

Edgar Morin and the Seven Essential Knowledges

Salaa Mohamed ¹, Kaabouche Ahmed ²

¹ University Center of El Bayadh- Alger

Email: salaadjihad@yahoo.com

² University Center of El Bayadh- Alger

Email : a.kaabouche@cu-elbayadh.dz

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Abstract

This study seeks to address one of the most significant domains attended to by Edgar Morin (see note 1) within his reformist project for the education of the future. In defining the contours of this reformative vision, Morin stresses the urgent need for a radical review of all educational systems, committing to an intellectual and pedagogical struggle to make humanity more open and responsive to the Earth's challenges. The significance and even necessity of this Morinian project become evident in shaping a cognitive framework for anyone aspiring to reform the educational system.

To secure a future for humanity in accordance with this education, it is essential to move beyond the fragmentary thinking established by Cartesian rationalism, which has historically shaped the Western unconscious, and to establish an alternative mode of thought that recognises the multiple dimensions of human nature.

This approach thus seeks to humanise education to foster awareness of the fragmented destiny of the human species, representing a central stake for education of the future and human development. It links

knowledge to the awareness of the shared existential conditions of all humans, and to the appreciation of the essential richness manifested in the diversity of individuals, peoples, and cultures.

Keywords: Education; Teaching; Complex Thought; Human Development; Future

Introduction

Edgar Morin is regarded as one of the pioneers of contemporary intellectual reform in the West. Within the epistemological field, he proposes a renewed and innovative perspective on education. Over the past decades, much of his work has focused on the problems of education and teaching. His engagement in this domain is fundamentally critical and intellectual, closely tied to human concerns and the broader project of human reform. Consequently, the educational objectives he advocates are universal in scope. In many of his texts, education is presented not merely as a tool for societal advancement but also as a matter of human priority.

Morin therefore seeks to articulate an epistemic transformation in the field of education by addressing the blindness of reductive thought (*l'esprit réducteur*) and its distortion of the world, according to the logic of complex thought. The primary significance of complex thought lies in its capacity to change the tools we use to understand the world. This mode of thought encompasses the totality of sciences and disciplines, unified under a single horizon: the horizon of complexity (Ziad Territer, 2018, p.102), which manifests across cognitive, human, social, political, and educational topics.

Morin emphasises that contemporary schools lack the essential features of true education. They fail to provide the proper methods that enable students to confront the fate of the self, of others, of life, and of uncertainties. Schools do not teach the art of living, nor do they teach how to question and reflect upon the quality of life or the art of life. Education, as it currently exists, instructs students only in a highly incomplete manner, undermining the very mission it should fulfill (Edgar Morin, 2016, p.50).

Accordingly, the central issue addressed in this study revolves around the role of complex thought in redesigning the pedagogy of education for a future fraught with risks, according to Morin's humanistic vision. It also examines the alternatives, arguments, and convictions that Morin offers to prevent education from falling into the traps of traditionalism and the mere reproduction of existing systems.

Methods

The researcher adopted a multi-faceted methodology in this study, primarily

dominated by the analytical approach, which forms the foundation of this research. However, adherence to this primary method did not preclude the occasional use of other approaches whenever deemed necessary, as philosophical thought is inherently dialogical-a means of producing knowledge and an opportunity to renew its problems and concepts in order to keep pace with ongoing developments.

1- The Crisis of Education

It is well recognised that attention to education represents a genuine challenge for all societies seeking progress and development, particularly with regard to the proper management of human resources-a goal Morin aims to achieve within the "school of the future." He believes that education as a social function has historically been subjected to projection processes that have proven unreliable, reducing it to little more than a large system of directives.

Consequently, Morin asserts that education suffers from a multifaceted crisis, the burden of which is borne by all societies. In this context, he observes that education is often a neglected or unexamined domain, leaving it, in its current state, as a space for the recycling of grand narratives, in the terms of Lyotard. According to Morin, the education we receive teaches separation and fragmentation rather than connection between knowledge domains, transforming our scientific acquisitions into a whole that resists comprehension. We no longer perceive the interactions, repercussions, contexts, and complexities that link different fields of knowledge, thereby obscuring major human problems in favour of specialised technical issues.

