



Research Article

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Death from the Perspective of Luhmann's System Theory

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to address the topic of death from a Luhmannian perspective. First, the article will introduce the general theory of Luhmann to provide a background for the way he is tackling sociological and philosophical problems and then will describe its application to religion and deduce various implications for the topic of death. For the discussion of death, we will refer to some of Hegel's insights, as they motivated central parts of Luhmann's theory, though he replaced the Hegelian notions with system theoretical ones. Even if it might seem like a further abstraction and mechanization, we assume that it significantly facilitates the combination of outside and inside perspectives on death. In contrast to philosophical existentialism, the system-oriented approach of Luhmann does not emphasize the situated character of human reason and its gaining authenticity by facing death and finitude. Instead, it points to the entanglement of society and consciousness, focusing on the former while providing hints to the otherness of consciousness. Here, authenticity is not achieved by writing about existential topics, but rather through some sort of parallax view.

Keywords: death, religion, sociology, existentialism, parallax view, contingency, God, Deleuze, Hegel, Heidegger, Žižek.

1 Introduction

It is common to use the cultural sciences for analyzing how society deals with death, for example, as in the context of thanatology.¹ From an existential perspective, such analyses are not satisfying, as they mostly assume a meta-perspective, which does not allow one to understand individual anxieties and impasses related to death (their existential dimension).² Some philosophical investigations are more apt to consider such deep issues, but seem to harbor the problem of an inadequate level of abstraction. A prime example is the death analyses of (the early) Heidegger, stating that “Being-towards-death has the character of care,” where care is the central “existential” of our existence.³ What Heideggerian existential and care really mean must be grasped at such a level that one's anxieties seem to be forgotten for the sake of an intellectual sophistication (e.g. care as the capacity of Dasein's relation to being in terms of open horizons and potentials, which are evoked by a call of death). Hence, from a scientific point of view, there is often only the choice between an outside and an abstract inside perspective.⁴ In both cases, an abstraction from experiences takes place.

1 Carverhill, “Qualitative Research in Thanatology.”

2 Nassehi and Weber, “Verdrängung des Todes – Kulturkritisches Vorurteil oder Strukturmerkmal Moderner Gesellschaften?”

3 Heidegger, *Being and Time*; Carnevale, “The Palliation of Dying.”

4 Castano et al., “Ideology, Fear of Death, and Death Anxiety.”

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Is it necessary to abstract from experiences to tackle death on a philosophical and scientific level? Niklas Luhmann, the central reference in this essay, had no doubt about that. Whatever is destined to be shared with a community must be transmitted through linguistic components that represent concepts. As Kant had already described how experience without theory is blind (and theory without experience a mere intellectual play), this is no new insight.⁵ However, death being an inescapable end to one's existence as well as all of one's experiences seems to be different from other topics. It cannot be constructed and deconstructed in ways social phenomena related to death, such as suicide attacks, fire disasters, or accidents, could. Only a first-person perspective in a "praemeditatio mortis" mode seems to be adequate, which emphasizes that one's own finitude cannot be understood by reference to external beings. Hence, the distance between theoretical descriptions and such a first-person perspective on death cries out for an alternative to conventional theorization.

The alternative to early Heidegger was related to an invention of new concepts, which triggered and represented the existential first-level perspective. Later, Heidegger relativized this approach as he saw the general problems with introducing new concepts to invoke and represent the nonconceptual dimension, and he leaned more toward poetry, for example, that of Hölderlin, emphasizing the paths instead of systematic works.⁶ In the same vein, Luhmann avoided theorizing the existential dimensions and used two strategies for taking them into account: (i) locating them in the "consciousness" system, which is declared as the environment of the social system, i.e. as something external to communication; (ii) discussing fundamental paradoxes of human existence, e.g. related to whether it is good to distinguish between good and evil, that are often exemplified by referring to certain mystics. One other prominent alternative is provided by Gilles Deleuze in his work "Difference and Repetition," which is directed against representational thinking and tries to capture the singularity of events and facts by emphasizing that they change permanently and never have a stable identity.⁷ Here, an existential dimension is destined to emerge through destruction of the generality of concepts and the exchangeability of entities falling under them.⁸

Whatever alternative is chosen, the deep anxiety is lost when entering such an intellectual level, as its paralyzing effect is performatively set aside. Another way of putting it is the decentering effect of subjectivation through language according to Lacan.⁹ Nevertheless, accepting this unavoidable effect of thinking is one way of giving at least a hint of where to look for what cannot be found intellectually. For Hegel, such a search would probably make no sense, as the transcendence domain is just the effect of retroactively constructing it.¹⁰ For him, there is no sense-making outside of thinking, which can be exemplified by equating the truism of Epicurus "If I am, then death is not. If death is, then I am not" with "If I am, then death is. If I am not, then death is not."¹¹ Such immanent thinking might seem to be unacceptable for religious individuals; however, for Hegel, religiosity is not achievable through transcending finitude, but instead by reflecting the finite and the infinite into each other, thereby sublating their contrast into the mediational domain of conceptual movements.¹² For its discussion of death, this article will mention some of Hegel's insights as a motivation for central parts of the theory of Luhmann, who replaced the Hegelian notions with system theoretical ones. Even if it might seem like a further abstraction and mechanization, we

⁵ Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft (Großdruck)*.

⁶ Herrmann and Heidegger, *Holzwege*; Trawny and Heidegger, *Winke I und II*; Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy*; Herrmann and Heidegger, *Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung*.

⁷ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*.

⁸ Bryden, *Deleuze and Religion*.

