit the reductionist ideal which claimed the pre-eminence of simplicity over complexity, of the parts over the whole, of the blind mechanism over the vital organization, of the separation between nature and culture. It was, rather, the science that was exploring the mutual imbrication of simplicity and complexity, the "cybernetic" forms of interaction of the parts and the whole, the autonomy of the living organization, the intimate, inextricable interweaving of nature and culture.

The scientific *ethos* of this *scienza nuova*²⁸, clearly syntonically with Gregory Bateson's *ecology of mind* (1972; Manghi, 2004, 2013), was not aspiring to a unilateral control over nature, innate to the reductionist epistemology, but to the "ecologic" task of inscribing the human adventure, in all its extraordinary complexity, within the history of the living, which

²⁸ Morin left the words in Italian, as they came from Gianbattista Vico (Morin, 1973, p. 229).

was also thought of as an adventure characterized since its beginning by a sophisticated logic of complexity (Manghi, 2009, chap. 2). In short, with a Morin-like slogan: from the empire of the Genes to the republic of the Complex (Manghi, 1990).

The human adventure had long been imagined as a kind of island in the sea of nature, and needed to be re-imagined as a “peninsular” adventure, as Morin wrote in *Le paradigme perdu* (1973), the formidable, clear *manifesto* of the undertaking to which he was to devote himself heart and soul over the next thirty years. He had already published a diary, significantly called *Le vif du sujet* (1969). Soon after (1974) he would publish the three volumes, edited together with Massimo Piattelli Palmarini, called *L'unité de l'Homme*, which collected the results of a pioneer trans-disciplinary study carried out by several scholars at the Centre Royaumont in Paris: 1. *Le primate et l'homme*, 2. *Le cerveau humain*, 3. *Anthropologie fondamentale*. 1977 saw the publication of *La nature de la nature*, the first volume of the great work which had been announced in *Le paradigme perdu*, and which Morin had termed by the “Cartesian” title, *La méthode*; the fifth and last tome, formed by two volumes, has been published very recently (Morin, 1977, 1980, 1986, 1991, 2001, 2004).

Of course, choosing Descartes as a starting point was strategic. It meant starting again from the act of birth of the modern subject; from the *cogito ergo sum* to which many have traced the proud self-separation of man from the reign of nature, as well as the first root of individualism seen as the thinking which assumes the individual subject as a “self-contained” unit of account in the social interaction. Yet for Morin starting again from the act of birth of the subject did not mean being symmetrically *opposed to* it, setting loose the individual in his belonging to nature, as many “anti-Cartesian” philosophies of an eastern or romantic nature had been advocating.²⁹ For Morin, rather counter-intuitively, the Cartesian challenge needed to be accepted completely: first, by acknowledging that Descartes had given birth to the first idea of the subject, founding it on self-reflexivity; and secondly – critically – by setting the main limit of that first idea not in the hypothesis that self-reflexivity is what distinguishes the

²⁹ This orientation would also include, according to Gilles Coutlée (1990), Bateson's *ecology of mind*, and this is clearly different to Morin's approach. Personally, I do not fully uphold this conclusion although it does have some convincing arguments; however, this is not the appropriate place to discuss the issue.

human from the animal reign, but rather in the hypothesis that the “spiritual” quality is *only* the human being’s. Self-reflexivity, the self-referential circle of the *pour soi* set in motion by the *cogito ergo sum*, is for Morin one and the same as subjectivity (Castoriadis, 1990). But, unlike what Descartes suggested, it does not draw the line between the human mind and matter as a whole (mineral, vegetal, animal, even our corporeal machine). Instead it draws the line between all the living, from bacteria to man, and the non-living. And when in the course of evolution the hyper-complex animal emerged, endowed with a conscience and with speech, which we called *homo sapiens*, it was not subjectivity tout court which entered the world, but a peculiar form of it.

