

Peter Fuchs

Niklas Luhmann – Observed

(translated by Caroline Huch)

I. Communication about reading difficult texts

Several scientifically interested conscious systems meet in the yard of university lecturer Martin T. Siebenschwan on a warm evening in early summer. The yard (replete with a sandbox and swings) affords an excellent view of the downtown **Frankfurt** area. The ensuing discussion is interrupted occasionally by the roaring of jet airplanes overhead. Siebenschwan is a sociologist who has acquired a reputation for peculiarity in his field ever since getting involved in system theory several years ago. At the beginning of the current semester he suggested providing a small, private forum for students and colleagues at his residence (in a relaxed atmosphere). Frieda and Frederik (a newlywed couple of university students) are taking advantage of his offer and have come for the first time this evening. These two are the only students who have found the energy to pursue such outside interests in spite of the demands of university study. They themselves are not quite sure why this is so. Also present is Dr. Hasso Beben, a social scientist soon to receive his postdoctoral degree, who hopes to gain a few additional footnotes to his work by attending the sessions. Siebenschwan's wife (Eva R. Siebenschwan-Pichel) is there and not there at the same time. She dashes across the patio now and then, always disappearing quickly again into the dim recesses of the bookfilled house, apparently occupied with unclarified activities relating to the children within. At the beginning of the excerpt of discussion that we are able to overhear, a large, brown moth is hovering around the beeswax candle that Eva R. Siebenschwan-Pichel has lit. Frieda blows the candle out.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

(moved) That which is alive I praise, that which longs for death by fire.

Frederik:

Huh? I didn't quite catch that.

Frieda:

(sighing) Dr. Beben was quoting Goethe.

Frederik:

Oh!

Siebenschwan:

(removing his glasses and wagging his forefinger) Now then! We have come together today, and I do hope that we'll be meeting often, to discuss theory - system theory, to be more exact - and even more precisely the species of system theory that Niklas Luhmann developed. I have been considering...

Frederik:

Damn this moth! ... Sorry!

Siebenschwan:

So, anyway, I have been considering what the best way might be to go about this...

Dr. Hasso Beben:

To go about what?

Siebenschwan:

How one might best introduce this very complicated theory, which actually resists the straightforward approach.

Frieda:

That's certainly true enough. I tried to read up on the subject, but I didn't get very far. And I've never thought of myself as particularly stupid.

Frederik:

(pats her knee) Of course you aren't, honey!

Siebenschwan:

(as Frieda brushes Frederik's hand away with annoyance) I am of the opinion that it is an intelligent method of dealing with non-understanding for one to name the thing by which one has been defeated.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

That may well be, but one thing is clear from the start. Luhmann is a polyscriptor ... a prolific. He wrote so much that one hardly knows what book or essay ought to be read first to make a stab at getting familiar with his theory. That sort of thing should be outlawed!

Frieda:

Yes ... I practically felt like forgetting about the whole thing when I went to the library and looked up Luhmann's works. The list of book titles nearly knocked the breath out of me.

Frederik:

Me, too.

Frieda:

You didn't even look.

Mrs. Siebenschwan-P.:

(serving coffee) I used to hate all that running around the libraries, too, when I was an undergrad.

Siebenschwan:

I utterly agree that Luhmann wrote so much that it's most difficult to recommend a "port of entry". And yet I do believe - while this is naturally a very preliminary and likely very unsatisfactory piece of information - that the whole opus magnum...

Frederik:

The what??!

Frieda:

(whispering) The great works ... the mass of them, you know...

Siebenschwan:

... that these numerous works of his are actually simply variations on a few central themes, applied within various topical spheres. To put it precisely, regardless of the point at which one enters into his theory, one always finds the subjects of system and environment, evolution, communication, functional differentiation and so on...

Dr. Hasso Beben:

And interpenetration and autopoiesis and first order observation and second order observation and re-entry...

Siebenschwan:

Here I can only ask you to put your trust in the claim that there are, indeed, a limited number of central themes by which one might organize an approach to the theory.