⁹ Kirshner, "Toward an Ethics of Psychoanalysis;" Miller and Lacan, *Formations of the Unconscious*; Alain-Miller and Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*.

¹⁰ Gabriel, "The Dialectic of the Absolute."

¹¹ Burley, "Epicurus, Death, and the Wrongness of Killing;" Rosenbaum, "How to Be Dead and Not Care;" Malpas and Solomon, *Death and Philosophy*; Condrau, *Daseinsanalyse. Philosophisch-anthropologische Grundlagen*.

¹² Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik*.

assume that it allows further insights on death. Luhmann is not an idealist, but instead a constructivist realist, emphasizing that reality is what a mental construction is capable of coherently constructing.¹³

From a methodological perspective, what makes Luhmann's system theory an apt tool to discuss the topic of death? Here, understanding the implicit reference to Hegel regarding the "self-relating negativity" concept is useful. According to Hegel (in a simplified way), understanding the immediate given is only possible through negating it (abstraction), which brings it into the sphere of reflection, leading to mediated knowledge. Negating mediated knowledge results in mediated immediacy (in contrast to immediate immediacy), and this second negation is just the application of the first one to itself, hence: self-relation.¹⁴ Mediated immediacy is the sphere of conceptual mediations, where the self-relating negativity is the dynamic activity, responsible for the never-ending process of grasping reality. Luhmann applies this insight to observation, which is a dual operation of drawing a distinction and indicating or marking one of the distinguished parts as the currently relevant one.¹⁵ An observation is a self-relating negativity in the sense that it negates the negation of its unity (we have two parts) through the process of observation itself. Logicians would demand to simplify the last sentence by stating that the observation affirms the unity of the distinguished parts. What would get lost, however, is the dynamic aspect of reality that Hegel and Luhmann wanted to convey. Luhmann used the paradoxical grounding of all observations for the development of a system theoretical approach that refers frequently to negative theology and polytextual logics. For example, Nikolaus von Kues is frequently referred to whenever transcendence is defined as a sphere, where even the distinction between distinction and nondistinction is not possible.¹⁶

In contrast to philosophical existentialism, the system-oriented approach of Luhmann does not emphasize the situated character of human reason and its gaining authenticity by facing death and finitude.¹⁷ Instead, it points to the entanglement of society and consciousness, focusing on the former while providing hints to the otherness of the latter. Here, authenticity is not achieved by writing about existential topics, but rather through some sort of parallax view. According to Žižek, it represents the realization that an epistemological shift in the subject's point of view reflects an ontological shift in the object itself.¹⁸ In other words, I am included in my descriptions of facts (in the guise of blind spots), which means that through describing certain mechanisms of reality, I can realize facts about myself that would stay buried when trying to describe them directly. Luhmann provides many such parallax views in terms of reflexive second-order observations, often accompanied by philosophical remarks.

The aim of this article is to address the topic of death from a Luhmannian perspective, while avoiding quarrels about the categorization of Luhmann as postmodern or not. First, this article will introduce those aspects of the general theory of Luhmann that are central for understanding how he tackles sociological and philosophical problems. After that, it will describe the application of his theory to religion and deduce the various implications for the topic of death. The motivations to provide Luhmann's views on religion as a social mechanism are: (i) the topic of religion is the most related to death and (ii) it provides an appropriate sphere for a parallax view that allows us to produce existential insights. Due to the highly cross-referential theory of Luhmann, the parallax view on death is effective in all the following sections. The section explicitly dedicated to the topic of death is destined to give clues for a systematic treatment of death in terms of Luhmannian theory.

¹³ Christis, "Luhmann's Theory of Knowledge."

¹⁴ Trisokkas, "Hegelian Identity."

¹⁵ Hall and Nousala, "Autopoiesis and Knowledge in Self-Sustaining Organizational Systems."

¹⁶ Kleine, "Niklas Luhmann und die Religionswissenschaft."

¹⁷ Andrew, "Approaches to Finitude."

¹⁸ Žižek, *The Parallax View*.

2 System theory according to Luhmann

The overall goal of Luhmann is to provide a general theory of self-referential systems to understand how society functions, while considering co-evolving systems, such as minds, as well.¹⁹ Due to its generality, the theory covers central philosophical topics. Hegelian self-relating negativity is visible in many fundamental notions of Luhmann's system theory. That is one reason why circularity and paradoxes seem unavoidable for Luhmann. Nevertheless, we will provide this simplifying linearization of all those basic notions, which are crucial for treating the topic of death (from the most basic to the most concrete): sense, medium, observation, system, communication, and functional differentiation. All these notions embody the unity of certain differences, and one can debate whether unity or difference might form the zero level of the theory. In the remainder of this section, it will become clear what the answer to this question should be.

2.1 Sense

Sense, in the context of Luhmann's thought, is the unity of the difference between actuality and potentiality.²⁰ When something is marked as selected against the foil of alternatives, this selection allows for the processing of inputs while retaining implicit references to those alternatives. There is no processing in systems without using sense as a fundamental complexity reduction mechanism. Reference to alternatives embodies the limitlessness of the world as well as the limitation of the actual selection. On the level of consciousness, this is one explanation for boredom and the desire for new experiences. Three dimensions of sense are differentiated: factual dimension (this/that), social dimension (ego/alter), and time dimension (past/future). Take, for example, a panic attack due to a sudden death anxiety: I have an attack instead of being calm or distracted, no one else can comprehend my anxiety, and this anxiety is related to my future nonbeing. Changing any of these dimensions has impacts on the intensity of the panic attack.