Morin, as we were saying, does not frontally oppose the “Cartesians” but tries to point out that their ideas of the individual is more complex than they themselves appear to believe. It is indeed able to raise new issues rather than conclude the one called *What is man?* Take as an example of this attitude of Morin’s towards the *cogito*, the following observation concerning the *theory of games*, introduced by the “neo-Cartesian” von Neumann and subsequently made more sophisticated by several generations of followers:

Certainly, von Neumann’s player is still an abstract subject who calculates what is best for him according to a strictly utilitarian vision and an economic strategy which aims at combining minimum risk with maximum gain. But this player does present the fundamental characteristics of the subject: the ego-centric will (interest), egoistic computation, the finality of for-oneself (1980, p. 227)

For Morin – this is the essence of his criticism to the Cartesian idea of the subject – the three notions evoked at the end of the above quote do not designate characteristics peculiar to the human being, but above all to all living organisms. From the most elementary bacterium to *homo sapiens*, life would not have been and would not be possible if it were not organized and did not organize itself by means of those three properties, as Morin more rigorously defined: *ego-auto-centrism, ego-auto-reference, ego-auto-finality*.

Before examining these three notions, I should like to dwell on an important prefix which appears in them, linking them and giving them structure: *auto*. Having being produced by the

cybernetic and systemic reflections of the Macy Conferences in the 40s and 50s, this notion started to acquire a general epistemological importance in a non-mechanistic way in the 60s and 70s thanks to the works of scholars like Heinz von Foerster, Gregory Bateson, Henri Atlan, Humberto Maturana, Francisco Varela and many others. For Edgar Morin this notion, on which he had based his explanatory principle of *autos* (1980, part II), is very important since it allows a connection, in the description of the living, between the two sides which reductionist science had assumed as the only relevant ones, separating them dualistically: the blind *necessity*, and the no less blind *chance*;³⁰ in other words, repetition and singularity, or again order and disorder.

By limiting the relevance of its operations to the ideas of chance and necessity, objectified for fear of falling into forms of irrationalistic vitalism, reductionist science ended up by expelling from its field of vision – or freezing in an abstract, impersonal image – the subject. In short, as Morin noted, it ended up by not questioning itself on that intense, uninterrupted, vital activity of interconnection which moment after moment, for each organism, sets up a certain coherence between the deterministic aspects and the aleatory ones, between the impersonal repetitiveness of physical, biological and social binds and the unforeseeable singularity of the events which each organism experiences moment after moment. In this intense, uninterrupted going back and forth, each organism sets up its own singular, unrepeatable uniqueness: its own way of organizing the relationship between necessity, chance and itself. A bird flying in the sky is never only one of its species (or of its *phylum*, etc.), but always also that particular bird, which at that moment is experiencing that particular thing and not another. Science, Morin argues, must be able to produce descriptions which do not only explain non-subjective features ascribable to chance and to necessity, but also subjective, self-reflective features which make up the autonomy of the living and the singularity of their experiences, as well as their coherence with broader living and non-living systems. And science must be able to do this, of course, not because of a romantic adherence

³⁰ Morin's dispute regarding the famous essay *Chance and necessity* by the Nobel laureate Jacques Monod (1977) recurs in various works, together with the debt of gratitude.

to ineffable irrationalistic principles, but in observance of the rational challenge animating scientific endeavours.

Thus, this is the function of the notion of *autos*: to enable us to think rigorously, methodically, the autonomy of the living, considered as a property emerging from the regularity of physical-chemical matter, but in no way merely ascribable to the latter. A property which Morin thinks of as having two dimensions, one in tension with the other and at the same time one depending on the other, identified by the terms *genos* and *phainon* (1980, part II, ch. 2):

- The term *genos* (*origin* in Greek) designates the generative property, the self-reproduction of individuals as generic, not singular beings. What is constantly reproduced, in this way, is the anonymous *idem*, or identity seen as the conformity of the individual to levels of the organization of the living which transcend him: “identity which is both *interior* (the heritage inscribed in our genes), *anterior* (the parent, the ancestor), *posterior* (the progeny) and *exterior* to the self (the congenera)” (*Ibid.*, p. 270). In temporal terms, the *genos* leads the present back to the past-future pair.

