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Roth, Steffen

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Dying Is Only Human. The case death makes for the immortality of the person

Steffen Roth

ESC Rennes School of Business, France

steffen.roth@esc-rennes.fr

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Abstract

The claim of the present article is that human mortality makes a case for the discovery of the immortal nature of the person. Based on a clear distinction of the concepts of the human being and the person, human beings and persons are considered immortal insofar as both entities evidently do not qualify for a definition as living systems. On the one hand, human beings are presented as neither lifeless nor living systems. On the other hand, persons are introduced as lifeless systems and, as a result, immortal system. This claim is extended by the statement that, even if supposed to be living systems, persons could be considered at least potentially immortal, which is illustrated by a brief and proxy case of the person of Karl Marx.

The human condition: Death becomes us

On the one hand, the situation could not be clearer. Humans are living creatures and as death makes life, human mortality is maybe the most constitutive feature of human nature. On the other hand, mortal man is said to possess immortality (Arendt, 1993), with this claim being staked out along the circles of life or the evolution of cultures that tie the generations. With due routine, the contradiction involved is solved by distinguishing individual humans and mankind; the latter of which has proved immortal so far.

Beyond the margins of this collective claim for human immortality, death appears as a very personal problem. Persons are commonly considered human, or at least living, beings and, therefore, mortal. Persons who, nonetheless, feature immortality are not considered natural - the result being that combinations of personality and immortality are so far attributed to legal persons only (Coleman, 1973). Hybrids by un-nature - these corporate actors or organizations - are personalized right up to the observation of individual attitudes (e.g. irony, cf. Hoyle & Wallace, 2008) or psychoses (Sievers, 2006) and, as collectives, nonetheless, are perfectly in line with the idea that all real natural persons die.

In the present article, however, we will start from the assumption that once born, persons are no longer so easily brought to death. The death of a human being is not enough to kill his person. Rather, the opposite is true: human mortality is the best case for the potential immortality of the person. In the following, we will demonstrate why.

The human personality: A matter of life and death?

Approaching an answer to the question of how human mortality supports the idea of the immortality of the person, we find that the concepts human and person are often used as quasi-synonyms. In the preamble, the Charter of the United Nations (UN) reaffirms “faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person”. Given that the UN does not intend to resonate the idea of non-human persons and explicitly contradicts the idea of human un-persons, the emphasis of the human nature of the person makes a tautological impression as long as we do not consider alternative foundations of personality. In presenting one of these alternatives, we will treat the idea of the human nature of personality as the null hypotheses, which we will even extend for the sake of the author’s challenge and reader’s convenience. Not regarding the multitude of necessary and sufficient human conditions discussed throughout the centuries, we will focus exclusively on the human feature relevant to the present issue - namely, the idea that personality is a matter of life and death. Accordingly, the null hypothesis is that human persons are to be considered living systems and, therefore, definitely mortal. Consequently, the alternative hypothesis reads: Persons are not mortal, regardless of whether or not we consider humans living systems. To corroborate the alternative hypothesis, we will emphasize the difference between the concepts of human and person, argue that humans are not living systems and, finally, demonstrate how the mortality of the human organism, nonetheless, makes the case for the immortality of the person.

The human being: Neither lifeless nor living

According to an almost canonical definition of life, living systems are autopoietic systems (Maturana & Varela, 1980; Varela, Maturana, & Uribe, 1974). Life, therefore, necessarily implies self- (re-) production. The life of living systems must be made by the systems themselves and not by others.

In this sense, it is completely unproblematic to consider a human organism a living system. However, it takes more than life to make a human. The concept of the human body already refers to both living and non-living systems. Moreover, being human also has a mental and a social dimension. Unlike allopoietic systems, like machines, DNA samples, and human waste - which are footprints rather than features of human life - organisms, minds, and social constellations (cf. figure 1) are sometimes considered different features of autopoietic systems (Maturana & Varela, 1980, 1987) and sometimes different forms of autopoietic systems themselves (Luhmann, 1990).