In order to propose effective reforms for education, Morin emphasises the necessity of diagnosing the intractable crises within educational curricula before presenting any methodological approach.

1- Dimensions of the Educational Crisis

Morin outlines multiple facets of the current educational crisis, including the dominance of contemporary technical sciences and the impact of new electronic communication media on the lives of young people. He also highlights the conflict between parents and children within the same society, or between teachers and students, which he refers to as the generational conflict. In addition, there is the spread of violence and the absence of values of tolerance in society, along with other extreme inhuman phenomena that have swept through human societies, shaped by the outputs of contemporary material life and the ethics of ruthless globalisation.

Morin emphasises that the educational crisis cannot be separated from the broader crisis of civilisation. He draws attention to the dangers posed by the spread of psychological anxiety within social environments and the regression of solidarity among members of society-a key element in his reformist thought. While solidarity once prevailed in workplaces, among neighbours, and within families, regrettably, the sense of belonging to humanity has now become a luxury. The rise of individualism and the centrality of the self in Western societies dominate social behaviour, contributing to a growing sense of frustration with both the present and the future.

For Morin, diagnosing the sources of this malaise is essential to resolve the situation, implement effective remedies, and perhaps restore more humane human relationships. The “educational crisis” today requires urgent and practical intervention due to the moral laxity produced by Western civilisation. As he asserts:

"At the heart of the educational crisis lies the crisis of education itself, and at the heart of the crisis of education lie weaknesses in teaching the art of living, of knowing how to live, which is the problem of every individual and the problem of all." (Edgar Morin, 2019, 09)

Morin thus exposes the core of the problem, highlighting the multiple dimensions of the educational crisis. He stresses that the pivotal battleground revolves around thought (Edgar Morin, 2009, 06), for those who possess thought possess knowledge, and understanding the present necessarily entails understanding the future.

According to Morin, the reasons for the deterioration of the educational system-at the level of scientific value, cognitive development of learners, psychological balance, pedagogical abilities, and moral capacities of students-stem from the adoption of a reductionist approach to knowledge (Abdelwahab Jaafar, 1988, 266), the proliferation of specialisations, methodological fragmentation, and the focus on branches at the expense of fundamentals, form over content, and material utilitarianism (Zohir Khouildi, 2016, 49). Additionally, the instrumental value of curricula, the reliance on numerical metrics, and the adoption of a technical perspective in addressing emerging problems contribute to this decline.

After diagnosing the crisis, Morin presents a new educational vision, derived from religious convictions, cultural experiences, and philosophical ideas, which he believes can overcome the multiple crises facing the world today. To define the framework of this reformist vision, he proposes seven fundamental types of knowledge in education, all related to the human being, human society, the universe, life, and the Earth (Edgar Morin, 2017). True education, according to Morin, must contribute to individual development and the promotion of an ethics of understanding (*une éthique de la compréhension*) (Edgar Morin, 2017, 66), fostering responsibility toward the human condition—that is, teaching how to live, citizenship, democracy, solidarity, and responsibility regardless of the citizen's affiliations (Edgar Morin, 2017, 66).

The Philosophy of Future Education: Edgar Morin's Approach to Human Development

It is evident that the goal of education must, in one way or another, align with human nature to contribute to the creation of global citizenship. Edgar Morin draws inspiration from this principle as a starting point for his humanistic and developmental educational project, which researchers classify within the broader field of human development, and more specifically, personal development. This vision is not intended solely for French or Western societies, but for humanity as a whole.

According to Morin, knowledge worth acquiring is that which humans strive to comprehend in its complexity, to explore the mechanisms of its functioning, and to benefit from it. Therefore, he considers knowledge itself as a form of development

and as possessing inherent authority, realized through effort, creativity, and the practical application of its content to effect positive changes in human capacities and expand one's choices. In other words, for Morin, powerful knowledge is closely linked to knowledge of knowledge.