- The term *phainon* (*appearing* in Greek) designates the property to maintain singularity, moment after moment. In other words, the individual aims at maintaining his organizational uniqueness and his peculiar bonding with the context by means of uninterrupted actions of transformation and assimilation. What is constantly reproduced, in this way, is the irreducible *ipse*, identity seen as uniqueness. Whereas the *genos* shows us order, repetition, invariance, the *phainon* shows us disorder, instability, variability. In temporal terms, the reference of the *phainon* is the present, the immediate, the here and now.

The *autos*, formed by the uni-duality *genos-phainon*, allows us to think of the living organization in its autonomy from the physical-chemical organization (from which it depends). In other words, it allows us to think of the paradox, which is inconceivable for the reductionist thinking, of the *self-organization* of the living.

3. Cogito/Computo: the living that think

The biological revolution of the *autos* would be incomprehensible unless we extended the organizational dimension of the living to the cognitive one. In other words, it involves the attribution of the property to think, to all the living starting with the most ephemeral of unicellular organisms, and not only the human animal. In particular, Morin recovers and extends the importance of Jean Piaget's subtle intuitions, in which the cognitive organization and the biological organization were manifestations of the same living logic (Ceruti, 1989), as well as the studies of Cognitive Science pointing in this direction, starting with those mentioned earlier by Maturana and Varela.³¹

The study of the cellular organization and the study of the immune systems carried out in accordance with this line of interpretation show that even the humblest cellular being is equipped with subtle *computational* skills. In other words, they show that each organism

is able to integrally compute its own organization and to partially compute the data of its external environment (Morin, 1980, pp. 159-60).

The reductionist scheme *gene=>behaviour*, which aims at eliminating the autonomy of the computational and auto-computational activity of the organism together with the notion of the subject, has now definitely been left behind even though we have not stepped out of the furrow of scientific endeavour. The organism is naturally *also* a machine, Morin writes, but it is never only nor separately a machine: it is *indistinctly* a being, a machine, a computing apparatus:

though it is possible to locate in the DNA the archives of the computing apparatus, the latter cannot however be located as such: it is a whole with the machine which is a whole with the being: in other words, the cell is *indistinctly* a being, a machine, a computing apparatus (*ivi*, p. 160).

³¹ Once again, it is apt to point out the analogy with Bateson's *ecology of mind*, which states that the evolution of the living should be thought of as a mental process (Manghi, 2013)

The properties Morin calls computational, it should be noted, are not merely skills in anonymous quantitative calculation. They are fully intelligent, thinking skills since they include the ability to examine, assess, appraise, suppose. *Com-puting* is also at the same time distinguishing, connecting, comparing, and naturally, moment after moment, deciding. Of course, for nearly all living species these operations are bound to a computational capital that is engrammed in the genetic code. And of course no behaviour can ever correspond without residues to this capital (or to the requirements of the *genos*). Even the humblest cellular organism, in fact, is destined to exist in an environment which is uncertain, ambiguous and unstable, which imposes (on the side of the *phainon*) exerting the computational skills.

Each living individual, Morin writes, computes himself. It is as if he were repeating to himself, uninterruptedly, moment after moment, *computo, ergo sum*. He does this through action, not through the self-conscious thinking; but by doing it, i.e. by acting his computing, he produces himself, self-referentially, as a subject. He produces himself as an irreducible “I am”:

The Cartesian *cogito* produces the consciousness of the “I am”. The *computo*, on its part, produces the *I am* (*ivi*, p. 190).

We can now return to the three subjective characteristics of the *ego-auto* mentioned earlier, with clearer elements in mind:

a) *Ego-auto-centrism*. For Morin, each living creature

places auto-reference in the most natural way in the center of its universe and [...] *it therefore asserts itself in a privileged and unique site, where it becomes the center of its universe and from which it excludes any other congener, including its homozygotic twin* (Morin, *ivi*, p. 164).

