

## General Complexity, Ethical Complexity and Normative Professionalization

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**Abstract** This article addresses the critical comments that focus on what is perceived as lack of clarity with regard to different uses of the system concept: on the one hand, in the usual general sense, on the other, in a specific ‘Habermasian’ sense. This final reply tries to remedy this in critical discussion with Morin, arguing that Morin’s paradigm of generalized complexity addresses the question of *what* subjects are, but remains silent with regard to the question of *who* they are. Answering this question confronts us with a specific *ethical* manifestation of complexity that cannot be adequately understood within the conceptual space of systems-oriented complexity theory.

**Keywords** General complexity · Ethical complexity · Normative professionalization

To start with I would like to express my gratitude to the three respondents for their willingness to comment on my contribution to this issue. Sometimes—oh happy moments—the writing and completion of a paper costs me comparatively little effort. At other times however, it is a long and arduous struggle to achieve sufficient clarity about the main argument and the best way to present it. This was most certainly the case in writing this paper. In view of this history, I am really glad that Rika Preiser and Koo van der Wal seem to endorse the general direction of my argument and even express their sympathy for my quest. This is clearly not the case with regard to the critical comments by Jef Peeters.

I feel a clear intellectual kinship with Peeters’ important work in the field of social work, in particular his efforts to connect social work with a radical ecological perspective. Moreover—just like Preiser and van der Wal—we are both fascinated by critical complexity thinking and convinced of its importance for clarifying central problems of our times. But it is also clear that our positions differ in important respects. I share Peeters admiration for Morin’s monumental work and recommend his path breaking analysis of general complexity to all my students. Other than Peeters however, I also have severe doubts about Morin’s idea of ‘generalized complexity’ and the viability of the encompassing paradigm shift he envisages.

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My doubts are closely related to my efforts to develop new connections between on the one hand insights from the natural sciences, in particular critical complexity thinking and relational biology, and on the other hand insights from the hermeneutic tradition and critical theory. According to Peeters, ‘Morin’s paradigm shift does have consequences for building an argumentation strategy with regard to a problematic position. Therefore, it is not about correcting such a position by means of add-ons which broaden our perspective, but about repositioning the problem at hand within the new paradigm and re-interpret it from that angle...In my opinion, Kunneman is not consistent in employing this strategy, and therefore weakens the paradigmatic interpretation of complexity’.

This critique presupposes that I accept ‘the paradigmatic interpretation of complexity’ advocated by Peeters. This is not the case. In my eyes, Morin starts off in the right direction, radically rethinking central epistemological and philosophical questions in terms of complexity and auto-eco-organization, but then takes a wrong turn by proposing general complexity as a new paradigmatic framework in which *all* central questions of our time can be posed. In this way, Morin and Peeters threaten to miss out on one of the most important insights formulated by Paul Cilliers—and elaborated by Rika Preiser—concerning the normative questions and ethical choices *necessarily* coming into play when we develop models of complex systems, including the encompassing model underlying Morin’s ‘Scienza Nuova’. Morin proposes a new paradigm, rooted in biology, that *assimilates* these normative choices into the notion of generalized complexity. Thus his ‘éthique complexe’ in the end remains an intellectual endeavor. The way he uses the notion of dialogue in his analysis of auto-eco-organisation is a case in point. Peeters rightfully points out that Morin designates the relations between ‘auto’ and ‘eco’ as dialogical. But in my eyes Morin uses the notion of dialogue in a very general and even superficial way here, boiling down in point of fact to ‘relational’ and ‘open’. Used in this general way, the notion of dialogue is equally applicable to autopoietic and diapoietic relations, and thus obfuscates the distinction that takes central stage in my argument.

This brings me to Peeters’ most important point of critique: my failure to distinguish clearly between the general notion of ‘system’ as used by Morin and Cilliers, and the specific way in which the notion of ‘system’ is used by Jürgen Habermas. Peeters wonders whether Habermas’ distinction between ‘system’ and ‘life world’ is usable at all within a framework of complex systems thinking: ‘After all, it understands the world in systemic terms. Morin... offers a different framework than that of Habermas to look to a control logic, and to apprehend why and how it ignores complexity. That way it is also possible to appreciate the idea of ‘re-embedding’ the economy in society as a pathway towards sustainability. That raises questions about the meaning of Kunneman’s formulation: “the economic, political and ecological systems in which civil societies are embedded”. Are there no different system concepts mixed up here?’