2.2 Medium

Luhmann adopts and extends the theory of Fritz Heider regarding the difference of medium and form.²¹ Both represent a substrate, composed of elements. The difference is that the former represents only a loose coupling of these elements, while the latter is a strict coupling. Take, for example, the medium of all words: they are loosely related through similarities and differences, but sentences exhibit a much more inflexible structure, generated by sense-making thought processes and grammatical rules. A form manifests itself more strongly in the medium the more loosely the elements are coupled. That is one reason why poetry with few restrictions on word and phrase formation is often chosen to express feelings. In system theory, sense represents a medium for observations, allowing the generation of strict couplings of marked selections into higher-level constitutions of facts. If a medium has the property of facilitating certain selections in the social context, then Luhmann speaks of symbolically generalized communication media – a term introduced by Talcott Parsons.²² One example is the medium love, consisting of all passionate demonstrations of feelings related to another person, which can be coupled in such a way that a resonance is much more likely with such a coupling than without it, especially in the age of modern love romance.²³

¹⁹ Luhmann, *Social Systems*; Luhmann, "System as Difference."

²⁰ Schützeichel, *Sinn als Grundbegriff bei Niklas Luhmann*.

²¹ Luhmann, "Das Medium der Religion;" Heider, "Social Perception and Phenomenal Causality."

²² Chernilo, "The Theorization of Social Co-Ordinations in Differentiated Societies."

²³ Morgner, "The Theory of Love and the Theory of Society."

2.3 Observations

An observation is a system operation of drawing a distinction and marking one of the distinguished parts as the currently relevant one (hence, it is processing sense). Without any distinction, there is nothing to mark. The separation of a distinction such as “poor/rich” from other distinctions leads to the notion of “form.” For Luhmann, usage of this notion is always related to a so-called second-order observation, observing how another system observes, i.e. what kind of distinctions it uses. All other available distinctions are the outer side of the form; they can replace the actual one. Hence, form is the inner side as well as the unity of the distinction. For the switch from the marked to the unmarked side of a form, Luhmann used the notion of crossing, e.g. instead of observing the poor community in their problems, the rich lifestyle and its disadvantages are observed in a dialectical movement. The similar concept of reframing in psychotherapy has two levels here: first, crossing, and second, realizing that the distinction is fluid and can be replaced, allowing a different perspective, e.g. using the distinctions “kind/unkind” or “educated/uneducated” instead of “poor/rich.”²⁴

2.4 System

Luhmann defines his central concept “system” circularly: it is the difference between system and environment.²⁵ One reason for this circularity is the transition from a subject–object distinction with its philosophical problems to a new perspective that emphasizes relations and differences. The issue of intersubjectivity is set aside with this move, and the focus is shifted to the stabilization of operations that allow for the perpetuation of a system. This is a functional perspective and requires determining the operation of a system (the environment is just the relevant source of vital resources and irritations for the system). For minds, the operations are thoughts; for social systems, they are communications. In the latter case, Luhmann differentiates between interactions, organizations, functional system, and world society. All these systems are self-organizing and self-producing and have therefore some sort of self-reference, either involuntarily as part of its operation (this element or process belongs to me) or voluntary through a re-entry, symbolizing its system–environment difference within itself. Re-entry does not involve a one-to-one mapping, but instead a construction because it can only operate with its own operation type. In other words, it is operationally closed.

2.5 Communication

Communication, as the operation type of social systems, is the unity of three selections: information, formulation, and understanding.²⁶ The last of these is the result of constructing a distinction between the information and its form (as a text or verbal), which is only retrospectively perceivable in the following communication events (psychological understanding is only important as a source of irritation at this level). If nothing follows, the communication ends or failed right from the start. So, communication is not a transmission of a message, but instead a selection process with at least two participants. That is the reason why one person alone cannot communicate at a given time and why Luhmann uses his famous phrase: “only communication can communicate.”²⁷ Minds are structurally coupled to communication

²⁴ Carvalho, “Therapeutic Intervention and High-Order Adjustments of Recursion.”

²⁵ Luhmann, “System as Difference.”

²⁶ Luhmann, “On the Scientific Context of the Concept of Communication.”

²⁷ Luhmann, “What Is Communication?”

systems, which explains their co-evolution and mutual irritation. Through communication, there is an interpenetration between social systems and humans. The former arises through the selection process of individuals, and humans gain their complexity by being embedded in a social structure.²⁸ However, sense is produced and processed differently. Communicating about death is frequently performed in interaction systems, i.e. in the context of temporary gatherings, with high flexibility in sense formation. If such communication is part of a more stable system, one that is associated with a sedimented expectation structure, such as religious organizations, the number of restrictions increases and the types of understanding that are compatible with system stability are limited. Such limitations are not only required for stability, but also for building new levels of complexity, e.g. by developing theories of death and providing counseling services.

2.6 Functional differentiation

Modernity is initiated by a transition from societies organized in a segmentary way to functionally differentiated ones. Instead of the dependencies found in a hierarchy from the king down to the peasant, functional systems, such as the economy or politics, form relatively independent communication contexts. A functional system is characterized by a binary code that identifies the type of communication for which it is responsible.²⁹ For example, the economy is responsible for every communication event that is guided by the code paying/not paying, where paying is the positive value in the sense of enabling further economic communications. Nonpayment is the reflection value, leading to a temporary disintegration and allowing for reflection on the reasons why a transaction was not successful. The selection of the positive value is guided by programs (rules and mechanism), e.g. investment models.³⁰ The function of the economy is to reduce scarcity, its output being the satisfaction of the society's needs, and the symbolically generalized medium is money. Hence, each functional system views society from a different angle: the economy is interested exclusively in whether payments are made or not and provides the means for such a decision. Of course, as with the human–social interpenetration, there are system–system interpenetrations, e.g. politics are highly irritated by the development in the economic sphere and *vice versa*.