Each single ego, in operating an *exclusive* occupation (i.e. excluding every *alter*) of a certain spatial-temporally defined *site*, acts simultaneously both as an unrepeatability singularity

(*phainon*) and as a member of one or various trans-individual classes it belongs to (*genos*). In asserting itself as a singular creature, irreducible to any other creature, it can but also assert the anonymous alterities that constitute it. So, the alterity is intimately constitutive of the idea of subject: i.e. there is no *ego-auto-centrism* without *exo-auto-centrism*, no autonomy without heteronomy, no independence without dependence.

b) *Ego-auto-reference*. Each living being refers to itself the myriad perceptive, computational and cognitive operations which it incessantly carries out both on environmental stimuli and on itself. This *auto-reference* implies that the single creature is capable of perceiving the limits to its own singularity, placing itself in an external observation post – without losing its own ego-centrism as a result. The theoretical orientation of social sciences which is known by the name of Symbolic Interactionism (George Herbert Mead) has devoted great attention to such mental and social processes leading to the formation of the self and regulating its maintenance and transformations. However, Interactionism has limited its attention only to the human species and only to the symbolic dimensions, considered separately. Morin suggests that similar interactive dynamics may be hypothesized also for the type of living organization which does not include the symbolic-cultural dimension, as the immune system studies clearly show. In Morin's terms, in the dialectics between *I* and *Me*, the *Me* designates the very site occupied by the individual, the "center" the individual refers each processing and each of its own actions to; while the *I* constitutes the act of self-designation, on the part of the individual, as exclusive occupant of that site:

The I designates neither an idea nor an individual but constitutes the self-designation, on the part of the individual, of its occupation of the subject's unique site (ivi, p. 168).

The human cogitation and language do not produce the subject, but a particular kind of subject: a subject which is conscious of being a subject. An individual whose subjectivity goes on to be produced by non-conscious computation. Without this generalized possibility of

asserting *I* through non-conscious operations and actions, there would not be any subjectivity, or any form of communication, or, even, any form of life. Each organism is self-constituted by repeatedly and uninterruptedly building up the distinction between self and non-self. And the non-self is vital to it, of course, no less than the self: the *ego-auto*-reference, in this sense, is always at the same time *exo-auto*-reference.

c) *Ego-auto-finalism (or -transcendence)*. To preserve the entity which occupies the above mentioned ego-centric site, each creature invests energy in different forms of action. In carrying out these forms of actions, the creature considers itself as its own fundamental finality. Yet it is not a matter of mere “selfish” ego-finalism. Once again, thanks to the geno-phenomenic *uniduality* summed up in the term *autos*, the election of one’s self to primary finality of the individual includes *from the very beginning*, simultaneously, the *alter* of the *genos*, the multiple facets of the generic and generative identity of belonging. In other words, there is no *ego*-finalism without *exo*-finalism. Not only: what we call, for simplicity of expression, finality, is actually a dynamic of multiple interconnected finalities, a complex multifinality. Schematizing, we might distinguish four orders of auto-finalities which are at the same time cooperative, competitive and conflicting with each other, two of an egotistic nature and two of an ego-altruistic nature:

- the survival at the moment,
- the survival in time,
- helping others to live (sacrificing oneself *pour les siens*),
- giving life to others (reproductive dimension) (ivi, p. 404 ff.).³²

The subject outlined in these three characteristics is tenaciously closed in itself, as it only knows what it understands in terms of its own point of view in the world. But at the same time it is also extraordinarily – *tragically* – exposed to the other subjects and the whole of the world. Each subject depends, for its own survival, on being capable of keeping itself a co-

³² In a very similar theoretical model of the individual subject, the distinguished Italian sociologist Luciano Gallino calls the two first finalities *individuations* and the two second ones *identifications* (1987a, Chap. VII).

evolutive part of these wider systems. The interior *ego* and the external *exo* are not only in opposition, but simultaneously in a relationship of complementarity and reciprocal specification.