This critical question really helped me to clarify my own thoughts on this theme. To start with, it helped me to realize that Habermas can be considered as a complexity-thinker ‘avant la lettre’ in the domain of social theory. Although he obviously is not familiar with the vocabulary of complexity theory, his analysis of the risks and possibilities of modernization and of the inner tensions characterizing modern societies, show a high sensibility for complexity, especially for interactions between different levels, feedback loops, interference and emergence. However, Habermas is also acutely aware of the *risks* connected with the obfuscation of the difference between theoretical models and moral values characteristic of the dialectical tradition that provided the most important intellectual background of the Frankfurt School. As a consequence, Habermas has invested a great deal of his intellectual efforts in the development of a *separate* normative justification for his critical theory of society. Although I have lost my faith in Habermas’ philosophical reconstruction of the normative deep-structure of

language quite some time ago, I think that his insistence on the necessity of a separate and explicit normative justification for critical social theory is completely justified. In this crucial respect, although on the level of content I explore different pathways, I endorse this pluralistic conceptual strategy.

In my contribution I have tried to explicate this pluralistic approach by distinguishing between epistemological and ethical complexity. Although these concepts are of central importance for my argument, they somehow seem to have escaped Peeters attention. Building on Robert Rosen's reinterpretation of Aristotle, I have proposed to designate as epistemologically complex all forms of explanation and understanding that acknowledge and use different forms of causality and their interrelations: material, efficient, formal and final causes. In terms of these distinctions, it is clear that Morin's *Scienza Nuova* has contributed in decisive ways to the conceptual clarification of the interplay between material, efficient and formal causes in the evolution of life. Moreover Morin's *Scienza Nuova* also incorporates final causation, not only in the form of his plea for new complexity-oriented forms of knowledge that liberate instead of blind us, but also by way of his inspiring evocations of an ecological sustainable instead of destructive world society. However, this incorporation of final causes remains *implicit*, and this silence is not accidental in my eyes. Morin proposes *one* conceptual vocabulary for all these forms of explanation and understanding—the vocabulary of systems, information flows, wholes and parts, auto-eco-organization and emergence—and then grafts his moral and political vision on this systems-oriented vocabulary, suggesting that it *also* supplies a basis for his moral and political vision. In this way, he over-stretches the systems based vocabulary of general complexity. This vocabulary is very apt for elucidating the interplay between efficient and formal causes, especially for clarifying the formal causality at stake in the autopoiesis or auto-eco-organization of living beings. But it loses its clarifying potential when extended to the final causation at stake in moral visions. It is telling in this respect that Morin consistently refers to the necessity of a *meta-point* of view, allowing us to look farther, to observe more, to have a wider vision. But this reflexive movement towards a more adequate meta-standpoint can at best *support* but never *replace* our answer to the most important ethical and moral questions of our lives, because these questions confront us not only with epistemological complexity, but also and even primarily with ethical complexity.

As I tried to elucidate with the help of Ricoeur's distinction between the Idem-pole and the Ipse-pole of identities, ethical and moral questions cannot be severed from our necessarily situated and embodied answer to the question *who* we are, as posed to us by *others*. Whereas the question '*what*' we are can be answered with the help of conceptual and empirical means—that is in terms of material, efficient and formal causes—the question '*who*' we are cannot be adequately answered at the level of concepts and observations, however complexity-sensitive they may be, because answers to this question first and foremost have an existential and narrative character. They are embodied in our concrete answers to the appeal of others for our solicitude, and vice versa, in the unfolding of our life story. Thus they have a *narrative* instead of a conceptual form, the form of the story of our lives as *lived, told and retold* by ourselves and by others. Following Ricoeur I have argued that the reflexivity at stake here concerns the narrative mediation of the tension between the Idem-pole and the Ipse-pole of our identity. This tension confronts us with ethical complexity as an *existential* experience and challenge, that asks for emotional and narrative mediation of the tension between autopoiesis and diapoiesis at the level of our own lives. This narrative mediation can be *supported* by conceptual paradigms, but never be replaced by them. It concerns the existential and ethical question posed to concrete, embodied persons: "who are you?" and to their answer: "here I am for you". This is the ethical answer that volunteers give to those asking for their support. The moral values with the help of which we articulate this 'being there for another' are

grounded in these embodied ethical answers of concrete persons actively relating to the needs and possibilities of others—and experiencing both personal and civic meaningfulness in this relating.