3 Religion and death from a perspective of system theory

3.1 Religion

Religion according to Luhmann is a functional system of society that is processing according to the binary code immanence/transcendence or profane/sacred.³¹ It is responsible for the double encoding of communication events into worldly facts and sacred references. Transcendence is not only one part of the difference but also, on a higher level, the unity of that very difference. In terms of sense, it is the appresented (intentionally implicated) horizon, the unmarked space. Such a broad definition covers every communication context, in which the constitution of sense is addressed. Such a constitution is made against the backdrop of the ungraspable vastness of the potentiality, which can, for example, be identified as God, Nirvana, or Nature. In contrast to that, second-order observation outside religion deals with concrete

²⁸ Luhmann, "Interpenetration – On the Relation between Personal and Social Systems."

²⁹ Luhmann, "Differentiation of Society."

³⁰ Luhmann, *Die Wirtschaft Der Gesellschaft*.

³¹ Luhmann, *A Systems Theory of Religion*; Laermans and Verschaegen, "'The Late Niklas Luhmann' on Religion."

differences (forms) and senses. Such a difference of second-order observations provides an additional motivation for the difference between the transcendence and the transcendental. Whereas transcendence aims at symbolizing the unsymbolizable, the transcendental stands for whatever precedes experience in the sense of being a condition of the possibility of experience, providing new forms such as “noumenon/phenomenon.”

Unsurprisingly, we have here a fundamental paradox at the root of religion. Its responsibility is to symbolize the unobservable with the goal to reduce contingency in the sense-producing process. In other words, religion provides the means for absorbing the paralyzing effect of pure contingency when reflecting on the fundamentals of the sense-making process: Why is there being at all? Why do I exist? What is the world? Hence, religion starts with reflections on these sorts of fundamental questions, related to the contingency of existence. Frequently, a contingency formula³² is used for transforming the problem of “how to reduce utter contingency” into “what or who is responsible for the contingency,” for instance, by referring to the decrees of the gods. Once such a contingency formula is established, sense-making is framed in such a way that reflection becomes more and more obsolete. This is the reason why religious crisis almost always refers to the original state of intense reflections with a fluidification of a contingency formula, facilitating changes to it (e.g. leading to a new conception of God with such a mercy that there can be no punishment).

Denoting the notion of “God” as contingency formula is not meant pejoratively, it just reflects the function of its everyday use. Nonbelieving individuals might use this notion as well for denoting a structure of transcendence that they do not believe in. Having such a notion facilitates the discussion on the relationship between immanence and transcendence, the undetermined horizon appresented in the unavoidable sense-producing process within thought. Replacing the notion of “God” with “nothingness” changes the course of reflection only when God is determined by certain features, thereby embodying an immanent–immanent and an immanent–transcendent role (we cannot leave immanence with our sense-process). One of the fundamental challenges of organized monotheistic religions is to harmonize these two spheres without losing the paradoxical effect of their unity (Hegel's true infinite). Mystics or proponents of negative theology avoid such features and often use nothingness as a replacement for God.

At first sight, it might seem strange to use the term religion in communication contexts that also cover nonbelievers in terms of organized religions. However, all kinds of idiosyncrasies and movements of the new-age form indicate a necessity to allow a broad term to address the fundamental concern related to indigestible contingency. The distance between belief systems of organized religions and peculiar needs of individuals is aggravated by the functional differentiation of society. An individual is participating in many functional systems, e.g. economy, education, science, and none of these operate according to the binary code of the religious system. Due to the dissolving of hierarchies, there is no functional system that can direct the course of all other ones. One mechanism for adjusting a religious perspective to these modern societal constellations is the establishment of relative transcendent references that can be referred to in different circumstances. These references can be saints, fortune, the stars, and so on. Another reason for using them is the need for graspable representations for molding the expectation structure in religious communications. Mere abstract considerations without graspable representations of the transcendence obstruct the function of religion and can lead to nihilism. We will come to nihilism and its concretizations as part of the religious system below.

Individualism in modern societies clashes more and more with religious organizations, not only because religion as a functional system is only one among others, but also because of how organizations work in general. According to Luhmann, organizations are decision-generating mechanisms for establishing stable expectation structures, i.e. they represent social systems that have decisions as their operations, where decisions are determinations in view of certain alternatives.³³ Membership to these organizations is exclusive and requires adhering to requirements and structures. Decisions reduce contingency by

³² Teubner, “Self-Subversive Justice.”

³³ Luhmann, “Organisation und Entscheidung;” Luhmann, “Die Paradoxie des Entscheidens.”

providing decision-making premises, e.g. guidelines, instruction hierarchies, and persons assuming pre-defined roles. In this way, uncertainties related to the future are addressed by pretending to possess the ability to impact it in a desired way, thereby transforming uncertainties to risks. In most cases, it is not possible to gather enough information about the environment to perform a rational comparison between alternatives. The main trigger for decisions is then a high density of information, which is determined to require those decisions. For religious organizations, such a general structure allows stabilizing textual interpretations and social practices but has an alienating effect for individuals who realize that everything accepted and reproduced simply constitutes worldly decisions. This might lead to a deconstruction of the contents of faith.

