

Edgar Morin's "Complex Thought": A Blueprint for Reconstituting our Ecological Self in the Anthropocene Epoch?

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1. Introduction

In the current Anthropocene epoch epitomized by an ecological calamity of epic proportions, this essay demonstrates that Edgar Morin's "complex thought" could be an invaluable point of departure for reconstituting our fractured sense of ecocultural identity. Delving into the basic tenets of contemporary scientific erudition, Morin posits that the sharp ontological distinctions between *homo sapiens* and the remainder of the biosphere partly inherited from Renaissance humanism and Cartesian philosophy run counter to the physical laws that undergird existence in all of its divergent forms. For this reason, the French philosopher and sociologist attempts to (re-) anchor human consciousness into the inner workings of an interconnected and interdependent planet. Reminding the reader that "humanity is a planetary and biospheric entity," Morin promotes a new kind of "cosmic polyidentity" or "earthly identity card" that weaves connections between our species and the myriad of other links that constitute the Chain of Being (*Homeland Earth* 44; 39; 46). Specifically, the philosopher advocates in favor of a richer, more nuanced sense of belonging that is predicated upon "evolutionary metaphors based on *relation* and *reciprocity*" as opposed to chimerical, anthropocentric delusions of grandeur (*De Siena* 413).

In place of the myopic, human-centered frame of reference that is emblematic of the identity quest in Western civilization, Morin proposes a radically different paradigm for

achieving a genuine state of self-actualization. This encyclopedic epistemologist, who incessantly and unapologetically transcends disciplinary boundaries in an effort to overcome the nefarious effects of academic insularity and "hyper-specialization," endeavors to foster a more global conception of human identity that is inextricably linked to the rest of the cosmos (Montuori 354). From a philosophical standpoint, Morin contends that it is impossible to "know thyself" without exploring our relationship to the chaotic, indiscriminate ecological forces that spawned and sustain all abundant life. Thus, the philosopher implores us to (re-)establish a direct, primordial connection to the earth in order to reintegrate ourselves into the larger biotic community of life from which we have become progressively detached. In the modern world in which many people no longer have any sort of meaningful bond with the universe upon which their continued existence depends, Morin constructs a biocentric, theoretical framework that he considers to be vital in the process of identity reformulation for the modern subject living on an imperiled planet. The philosopher explains that the key to avoiding or delaying the impending anthropogenic crisis is to leave behind outdated homocentric notions of identity by learning to think about our species differently and to live otherwise. If we are to survive the unprecedented environmental disaster of our own creation, "we must understand and acknowledge our cosmic *Dasein*, our earthly identity" (*Homeland Earth* 79).

2. Our Fractured Sense of Ecological Identity in the Modern World

From both a historical and philosophical angle, Morin investigates how human civilization has arrived at this crucial tipping point. Adopting a similar approach as an evolutionary psychologist or an ecopsychologist, the philosopher attempts to identify the biological underpinnings of this problematic and potentially ecosuicidal "disconnect from nature" that concretizes nearly every facet of the modern lifestyle (Kesebir and Kesebir 258). Synthesizing theories from numerous fields in the hard sciences and the humanities, Morin outlines a transdisciplinary explanation for this cosmic estrangement. The philosopher concludes that the roots of this schism can be traced back to the interrelated processes of hominization and urbanization. In academic circles, the concept of hominization suggests that "*homo sapiens* have morphed into a different kind of animal in comparison to our human predecessors because of various technological advances in addition to the birth of modern medicine" (Moser 102). In the context of various forms of human ingenuity that now enable us to control certain aspects of our evolutionary destiny including reproduction, Zofia Sikorska-Piwowska, Marta Joanna Zalewska, Jacek Tomczyk, Antoni Dawidowicz, and Hanna Mankowska-Pliszka underscore the importance of the "hominization tendency that leads to the emergence of the modern human" (78).