Frederik:

Well, okay ... but it's not just the volume of paper and words...

Frieda:

Right ... that's not the only thing. It's Luhmann's language itself that makes it so difficult for me ... for us to understand.

Frederik:

Exactly!

Dr. Hasso Beben:

(leans back, his eyeglasses flashing) Well, Mr. Siebenschwan, I'll be interested to see if you react to this problem with a call for trust as well. Trust may be a good thing ... it may reduce complexity, but it doesn't always stretch as far as the system theorists would like it to.

Siebenschwan:

I have no wish to deny that Luhmann writes a rather odd sort of prose, if I may call it that, but at least this oddness does not stem from his using a large number of foreign words or writing endlessly long sentences. I would say that the difficulty lies in the fact that his writing is so simple and abstract at the same time.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

You'll forgive me for laughing ... just allow me to quote something here. At a place where he is talking about how symbols function, it says: "One can say with regard to the origin of the concept: a symbol makes the re-entry of a difference comprehensible in its very difference. It serves as a sign of hospitality in the hand of a guest. It serves as a sign of the connection between familiarity and unfamiliarity in familiarity."

Siebenschwan:

But your quote merely confirms what I'm saying. There are no foreign words, all the terms are familiar ones, and there is even an example given.

Frederik:

And yet I still don't understand the sentences.

Siebenschwan:

That may be, I think, due to the degree of abstraction. Luhmann formulates things in a way that forces us to think within highly confined quarters, so to speak. And the examples he gives are so brief that they have to be read several times before one understands at all what they are supposed to be demonstrating.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

But even if you do read it over a few times and start to halfway comprehend what might be meant by it, a quote doesn't entirely disclose itself to the reader.

Siebenschwan:

I believe that is because sentences like these should be seen against the background of the theory to which they belong, and which they construct.

Frederik:

(shaking his head, meanwhile rolling a cigarette under Frieda's disapproving eye) I just don't know. Something in what you're saying there sounds pretty fishy to me.

Frieda:

Yes ... It sounds ... a little too slick.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Circular, my friends, circular! Mr. Siebenschwan said that one can only understand the sentences that make up the theory if one understands the theory, but one is only in a position to understand the theory if one understands the sentences ... in short: a vicious circle!

Siebenschwan:

You have caught me there, but then again you haven't. First of all, I am a system theorist, and it is only possible to be so by throwing off the 'quaking fear of circular and paradoxical circumstances' (to slightly vary an expression of Thomas Mann's). We will be confronted with this issue repeatedly in our discussion group. All right, what if we have a circle? Let's see what happens if we jump into the circle and attempt to figure out what it's about.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

(slowly and with gravity) If I understand you correctly, my esteemed Mr. Siebenschwan, that is, if I understand you fully and quite correctly, you are basically calling for a blind leap into this theory. The prerequisite for enlightenment is this redeeming leap of faith! This sounds quasi-religious, practically sectarian.

Siebenschwan:

Why so fanatical? We can just as well reformulate what you've said into game-playing terminology. This will relieve the issue of any obligatory character. There are simply a couple of rules to be followed and a few moves to be made, and then one can determine whether the game is any fun or not. If it's not fun, one shoves the gameboard and pieces from the table ... Indeed, one learns a game only by playing it. There's nothing reprehensible about that.

Frieda:

Fine ... This, I can understand. You're saying, then, that we ought to "play" this theory that we want to get to know, work the knobs and turn the dials, and have confidence that we'll grasp what it is and what it's good for while we're playing along.

Frederik:

Sort of like how you learn to work with computers?

Dr. Hasso Beben:

(slowly again and with gravity) I think I should warn you here! You mustn't forget that Luhmann's theory has not fallen into disrepute and found enemies due to its degree of difficulty alone. It has also been accused of exiling human beings from society, and of being sociotechnological - cold to the existential needs of humans...