As symbolically generalized communication media are intended to increase the probability of transferring certain selections, religious organizations as well as more fluid religious communication contexts seem to establish one: belief. It constitutes a loosely combined set of immanence–transcendence constellations that can be held true. Through the medium of “belief,” the religious code is concretized, which facilitates the function of the religious system. Commandments and prohibitions constitute concretizations that are highly utilized for shaping the religious practice. A primary source for them is religious texts, as it is rather difficult to establish them via oral transmission alone, at least for a longer period and with some authority to have a significant impact on experiences and beliefs with respect to the relation between immanence and transcendence. Fixing central tenets via texts does not mean that the texts and their interpretations remain stable. On the contrary, texts often allow greater shifts of many teachings and practices, as it is clear to what an opposition can be formulated. A higher entity is typically the one who has issued these commandments and prohibitions, guaranteeing that they are valid and related to consequences, thereby also reducing the danger of radical shifts. In the end, the medium of “belief” is beneficial for the perpetuation of the religious system, but the forms in that medium cannot fully address the existential dimensions, such as death anxieties, that initiated religion in the first place.

Another way of describing the alienating effect of religious forms is by referring to the original paradox of symbolizing the unsymbolizable. A paradox indicates the need for its resolution, and this requires further distinctions, e.g. deciding what the identity of different entities means often leads to the introduction of additional levels of identity. These further distinctions do not only resolve the paradox, they also invisibilize it. If the paradox is associated with an existential dimension, this means that the replacing forms will probably bring about an attenuating effect, and as forms lead to new forms, a further shifting takes place, for which the term “unlimited semiosis” was coined.³⁴

3.2 Death

From a parallax point of view, hints for the relevance of death in Luhmann’s system theory were already provided. Here, we will make the hints more explicit and deduce further implications. At the level of society, death in its existential dimension is naturally neglected twice. First, it is neglected by placing the individual in the environment and thereby emphasizing her interchangeability. When someone dies, it is irritating to society, which may register the loss of a unique perspective in the world, but the perpetuation of social operations is all that counts for (modern) society. Second, it is neglected through the inability to face the inevitable fact that all societies are doomed to end, when the sun has cooled down at the latest (ignoring star-trek scenarios for the moment). Communications related to death and apocalypses do not change this neglecting aspect, as they performatively contradict what they try to convey, which is generally caused by the sense-making process. At the level of religion, death is considered according to certain forms of belief, thereby losing its existential dimension. For the individual level, Luhmann seems to say little, and this makes it possible to give the existential dimension of death its due place in a theory covering religion,

³⁴ Nordtug, “Subjectivity as an Unlimited Semiosis.”

mimicking the intentions of negative theology with respect to the notion of "God." These issues are discussed in greater detail below.

Modern societies do not provide a homogenous image of death that is constitutive for sense-making. Different functional systems deal with death in their own mode of operation, e.g. medicine defines physical death to decide when to stop treatment. A society that is not primarily defined through religion – a recent anomaly, according to Toynbee³⁵ – leaves it to the individual to harmonize the requirements of the different functional systems. Even if the no functional system can direct the course of the other ones, the religious system suffers more from its inability to intervene in a causal way, because its binary code implies a responsibility for all kinds of communications. Hence, reassurance through religion is becoming increasingly difficult. For modern society, such a reassurance is contra-productive anyway, as its perpetuation requires a restlessness through irritations, which is a system theoretical reasoning for why the economy and science have a predominance with their focus on the (never-ending) generation of new needs, experiences, and knowledge.

Neglect of death in its existential dimension cannot and should not be blamed on the social level. Luhmann was heavily criticized for not criticizing society and providing proposals for improving it.³⁶ Such a meta-perspective ignores that there is no center of society that can direct its course and that adequate descriptions have a liberating effect themselves. One important implication of Luhmann's theory is related to the limits of society, which can only operate in the form of communications. Without communication, there is no reality of climate change or any other (socially constructed) fact, which is a modern consequence of Hegel's insight that "what is rational is actual, what is actual is rational," if actual = facts and rational = stabilized communication process. In contrast to Hegel, Luhmann did not intend to provide an understanding of the world, but only of society, leaving a space of a-rationality. In such a space, individuals pave their idiosyncratic way of life, and only those parts that are communicated can be rational. Wittgenstein described a similar feature of communication by pointing out that there is no private language.³⁷

Typically, societies have funeral rituals and mourning phases as the mechanisms to register the deaths of individuals and to cope with them. Again, the structure of society (communication as a threefold selection) makes it impossible to grasp the existential dimension through society itself. Even if a funeral might trigger such a dimension, it is an individual mechanism, not explainable through reference to the funeral itself. In addition to that, the requirements of different functional systems regarding the funeral, e.g. payments or legal obligations, exhibit the distance of social mechanisms from the individual a-rational space, which can frustrate the feeling of those involved. For some individuals, a funeral might trigger a feeling of the futility of worldly existence, some might feel a great loss, and others just assume their social roles. The ascribed social function of funerals is a release of tensions created by requiring the execution of certain activities. These different forms of interpenetration between the social and the psychical systems exemplify the different sense-making processes.

Religion is the functional system that promises the greatest proximity to the existential dimension of death. One trivial reason is related to the fact that death is not just an occasion to deal with but is also a form to present one part of its binary code (transcendence). Death embodies complete otherness and can be equated to a transition, redemption, or eternal peace. Yet, this potential resonance between individual and social sense-making is still just the result of an interpenetration. The distance might be reduced, and due to the density of transcendence-related communication, an existential dimension is often expected. However, as with religiously structured societies in general, there seems to be a saturation effect, if there is no space for an a-rational dimension besides religious gatherings, rules, and texts. Religions that emphasize frequent prayers and meditation without the necessity of a social surrounding and religions with less

³⁵ Toynbee, *A Study of History*, Vol. 1; Krejci, "Civilization and Religion."