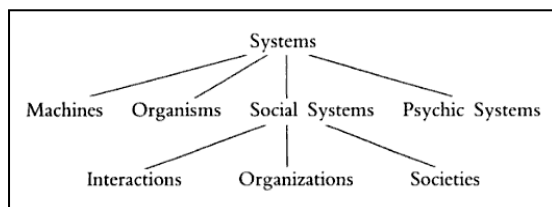


Figure 1: Typology of systems (Luhmann, 1995, p. 2)

In the first case, life already is cognition because any system’s Autopoiesis necessarily involves adaption to a changing environment and, therefore, calls for at least rudimentary capacities of information processing. Furthermore, given that reproduction leads to co-existence, life is a social state itself, as well. The second claim is then made not to fundamentally contradict the first one, but rather to avoid certain biases to paradoxes and tautologies involved in the assumption that life is defined by self-reproduction (=life) and the (re-) production of cognition and sociality. In other terms, the case is made to emphasize that it is not the Autopoiesis of the organism that reproduces the mind. The need for such a clear distinction of the commonly intertwined levels of analysis becomes even more evident if we recall that the Autopoiesis of a social system can by no means be reduced to the Autopoiesis of an (individual) organism.

Taking the mentioned distinctions serious, we find that most concepts of the human condition can be re-conceptualized as assumptions either on particular constellations of organic, psychic and social forms of life or, if for sentimental reasons the term life shall be reserved for organic systems, on particular constellations of living and, further, self-made systems. In both cases, however, “human systems” would be neither lifeless nor living systems, either because they display both living and lifeless features or because symbioses of living systems do not yet make living systems of their own virtue. In plain language, this means that, unlike organisms, psyches, and social systems, the human being is not a self-made systemii.

There is, consequently, nothing to be gained for death, no matter how often his cold hand claws for a human. If death refers to irreversible systemic disintegration (Schimank, 1996, p. 91) of a self-made system, then even death despairs of the never integrated human condition. Death cannot take the life of what is not living. He may, therefore, want to try his luck knocking at the gates of personality.

The form person: A climate of opinions

Given the neither lifeless nor living nature of human beings, the case of the mortality of the person is a matter of whether or not persons can be considered independent of “their” human being, i.e. the particular combination of organic, psychic, and social forms of Autopoiesis they are assumed to be involved in.

Locating the person in this multi-systemic context, we are in line with even the most classical concepts of personality if we state that the concept clearly refers to the social dimension of the human container concept. Personality is typically related to human interaction and the role(s) persons play in interactions.

More specifically, “(i)nteractions emerge if the presence of persons is used to solve the problem of double contingency by means of communication” (Luhmann, 1995, p. 814). In this vein, interactions are considered specific forms of communication that communicate who is participating in communication, which may include the exclusion of the physically and mentally presentiii as well as the inclusion of the physically and mentally absentiv. Participating persons individualize by virtue of the resources, duties, or constraints they have in present and further interactions. Such, persons must be considered results rather than origins of interaction. In fact, individual persons are made at the interfaces of interactions, which is an idea that Georg Simmel (Simmel, 1922) partly anticipated by what is translated as his comments on “The Web of Group Affiliations” (Bendix, 1969, p. 125)v. In both cases, individual persons are not taken for a history of states of mind or body, but rather for their interaction history.

Both Simmel and Luhmann also agree on the idea that patterns of interaction significantly changed during the transition from the medieval to the modern world. Medieval societies allowed for a comparably low degree of both physical and social mobility: Whether merchants, monks, or margraves, they stayed at the place in space and society they were born to, which considerably limited the scale and scope of interactions that common people could get involved in. The progressive removal of feudal barriers, however, soon led to observe that persons can, and more and more have to, take increasingly different roles in considerably growing numbers of interactions. This shift of observation from role having to role-taking made the once undivided individuals discover their individuality as token for the problem of staying the same while having to play so many different roles, day-in, day-out, in an increasingly liquid modernity (Baumann, 2000).

In this way, individual persons can be said to condense as side effect of interaction (Luhmann, 1991, p. 149), which is the more obvious the more “famous” persons get and, thus, the more condensate there is to make them appear “no more a person now but a whole climate of opinions” (Auden, 1939) and role expectations of the person. As a matter of course, this climate is likely to change from time to time, and keeps on changing even after the decease of the body-mind-complex that is said to have caused it once.

Such, it is indeed the easily conceivable irreversible disintegration of the human organism and the human psychic system that allows for free sight on the immortal nature of the person. Persons can be considered immortal because they are not self-made systemsvi. Besides, even if they were, we would have to admit at least potential immortality due to the fact that they are able to “survive” “their” minds and bodies, which is a remarkable ability that will be illustrated with regard to a brief discussion of a considerably small number of personal cases.

The case made by interaction: Karl Marx and other immortal persons

The claim that the person of the man we say to be Jesus changes with the identity of the We in the present sentence is as modest as it is momentous. Already, a smaller shift of confessions turns the prophet into the Messiah. Goethe also would make an interesting case if we compared all the different post-human persons he was to the German empire, the Weimar Republic, the Nazi regime, the FRG, the GDR, and contemporary Germany.