Frieda:

(strongly) I've heard that, too. And I don't want anything to do with an immoral theory.

Siebenschwan:

I do not know how you can determine the immorality of a theory. You would have to have a theory dealing with morality and immorality, and the theory itself could be neither moral nor immoral ... But apart from all that! There are indeed such accusations levelled at this theory, and they are correct in the sense that Luhmann refuses to talk about human beings. The concept is simply too compact. What is a human being? An ensemble of kidneys, neurons, skin, lungs ... or what exactly? Or is it an idea, an abstraction, which is radiated from five billion individual specimens, all compressed within a single idea? Luhmann would rather talk about conscious systems, about consciousnesses, or - in connection with communication - about persons...

Dr. Hasso Beben:

All right. I'll agree with that. That *the* human being, as such, not only doesn't exist, but that it is also an unclear, far too compact concept: I think we'll be able to come to an understanding on that point quickly enough. The accusation brought against Luhmann is, however, to be more precise, that he excommunicates humans from society.

Saskia:

(a little girl darts out the patio door, pursued by Eva R. Siebenschwan-Pichel) Eeny, meeny, miney, moe, catch a tiger by the toe, if he hollers let him go, eeny, meeny, miney, moe.

Mrs. Siebenschwan-P.:

Saskia, come here! This minute!

Siebenschwan:

(transfigured) Saskia, didn't you hear what Mommy said?

Saskia:

(pulls the apron of her dress up over her head) I'm not here, so where am I?

Mrs. Siebenschwan-P.:

(has caught the child and, with apologetic looks, leads her back across the yard and into the house) Come along with me this instant!

Siebenschwan:

Where were we?

Frieda:

I think Dr. Beben was just saying that Luhmann excludes humans from society.

Siebenschwan:

Right. A fundamental conclusion of his theory is, as a matter of fact, that social systems and conscious systems are two entirely different ball-games. Conscious systems are *in* the environment of social systems, and social systems are *in* the environment of conscious systems.

Frederik:

So, that means ... that would mean that we - sitting here like we are now - we don't represent a social system at all!?

Dr. Hasso Beben:

(spitefully) Exactly ... We're not here at all.

Siebenschwan:

We are indeed here, each for himself, but we do not add up to a social system. We are confined within our own heads, and do not emerge from them. But together (through our contributions) we have a share in the production of a social system which, to put it metaphorically for now, detaches itself from us, has its own laws, and must be observed in terms of these laws and characteristics. But this is diving in too deep too soon, and I didn't really want to go that far today.

Frieda:

Did I understand you correctly? Human beings, or rather conscious systems, are in the environment of social systems, and vice versa? That certainly sounds pretty strange.

Siebenschwan:

But it's not really so very strange at all. If you ask what the field of sociology refers to in dealing with the world from a sociological standpoint, I'll wager you would be hard pressed to find a single sociologist who would say: It refers to human beings! I believe you'll admit to that, Dr. Beben?

Dr. Hasso Beben:

More or less ... In general we talk about actions, but there are something like subjects behind those actions, initiating them, causing them, following some purpose...

Mrs. Siebenschwann-P.:

(comes out and stands behind her husband's chair) Excuse me, please ... Saskia is being a little devil today. She's determined to drive me crazy.

Siebenschwan:

Now, dearest! She's not determined to drive you crazy, she had a fight with her friend today and she's just letting it out this way. She's not doing it on purpose, she's a victim of her problems.

Mrs. Siebenschwann-P.:

Whether she's doing it on purpose or doesn't know what she's doing, it's all the same. You're going to have to have a talk with her either way. (Siebenschwann goes into the house with his wife to deal diplomatically with the trouble brewing there)

Frieda:

She's a little sweetie.

Frederik:

(Piercing screams and screeches reach their ears from the house, sounding extremely like someone throwing a temper tantrum) Seems to be leaning more towards the bad side at the moment.

Frieda:

Children are never bad. They are merely reacting to their environment ... And sometimes that environment is only to be dealt with at high volume.