³⁶ Bausch, "The Habermas/Luhmann Debate and Subsequent Habermasian Perspectives on Systems Theory."

³⁷ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*; Anscombe, "Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language;" Kripke, *Wittgenstein Rules and Private Language*.

organizational structure grant this space more frequently than highly structured ones. Of course, this has a price, which is a reduced commitment to religious organizations in general. Hence, departures from religions are made both for reasons of nonbelief and because of the lack of resonance with the individual existential dimension, and both reasons are particularly pronounced in modern times because of functional differentiations.

One central aspect of the function of the religious system is to provide concrete symbols for the transcendent objects, and one might ask if there is always a trade-off between this aspect and the realization of the existential dimension in the individual. If we assume a separation between social and psychic systems, the answer is yes. This is the reason why Hegel merged the two spheres and assumed it would eradicate the related alienations. In regard to content, Luhmann is of no help here because his interpenetration concept does not allow deducing any similarities between the ensuing sense-making processes. Applying a parallax view on Luhmann's frequent citation of Nikolaus von Kues, one can deduce a more Hegelian approach. It seems possible to stably project onto religious communication processes an inner dimension, and thereby realize a unity between the social and the psychological spheres. Mystics provide many stories, e.g. Christ and the dead dog, that describe how the immanent is equal to transcendence without making any reference to an external transcendent entity. Hence, Luhmann seems to indicate a way to such a unity that he cannot admit is possible. One explanation might be the fact that such a perspective constantly reintroduces the original paradox of religion, which is not conducive to formulating a detailed theory (observing from a distance with the goal to create descriptions).

Death represents the original paradox of religion in its most severe dimension. Many symbols for transcendence are meant to provide reassurance, but death represents the ungraspable dimension of eternal nonbeing, which is incompatible with the mode of operation of any system. As sense-producing systems, we are unable to think or feel a last thought that does not point to a horizon of further thoughts. Therefore, death is a dimension that entails both certain and uncertain knowledge at the same time. Searching for ways to address this paradox in a social (communication) context is subsumed to the religion system, even if nihilism gains the greatest plausibility. Death as a black hole, nullifying every form of existence, represents a bleak form for symbolizing transcendence, but it still constitutes one. Alternatives to this perspective are found in the religious system, not in science or in ethics. Nihilism that does not try to symbolize transcendence, no longer remains nihilism, rather leading to an "I do not want to think about it, as it does not lead anywhere" agnosticism, which ignores transcendence altogether. Descriptions and symbolizations of death simultaneously evoke alternatives in its horizon, which makes it plausible why a preoccupation with nihilism can strengthen one's own religiosity. For example, Christian theology was highly influenced by existentialism,³⁸ motivating, from a historical perspective, the broad term of a functional system of "religion" in Luhmann's theory.

In an interview, Luhmann mentioned his experiences in World War II, facing death and witnessing the death of his comrades.³⁹ His conclusion was that he had two options: either let it drive him crazy or gain inner distance, motivating his choice for developing theories. Domestication of existential borderline experiences is a task for all social systems, as their main impetus is to guarantee their perpetuation. Describing this effect on a second level of observation can allow a parallax view, reconstructing the original experiences, but there is also an opposite effect of such descriptions: getting more and more entangled in theory and thereby increasing the distance to such experiences. For Hegel, there is no way out. Once thinking and reflection are initiated, there is no immediate immediacy anymore. My original experiences are necessarily tinged by being thought as well as communication, and the most adequate level for reaching (mediated) immediacy is a dialectical thought system. For mystics, it is the other way around: the limits of thinking in the social context should not be made dialectical but instead should be used to break it down and achieve the level of experience again. Luhmann combined both options by placing the mind in the

³⁸ Peach, "Death, Faith and Existentialism;" Michalson, "Existentialism Is a Mysticism;" Franke, "Existentialism."

³⁹ Hollander, "Beyond Historicism."

environment of society, and thereby representing the fact that individual experiences have their own sphere.

However, gaining a holistic perspective by indicating the difference between the social and the individual has some disadvantages. First, to understand the theory of Luhmann, some time and energy is necessary. Only after penetrating the theory does a parallax view become possible, which can have a liberating effect in terms of opening the space of a-rationality against the backdrop of understanding society. At least, this does not seem to be the easiest way to deal with death in its existential dimension. Second, in contrast to the medium sense in general, forms related to meaning might indicate failures, as one's interpretation of the a-rational individual space can rather obstruct than help one find an adequate way to deal with death. Luhmann does not provide any reassurance of being on the right track with respect to the existential dimension. Third, the abstract characterization of an environment in system theory is far from being an invitation to translate existential crises into the social sphere. Referring to the first point again, this is only a strength if one has already taken a Luhmannian perspective. Other forms, such as poetry or religious aphorisms, are often needed for translating and touching a-rational experiences.