The environmental anthropologist Ajeet Jaiswal reveals that most theorists maintain that the phenomenon of hominization began with the creation of the first tools which externalized functions that used to be performed by the human body itself (43). The increasing sophistication of our inventions would result in an ever-widening ontological gap between modern *homo sapiens* and our not-so-distant biological ancestors. As evidenced by longer life spans, a virtually non-existent infant mortality rate in developed countries,

and the complete eradication of several diseases that decimated our predecessors, the quotidian experiences of modern hominids are indicative of a new human condition that only vaguely resembles the previous one.² As the philosopher affirms, “The conscious pursuit of hominization would bring about a new birth of humanity” (*Homeland Earth* 81). Our ability to soften bittersweet evolutionary laws and to protect ourselves from the indifferent furor of the elements through adaptation has also led to a physical and affective separation from the biosphere.

Although Morin readily admits that millions of people around the globe “reap the benefits of a cosmic diaspora,” he also expresses his disquieting anxiety concerning the adverse consequences of this vastly different way of living and being in the world (Bostrom 311). When one lives in almost complete isolation from the rest of the planet inside of an extensive human bubble, Morin observes that this situation described by Michel Serres as “exo-Darwinian evolution” induces a dangerous kind of ecological amnesia (Weibel n.p.). Given the distance that separates us from earlier humans who had a more intimate rapport with the earth, the philosopher argues that it is easy to forget what and who we are in the technosphere that much of the world’s human population now calls home. In this vein, Morin declares, “It must be well understood to what extent the development of hominization is a risky adventure, a journey, an odyssey” (*Homeland Earth* 86). In the section “Human Identity” from chapter two of *Homeland Earth*, Morin explains that nothing exists entirely outside of the physical laws of the universe.

After highlighting the “anatomical, cerebral, psychological, affective, and social transformation” that he refers to as hominization, Morin asserts, “*Homo*, however, did not escape from its animality during this transformation. *Homo* is not a postprimate but a superprimate, who has improved on abilities already present in the higher primates [...] *Homo* is not a postmammal but a supermammal” (*Homeland Earth* 39; 40). In this passage, Morin theorizes that our partial mastery of the earth and limited capacity to influence the evolutionary trajectory of our species by means of our inventions have convinced us of our unique ontological essence. If this unfounded doctrine of human exceptionalism remains unchallenged, the philosopher illustrates that this form of bad thinking could hasten the demise of all of the creatures that inhabit this biosphere. Not only are we comprised of the same rudimentary building blocks as every other cosmic entity, but we also have the same basic needs that only the earth’s limited natural resources can provide. Like other primates and mammals, our “biological identity is completely earthly,” even if we have evolved into a “super-being” because of our genetic predisposition for innovation (*Homeland Earth* 39; 39). Morin insists that the stakes of recognizing our primary materiality have never been greater in a world that is teetering on the edge of oblivion.

In the Anthropocene epoch, the philosopher emphasizes the urgency of the ecocentric realization that our animality grounds our very being. Instead of trying to pretend like we are somehow *different* from the arbitrary forces that would eventually toss us into the chaos of existence starting with a big bang, a stoic acceptance of material realities from which there is no escape lies at the heart of the cosmic polyidentity promulgated by Morin. In his six-volume work *La Méthode*, the philosopher reiterates that the dawning

of hominization would indeed usher in a new era for humanity. However, Morin also reminds us that it is impossible to realize a “total exit” from the cosmos. As the philosopher muses, “Knowledge of life doesn’t know how to stop where human life begins. The boundary that separates *homo* from other living beings is not natural: it’s a cultural boundary, which does not cancel out life, but rather transforms it and allows for new developments” (*La Méthode 2: La vie de la vie* 12). Despite the remarkable achievements that exemplify the ongoing process of hominization, Morin encourages us to not lose sight of the scientific fact that we are part and parcel of the universe. Without the other threads that constitute the delicate fabric of life, human beings would cease to exist. Consequently, Morin’s reworking of identity in an age of hominization stresses the interdependency of all organisms, thereby compelling us to think beyond the strictly human realm. In *Homeland Earth* and all throughout his multi-volume series *La Méthode*, the philosopher invites us to expand our intellectual horizons and to “conceive a principle of knowledge that is capable of embracing life” in a period of tremendous ecological uncertainty in which we are more disconnected from the biosphere than ever before (*La Méthode 2: La vie de la vie* 12). In the era of hominization, Morin beckons us to make a concerted effort to reconnect ourselves to the cosmic whole. According to the philosopher, this “existential aliveness” facilitates an intuitive type of ecological awareness that is paramount to defending the planet and saving ourselves in the process (Montuori 350).