Siebenschwan returns to the group, but somehow the momentum of their communication appears to have dissipated. Frederik and Frieda feel more like strolling through the warm summer evening and solving the problem of whether or not children are capable of badness. Dr. Hasso Beben wants to do a bit more tinkering on his thesis, and Siebenschwann himself has the feeling that his wife will be annoyed with him if he doesn't see about the children. In short, the communication trickles along a little further, peters out, and another evening in the following week is agreed upon. At that meeting, an earnest assault on system theory is to be undertaken at last.

II. Communication about observation

Rain has set in during the week. For this reason the combatants are not sitting out in the yard, but are meeting in Siebenschwann's reading room, a spacious study that is isolated against the noisiness of the children downstairs. A samovar hums quietly on the table, the rain streams soundlessly down the double-paned glass of the windows.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

(rubbing his hands) Well, my dear Siebenschwann, where shall we begin?

Siebenschwan:

I've given it a lot of thought and have come to the conclusion that it would be most advisable to approach this wild animal from behind, so to speak - from the latest theoretical developments.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

I have a sense of foreboding...

Frederik:

Couldn't we just start small? With some of Luhmann's initial works?

Siebenschwan:

They require a large stock of sociological knowledge, even if the central ideas in these early works of his may be grasped more quickly (provided one has the aforementioned knowledge).

Frieda:

But I don't ... we don't have a large stock of sociological knowledge.

Siebenschwan:

I realize that, and, moreover, Dr. Beben is a social scientist...

Dr. Hasso Beben:

(suddenly sitting up quite stiffly in his chair) What is that supposed to mean?

Siebenschwan:

Nothing bad, just that social scientists tend to have a more general sort of knowledge, but are somewhat deficient in terms of specific knowledge in the individual disciplines.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Well, that is simply...

Siebenschwan:

There's no need for you to be upset. I'm merely assuming that you lack intimate knowledge in the field of sociological theory, that your knowledge of Durkheim, Weber, Pareto, Simmel, Schütz, Parsons and Haberman is not of the most solid foundation. And I think, therefore, that it would be better to start with contemporary theory, since the ideas we find put forth there are of a more general nature.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

I really must strongly protest...

Frederik:

But I ... we *don't* have all this stock of knowledge in any case, so I would ... we would really rather not have a whole lot of sociological background demanded of us. We can catch up on all of that later.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

If I know the Luhmannists, they won't find that necessary.

Frieda:

Oh, let's just get started!

Siebenschwan:

Ahh, have we not already done so? But all kidding aside now, I was planning on making the concept of observation the focal point of our meeting today.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Concept?

Siebenschwan:

Concept!

Frederik:

Well, I don't know. Of course we're familiar with the word observation. It means concentrating on something and taking a very hard look at it ... something like Daniel Boone lying hidden in the bushes, watching the Indians dancing and hopping around a sacrificial stake.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

(indignant) Hopping around ... that doesn't exactly do justice to the fate of that noble race.

Siebenschwan:

That depends on one's point of view, and your point of view has apparently been determined by a distinction between morality and immorality ... But we can get into that some other time.

Frieda:

(taking out a tablet of notebook paper) So, what *is* meant by observation?

Siebenschwan:

Well, to begin with it is an event that has a characteristic structure.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Why so impersonal?

Siebenschwan:

The observation concept we're attempting to grasp here does not require any human-like authority to undertake the observing.

Frieda:

I beg your pardon! Who, besides human beings, can observe something?

Siebenschwan:

An amoeba, for example ... It has to make a distinction between itself and not-itself, otherwise it would eventually eat itself up. Or a refrigerator, for example, that has to make a distinction between temperatures that are too high or too low ... or communication, that must

distinguish between information and the communication thereof ... But that's going a little too far for now.

Frederik:

Hold it ... So, you're saying that this is about distinctions and differentiation.

Siebenschwan:

Not those alone ... but observation is, in any case, an event that works with a distinction – an event that makes use of a distinction.

