

Niklas Luhmann and the Risks of Moral Communication: Polemogeny and Modernity

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Abstract: Niklas Luhmann's systems theory offers a radical rethinking of morality and society, conceptualizing the latter not as a collection of human beings grounded on a moral consensus, but rather as a collection of operationally closed systems of communications. Within this framework, morality is identified as a specific, highly volatile form of communication characterized by the binary code of respect and disrespect, or esteem and disesteem. This medium does not integrate modern society in the way classical thinkers within the sociological tradition such as Émile Durkheim imagined. Rather, in a world defined by the evolution of functional differentiation, morality assumes a provocative "alarm function" that frequently generates more conflict than it resolves, a condition Luhmann identifies as inherently "polemogenous". As a remedy to the contemporary overproduction of moral discourse and moral panics, I propose that a Luhmannian approach must emphasize pluralism and the autonomy of systems.

Keywords: Autopoiesis, communication, constructivism, morality, Niklas Luhmann.

INTRODUCTION: SOCIETY AS COMMUNICATION

The sociological inquiry into morality often founders upon the hard problem of normativity. Attempting to establish what is "good" or "right" in itself, rather than observing the social reality of moral communication as it functions within the functional differentiation of society, is bound to fail, given the absence of moral consensus in modernity (Luhmann, 2013a). Niklas Luhmann's systems theory offers a radical rethinking of the role of morality in society, conceptualizing the latter not as a collection of human beings grounded on a moral consensus, but rather as a collection of operationally closed systems of communications (Luhmann, 2012). Within this framework, morality is identified as a specific, highly volatile form of communication characterized by the binary code of respect and disrespect, or esteem and disesteem. This medium does not integrate modern society in the way classical thinkers within the sociological tradition such as Émile Durkheim imagined. Rather, under functional differentiation, morality assumes a provocative "alarm function" that frequently generates more conflict than it resolves, a condition Luhmann identifies as inherently "polemogenous" (Luhmann 1992, 1004). This neologism refers to the Greek expression *polemos*, which means "war" or "struggle." As a remedy to the overproduction of moral discourse and moral panics, I propose that a Luhmannian approach must emphasize pluralism and respect for the autonomy of function systems.

To understand Luhmann's approach to morality, one must first recognize the foundational premise that social systems consist exclusively of communications and not individuals, a significant departure from methodological individualism (Šubrť, 2019). Individuals or, as Luhmann prefers to describe them, "psychic systems", belong to the environments of social systems (Luhmann, 1977). This distinction does not deny the importance of individuals, but is a necessary step to maintain the operative closure, or autopoiesis, of social function systems. Communication is understood by Luhmann as a synthesis of three components: information, utterance, and understanding, without cognition playing any role therein. The evolution of society is an emergent and self-generated process, while the reproduction and growth of society occurs through the recursive connection of one communication to another (Luhmann, 2012).

Meaning serves as the medium through which social and psychic systems alike process and reduce their internal complexity. Binary codes are used by social systems to categorize aspects of their environment, translating the environment into irritations that can be responded to. Meaning is also constituted through the distinction between actuality and potentiality: every actualized meaning indicates a horizon of other possibilities that remain latent but accessible. Morality is a specific way of processing meaning that relies on the social dimension—the distinction between ego and alter (Luhmann, 1995). It is a "social fact" in the Durkheimian sense only insofar as it exists as communication (Luhmann, 2013a).

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THE LOGIC OF THE MORAL CODE: RESPECT, DISRESPECT, AND SYMMETRY

The specific character of moral communication lies in its binary coding. Every function system operates by applying binary values to events and processes, which they transform into internally constructed "irritations". Luhmann claims that function systems operate on the basis of such codes. For morality, the dominant code is good/bad or, when incorporating subjective attitudes, good/evil (Luhmann, 1996). This code does not refer to the quality of specific achievements but to the "whole person" as a morally coded entity. As Ayumi Higuchi explains, on the level of psychic systems, "morality is communication that expresses approval and disapproval based on the good/bad distinction and is applied to the person as a whole. This concept is independent of other codes and is not limited in terms of its application" (Higuchi 2022, 1870). There is no society where individuals do not judge one another as whole persons based on their behavior, but the ways in which psychic systems categorize one another are derived from categories provided and elaborated on a higher level by the moral function system.