Nevertheless, Morin is a realist who is astutely cognizant of the plethora of obstacles that render the realization of this biocentric, identity ideal more difficult in the modern world. In addition to the phenomenon of hominization, the philosopher discusses how excessive urbanization has profoundly altered our state of being-in-the-world. To be more precise, Morin devotes several passages to the multifaceted problem of the rural exodus in *Homeland Earth*. The philosopher criticizes mainstream Western thought for being too cosmic and ignoring the philosophical ramifications of this sweeping social transformation. Whereas it is commonplace for contemporary researchers like Nick Deschacht, Anne Winter, Gerd Spittler, J.C. Barbier, Patrick Carr, and Maria Kefalas to probe the deleterious economic impact of the rural exodus, Morin contends that this monumental demographic shift merits more philosophical attention as well. Many writers representing several different literary traditions, such as T.S. Eliot, J.M. Coetzee, and J.M.G. Le Clézio, have tried to undermine the pervasive attitude that cities are a privileged space in comparison to dwindling rural areas. For instance, Prajna Pani notes in her analysis of the philosophical value of T.S. Eliot’s poetry, “Through ‘Prufrock’ Eliot demonstrates the tiresome, tedious nature of city life” (310). In *Homeland Earth*, Morin generates a powerful, dystopian vision of the urban space in which the vast majority of the human inhabitants of this biosphere now reside.

From a philosophical and environmental lens, Morin opines that the rural exodus is not merely an economic issue. Not only do modern megapolises afford very little authentic contact with the other strands of life that the philosopher deems to be essential to the reconstitution of our ecological self, thus exacerbating the rupture actuated by the process of hominization, but Morin also posits that the urban lifestyle isolates individuals from

each other. As José Marin explains in his reading of *Homeland Earth*, Morin decries “the mega urbanization that disintegrates traditional communities, and atomizes people, depersonalizing their experience in the midst of the ‘solitary crowd’” (359). In the large urban concentrations that continue to grow exponentially on a global scale, the philosopher suggests that this way of living has severed our connection to everyone and everything. In a recent interview with *Label France*, Morin’s epitextual comments related to the challenge of “humanizing cities” should be understood in this context (Rapin n.p.). The philosopher hypothesizes that the present configuration of most cities is antithetical to the creation of a stable, collective sense of identity, or strong feelings of belonging to something larger than ourselves. Furthermore, urban spaces as they have traditionally been conceived and constructed in Western society problematize “the deeper connection to the non-human world” for which Morin advocates (McCune 49). The “ethos of industrialization” inevitably produces “ecological estrangement” by relegating the non-human realm to the status of non-existence (McCune 49; 49). In simple terms, it is harder for the city dweller to experience the elemental euphoria of communing with the remainder of the biosphere as a viable path to ecological self-actualization.⁴

Painting a rather bleak portrait of contemporary urban life and the modern subject’s “search for his shattered identity” and his “lost relationship with the cosmos” (Cioran 160; 160), Morin offers the following assessment of the current planetary situation:

the soil is overworked, the climate is being degraded, the population is increasing [...] A polyculture keyed to familial and local needs is being replaced by a monoculture subjected to the hazards of the global market [...] The rural exodus fills shanty towns with the unemployed. The monetarization and commodification of everything destroys the communitarian life [...] and the best of indigenous cultures disappears to the benefit of the worst of Western civilization. The idea of development was and is blind to the cultural riches of archaic societies [...] without even imagining that they contained profound intuitions, knowledge gathered over the centuries, and life-wisdom and ethical values that have been let to atrophy (*Homeland Earth* 60)