When compared with Heidegger's existential analyses, system theory's silence on the existential dimension represents unrealized meaning rather than failed meaning. Making this blind spot fully productive would, in the end, probably also lead to a failed meaning, as the gap between (philosophical) description and experiences cannot be closed. That is the reason why only hints are presented here and why a full theory of death in Luhmannian terms might be counterproductive for an existential view. Luhmann seems to point to Hegel's totality to say: "that's not all." Communication processes are all society can register, and we should realize that symbolizing what is not graspable is just a way to make it socially digestible, at the cost of losing its uncanniness. Pointing out that producing reassuring meaning for one's own death anxieties is doomed to fail can indicate the absoluteness of death, and this is another way of indicating the loss in the social sphere. In Heideggerian terms, Luhmann remains on the "they"-level, not attempting to achieve authenticity by theorizing it. As we cannot domesticate nonbeing, Luhmann proposes that we should accept the "they"-level.

4 Discussion

Death in its existential dimension constitutes a paradox because, from the first-person perspective, I will never experience it and yet it is a horror to imagine myself never being there again. However, Epicurus's truism does not consider that my experiences are limited due to my forthcoming death. Ignoring this fact means taking fundamental decisions and setting priorities without taking a fundamental horizon into account. Religion rescues this horizon and tries to soothe at the same time. Luhmann described this feature of religion by identifying transcendence with the unmarked space and referring to the necessity of symbolizing it (re-entry of transcendence in the sphere of immanence). Without this re-entry, my self-determination remains limited, but because a concrete symbolization of transcendence and the connected forms are themselves limitations, one can always question what the most authentic way of being is. A leap of faith is unavoidable for any answer to that question.⁴⁰

Uncertainty about the right way to live arises also from the contingency of time: at any moment, I can perceive myself quite differently than I did just a moment ago.⁴¹ Stabilizing sense-making production through religion is accomplished by establishing a central immanence–transcendence distinction that orients all other differences used in observations (observation = unity of distinction and designation). As the other functional systems operate according to their own binary codes, the individual is responsible for making use of this orientation in everyday life. Further distinctions, such as salvation/sin, agreeable to

⁴⁰ Green, "The Leap of Faith."

⁴¹ Luhmann, "Temporalstrukturen des Handlungssystems."

God/nonagreeable to God, or right path/wrong path, are provided by religion to facilitate the double encoding of observations. Through such distinctions, religion explains what was already explained or what cannot be explained at all. Attempts to make (scientific) predictions based on religion are therefore doomed to failure. In the best case, one can state compatibility with science, but, again, religion does not operate according to the binary code truth/falsity in the sense of generating intersubjective knowledge. When using this distinction, religion has already over-formed it with its transcendence–immanence distinction. Then, truth indicates an orientation toward transcendence, while falsity represents the lack of such an orientation, which is equated with sin, the wrong path, or godforsaken worldliness. As death represents the existential zero level of transcendence, truth in the religious must do more than merely project worldly life to the afterlife. Consequently, if a religious form would just soothe without pointing to the radical rupture through death, it would lose its religious function.

Generalizing the issue of addressing contingency by using differences leads back to the distinction between unity and difference. In contrast to Hegel, Luhmann gives difference such a fundamental role that it is not sublated afterward. A system is the difference between system and environment, not its unity, and there is no way for a system to represent one-to-one its environment within itself. When Luhmann discusses unity and the paradoxes that arise from trying to think unity, he also emphasizes the explosive force of the underlying differences. There is no unity in the sense of reconciliation, but only as a driver for introducing further distinctions. This explains his frequent reference to Derrida and Deleuze, especially in his later works. For example, the emphasis on events reflects the insight of Deleuze that a thing's essence is its power to become, which means that essence is always difference, motivating Deleuze to use infinites, such as to be green and to act. However, it is important to note again that Luhmann assumes a functional perspective and not an ontological one. When discussing the role of death for religions, he considers ontological and metaphysical issues, but always for the sake of understanding their function for religion. A distance from philosophy is most obvious in this attitude, and it would make no sense to compare Luhmann's usage of difference with the sophistication of a philosopher like Deleuze.

It may seem as if this article formulated many observations in a highly decisive manner. This must be put into perspective. Of course, the remarks are motivated by observations, but observations, according to Luhmann, are always constructions, or in other words, they are proposals. One goal in using Luhmann's terminology was to increase the clarity of certain terms and thereby reduce the abuse of language. Our discussion of religion in Section 3.2, for example, was based on Luhmann's proposal to use the binary code of immanence/transcendence as the central feature of religion, which touches the etymological meanings of "re-connecting" (to transcendence) and "choose." While the first meaning is represented by the content in the binary code, the second meaning is related to its function of guiding selections. Religions provide programs for this task, but one can also formulate a principle on a meta-level: act always in a manner that increases the number of choices and fosters openness toward alterity. Regarding death anxiety, this translates to the acknowledgment "that no description is ever able to grasp the vehemence of death anxiety... thereby, one remains open to its complete otherness."⁴²

What were the advantages of using the Luhmannian system theory for tackling the issue of death? (i) Its breadth in terms of topics covered around death, (ii) its ability to describe the effects of modern society on the individual, and (iii) its space for an untheorized dimension. (i) Luhmann used all the notions introduced in Section 2 – sense, medium, observation, system, communication, and functional differentiation – to tackle various issues, such as economics, politics, arts, mass media, education, and justice. Hence, the various connections between death and other topics can be addressed in a unified and systematic manner. Here, religion was chosen because it is the topic that related the most to death. Section 3 provided several insights concerning this relationship, and I want to emphasize the one stating that the neglect of death in its existential dimension within society and religion is not something that should be complained about. It is a structural necessity of the social sphere, and that is one reason why there is often a distinction between exoterism and esoterism in organized religions, pointing to a sphere that cannot be captured by means of

⁴² Sariyar, "How to Justify Avoidance of Communications Related to Death Anxiety in the Health Care System."