A critical requirement for moral communication to emerge is the "interdiction of self-exemption" (Luhmann 1996, 29). This is the precondition of symmetry: whoever communicates esteem or disesteem for another must accept that the same standards apply to themselves. If a communicator claims the right to judge others while exempting themselves from the same judgment, communication ceases to be moral and becomes an exercise of power. Symmetry provides morality with its socially binding force but also its inherent danger, as it forces participants into a zero-sum game of identity preservation, without any definite limits to the applicability of moral communication: potentially any action can become the object of moral judgement. Indeed, even everyday actions related to health concerns are often subject to moral panics, a tendency accelerated by social media (Räwel, 2022).

The role of morality has undergone a fundamental transformation due to the evolution of social structures. Luhmann identifies three primary forms of social differentiation: segmentary, stratified, and functional differentiation (Luhmann, 2012). In segmentary and stratified societies, morality and social rank were linked. The "noble" was considered naturally "better" than the peasant, and the code of honor served to integrate upper strata of society. Morality in these contexts was often convergent with the social

hierarchy, providing a shared ground for regulation of inclusion and exclusion, often in conjunction with ritual practices centering on the purity/impurity dyad (Van den Bogaert, 2025). The transition to modern, functionally differentiated society severed this link. Today we no longer live in a class society, at least in Luhmann's view, for there is no dominant social function that categorizes psychic systems into separate groups; social relations have been denaturalized and decentered to such an extent that there is no longer a single category or norm that regulates the identity of psychic systems (Schechter, 2017).

Modernity in Luhmann's account, is characterized by the "outdifferentiation" of autonomous functional systems—such as law, economy, politics, science, and religion—each following its own "amoral" code. For example, the legal system uses the legal/illegal, the scientific system true/untrue, and the economic system payment/non-payment binary (Luhmann, 1995). Not even science can provide a value-neutral objective coding of reality-in-itself, particularly due to its dependence upon the mediation of other systems, primarily the media but also governmental funding bodies (Hakobyan, 2024; Roth, 2024). The choice of research questions can be impacted by the mediatization of science, although the extent to which this damages the self-referentiality (autonomy) of science remains debated (Weingart, 2011). It is a demonstrated fact that government funding accentuates "boom and bust" cycles in scientific research, due to politicization of scientific research topics (Butos and McQuade 2023, 124-7). All function systems operate best when they remain operatively closed, responding primarily to their own internal logic, not to external directives. According to Luhmann, this has resulted in the increasing irrelevance of the moral function on the functional, i.e., code level. This does not mean however that morality has lost its influence. Precisely because it has lost its place within society, morality increasingly becomes a default oppositional stance in relation to rival function systems.

In a complex social environment, morality can, in Luhmann's view, no longer act as the primary mechanism for social integration. The "whole person" cannot be placed within a single social function; instead, individuals participate in various functional systems as "included" yet peripheral members, situated at the interpenetration point of functions (Luhmann, 1991). Consequently, morality, at least in the Western world, has become paradoxically "universalized" in its

Table 1: Social Forms and their Respective Moral Systems

Society Type	Primary Mode of Differentiation	Nature of Morality	Integration Source
Segmentary	Tribal / Local	Particularistic / Ritualized	Shared Myth
Stratified	Hierarchical (Rank)	Rank-based / Code of Honor	Apex (Nobility/Church)
Modern / Functional	Systemic (Function)	Alarm-based / Reactive	Structural Couplings

abstract claims (e.g., human rights, equality) but "marginalized" in its practical reach. This has led to what Luhmann calls "paradigm lost" in the field of ethics: the inability of slow theoretical reflection to keep pace with the fast amoral autopoiesis of functional systems.