The philosopher juxtaposes the disconcerting and perilous isolation that defines much of human society in an age of unbridled urbanization to the biocentric lifestyles and *Dasein* of many autochthonous civilizations. Morin asserts that traditional societies have much to offer the modern world in dire need of a radical paradigm shift. The philosopher urges us to broaden our outlook on life and our place in it by tapping into these rich ecocultural value systems that have existed for eons. Facing a global predicament that necessitates universal collaboration on a planetary scale in the form of anthropogenic climate change, Morin proposes a polycultural solution that unites the human family in a joint effort to stem the tide of the ecological crisis. By valorizing the critical contributions of all cultures, both large and small, Morin insists that it is possible to envision and implement a more sustainable way of thinking.

Moreover, the philosopher’s reflections about the rural exodus shed light on the core principles of the “complex thought” that he has been honing for nearly seven decades. As the terminology itself unequivocally underscores, Morin’s “*Method*” outlines a way of approaching inquiry that does not reduce or separate, and does justice to the complexity

of life and experience” (Montuori “A Partial Introduction” 11). In the above passage from *Homeland Earth*, the philosopher pinpoints the ideological pitfalls of simplistic, reductionistic thought related to the construction of our ecocultural identity centered around binary logic. Similar to Michel Serres, another pioneer in the field of French Environmental Philosophy with whom he shares many affinities, Morin maintains that binary codes provide an inaccurate, mental representation of the complexity of material reality and our relationship to it.

In this regard, Serres and Morin deconstruct the usual view of “progress” and “development” in Western society. In a revealing conversation with Denis Lafay, Serres elucidates that “progress” and “regression” are not polar opposites. Challenging the idea based upon binary thinking that “progress” and “development” are linear processes, Serres theorizes that they coexist in an ever-evolving, intricate “landscape” (Lafay n.p.). For Serres, the real question is how to minimize the regression in one area induced by a certain form of progress “in another domain” (Moser 120). A salient feature of Morin’s philosophy is to expose this same error in logic that describes “progress” and “development” as straightforward paths. The framing of environmental considerations in binary terms prevents a more nuanced discussion from taking place about the potential advantages and drawbacks of a particular type of development. The new identity card promoted by Morin recognizes that the biosphere is a complex, fragile network in which every human alteration is capable of generating ripple effects throughout the cosmos. This vision of ecocultural identity cautions us to not fall prey to the trap of binary logic and its devastating, real-life consequences. For the ever-increasing percentage of individuals who spend most of their time in exclusively urban settings, Morin explains why it is so important to overcome the limitations and dangers of a worldview that serves to conceal the complexity of our earthly identity and the conditions that support all life on this planet.

3. Envisioning a New Biocentric Identity Card

In order to “awaken to our being as citizens of the earth,” Morin proposes a new method for ridding mainstream Western philosophy of anthropocentric, dichotomous thinking that stands in the way of achieving the deep sense of cosmic affiliation that could very well determine the future of the human race, or lack thereof (*Homeland Earth* 145). He compels other contemporary thinkers to re-examine traditional philosophical assumptions that have been debunked by modern science. Morin argues that the biological realities into which the human saga has been woven are much more complicated than simplistic dualities such as man and nature, nature and culture, and subject and object suggest. As numerous critics like Laurent Dobuzinskis, Sergio Manghi, Alfonso Montuori, and Bruno Marion have noted, Morin often takes aim at misleading, scientifically erroneous, Cartesian dualities that do not hold up to critical scrutiny. Without succumbing to polemical attacks on Descartes, Morin opposes the Cartesian worldview on the basis of valid philosophical and scientific grounds. Morin strives to create a non-reductionistic method that is a more faithful representation of human existence (Manghi 62).