communication alone. Even though exoterism tries to cover death in a holistic way, for example, through *ars moriendi* instructions, it cannot do more than assuming that a resonance between the outer and the inner can be achieved. (ii) According to Luhmann, one important trait of modern society is its functional differentiation, and the main impact on the individual is its task to harmonize the requirements of the different functional systems within his idiosyncratic interpenetrations. With respect to death, this translates to the acknowledgment that religion cannot convey how to deal with the processing of the topic of death in the different functional systems. An individual might try to free himself from inclusion into functional systems in order to be able to disregard their requirements and to gain a new level of authenticity related to death. However, a complete exclusion is highly difficult to achieve and does not guarantee the realization of what in (modern) society is or seems to be unavailable. (iii) Everything that is not part of communication is declared to be the environment of the social system by Luhmann. The most relevant environment is the consciousness of individuals. Avoiding theorizing it allows a space for an unrepresentable dimension of thoughts and feelings about death. Analogous to such a dimension is the ineffability of how a difference is generated out of an unmarked space – the distinction is just drawn, which corresponds to the nonvoluntary emergence of anxiety out of nowhere. Without a theory but with certain hints toward otherness, achieving authenticity and facing death may be easier.

What could a Luhmannian book called *The Death of Society* look like based on the conclusions drawn here? First, it should not be a theory from an existential point of view, but rather a description of the ways functional systems treat death according to their primary binary codes. For example, in law, defining and determining death is relevant for deciding how and when certain rights expire or are transferred. It is telling that, for many rights, there is no difference whether it is an organization that has faced its end or a human individual. Describing the definitions and effects of death in the functional systems in such a manner would make it possible to grasp how modern society deals with death from various angles. This constitutes a contrast to thanatology, which intends to describe how society deals with death by establishing a subject field with methods gathered from other fields, such as sociology and psychology. The contrast can also be explained through the difference between functional structuralism and structural functionalism: thanatology stresses social and cultural structures and deduces social functions that are engendered by these structures, whereas Luhmannian system theory focuses on the functions within society and describes the structures that are generated by them. A final chapter of such a book should discuss the limitations of both approaches regarding the otherness of the existential dimensions of death.

To discuss the otherness of the existential dimension, the different approaches of early and late Heidegger as well as of Deleuze represent examples to which Luhmannian theory can be contrasted. The Heidegger of “Being and Time” indicates some sort of “transformation mystica” by describing how virtually facing death brings about an “Eigentlichkeit” that leads to a mode of being far away from the demands and the attractions of everyday life (the state of sin in religious terms). The late Heidegger still emphasizes the relevance of death, but not so much as a latent call for an existential transformation. Death is rather described as the “still unimagined measure of the immeasurable,” which can be seen as a (paradoxically formulated) call for thinking and enduring the contrast between the demand of death and the limits of thought.⁴³ The silence of Luhmann on the existential issue was already discussed. However, affinities between the late Heidegger and Luhmann are discernible in such paradox formulations (see above), even though prima facie, the Luhmannian paradoxes may not have the depth of the Heideggerian ones. That is one reason why I assume that a parallax view is most adequate for understanding Luhmannian theory, which allows one to detach oneself from society by understanding how the social sphere is constructed. As mentioned in the introduction, Deleuze represents another contrast to Luhmann, emphasizing the limits of representational thinking from a pure immanent point of view. Deleuze’s theory of difference as an unrepresentable field of relations and intensities is used more and more for understanding what is beyond thought.⁴⁴ For example, when describing the sublime as an overwhelming encounter that cannot be

⁴³ Heidegger, *Der Satz Vom Grund*.

⁴⁴ Justaert, *Theology After Deleuze*.

processed with the mental faculties, it could be read as an experiencing of an unnamable beyond, and one might argue whether this beyond must be immanent or can be assumed to be transcendent. The advantages and disadvantages of just pointing to other dimensions of being can be discussed more profoundly against the backdrop of such a metaphysical theory of unrepresentable forces and domains.

Let me end with a few self-observations. The choice to compose a scientific article is itself an indication of the distance from my experiences of death anxieties that motivated the occupation with the subject in the first place. During the writing process, I deepened my understanding of that distance and indeed increased it. Addressing the subject systematically seems not conducive for touching the sphere of individual experiences. Science (including philosophy) as a functional system is anyhow only interested in descriptions that could be classified as true or wrong – “True” (capital t) for philosophy means the adequate grounding of being and knowledge – not in ones that are connected to an existential domain.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, some formulations, such as “the horror of one’s own death” or “paralyzing effect,” resonated to some extent with my anxieties. Applying the parallax concept to this insight again, it is important to enrich theories with formulations that point to another sphere, without trying to theorize these formulations. Phenomenological research is intending exactly that by going back to the things themselves and giving experiences a space before processing them according to scientific requirements.⁴⁶ I assume that this constitutes one major motivation for Luhmann to concern himself with Husserl. At least, I project this onto Luhmann, as this perspective motivated me to rely on phenomenology without making it a significant part of this article. This leads me to a final plea: increase the sprinkles for a-rationality to facilitate moments of resonance between individual experiences and scientific descriptions. With respect to Luhmann, this translates to the feeling that the “wandering” Heidegger should have been more present in the work of Luhmann.

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⁴⁵ Luhmann, *Die Wissenschaft Der Gesellschaft*.

⁴⁶ Garfinkel and Liberman, “Introduction;” Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology*; and Ströker, *Husserl’s Transcendental Phenomenology*.

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