4. Sapiens/demens: the anthropological unfinishedness

What is man? Morin returns to this age-old question (the innumerable answers given will not be dealt with here, naturally) after the extraordinary journey to the world of the living, which has so far only been glimpsed at here. A journey to reconstruct man's *peninsularity*, we have said, which was lost in the dualism nature-culture, machine-subject, genes-behaviour. As we have seen, Morin returns from this journey with a key-idea, to radically question himself again on the human subject: subjectivity belongs to each living individual. Thus, the question to ask oneself, as far as the nature of *homo sapiens* is concerned, is not – in a Cartesian manner – what is a being capable of subjectivity, but rather what specific, peculiar shapes the subjectivity (that is distinctive to all the living) assumes, when in the individuals the auto-reflexive modalities become so complex that they require/develop that extraordinary system which is the human mind/brain.

Morin suggests answering this question through a sharp scrutiny of the models mind/brain which have paid greater attention to integrating in non-dualistic forms the neurological research with the psychological one, as well as with the social and anthropological ones – Paul D. McLean, Karl Pribram, and various others whom it would take too long to list and whom we could not in any case discuss here (Morin, 1986).³³ Thus, we will only briefly outline Morin's answer to the question *What is man?*, an answer which rotates around one word: *hyper-complexity*.

³³ MacLean's *triunique* model (1970), which predicts the conflicting cooperation of three brains (reptilian, archaic-mammal, neocortex) delegated to govern different behaviour typologies, has often triggered polemics and been accused of biological reductionism. Without entering into details given the lack of space, we wish to underscore that the interpretation provided by Morin is obviously in an anti-reductionist key (Manghi, 2009). Gallino's model too, quoted above (1987), attributes considerable importance to MacLean's studies, and also keeps away from the reductionist drifts.

In Morin's view, what characterizes man is a very high degree of auto-organizational complexity, distinguished by an order/disorder dialogic which functions at an extremely high level of creativity, dissipation, disorganization, destructive risk. In other words, at a high level of tension between *genos* and *phainon* between the repetitive calculation and creative ingeniousness, between *problem solving* and problematization, between the social belonging and the existential solitude, between the blinder subjection to myth and the more lucid exercise of free thinking, between the more unbearable pain and the more sublime ecstasy, between reason and folly, and so on.

According to Morin (1986), the process of hominisation has not produced, as we are comforted in thinking, a *homo sapiens*, but a *homo sapiens/demens*. Our *demens* side is not an extraneous agent intruding at a certain point in our evolutive history, in the natural evolution of things. It is a constitutive characteristic of human nature, an extreme implication of the *logic of the living* which has always regulated biological evolution and which has assumed new forms through the human brain. A brain that is constitutively composed of different brains in reciprocal competition and cooperation, each of them being organized by different kinds of properties: rational, affective, instinctive, all of them endowed with the same importance and dignity, through their mutual, uninterrupted, interaction.

As Morin clearly stated in *Le paradigme perdu*, the complexity of the human mind/brain is not a mysterious, vitalistic, extra-natural quality, but a highly sophisticated consequence of a natural quality:

the disposition peculiar to the complex auto-organized system – to life in its broader sense, incorporating man and the mind – to use the forces of disorganization to maintain and develop one's own organization, to use aleatory variations, upsetting events to enhance diversity and complexity (1973, p. 104).

The organization of the human encephalon should be understood in this dynamic perspective of order/disorder. The degree of disorder which can be transformed into information by a living being endowed with a highly developed nervous system can achieve

extremely high levels, since the processes of internal differentiation and redundancy can achieve highly sophisticated forms. However, as the cerebral complexity grows, and the corresponding genetically engrammed automatisms decrease, there is not an increase in the degree of certainty with which the subject perceives, classifies, organizes, memorizes, acts and so on – as the current “cognitivist” representation of the brain as an artificial device induces to believe. On the contrary, as the mass of disorder that can become information grows, the degree of uncertainty grows, of ambivalence and ambiguity characterizing the subject’s relationships with the others and with the environment. The more internally complex the brain is, articulated in changing networks of neurons, organized by differentiations and redundancies that are scarcely bound to imperatives of survival mediated by genetic memory, the less univocal and foreseeable the subject’s reactions to novelties will be, to unexpected perturbations, to external and internal environmental emergencies. In its proceeding by trial and error, the number of trials destined to turn into error will increase enormously.