The case of a person as ambivalent as influential as Karl Marx, however, is maybe the most informative due to the fact that his person changes with virtually every move our We can make in time and social space. He was both designer of one part of the world and corrupter by the second; both messiah of the working class and boogie of the bourgeoisies; both co-founder and after-wit of both political ideologies and scientific schools of thought.

After the irreversible disintegration of his mind and body, nothing really changed for the person Karl Marx, except maybe for a certain expansion of the margin of plausibly attributable opinions and role-expectations. After a long and largely post-human career, his person is still considered present in larger parts of contemporary interactions and, most recently, his character changed again in the light of the post-millennium economic crises. Accordingly, ever since his emergence, his person proved to be immortal as the entire human race.

The lifeless person: Narcissist shocks induced by immortality

In the present article, we claimed that human mortality makes a case for the discovery of the immortal nature of the person. After a clear distinction of the concepts of the human being and the person, we presented both human beings and persons as immortal insofar as both entities evidently do not qualify for a definition as living systems. Human beings can be either defined as the observation of mixed systems featuring both aspects of living systems (organism) and lifeless systems (consciousness, personality) or as the observation of a symbiosis of autopoietic organic, psychic, and social systems without an Autopoiesis of its own. Human beings were, therefore, presented as neither lifeless nor living systems. In further course of the argument, we demonstrated that the person also is not a self-made system, and, therefore, does not qualify for the definition of a living and, as a result, mortal system. With particular regard to the person, we extended the claim of the immortal nature of the person by stating that persons could be considered at least potentially immortal even if considered living systems. Illustrated by the brief and proxy case of the person of Karl Marx, the article's extended alternative hypothesis was finally corroborated by demonstrating that persons can be subject to change even after the death of "their" mind and body. In this sense, it is the inescapable mortality of the human body and mind that makes the case for the option of post-mortal careers. In fact, the meanwhile largely post-human nature of the person of Karl Marx and many other immortals clearly supports the idea that, given on-going interaction, persons are immortal even in a second sense.

Resuming the aforementioned distinction of natural and legal persons against the background of the immortal and lifeless, in any case, not self-made, nature of the person, however, the most essential further research question the present article points to is whether legal persons, that is to say, corporate actors or organizations, actually qualify for Autopoiesis and, thus, for what is commonly referred to as agency.

For the moment it seems that the narcissistic shock the thousand times divided individual person is already working up in terms of constructivist and deconstructive theory programs is still imminent to organization, which even in its most poly- or hetero-phonous variants, is still considered autopoietic systems (Andersen & Born, 2007).

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ⁱ The concept of life does not cover its physical conditions, no matter how essential they are. A cell is not matter, but what it does to matter. Systems essentially *are not* what they require.

ⁱⁱ Which is indicated by the fact that, taken by itself, neither the observation of organic functions, reflections, or social interactions nor the observation by organic functions, reflections, or social interactions would ever allow for an adequate definition of the human condition or, far less, make a case for human Autopoiesis.

ⁱⁱⁱ Like in the case of slaves, servants, children, or restaurant guests on neighbouring tables.

^{iv} Such as with asleep, comatose, or long-gone persons, "*whose*" bodies, memento, or books still make a difference in interaction.

^v "What Simmel had in mind was that each individual is unique in the sense that his pattern of group affiliations is never exactly the same as that of any other individual". (Bakken & Hernes, 2006, p. 125). Reading this, we might feel tempted to assume that groups consist of individual persons and that it is again persons, now simply in plural, who make persons, in the end. Keeping closer to the original title "*Die Kreuzung sozialer Kreise*" (*The Intersection of Social Circles*), however, we find that Simmel anticipated a way of thinking that still only few want to follow. It is indeed still quite common to conceive social relations as ties of knots of individual behavior. Simmel, however, displays the individuals' role of tying social circles, in other words, his sociology is focused on knots of social relations that are tied by individual behavior. In bringing the social back to the center of sociology and moving "the individual" to the intersection of social circles (read: at the borders of the social), he clearly paves the way to Luhmann's historical Defenestration of the Individual. For Luhmann, society does not expressively consist of individual humans or "*their*" contributions to communication, but rather in the eigen-logic of communication itself. Using the metaphor of a score we might say that Luhmann is not interested in how individual tones are produced, but rather in the laws of harmonics.

^{vi} We, therefore, actually *are to produce the person*, not only in legal terms, but also with regard to the very basic nature of the person.