In his analysis of “the vast theoretic reach of the Morinian idea of the subject,” Manghi explores Morin’s “objections to the Cartesian idea of the subject” (77; 62). Heavily

influenced by the groundbreaking discoveries of the German biologist Jakob von Uexküll and the research he would ultimately inspire in the field of Biosemiotics,⁵ Morin proclaims throughout *La Méthode* that the ontological status of subjecthood should be conferred upon all life forms. Embracing a biosemiotic viewpoint, the philosopher asserts that we are immersed in a world of “autonomous subjects” who are all capable of conceiving their own mental models, purposefully exchanging signs through their primary modelling devices, and making informed decisions related to their survival (Dobuzinskis 438). In reference to the philosophical and scientific implications of von Uexküll’s (re-)appropriation of the term *Umwelt*, the biosemiotician Dusan Galik explains, “every living organism creates its own world, its own reflection of the surrounding environment and acts in this environment according to its reflection” (860). In *La Méthode*, Morin claims that human beings are objects in “the subjective inner world” of other organisms (Barbieri 104). In contrast to the standard philosophical view of a subject, associated with Descartes, Morin declares, “The notion of a subject is thus and first of all fundamentally biological. First of all, it has to be considered as a fundamentally scientific notion” (*La Méthode 2: La vie de la vie* 274). The philosopher’s biological (re-)conceptualization of subjecthood challenges longstanding ideas that have been a hallmark of human identity in Western civilization for centuries.

Shaking the foundation of Descartes’s method, the Morinian vision of subjecthood “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” (Manghi 65). In this sense, Laurent Dobuzinskis highlights the significance of Morin’s neologism “computo” that “extends the meaning of the Cartesian ‘cogito’ far beyond human consciousness” (437). As the philosopher affirms, “There is no living body without computational animation or *animus*” (*La Méthode 2: La vie de la vie* 291). In an attempt to recenter the dominant narcissistic narrative that only recognizes the existence of human cogito, Morin develops the concept of universal subjecthood that is no longer “deprived of life, deprived of roots” (*La Méthode 2: La vie de la vie* 283). For Morin, the findings of von Uexküll and those who followed him, which prove that even the most primitive bacteria possess a rudimentary form of self-awareness and the ability to exchange information, deliver a final *coup de grâce* to purely anthropocentric frameworks for understanding the complexities of human identity. Adopting the biosemiotic perspective that “the biosphere is coextensive with the semiosphere,” Morin implores the reader to reflect upon the sizeable amount of information being incessantly circulated through our bodies by both harmful and symbiotic bacteria (Wheeler 174). The philosopher demonstrates that “the infinite interactions between the thirty million cells and the thousands and thousands of molecules that constitute our body” that occur beneath the surface are indicative of the varying degrees of consciousness and communication that exist on a larger planetary scale (*La Méthode 2: La vie de la vie* 334).

Morin posits that the “biological revolution” jumpstarted by von Uexküll should have also led to a philosophical evolution (*La Méthode 2: La vie de la vie* 124). Unfortunately, our outmoded, homocentric thought systems have yet to evolve to reflect this knowledge. Instead of placing our species on an ontological pedestal as members of an allegedly superior race, an ecocentric model of identity that takes into account this contemporary

scientific erudition emphasizes the principles of cosmic humility and biotic egalitarianism. Asserting that the only logical conclusion that can be deduced from these biosemiotic insights is that *homo sapiens* have the same intrinsic right to exist as anything else, Morin passionately exclaims, “What a joke this ego-centrism is in which we pretend to be the center of the world! What madness (there is) in this auto-transcendence in which we place ourselves above other beings” (*La Méthode 2: La vie de la vie* 279). In the Anthropocene epoch, Morin illustrates that it is time to forge a new sense of identity that refuses to reduce other subjects to mere objects to be ruthlessly exploited for the exclusive benefit of humanity. Human-centered conceptions of identity continue to justify our exploitative rapport with the remainder of the biosphere. By objectifying all other organisms from a psychological and philosophical standpoint, Morin theorizes that we have absolved ourselves of any ethical responsibility toward the Cosmic Other. Given that the anthropocentric, ideatory vantage point is untenable for this reason, the philosopher promotes a biocentric, ecocultural comprehension of the multilayered nuances of our ecological self.