Furthermore, the more aleatory and arbitrary the subject’s relationships with the environment are, the greater his dependence will be on *social* confirmations and re-confirmations of his perceptions and maps. The stability of the maps through which he will be in relation to the others and to the environment will depend increasingly on the stable forms of participation in associated life. The forms of associated life – power, institutions, religions, means of production, relationships between sexes and generations, division of labor and so on – will subtly permeate the entire web of those maps. Up to the point that, with *homo sapiens/demens*, each single act of perception will be constructed through social interaction:

The brain/mind is thus re-integrated in the whole being, but it is also necessary to re-integrate the human being in society to allow the computation of his brain to develop in cogitation, through language and the knowledge that is contained therein (Morin, 1986, p. 84).

So, the appearance of the neo-cortex has not produced a being governed by reason. In spite of the extraordinary analytical and logical capacities that are displayed by the cerebral neo-

formation, the gap has not been bridged between the brain and the phenomenic world which was created with the regression of genetic determinisms in favor of cerebro-socio-cultural ones. Impulse instability, hyperaffectivity, aptitude to *hybris* and to ecstasy are fully human products of hypercomplexity and not mere residues of an ancestral past. The dementia of *homo sapiens/demens* is not the product of the “low” areas of the encephalon, but of an order/disorder logic inherent to the whole encephalon.

Even the self-consciousness, the “flower of hypercomplexity”, as Morin calls it, follows this *tragic* destiny of determinateness/indeterminateness. It takes flight where myth and magic proliferate, where the real and the imaginary meet and exchange parts, it emerges with its own “certainty” physiognomy, and through the multiplication of doubts, of lucid self-critical returning upon itself (self-self-consciousness...), is once again immersed in doubt, in ambivalence, in indeterminacy. It depends entirely, for its own indispensable as well as precarious certainties, on the myriad of non-conscious *computo ergo sum* which it presupposes. Not only: without losing its autonomy, it depends entirely on the social worlds which it concurs in re-constructing endlessly. As we outlined above, the *ego*-auto-centrism/reference/finality is also complementary to, not only in opposition with, the *exo*-auto-centrism/reference/finality. As Morin put it:

The becoming-subject cannot develop with the exclusion of one of the two terms of the individual/society pair. It cannot develop outside the complementary opposition between egocentrism [...] and sociocentrism. We need to understand that society must remain open and unfinished. An *open society* and the rights of man are not merely “superstructures” or “epiphenomena”, but a fundamental requirement for humanity (1980, p. 357).

Sublime as well as fragile, the *sapiens/demens* subject emerging from the Morinian hypercomplexity is not a complete, pure, finished subject, potentially master of itself and of its environment, as the main modern representations of the self would like to believe. Rather, it is an incomplete, impure, unfinished subject. Always trying to achieve finishedness, never achieving it, never ceasing to *become* a subject. What Morin calls unfinishedness is not mere immaturity, inadequacy, inauthenticity, or even alienation, or the measure of a path still to

trodden, but a constitutive characteristic of the human subject, for good or for evil: its fragility as well as in its creativity, in its capacity to transform disorder into order, errors into learning, constraints into possibilities, perturbations into meanings, suffering into joy. Without this radical unfinishedness, in our species, there would not be such an extraordinary creativity, because the evolution of our creativity is the consequence of a radical regression: the radical regression of genetic determinisms. The hominisation did not generate an adult species, as we moderns prefer to imagine, but rather an infantile one, or a juvenile one:

Indeed, the end of hominization is at the same time a beginning. The man realizing itself in *homo sapiens* is a young and juvenile species: its genial brain appears weak if it is deprived of the cultural apparatus; all its attitudes need to be nourished by a feeding bottle. What hominization completes itself in is the definitive, radical and creative unfinishedness of man (Morin, 1973 p. 105).