Frieda:

Like the distinctions between big and small, fat and thin, pregnant and not-pregnant...

Siebenschwan:

Or between stone and water, slow and fast, between a midget and all non-midgets and so on.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

We know what distinctions are. Bateson taught us about them in 'Mind and Nature'. There, he makes the distinction (using a Jungian differentiation) between 'pleroma' and 'creatura', and ends up backing creatura as far as distinctions are concerned... But you said, Mr. Siebenschwan, that the observation-event makes use of a distinction. This act of differentiation alone is certainly not it - the observation?

Siebenschwan:

No ... the observation-event uses a distinction and marks one of the two sides of this distinction. I might also say: An observation-event is the marking of one side within the framework of a distinction: this, not that! Kennedy, not McCarthy! War, and not peace! Vodka, and nothing else!

Frieda:

(who has ceased to take notes) Is that the complete definition, then?

Siebenschwan:

Not entirely, but almost! When someone or something marks one side of a distinction within the context of this distinction, he is indicating something, he *refers*, he creates a reference, and this act of referring becomes an observation when that which is being marked is put to use in the further processing of information.

(The door flies open. Daniel, a red-headed boy of perhaps two years, runs into the room chased by Eva R. Siebenschwan-Pichel.)

Mrs. Siebenschwan-P.:

(breathlessly) Will you stop this?! Will you stop this right now!??

Daniel:

(having taken refuge on his father's lap) Pay waam ... pay waam...

Siebenschwan:

Excuse me, he wants to play our game. I always have some chocolate hidden in this room, and until he has finished hunting for it and finding it..

Mrs. Siebenschwan-P.:

Chocolate...! Martin, I hope my ears are deceiving me...

Siebenschwan:

Go on, Daniel, go! (Daniel climbs down from the lap and toddles around the room) Cold ... ve-ery cold ... lukewarm ... lukewarm ... warm ... warmer ... hot ... very hot ... (Daniel finds a rather battered-looking piece of chocolate on top of a stack of manuscripts. He is radiant.)

Daniel:

Waam ... cod ... cod ... hot...

(His mother, visibly displeased, takes him by the hand and leads him out of the room. As they pass the storage heater, Daniel pulls free of her and places his hand on the heater)

Hot!!

Mrs. Siebenschwan-P.:

Warm, not hot ... Hot gives you an ouch! You remember that! (and they disappear)

Siebenschwan:

Once again ... I apologize for all these interruptions.

Frieda:

That's perfectly all right! I think children are so sweet.

Frederik:

Within the context of what distinction? Sweet or sour?

Frieda:

Frederik!!!

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Well, it may be that his comment was not so very unjustified. If I understand Mr. Siebenschwan correctly, a distinction has just been used and the sweet side has been marked. Our young lady here, within the framework of a distinction, marked 'sweet'.

Siebenschwan:

She referred to 'sweet', at least. The question is whether this reference yields any further processing of information in a meaningful way.

Frieda:

(very irritated) Am I some kind of guinea pig now?

Siebenschwan:

No, God forbid...

Dr. Hasso Beben:

(sarcastically) Aha, what have we here? What distinction have you adopted as your basis now? God, as opposed to what?

Frederik:

Retreat! Put it in reverse...

Siebenschwan:

Quite right. Of course. One more time, now. We have represented observation as an occurrence in which - against the background of a distinction - one side of this distinction is marked.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Yes, and ??? What are we to derive from this?

Siebenschwan:

More than you think. For example, that the distinction used to achieve the marking cannot be observed itself. This distinction always remains invisible to the observer employing it. He only sees the thing he's marking, and if he wishes to see what distinction this marking makes possible, then he would need yet another distinction which distinguishes the first distinction from other distinctions.

Frieda:

My God!!

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Here we go with *that*, again...

Frieda:

I didn't understand a single word.

Siebenschwan:

Just a moment ago you marked 'sweet', and in so doing you brought a distinction - or an entire complex system of distinctions - within topical range. And you did this, if I may say so, without being in a position to notice it. Your boyfriend...