THE ALARM FUNCTION OF MORALITY IN MODERNITY AND THE DANGER OF POLEMOGENY

Despite its displacement from its prior central role in social integration, morality remains a pervasive feature of modern communication. Luhmann identifies its current role as an "alarm function": morality activates itself when the operations of functional systems produce outcomes that are perceived as sub-optimal by psychic systems. In particular, anxiety functions as a self-immunizing characteristic of moral communication. Agents who are anxious are almost automatically in the right. Because "anxiety cannot be controlled from the functions systems (...) better functional performance can go hand in hand with increased anxiety without being able to remove it" (Luhmann 1989, 128). When mobilized by activist movements or scientists, morality can serve as a sensor for urgent social problems that cannot be adequately processed by the amoral media of other functional systems incapable of processing the good/evil binary, such as complex ecological problems beyond the purview of any specific function. However, *in extremis* anxiety can also result in moral panic discourses.

The alarm function of moral communication is most evident in the rise of social protest movements and ecopolitical discourses. When the economic system prioritizes profit at the expense of environmental sustainability, or the political system ignores social injustice, moral communication "rings the bell", so to speak, stirring social agitation by framing systemic irritations in terms of the binary code of good and bad. However, morality's ability to "alarm" society is not matched by a corresponding ability to provide technical solutions. As Luhmann observes,

"Moral communication now has free rein and is directed to where disquieting realities are apparent: the social question in the nineteenth century, the stark worldwide differences in prosperity, and the ecological problems of this century, which seemingly cannot be overcome either economically or politically. This leads to an inflation of moral communication, albeit highly selective. Its code is easily actualizable without clear directives; its criteria (rules, programs), however, are no longer amenable to consensus. Morality takes on 'polemogenous,' war-generating traits: it arises from conflicts and encourages conflicts" (Luhmann 2012, 244).

A moral protest against nuclear energy can signal fear and anxiety, but it cannot replace the complex scientific or economic calculations required to manage a modern energy infrastructure. On a meta-level, the precarity of social function systems appears to be a fundamental value that should not be sacrificed, even on an otherwise morally sound basis (Valentinov, 2017). The greatest danger identified by Luhmann is the "polemogenous" (conflict-generating) nature of moral communication. Because morality follows the binary code of respect and disrespect, while addressing the whole person, it has a tendency to escalate conflicts into existential struggles without any final consensus. In a moral dispute, the issue is not merely a difference of opinion; it is a judgment on the opponent's social worth. Scandalization and scapegoating, especially in social crises, can even overrule the continuity of functionality (Ehrt, 2011).

POLEMOGENY IS DRIVEN BY SEVERAL SYSTEMIC FACTORS:

1. **The Absence of Stop-Rules:** Functional systems like law have institutionalized procedures (e.g., court rulings) to end a dispute. Morality however has no such internal limit. A moral conflict can continue to escalate as each side perceives the other as "bad" or "evil" for not

sharing its convictions. Function systems, as distinct from psychic systems, cannot adjudicate divergences among their codes, for they do not engage in conflict due to their non-anthropomorphic nature.