In *La Méthode*, Morin’s approach to the reconstruction of our ecological self avoids the common problem of reducing the complexity of our earthly identity to “nothing but sameness of Consciousness” (Strawson 215). Outlining the implications that can be gleaned from the biosemiotic discovery that marked individual differences are inscribed in the genetic code of every species, the philosopher speaks directly to the reader, “and you, the reader, you are one of the billions and billions of others who came after each other and who are going to always come after each other [...] in the middle of reading a *Method* [...] you will remain unique and singular [...] We know that there are not two bacteria, two lizards, two elephants that are exactly alike” (*La Méthode 2: La vie de la vie* 342). Even though the same tragic fate awaits all of the creatures that roam this biosphere at the end of their ephemeral journey in their current ontological shape, Morin reveals that every human and non-human individual experiences the world differently. Empirical evidence underscores subtle but essential variations in the genetic makeup of members of the same species including unicellular organisms that help us to understand how personal identity is negotiated inside of a given *Umwelt*. The genetic discrepancies highlighted by Morin in this passage explain how human and non-human entities position themselves as unique individuals within the confines of their subjective, inner worlds. Recent studies (e.g. Ogden, Dingemanse et al., Stamps and Grootuis) dedicated to animal personalities reinforce Morin’s position that personhood should also be extended to the entire universe. Based on data obtained from the hard sciences, it could be soundly argued that each time an act of human aggression results in the demise of another being a person has been removed from this earth. Not only does Morin encourage each of us to pursue our own authentic path in life by taking advantage of the individuality etched in our DNA, but he also urges us to respect the ontological sovereignty of non-human agents that have also embarked upon their own existential quest for self-actualization. This recognition of universal subjecthood and personhood could be one of the missing links in the creation of a more sustainable environmental ethos that prevents us from continually ravaging the hand that feeds without a passing thought.

As Morin himself explicitly confesses in *Homeland Earth*, the roadmap that he endorses for the reconstitution of our ecological self has evident spiritual connotations. In the aptly named chapter “Our Earth-Centered Goals,” the philosopher maintains that our ability to (re-)establish a spiritual connection to the biosphere is pivotal for survival in the Anthropocene epoch. Fernando Bernades observes that the Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss’s deep ecology engages in the same kind of transdisciplinary, spiritual “dialogue” as Morin’s complex thought (183). Similar to Næss, Morin asserts that the urgent task of contemporary philosophy is to nurture a type of environmental awareness revolving around the “Self-Realization that one has to realize his/her sense of self beyond the narrow ego to identify with all living beings. It is the spiritual realization of the self as the part of human and nonhuman worlds” (Soni 77). Morin explains that we must first recognize the existence of non-human subjects and persons in addition to accepting that we live in a universe in which everything is connected. In Morin’s cosmic conception of the divine, this deep spiritual identification with the rest of the universe hinges upon reducing the distance that separates us from other life forms to the greatest extent possible. By rejecting the anthropocentric “view of the self as separate from the world” and restoring our direct, sensorial connection to the earth, the philosopher theorizes that the alienated, modern subject can reintegrate himself or herself into the web of life (Strumse 11).