Frieda:

My husband!

Siebenschwan:

Your husband affixed the distinction-side 'sour' to your marking, and made the supposition that you were working with sweet/sour.

Frieda:

But I wasn't thinking of 'sour' at all when I said 'sweet'. I didn't have any particular distinction in mind at all. I just said what I said. It would sound awfully strange if you were always

differentiating between your own distinction and other distinctions, just so that the distinction that you were using *could* be differentiated from other distinctions.

Frederik:

(with admiration) Hey, Frieda ... listen to you!

Frieda:

(as if in a trance) On the other hand, you do sort of have to employ a distinction when marking something ... but you use it without noticing it...

Dr. Hasso Beben:

This is nonsense!

Frieda:

(still not herself) There, you say 'nonsense' and are not even aware of what you're saying, or were you able to observe the distinction you used in order to arrive at the marking 'nonsense'? ... Aside from the fact that it is difficult to make any further associations in terms of this marking, it is also not a very deep one. But it may serve its purpose as an example and is thus associate-able after all. The association I am making, I find... (as if waking up) But, I don't even understand what I've just been saying.

Frederik:

Whoa! You really let 'er rip for a minute there!

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Deep or not, I do not have the slightest idea what all this fancy word-play is supposed to mean, and certainly not how it is going to help us get anywhere.

Siebenschwan:

Well, at least two things have become clear. Each and every observation requires the presence of a distinction, whereby it is then no longer able to observe itself *using* this same distinction. In order to observe the first distinction that was used, that distinction must be marked: this act requires, however, yet another distinction, within whose framework the initial distinction is distinguished from other distinctions.

Frederik:

(annoyed) I need an example.

Mrs. Siebenschwan-P.:

(opens the door) Martin! Excuse me for interrupting, but there's a salesman downstairs...

Siebenschwan:

Yes, and?

Mrs. Siebenschwan-P.:

I can't get rid of him.

Siebenschwan:

Just throw him out!

Mrs. Siebenschwan-P.:

You know I'm not good at that sort of thing...

Siebenschwan:

I'll take care of it.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

(Siebenschwan has left the room, they hear the sounds of voices and then the slamming of a door) Typical for a woman!

Frieda:

And how do you figure that? (very slowly) Just a moment! You are observing this event within the framework of a distinction between man and woman!

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Naturally ... it was utterly typical behavior for a fema ... for a woman!

Frieda:

One could make the distinction in a different way. For example, considerate or rough, yielding or rational. And, depending on how one makes the distinction, one arrives at different results. As far as the event in question is concerned, you made the distinction man/woman, and have thus...

Siebenschwan:

(who has heard the last few sentences) ...and have thus brought a particular reality within range; that is, the precise reality that comes into being through this distinction and not through others.

Frederik:

(haltingly) But that would mean ... "Real" is something produced by means of a distinction. A reality independent of observation doesn't exist.

Siebenschwan:

I would try to avoid the word "exist". Perhaps there does exist a reality, in and of itself, but...

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Let me guess ... but this reality would not be possible to observe. There we have your circularity, again!

Siebenschwan:

But the circle is truly not a vicious one, I say. Hardly anyone today disputes the fact that reality is an unreachable thing. Basically, I'm just putting a tautology into words: namely, that the not-observed is not-observed, and that the observed is observed. Period. And anyone who attempts to observe by not-observing will end up with Nothing to show for it ... Zen Buddhists and mystics endeavour to do just that. For us, it is enough to say that an observation, in that it marks something,

brings distinctions within range that generate reality ... one or another, depending on how we go on associating things from the marking.

Frederik:

(still annoyed) I need an example. It must be possible to work or play this out somehow.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

I don't know if the metaphor of "playing" is an apt one here, that is, if we're making the distinction between "playing" and "seriousness". I have the feeling that a rather **artistic sort of oblivion to existence** is in the process of asserting itself here ... That is...