2. **Mutual Disesteem:** In the pursuit of their own perceived "goodness," participants in moral communication (that is, psychic systems) often fall into the trap of mutual disdain. Yet moral "values are interchangeable by simple negation", entailing the permanent instability of moral categories (Luhmann, 1996, 31). By portraying the other as morally inferior, participants close off the possibility of compromise, as any compromise with "evil" is itself seen as inherently bad ("silence is violence", etc.), while the values, often embodied, used for evaluation can be transvaluated at any point by rival participants, a frequent occurrence for example in post-Nietzschean gender politics that emphasize self-transformation as a subversive practice (Butler, 1990; Messerschmidt, 2025).
3. **The Rhetoric of Anxiety:** In modern discourse, whoever suffers anxiety is often seen as being "morally in the right". Anxiety, unlike specific fears, cannot be "regulated away" by functional systems, providing an unassailable but, in the final instance, irrational ground for moral demands.
4. **Moral Inflation and Devaluation:** In an information-saturated society, there is a constant pressure to moralize issues to gain attention. This leads to an inflation of moral communication and expectations, wherein every social issue is judged, but nothing is resolved, eventually devaluing the medium of morality itself (Luhmann, 2013b).

As mentioned, Luhmann believes that morality constitutes a danger to social cohesion due to its conflictual nature. The good/evil distinction both arises from conflicts and encourages them. In polycontextual functionally differentiated modern societies, where different systems use fundamentally incommensurable binary codes to categorize reality, the imposition of a single moral judgment can lead to social dysfunction. Some authors have critiqued Luhmann as an adherent of an amoral stance (Neckel and Wolf 1994). Against this misrepresentative view, morality *does* have a constructive role to play in Luhmann's theory, for moral

communication can defend the integrity of binary codes, a normative value Luhmann explicitly advocates for:

"It must be possible to reject the form of morality, too. This in turn does not mean that morality is no longer to be important in society but only that the codes of the functional systems have to be fixed at a level of higher amorality. (...) Only when this is accepted does one see the onset points of morality in binary coded systems, too, above all where the binary coding itself is undermined—for example by doping in sport, by intimidating judges, by forging data in empirical research" (Luhmann, 2013b, 92).

In all three specific pathological examples mentioned by Luhmann, moral communication arises as a possibility. Immoral conduct is any action which undermines the selective closure of a binary code, hence morality in this context works as a correction mechanism. The modern reproduction of morality is linked to the system of mass media (Luhmann, 2000). Indeed, doping, intimidation, and data falsification are all scandalous instances which can generate substantial media attention. Luhmann defines the mass media as all institutions that use copying technologies to disseminate communication.. The mass media operate on the binary code of information/non-information. Since information "decays" once it is understood, the system must constantly produce new "surprises" to maintain its autopoiesis. Therefore scandals are useful for the mass media: "norm violations often take on the character of scandals. This intensifies the resonance, livens up the scene and rules out the expression of understanding and forgiveness that may occur upon the violation of a norm. Where scandals are concerned, a further scandal can be caused by the way a scandal is commented on. By reporting such norm violations and scandals, the mass media are able to generate a greater feeling of common concern and outrage" (Luhmann, 2000, 29), resulting in communication generating further communication.

Scandals are the primary mechanism through which the mass media reproduce morality. A scandal is not a factual event but a communicative construction. It occurs when the media select a norm violation and present it in a way that allows the public to identify with the good side, as opposed to the bad side. This process serves the media's perpetual need for

interesting topics, but it also creates more irritation: “the mass media merely provide a constant irritation for society, a reproduction of moral sensibility at the individual as well as the communicative level. However, this leads to a kind of ‘disembedding’ of morality, to moralizing talk which is not covered by any verifiable obligations” (Luhmann, 2000, 31). This “tele-socialization” fosters a form of moral intelligence that is quick to judge and condemn but remains largely ineffectual when it comes to addressing underlying systemic causes of the scandals it reported upon. These considerations of course apply to the intersubjective, that is, the psychic system level of society, and not to functional systems, which do not follow subjective views and cannot hold normative stances. However, function systems may respond to media irritations via refinement of their self-regulation, in the aftermath of scandals.