From the above, Morin's approach to the philosophy of education can be seen as a call for self-development through the pursuit of a renewed, methodical educational vision. It is a philosophical study concerned with the inner workings of the educational process and self-motivation, linking philosophy, education, and development to teaching practices. It addresses the principles, objectives, and outcomes of education and learning. This philosophy emerged as a product of and contribution to UNESCO's global dialogue on how to redirect and guide education toward sustainable development, while addressing central and fundamental problems that have long been neglected in educational systems.

Morin, who devoted a significant portion of his research to problems of knowledge, was asked to express his ideas about future education in relation to the "reform of thought." In his lectures, he often emphasizes the necessity of teaching students, from the primary level onward, the theory of knowledge, and of instilling the principle of valuing mistakes and granting them a special status, much like the truth is valued in educational curricula, starting from students' own errors.

He elaborated these ideas in his work *Seven Necessary Knowledge for the Education of the Future*, which presents the major pillars of the reform he has advocated for years,

based on his experiences in research, reflection, and the struggle for a better future in which understanding and decision-making correspond to the complexity of human phenomena (see footnote 2.)

The Seven Essential Knowledges for the Reform of Future Education

Les sept savoirs nécessaires à l'éducation du futur

This is one of the most important components of Edgar Morin's reform project, focusing on addressing the educational dimension and the genuine investment in human resources. Attention to children from an early age is the best way to achieve a promising future. The reforms necessitated by the issues of education and schooling, in turn, require multiple other reforms, which, according to complex thought, are of urgent priority. In Morin's view, the most significant challenge facing policymakers concerns the selection of the content and knowledge of education—more precisely, the essential knowledge on which every educational philosophy should be based.

As an introduction, Morin often notes in his lectures that subjects and disciplines are taught separately from one another. This long-standing separation has led to the emergence of what he calls “black knowledge holes” in the field of knowledge, which have undermined all reform attempts. Morin personally identified seven such black holes in the current educational system (Edgar Morin, 2002, p. 21). In this context, he proposes the creation of seven chairs aimed at addressing this issue and disseminating the seven essential knowledges, which would help recover what is lost through these gaps.

Cognitive Blindness

Les cécités de la connaissance l'erreur

The first fundamental question raised by Morin is: What is knowledge? Or, more precisely, what must be known about knowledge itself? According to him, this question is usually only raised within a philosophical and elite discipline called epistemology. It is rarely acknowledged that this problem—the problem of defining knowledge—is a problem for every human learner, a problem for all, because at its core, the problem of knowledge is essentially the problem of error and illusion.

Morin cites Karl Marx (1818–1883) to illustrate this issue, summarizing a famous statement that raises the problem: “People do not know what conditions they are under, nor what they are doing.” Morin adds that Marx himself fell into this trap during his work (Edgar Morin, 2002, p. 21). The same observation applies to us: when we examine and reflect on history, we find it is a series of errors and illusions. Morin gives concrete examples from the recent past, including Nazi, fascist, communist, Stalinist, and even contemporary liberal systems, revealing the errors and illusions inherent in these systems. Although these were once experienced as concrete realities, what was once considered true in the past has now proven to be false or illusory. In this way, history appears as a continuum of persistent errors.

Edgar Morin considers that education under the paradigm of simplification aims at transmitting knowledge, yet remains ignorant of the nature, mechanisms, limits, and difficulties of human knowledge, and consequently of its natural tendency toward

error and illusion. “It may not even occur to us to uncover the essence of knowledge” (Edgar Morin, 2002, p. 21). In other words, we often treat knowledge as a ready-made tool that can be used without examining its nature. Therefore, education must identify and reveal the sources of errors and illusions in knowledge (Edgar Morin, 2002, p. 21)

Mental errors are part of cognitive blindness because psychological approaches have shown that the emotions play a role in developing cognitive abilities and can also inhibit knowledge. The development of human intelligence is inseparable from the development of the emotions: “There is always a dialogue between the mind and the emotions” (Edgar Morin, 2002, p. 22). A weakness in emotional capacity can negatively affect the faculty of reason, even paralyzing it completely. Similarly, weakened emotional abilities may lead to irrational behaviors, whereas properly directed emotional capacity can provide a necessary motivation for correct rational actions (Edgar Morin, 2002, p. 22)