Our radical unfinishedness makes us necessarily creative, for good or for evil. It makes us born to be reborn, and reborn again to ourselves, each of us through the others. To be reborn, of course, not only as individuals, but as societies too. To be reborn as *humanity*, as Morin argues.

5. Pre-history of the world-society

The Origin of *homo sapiens* appears in the course of a long process of hominisation it undergoes. The new Origin, which might appear starting with our uncertain planetary agony, should be the beginning of humanization.

Edgar Morin

Thus, in Morin's view, the subject is intimately constituted by a tragic tension: the tension between what is long-lasting and what is ephemeral, between autonomy and dependence,

between ego-centrism and eco-belonging, between ego-centrism and social belonging; between opposite polarities, in short, which are at the same time necessary to each other. A tragic tension in that it is never pacified. Subjectivity is not a substance existing independently of any action of the individual: it can exist and continue to exist only by continuous auto-regeneration, in an uninterrupted vortex of ecological and social interactions. It can exist and continue to exist only by connecting and re-connecting, tirelessly, creatively, the margins under tension of the broader vital tissue through which it emerges.

This tragic condition is thus not the fruit of lacerations which have at a certain point in history intervened to upset previous non-tragic harmonies. *Tragedy* dwells in subjectivity in its very nature, ever since its most elementary manifestations. Even the humble *Escherichia coli*, Morin writes, is constituted of *autos*. Unlike inorganic matter and even the most sophisticated artificial apparatus, it is in fact never banally heteronomous, unilaterally dependent on external agents. As a living being, *Escherichia coli*, too, just like *homo sapiens*, interweaves autonomy and dependence – auto-reflexively, therefore subjectively.

This, of course, does not imply that the continuous re-birth to which the human subject is called can simplistically be reduced to that of a bacterium or of any other individual of another species. As we have seen, the elevated complexity of the human subject, i.e. of a radically incomplete and juvenalised subject, both highly unstable and hyper-affective, involves very specific challenges. It involves highly aleatory and at the same time highly creative re-births. Re-births through which, in order to maintain himself and re-generate himself as a subject, *homo sapiens/demens* must constantly build and re-build whole, vast worlds of meaning, whole, vast ecological and social networks.

In Morin's view, the society of *homo sapiens* is in turn a sort of *sui generis* individual, retro-acting on its components. An individual which in the course of history has assumed more and more complex forms to respond to the challenges of its own survival. If we look back we can identify three distinct, subsequent "births" of society: the paleo-society of the hominids who preceded *homo sapiens*; the archeo-society of hunters-harvesters; and the highly differentiated historical society which has gradually been structured through some

form of state. Each of these births has involved large-scale destruction, great risks, and (given that we are here to speak about it) great creativity. And each has, naturally, integrated in itself the previous one. The paleo-structures and archaisms found in historical societies are not mere residues of the past, but the condition of the possibilities of the present, together with the most modern institutions.

Yet, Morin writes, our present is no longer simply inscribable on the horizon of historical societies. When the *planetary era* started in that fateful year 1492, the need for a new birth started to take shape in the womb of our historical societies: the “fourth birth” of human society, with the inevitable dialectics of destruction and creative hazards that each birth involves. The planetary era that had just started was in the midst of its own *iron age* (Morin, 1981). And it is, indeed, this very condition, this “fourth birth”, which calls for a radical re-thinking of the idea of the subject, notwithstanding the opposite drifts – mentioned at the beginning of these notes – which intend to re-affirm it in its “modern” auto-sufficiency, or abandon it to its “post-modern” evanescence.