In an epitext entitled “Realism and Utopia,” Morin clarifies what the terrestrial vision of the divine that he outlines in *Homeland Earth* entails. Elucidating that his concept of cosmic polyidentity is intertwined with the spiritual sensibilities that he often evokes, the philosopher declares, “For me, the *terrestrial homeland* takes shape in the realization that all of us human beings are derived from the same trunk, born of the same matrix—the earth—through our biological evolution. It is the awareness that we share the same identity [...] all human beings share the one destiny in relation to the great problems of life and death” (Morin “Realism and Utopia” 141). In an interconnected and interdependent planet, Morin theorizes that genuine feelings of belonging related to the formation of our ecocultural identity are *relational*. In the era of hominization and urbanization, the philosopher contends that millions of people around the planet no longer have a relationship at all with the universe. According to Morin, this shattered, spiritual bond must be repaired in order to enable modern *homo sapiens* to rediscover their small place in the larger cosmic whole. The philosopher’s spiritual ideal closely resembles the traditional belief systems of many Eastern religions in which the ultimate aim is to “become one” with the one (Whitman 608).

Morin’s conception of the divine is also reminiscent of the philosophical and spiritual paradigms that undergird the biocentric *weltanschauung* of numerous autochthonous civilizations. Specifically, the philosopher employs the metaphor of “fusion,” a concept that one frequently encounters when studying the spiritual practices of indigenous peoples, to explain this intimate rapport with the earth (Grieves 10). In a section of chapter four from *Homeland Earth* in which he discusses what he calls an “ethic of development” in the Anthropocene era, Morin paints a lyrical portrait of this deep, harmonious connection to the biosphere (85). As the philosopher muses, “We must relate it dialectically to the idea

of envelopment and involution, which brings us back to the origin or preworld, which immerses us in Antiquity, which involves reiteration, self-forgetfulness, a quasi foetal⁶ immersion in a beatific amniotic bath, a oneness with nature, reentry into myths, an aimless quest, a silent peace” (*Homeland Earth* 86). In this passage, Morin explains that this spiritual exercise of “fusing” with the natural world is an attempt to facilitate a heightened state of ecological self-consciousness. By immersing oneself into the depths of material reality through unfiltered contact with the universe, the subject catches a glimpse of the cosmic mystery of which our species is but a small part. Directly associating his view of the divine and our minute place in it with the Eastern notion of “involution,” Morin highlights the importance of this “Super-conscious, Supra-mental” frame of mind induced by this spiritual communion for healing the identity disconnect that epitomizes modern life (Sivaramakrishnan 4). In comparison to the “rule-based morality” of the world’s dominant monotheistic religions, this sort of cosmic spirituality is non-dogmatic (McCauley 177). The cosmic divine that Morin promotes and defends does not impose a predetermined meaning upon the elemental ecstasy experienced during these poignant instants of cosmic matrimony. The subject has the complete freedom to interpret the significance of this fusion with the cosmos.

Later in the essay, Morin further reiterates that the spiritual renaissance for which he advocates is non-reductionistic because this hypothetical religion does not pretend to have definitive answers to life’s greatest questions. Underscoring the role of ambivalence in both his complex thought and in his aspirations for the future creation of a new spiritual system connected to the biosphere, the philosopher states, “unlike other religions that repress doubt through excessive zeal, it would make room for doubt within itself. It would cope with uncertainty. It would look out on the abyss” (*Homeland Earth* 142). Explaining that knowing thyself and understanding the earth from whence we originated more fully does not provide any redemption from the poverty of the human condition, Morin speculates, “Such a religion would not have promises but roots [...] roots in life, roots in the stars that have forged the atoms of which we are made [...] Such a religion would be terrestrial, not other-worldly [...] It would not be a question of salvation, then, but of safeguard, rescue, liberation, and fellowship” (*Homeland Earth* 142). Although there is no external source of salvation to be found in a chaotic biosphere governed by indiscriminate physical laws that is the basis of Morinian spirituality and identity, the philosopher emphasizes that this rediscovery and euphoric celebration of our cosmic roots allows us to project meaning upon an absurd⁷ universe. As his reflections about spirituality demonstrate, Morin affirms that the quest for ecological self-realization and the search for ontological significance are one in the same.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, in a fragile universe that has been severely compromised by an anthropogenic, environmental crisis that is spiraling further out of control each day, Morin’s complex thought is a welcome contribution to the ongoing debates whose outcome could seal the collective fate of all of the earth’s human and non-human inhabitants. Confronted with an impending disaster of this magnitude that threatens to destroy life as we know it,