THE RISK OF MORALITY

In his works, Luhmann applied his critique of morality to the problem of “risk society.” He distinguishes between “risk”—potential damage attributed to one’s own decisions—and “danger”—potential damage attributable to external factors (Luhmann, 1987). In a functionally differentiated society, almost all social occurrences can be traced back to organizational decisions, meaning that “danger” is increasingly transformed into “risk” (Sapan, 2022). Whenever we make choices, we are dependent upon organizations having already made the important decisions. For example in the case of a consumer item, we trust that the producing company has adhered to proper standards and that regulatory agencies impartially hold it to account. Hence, trust is a legitimating condition of power in a complex society, in which the lack of visibility is a norm and not the exception. (Luhmann, 2017). Functionally differentiated society is intransparent, due to its complexity and the absence of a unifying code.

In risk society, the moralization of risk can be identified as a significant social hazard (Beck, 1992).

When risks are framed morally though, the focus shifts from a rational assessment of probabilities and causal relations to the condemnation of “risk-takers”. In risk society, the guiding assumption is that “the future depends essentially on decisions to be made in the present, so that future presents are always decided now, even though the future cannot be known” (Luhmann, 2013b, 311). This irritates society, which attempts to immunize itself against contingency via the politicized redistribution of risk. Politicization and moralization can lead to problematic outcomes. Firstly, decisions that involve unavoidable risks are often treated as inherently moral failings or criminal acts, while the complexity of environmental factors represents a clear challenge to environmental law and undermines notions of causal attribution of responsibility. Secondly, psychic systems have different thresholds for what constitutes a “disaster,” meaning that a moral consensus on risk is structurally impossible (Luhmann 1993, 3). Thirdly, psychic systems that take high risks (e.g., smoking, mountain climbing) are often the most sensitive to risks imposed on them by others, leading to a breakdown of moral reciprocity (Luhmann, 1993, 102).

Luhmann suggests that modern society requires “moral abstinence” when dealing with complex technological and systemic risks (Luhmann 1987, 93). Moralizing complicated issues tends to obscure the complex trade-offs inherent in any organizational decision and encourages the political exploitation and instrumentalization of public anxieties. Luhmann contrasts morality with “symbolically generalized communication media” like money, power, truth, and love. These function systems are differentiated precisely to solve the problem of the “improbability” of communication, providing specific programs (on the intersubjective level, “motivations”) for accepting a communication that would otherwise be rejected (Luhmann, 2012, 120-3).

Crucially, success media can only function efficiently if they are “de-moralized”. If every economic transaction, personal relationship or scientific discovery

Table 2: Success Media and their Corresponding Values

Success Medium	Reference Problem	Code	Function
Money	Scarcity / Utility	Payment / Non-payment	Economic autopoiesis
Power	Collective Decision	Power / No-power	Political steering
Truth	Cognition	True / Untrue	Scientific research
Love	Intimacy	Love / No-love	Personal identity

had to pass a morality test, this would render their respective functionalities impossible. The differentiation of these media required the "higher amorality" of functional systems. As Luhmann emphasizes, referencing Hegel's idea of *Aufhebung* (synthesis of opposites into a new unity), "the concept of 'higher amorality' does without the apotheosis of such a unity. It means only that, at a functionally equivalent point in the theory, the distinction of morality as a distinction can be rejected in the interest of other distinctions, and that this happens in the structure of the system of modern society at nonarbitrary points" (Luhmann, 2013b, 383). Amoral functioning, despite being essential to the efficiency of function-specific communication, is often precisely what triggers the "alarm function" of morality, creating a permanent structural tension between the structural characteristics of functionally differentiated society on the one hand and the moral expectations of psychic systems on the other (although we may also add that the moral system itself has a vested interest in its own self-perpetuation).