The tragedy of the human subject in our present age comes from a wholly unprecedented challenge to survival: the borders of the vast social and ecological networks which need to be built and re-built in order to survive now coincide, for the first time since the appearance of man, with the entire planet: *Homeland-Earth* (Morin, Kern, 1993). The historical forms of our social organization are gravely insufficient to respond to this challenge: the birth of the *world-society* (Manghi, 2009, ch. 6, 2011). This is indeed the most radical challenge ever encountered by *sapiens-demens*, since it is testing as never before its ability to tolerate disorganization, disorder, uncertainty, creatively distilling therefrom a new organization, new order, new certainties. We do not here have the space to compare these images with those developed by important contemporary sociologists, like the society of risk (Beck, 1986), the society of uncertainty or of liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000). Yet it is clear that Morin, starting in the 70s, thoroughly perceived this distinctive cipher to our present age: the irreversible vanishing of the “solidities” which had been considered the bearing structures of

historical societies by several millennia of traditional communities and by several centuries of modernity, deluding ourselves that they were targets we had attained for ever.

This subtle ability to interpret the spirit of the times, and in many cases to anticipate issues which today permeate our common feelings, comes to Morin from his ability to place our present age, in all its emotional intensity, in the long-term prospective of the history of our species. Of a species, we should note, which is re-imagined by him as a very different species to the one which we have normally represented to ourselves in the course of modernity: a species which is at the same time very fragile and highly creative, constitutively bio-cultural, ego-altruistic, *sapiens-demens*. Entirely constituted by all its past and at the same time by an adventurous future which is, of course, unknown, uncertain and unpredictable, which it is its “destiny” to invent and re-invent. The great uncertainty inhabiting our souls in the vortex of our “globalised” present age, as read through Morin’s works, may appear to us as a hint not only of the anguish, loss, disorientation, but also, simultaneously, of the exploration, of possibility, of hope.

In conclusion, Morin’s oeuvre helps us not to experience the emotions of our present as signs of a waning, a decline of societies which are “old”, but rather as signs of a hyper-complex present which is the laboratory for as yet unthought of futures. It helps us to view in the present not the signs of the end of history, but the signs of a new pre-history in which we are deeply, irreversibly immersed. The pre-history of the world-society. Without any facile euphoria, of course, since it cannot be taken for granted that our affective, scientific, artistic, political and religious creativity will be up to the challenge; viewing the ecological and wartime destructions of our time, or the revival of particularism and fundamentalism, we can instead speculate that this might even be improbable. However, this does not imply that we should cease to stake on our creative abilities, mindful of the fact that our hyper-complex and hyper-juvenilized brain, still largely mysterious, has already successfully taken up epochal challenges in the past and favoured the emergence of previously unthought-of forms of co-existence. Morin likes to insist that the unlikely is more consubstantial to human beings than what modern reason would like to think (Manghi, 2009, ch. 7).

If we manage to view in the growing uncertainty of our time the sign of the order/disorder dynamics which are peculiar to our “second pre-history”, the ongoing travail of the “fourth birth” of human society, we might hope to be able to draw up world maps which can help us to be creatively oriented in our choices. We might hope to better understand the importance of structuring the world-society unitarily, by nurturing a planetary juridical system, a form of global government, a shared terrestrial conscience. And also, together, concrete infrastructures for the auto-organization of the new *sui generis* individual which is the world-society:

My thesis is that the globalization of the end of the twentieth century has created the communicational, technical and economic infrastructures of a world-society: Internet may be considered as the draft of a semi-artificial neuro-cerebral network of a world-society (Morin, 2004, p. 188).

We have thus come to the end of these notes, which I hope have shed light on the vast theoretic reach of the Morinian idea of the subject, as well as its strategic importance in the difficult challenges facing us in our “pre-historic” present age. These challenges do not permit us to separate the destiny of our daily existence from that of the entire Homeland-Earth we inhabit. Morin’s extraordinary reflections help us to not submit to this separation as they teach us to recognise in the *tragedy* of even our most ephemeral daily subjective events the breadth of the great questions issuing from our belonging to society, to humanity and to the biosphere in a time of radical transformations which disorient our habitual mindscapes. I believe that we will always have reason to be grateful to Edgar Morin for these extraordinary reflections, which are both rigorous and passionate.

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