It is therefore remarkable that education can suffer from blindness even while its mission is to empower knowledge. Here we reach an important conclusion with Morin: we must acknowledge the presence of rational justification at the core of our rationality, as well as our own myths, including the myth of the mind’s omnipotence and the myth of inevitable progress (Abdel-Maqsoud Salem, 2012, p. 62)

Reforming Thought and Principles of Adequate Knowledge:

Edgar Morin’s scientific prescription within his project for the education of the future, in its second principle, focuses on reforming

thought to achieve adequate knowledge that responds to the demands of the era, or on how information can be transformed into meaningful knowledge. This type of knowledge, however, has no connection with the complexity that future education seeks to attain.

Meaningful knowledge is that which enables us to organize information and contextualize it within its framework, a context that remains more important than the information itself, as an intellectual necessity. Its first task begins with understanding the fundamental problems of the world, which have become universal for every citizen. Therefore, it is impossible to acquire organized and adequate knowledge without comprehending the world’s problems, which constitute the core and primary concern of education. This involves addressing questions such as: How can the world be known? How can this knowledge be utilized? (Edgar Morin, 2002, p. 35). It also requires understanding context and wholeness, the relationship between the whole and its parts, and the multiple and multidimensional aspects.

In this fragmented reality, Morin argues that the real problem cannot be decoded unless we adopt relational thinking, a mindset that considers relationships. We need thought that connects knowledge, organizes information, places it in context, and links it to the broader systems that govern this or that material. Importantly, the comprehensive system through which our knowledge should be framed is neither the national nor even the regional system; it is the planetary system. The overarching system is the Earth system in its broadest sense (Edgar Morin, 2002, p. 35).

Teaching the Human Condition:

In this context, Morin argues that “the human being is simultaneously a physical, biological, psychological, cultural, social, and historical entity, and this complex unity of human nature is not understood by education across different school subjects. Due to this fragmentation, it has become impossible today to learn what it truly means to be human,” which Morin calls the “forgotten continent”. Therefore, every individual, wherever they are, must “comprehend the complex nature of their own identity as well as their shared identity with others” (Edgar Morin, 2002, p. 45).

What is particularly striking, according to Morin, is that the educational system has neglected the teaching of the core human component, considering human beings as a neglected subject-not only by social and human sciences but also by the exact sciences. A significant part of human activity falls within the scope of these sciences. For instance, in physics and chemistry, it has been shown that life is an organization of physical-chemical elements, molecules composed of atoms. It has been revealed that part of the human condition is physico-chemical in nature (Edgar Morin, 2020, p. 14). However, teaching these sciences separately prevents us from understanding these connections and their formation. Contemporary studies in physical sciences have shown that our bodies carry molecules whose origins date back to the first seconds after the birth of the universe. Our physical makeup contains carbon atoms formed in the cores of stars that predated the sun of our solar system; after stellar explosions, these atoms dispersed and/or aggregated on the small planet we now call Earth.

The primary elements accumulated until conditions for life emerged. Hence, we carry within us the first living cells that appeared at the dawn of life on Earth; we also carry the animal world, the structure of vertebrates, and everything related to the history of mammals. We bear within us traces of primitive life (Edgar Morin, 2009, p. 33). From this perspective, Morin emphasizes that education must make the human condition a central topic, and education should deepen the understanding of both human unity and diversity. It should attend to unity as much as to diversity, as human unity inherently contains the principles of its multiple differences (Abdel Maqsoud Salem, 2012, p. 65). The human composition, being largely invisible, conceals human truth, rendering knowledge reductive, unable to grasp the complexity of human existence, and cloaked in ignorance under the guise of rational justification.

Teaching Earthly Identity :

This knowledge concerns the human planetary destiny. The humanistic perspective with a planetary dimension entails awareness that Earth, our home, represents a shared fate, whether in origin, life, death, or destruction (Edgar Morin, 2012, p. 07). Morin emphasizes that knowledge must address the current globalized era, and recognition of an Earthly identity is a core subject of education. Additionally, it is necessary to teach the history of the planetary age, which began with the interconnection of continents in the sixteenth century. Education must explain how all regions of the inhabited world became interdependent and interconnected, without ignoring the history of oppression and domination that has harmed-and continues to harm-

humanity as a whole. In this context, Morin highlights the complex nature of the planetary crisis that characterized the twentieth century to show how humans share the same problems of life and death, living a common fate.