The binary code of morality is based on an internal paradox: the distinction between good and bad must itself be "good" (Luhmann, 2013a, 61). If the distinction were judged "bad," morality would be revealed as inherently self-negating. Luhmann implies that systems theory must pass precisely such a judgement upon morality, insofar as the latter illegitimately invades other functional areas of society. To remain operational, morality must render this paradox invisible, substituting the basal distinction with a variety of programs (*ibid.*). Historically, religion performed this "invisibilization" by anchoring morality in an unknowable transcendental principle—in monotheistic religions, the will of God, in Buddhism the laws of karma, and so on, as the ultimate "good," providing a foundation for moral judgments that could not be questioned. Today however in most advanced societies "generalized values can no longer be accommodated in differentiated society" and this idea is substituted by the morally self-imposed necessity for society to protest against society (Luhmann, 2013b, 154-5).

In modernity, the omniscient and omnipotent "observer God" has been replaced by second-order observation—the observation of observers. We no longer see the world as it is, but as it is constructed by different observers (Luhmann, 2013a, 99). This shift reveals the contingency of all moral codes. Without a religious "secret" to stabilize binary coding, morality retreats into "utopia" or "nostalgia". Luhmann's 1992 Heidelberg lecture on "indispensable norms" illustrates

this by showing that even high-level norms like "human dignity" are revealed as undecidable facts of communication rather than transcendental truths when faced with exceptional scenarios like terrorism or torture (Luhmann, 2008; Werber, 2008).

SYSTEMIC AUTONOMY OUTSIDE AND ALONGSIDE MORALITY

A central feature of Luhmann's social systems theory is its "autological" status: as a theory of society, it is itself an operation (self-observation) of society conducted *within and by* society. The sociologist is an observer of other observers and cannot claim an external, objective or superior vantage point. The best a sociologist can do is "respond to societal facts that are already in evidence" while radically revising their scientific discipline (Luhmann, 2012, 186). The Luhmannian sociologist adheres to a stance of "moral abstinence" or "higher amorality". The task of the sociologist is to observe the *social consequences* of communication, including dysfunctions arising when one mode of communication asserts dominance over other functions. From a Luhmannian perspective, any attempt to use the scientific function system to enforce or impose moral judgments is a form of code-coupling that threatens the autonomy of science (Brier, 2007). The sociologist must remain disinterested to be able describe the structural complexity and risks of modern society adequately

While Luhmann completed his work before the full maturation of the digital age, his theory provides tools for the analysis of the current transformation of moral communication. The rise of digital social media has enabled a form of "individual differentiation" that makes people more vulnerable to moral judgments across all social spheres, a tendency exacerbated by algorithmic categorization via user profiles. (Räwel, 2022). Digital infrastructure amplifies "suspicion regarding the asymmetry of communication" (Higuchi, 2022, 1875). In a quasi-anonymous online environment, the interdiction of self-exemption is more difficult to monitor, leading to the rapid escalation of disesteem and the creation of scandalizing echo chambers, further worsening the polemogeneous characteristics of moral communication (Rodrigues da Cunha Palmieri, 2024). New mechanisms, such as the Chinese social credit system, also demonstrate the risk of using moral judgments to regulate inclusion and exclusion across multiple functional systems. This represents a hierarchical "re-stratification" of society through digital moralizing, which Luhmann's theory would identify as a

highly improbable and dangerous development in a functionally differentiated world, one that perhaps indicates a shift to algorithmic differentiation and a corresponding rehierarchization of society (Taekke, 2022).

Luhmann's approach to moral communication reveals a structural tension latent within modern society. Morality is a universal characteristic of society, because psychic systems will always judge one another as whole persons. In a world of amoral functional systems, morality performs an "alarm function," identifying irritations that systems like the economy or politics may otherwise ignore. However, the "risk of morality" is that its logic can overwhelm the functional capacity of society to manage its own complexity. Morality thrives on conflict and tends to drive societies toward polarization and fragmentation. In the absence of traditional foundations or a stable moral paradigm, morality can become a free-floating weapon of disesteem, amplified by mass media scandals and digital networks.