All this implies that I do not accept the primacy of the concept of system in modelling complexity, and I gladly acknowledge that it would have helped if I had made this clear in my contribution. In my eyes critical complexity thinking has to address both epistemological and ethical complexity. The relevance of the idea of system is restricted to the elucidation of epistemological complexity; that is: to explaining and understanding complexity in terms of the interplay of material, efficient and formal causes. It has only limited relevance for understanding and explaining final causation. And it seriously hinders in my eyes the explication, understanding and practical confrontation of ethical complexity, because it obfuscates both the crucial difference between ‘what’ and ‘who’ and the narrative character of the mediation between the *Idem* and the *Ipse* pole of identities. To further clarify this mediation, I have proposed to distinguish between ethically simple narrative plots—that highlight only one side of the continuum between autopoietic and diapoietic relations—and ethically complex narrative plots that foreground and ‘work’ with the tension between them. This distinction is of crucial importance in my eyes for clarifying the tension between the dominant neo-liberal narrative of individual accomplishments and rewards on the one hand and the ethically more complex narrative articulated in the idea of civic meaningfulness on the other hand. The neo-liberal narrative provides a legitimation for the autopoietic dynamic of markets and state bureaucracies in terms of efficiency and the growth of consumptive possibilities for all, by way of the ‘beneficial’ work of the ‘invisible hand’. In this way, it presents them as neutral systems that have to keep functioning the way they do as a prerequisite for continued consumptive growth.

Both Peeters and I are very critical of this neo-liberal narrative, in particular of its ecological blindness. Whereas he proposes to criticize the ‘control logic’ characterizing markets and state bureaucracies with the help of Morin’s complexity paradigm, I have used Habermas’ critical adaptation of Luhmann’s systems-theory to characterize this autopoietic logic. Peeters critique has helped me to realize that this is indeed confusing and has stimulated me to explicate my implicit critique of Morin’s overstretching of the idea of system. On the basis of this foregoing explication, I conclude that the same critique applies to Habermas’ (restricted) use of the notion of system and have thus decided not to use this notion anymore in the context of the critical analysis of neo-liberalism and the autopoietic logic of markets and bureaucracies. In point of fact, by arguing that the idea of civic meaningfulness should not be restricted to the context of voluntary work but should be extended to the meaningfulness of professional work in economic and bureaucratic organizations, my own analysis already implied that this autopoietic logic does not reign supreme, but is modified and countervailed *within* professional organizations by processes of normative professionalization. Formulated in terms of epistemological complexity, this means that the characteristics of economic and bureaucratic organizations within present day capitalist societies can no longer be adequately understood only in systemic terms referring to efficient and formal causes, but also involve final causes and confrontations with ethical complexity as part of their inner dynamic.

This clarification of my own position brings me at last to Peeters’ dismissal of my proposal to extend the notion of civic meaningfulness to professional work. This critique did not impress me as particularly helpful. He just repeats his own position here, and dismisses my proposal without real attention for my arguments. I will not repeat those here, except for my central contention that normative professionalization adds a political dimension to professional work that differs from the political significance of voluntary work, because professional work directly influences the *specific content* of, for instance, technological innovations or

governmental regulations or educational practices, and thus influences state bureaucracies and markets also from within. I meant this as an important *addition* to the political significance of voluntary work and fail to see why Peeters clings so strongly to the political primacy of a civil society that is very much in the defense and thus can use all support it can get for its causes from other quarters.

In conclusion I would like to thank Rika Preiser and Koo van der Wal for their friendly and helpful comments. That goes in particular for Preiser's elaboration of what she designates as 'the dialogical hermeneutics of critical complexity thinking' and for van der Wal's remark that my contribution could have benefited from a concrete example. There is indeed a curious lack of narrative content in an argument that repeatedly underlines the importance of hermeneutics, narratives and existential challenges, and I gladly promise to heed van der Wal's friendly advice in my future work.

**Harry Kunneman** (1948, M.Sc. Sociology, Ph.D. Philosophy) occupied the chair for Social and Political Theory at the University for Humanistic Studies in Utrecht from 1990 to 2014 and now has a personal chair in Social Philosophy at this university. His main research interests lie in the field of critical theory, philosophy of science and critical complexity thinking (see: [www.kunneman.org](http://www.kunneman.org)).