Globalization represents the shared human destiny. In this era, geographical boundaries have disappeared, communication accelerates, and knowledge accumulation multiplies, “especially through information networks, to the point that the world has enveloped us” (Edgar Morin, 2012, p. 57), facilitating the integration of the remaining parts of the world into the market economy, making the Earth appear as a unified whole. Morin comments on this situation: “The world has become increasingly a whole, and each part of the world has become increasingly an inseparable part of this whole. Likewise, the world, as a whole, is increasingly present within each of its parts” (Abdel Maqsooud Salem, 2012, p. 67).

For the first time, humans truly understand that they inhabit this planet and perhaps must think and act according to a new perspective, not merely from the standpoint of the individual, family, humanity, or the state, but also from a planetary perspective (Edgar Morin, 2012, p. 57). This requires multi-centered thinking capable of adopting a conscious global vision in which all cultures intersect and nourish one another. This diversity and multiplicity are treasures for humanity and sources of all creativity and innovation. For greater brilliance and development, unity must be enriched, as experienced today, where information flows instantly from across the globe.

Consequently, the fate of humanity on Earth has become a shared destiny, particularly

under globalization. By the end of the twentieth century, there is evidence of coherence, harmony, and unification—whether under the pressure of interests, wars, or peace—which education often overlooks. Understanding global developments and recognizing Earthly identity should therefore be core subjects of education (Edgar Morin, 2009, p. 147).

Confronting Uncertainties :

The utility of this axis lies in the fact that sciences have provided us with a set of certain truths, while simultaneously revealing, during the twentieth century, countless uncertainties that emerged at the core of physics, microphysics, thermodynamics, cosmology, and biological sciences. From this perspective, it became essential to teach the principles of a strategy for confronting the possible, the unexpected, and the uncertain, “based on information obtained while performing an action and working to influence its trajectory, and the necessity to navigate the ocean of uncertainties through certainties” (Edgar Morin, 2009, p. 147).

Moreover, it is necessary to abandon deterministic notions of human history that claim predictability of the future (Edgar Morin, 2009, p. 148). As a fundamental entry point into the scientific practice of anticipating the unexpected and confronting it effectively, those who dedicate themselves to education must lead the educational effort in addressing the uncertainties of our age (Edgar Morin, 2009, p. 148). Therefore, curricula must include the uncertainties that have arisen across various sciences as a critical measure to prepare minds for unforeseen challenges.

Life itself has taught us that we cannot predict the emergence of the new. History does not follow a linear, smooth path but contains deviations driven by innovation, events, and internal or external contingencies. Humanity exists in a constant state of confronting uncertainties; for this reason, education must recognize the ***“principle of uncertainty” (Edgar Morin, 2009, p. 148). Logically, contradiction should not be considered error, nor consistency proof of truth.

Teaching Understanding :

Morin considers understanding both the means and the goal of human communication. Yet education completely neglects teaching understanding. Today, our planet requires mutual understanding at all educational levels and across all age groups, necessitating a reform of mentalities (Edgar Morin, 2009, p. 148). Human understanding, whether between relatives or strangers, is vital to free human relationships from the brutal consequences of misunderstanding. Therefore, it is essential to study the roots, patterns, and outcomes of misunderstanding, including racism, xenophobia, and contempt. Such study can simultaneously provide the most reliable foundation for education to achieve peace and to elevate human relations from their savage state dominated by misunderstanding** (Edgar Morin, 2012, p. 87)

The absence of understanding has been a primary cause of disintegration and wars in the world, leading to enmity and the loss of peace among humans. Understanding is thus a means to develop dialogical awareness, a path to recognizing others, promoting solidarity, and preventing

cognitive errors and illusions (Edgar Morin, 2012, p. 87). Human understanding transcends mere explanation: while explanation suffices for rational or objective comprehension of abstract or material things, human understanding requires self-knowledge and intersubjectivity, which demands openness and empathy (Edgar Morin, 2012, p. 88).