For the sociologist, the only viable response is a commitment to observing the "blind spots" of moral judgments. By understanding morality as an operatively closed communicative operation we can better navigate the hazardous terrain of a polycontextual world society. The challenge for the future is to find ways for functional systems to remain sensitive to the "alarms" of morality, without succumbing to its conflict-generating and irrational unintended consequences (political-ideological fanaticism, religious fundamentalism, Ludditism, etc). Any systems theoretical morality must emphasize the irreducibility of pluralism (Bombaerts, 2023).

Luhmann's reflections on "indispensable norms" emphasize the precariousness of modern morality. Using the example of human dignity and the constitutional prohibition of torture, he illustrates that in "hard cases" or exceptional crises, norms reveal themselves to be social facts rather than transcendental truths. From the perspective of the legal system, validity of norms remain unquestioned, but from the perspective of society, all norms are seen as undecidable facts of communication. The problem of "tragic choices"—situations wherein every decision violates a norm—cannot be solved by recourse to universal values or principles. Instead, society must accept the paradox of its own normativity. Realistically, the "indispensability" of norms is not about conclusive formulas or highest values, but about continuing the

autopoiesis of communication in the face of uncertainty and risk.

The traditional "ethics of responsibility" (*Verantwortungsethik*) is also problematized by Luhmann. He notes that while calls for responsibility are ubiquitous, the complex mesh of causal relations in modern society makes it very difficult to attribute results to individual decisions. Much of what is presented as "ethics" in business or politics is a "disguised" attempt to handle systemic ignorance while making complex issues mediatizable and available for sensationalistic representation. As Luhmann remarks caustically, "what today goes under ethics (for example, ethical funds of banks, medical ethics, environmental ethics, and enterprise ethics) exists on account of the urgency of the problems and the aim of presenting one's own opinions effectively from a rhetorical and journalistic angle—and all the more when consensus cannot be presumed" (Luhmann, 1992, 1008). When a system communicates its ignorance as "risk," it relieves itself of the need for any final authority but also undermines grounds for moral condemnation. An open ethics of transition (ethics being, for Luhmann, the external observation of moral observations) would be predicated upon infinite deferral via proceduralization, as well as a focus upon process instead of final decision or judgement (Paterson, 2003). This represents a repetition of second-order observation *ad infinitum*: if we do not know what is "good," we at least we can agree to defer judgement and test to see if reasons are "good", i.e., consonant, within communication itself. This "higher self-awareness" of ethics would be more fitting to a functionally differentiated society wherein consensus and social integration are neither possible, nor meaningful, nor desirable. We must satisfy ourselves with messages that do not engage the whole person but specify the conditions of systemic cooperation in the space of interpenetrations wherein subjectivity is constantly being generated and dismantled.

CONCLUSION: NEUTRALIZING POLEMOGENY

The Luhmannian analysis of moral communication provides a sobering view of modernity's moral landscape. Morality is identified as a necessary sensor for irritations, but its conflictual logic and lack of stop-rules make it a source of social danger. In a functionally differentiated society, the integration of society through morality is a "lost paradigm," replaced by the alarm function and the reproduction of scandals through mass media. The future of moral

communication lies in its increasing "mediatization" and "individualization" through digital networks, which accelerate the polemogenous potential of respect/disrespect. For the sociologist, the task remains that of inculcating "moral abstinence" via a disciplined observation of how morality operates as a communicative system, adhering to the warning that unreflective use of moral registers can result in endless conflict. On a Luhmannian view, we as psychic systems may certainly engage in and utilize moral communication, but it must be used sparingly, without inflating moral categories. We instrumentalize morality at our own peril, for all moral values can be transvaluated and used against us in turn. Nevertheless, environmental sensitivity, coupled with the imperative to make autopoiesis sustainable, carries within it the possibility of a moral program compatible with Luhmann's model of social systems (Valentinov, Hielscher and Pies, 2016). Only by recognizing morality as a risky social construct can society hope to maintain the structural autonomy required to maintain its own irritations and survive the unintended consequences thereof.

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