the philosopher's ambitious, transdisciplinary project tries to rethink the essence of everything. Persuasively arguing that it is imperative to conceive a more sustainable, non-reductionistic thought paradigm, Morin asserts, "Never before in the history of humanity have the responsibilities of thinking weighed so crushingly on us" (*Homeland Earth* 132). Accepting the daunting challenge of completely (re-)conceptualizing how we perceive ourselves in relation to the cosmos, the philosopher outlines a radically different way of being and living in the world that endeavors to avoid the pitfalls that have placed human society in this extremely precarious position. If merely for the sake of self-preservation, Morin illustrates the absolute necessity of rehabilitating our fractured sense of ecological self. By reminding us of what and who we are from a scientific perspective in an age of hominization and urbanization, the philosopher begins the arduous task of tracing the basic parameters of a new identity card designed to protect the sanctity of the delicate Chain of Being. In *Homeland Earth* and *La Méthode*, Morin has initiated this voyage of self-rediscovery that takes us on a biocentric journey in which we encounter an infinite number of other autonomous subjects that are part of the biotic community of life. Empowering us to flesh out and implement the details of this symbiotic, spiritual partnership with the earth, Morin realizes that his thought experiment is far from complete. Despite the inherent limitations of his complex thought, Morin's philosophy bears testament to the fact that the issue of ecocultural identity truly matters.

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Notes

¹ These words are italicized in the original text.

² The medical historian Roy Porter discusses all of these points at great length in *The Greatest Benefit to Mankind: A Medical History of Humanity*.

³ All English translations from *La Méthode* are my own unless otherwise indicated.

⁴ This issue will be more systematically investigated in the following section of the essay.

⁵ It should be noted that Morin explicitly mentions von Uexküll numerous times all throughout *La Méthode*.

⁶ Sean Kelly and Roger LaPointe's English Translation uses this alternative form of the word fetal.

⁷ I am employing this term in the Camusian sense. Moreover, it is noteworthy that Camus promotes a similar type of cosmic "nuptials" as Morin in his collection of essays *Noces*.

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The Disappearance of 1984

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I

Can a famous novel disappear in plain sight? The very possibility seems to hover over the present fate of George Orwell's *1984*. Officially, our culture still agrees that *1984* is "the definitive novel of the 20th century, a story that remains fresh and contemporary" (in the words of the *Guardian* Newspaper) in any of the 65 languages by which it is known to millions of readers. However, there is good cause to think that, if millions go on turning the pages of *1984*, it will not be on the recommendation of university instructors. This novel that is one of the most important witnesses of the twentieth century, a novel that has enriched our political vocabulary with such terms as "newspeak," "doublethink," "Big Brother," or indeed "Orwellian," has virtually disappeared from the university classroom. It is the destiny of most books that they must vanish in the fullness of time; it is the strange destiny of *1984* to vanish even as its fame stands undiminished, and to vanish indeed at the hands of people whose social function is to keep books alive.

How rare *1984* has become in college classrooms is not a matter of speculation. The Open Syllabus Project, a large-scale internet database, mines over one million college-level syllabi across 5 English-speaking countries, among which the United States, and is able to extract statistically accurate pictures of the most and the least frequently assigned books in universities. It should be of interest to the cultural historian that, by its rate of appearance on university syllabi, *1984* languishes at the risibly submerged end of the scale, very near the crevasse of oblivion. At number 716, it keeps company with Bede the Venerable's *Ecclesiastical History* and *Germania* by Tacitus. It is strange, to say the least, that a novel reckoned to be fundamental ("fresh and contemporary") to our times should compete for a slot in the same dark reaches of the syllabus universe as the evangelization of Northumbria and the state of Germanic tribes under the Roman Empire. The discrepancy