Ethics of the Human Species:

Education must lead to pure human ethics, which Morin calls “anthropo-ethics”, considering the three-dimensional nature of the human condition-individual, society, and species (Edgar Morin, 2009, p. 99). Ethics at the individual/societal level entails mutual oversight, i.e., democracy; at the individual/species level, it ensures planetary solidarity and global citizenship (Edgar Morin, 2009, p. 99).

The ethics Morin envisions are universal and cannot be learned through lectures alone; they must be instilled from early life, based on the awareness that human essence simultaneously encompasses individual, societal, and species dimensions. Therefore, true human development must combine autonomous individual development, social solidarity, and awareness of belonging to the human species (Edgar Morin, 2016, p. 142)

Conclusion:

In studying Edgar Morin, particularly through the lens of philosophical, scientific, and epistemological inquiry, it is crucial to start from the principles of his intellectual project, grounded in complexity and awareness of the intricate nature of human phenomena. His approach to the future of

education falls within a critical epistemological perspective, challenging classical thought and reductive approaches that rely on clarity and self-evidence.

The advances of the twentieth century led to a serious decline in knowledge, as specialization disregarded context and ignored holistic and complex dimensions, thereby obscuring comprehensive realities and fragmenting human understanding across knowledge sectors. What we know is that we are unaware of the direction in which we are headed, which represents a central concern for Morin.

Morin proposes an educational reform method as a means for human and self-development, guided by an open, constructive rationality that embodies theories aligned with reality and empirical evidence. Key principles include:

Reviving critical rationality that addresses errors and illusions, transforming them into rational justifications while exposing distorted foundations of knowledge.

Recognizing that simplistic knowledge contains both errors and truths.

Developing human thinking to build knowledge suitable for the future.

Encouraging learners to construct a comprehensive vision for organizing knowledge according to the complexity approach, overcoming fragmented knowledge and obstacles of reductive rationality.

Acknowledging that although we possess knowledge, we often do not truly know what knowledge is.

Emphasizing the complex unity of human nature, which remains absent in curricula.

Understanding the intricate interconnections of our universe, and

reforming education, knowledge, and thought are vital to renewing epistemic perspectives, avoiding mere reproduction of failed traditions.

Promoting universal human values shared across cultural and religious contexts-justice, non-violence, altruism, equality, tolerance, cooperation, love, and shared human experiences such as happiness, suffering, and compassion.

Raising awareness of our shared belonging to Earth, as humanity's fate has become interconnected, requiring the consolidation of a solidarity-based human consciousness across cultural spaces and educational systems.

Education must address the uncertainties emerging across sciences as a critical necessity, preparing minds to face the unexpected challenges of a complex, interconnected world.

References

1-Edgar Morin: Edgar Morin is a French philosopher, sociologist, and biologist, born in Paris on July 8, 1921. He is considered one of the most prominent living thinkers and philosophers, still actively engaging in intellectual and epistemological struggles as a committed humanist scholar. He is known for his theory of “no knowledge without knowledge of knowledge” and the theory of complex thought (*La Pensée Complexe*). Morin is one of the few global intellectuals who can still be described as a “committed humanist thinker.” He has never hesitated to take clear and explicit positions on most of the issues facing humanity, aiming to understand its complexities and contribute to the developmental thought of humanity as a whole. Among his most important works are *The Method of Humanizing Humanity*, *Politics of Civilization*, *Culture*

of Europe and Its Barbarism, Where Are We Going?, Violence in the World, and Teaching Life: A Statement for Educational Reform.

2- Definition of Education (Terminology): Education, in the technical sense, is “assisting the child in developing their capacities, achieving a greater balance with the environment, and bringing latent potentials into realization through organized effort” (Ibn Manzur, Lisan al-Arab, Vol. 14, Entry: Raba, p. 307).

3-Karl Marx: Karl Marx was a philosopher, political theorist, and social theorist, considered along with his collaborator Friedrich Engels one of the main founders of communist thought. He is known for his theory of capitalism and his defense of the proletariat, which earned Marxist theory worldwide recognition.

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