Siebenschwan:

Is???

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Don't tell me that I've just used the word "is" against the background of the distinction between "Being" and "Nothing"!

Siebenschwan:

That is what I wanted to say.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

And you have observed this on the basis of what distinction?

Frieda:

Simple ... He distinguishes the distinction you have made from other distinctions such as, for example ... Ahh...

Frederik:

(sarcastically) You're sharp as a tack today, but you don't know what to say now, do you?

Dr. Hasso Beben:

I remind you of my question. I must insist on your answering it.

Frederik:

Is this like the sixty-four-thousand dollar question?

Mrs. Siebenschwan-P.:

(entering with a tray boasting an assortment of fancy cocktail sandwiches and setting it on the table) Man cannot live on science alone.

Siebenschwan:

Take a seat, Evie! You've come at just the right moment. I'm between a rock and a hard place. I've just been asked the sublime question.

Mrs. Siebenschwan-P.:

Since when is anyone interested in your stance on religion?

Siebenschwan:

Not exactly on religion ... But in my stance on Being.

Mrs. Siebenschwan-P.:

I would say you should have something to eat, first.

Frieda:

(to Dr. Beben, who is just opening his mouth to speak) And don't say "Typical for a woman" again!

Siebenschwan:

What are the kids up to, Evie?

Mrs. Siebenschwan-P.:

They are in their room, playing...

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Are?

Frederik:

Oof!

Siebenschwan:

We shall suppose that they are in their room...

Mrs. Siebenschwan-P.:

I think I'd better have a look. They're so quiet, and when children aren't making any noise, then...

Siebenschwan:

You stay put, dear, I'll go and see. (leaves)

Dr. Hasso Beben:

How on earth do you stand it with that man?

Mrs. Siebenschwan-P.:

I like him.

Frieda:

That's a fairly fine distinction.

Frederik:

(chewing away mightily) These are great. Absolutely great!

III: Communication about the observation of observation: To be or not to be

Siebenschwan returns to the group after a while. He appears to be somewhat ruffled and exhausted. The rain has let up. They open the windows. Cool, fresh air rushes in, along with the ceaseless hum and growl of distant city traffic. Frederik is finally allowed to roll himself a cigarette. Mrs. Siebenschwan-Pichel has cleared off the table. Siebenschwan turns on the overhead lamp. They all find themselves blinking in the light.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

I hope that you have not forgotten my question.

Siebenschwan:

No, I haven't forgotten it. I'm merely a bit shy of discussing such complicated issues so early on. We have only just sniffed at the haunches, if I may so express myself, of the concept of observation ... I do not wish to put too great a strain on everyone's patience.

Frederik:

(taking a deep, pleasurable drag on his cigarette) I have patience.

Frieda:

(turning from him with disapproval) Well, I have more than that. I want to know what all this about "Being" and "Nothing" is, although I'm not so sure if we're still within the realm of sociology there.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

I'm not so sure, either. I believe I would even have to challenge the claim, but then again... "to be or not to be" ... It is a portentous digression.

Siebenschwan:

I don't believe that we're making a digression. But, all right. Let us begin again with the concept of observation. We said that something is marked in the observation-event or operation, and that by and through this marking a certain thing is distinguished from another thing or from all other things. The situation becomes more difficult if we include yet a further circumstance in our considerations; that this "thing" could be another observer.

Frederik:

Like I said: Daniel Boone observing the Indians, who - hopping around - are observing a victim tied to the stake.

Frieda:

You don't even need Daniel Boone. The Indians observe how the victim is observing how they are hopping around.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

I don't know what you two have against Indians.

Siebenschwan:

Indians or not ... One thing is clear and that is that we must make a distinction between simple observation and complex observation, or, one might say, between first order observation and second order observation. Things are somewhat different in the latter case.

Frieda:

Of course ... That's not so terribly difficult.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

(firmly) Ha! Ha! Ha!

Frieda:

I beg your pardon! If one wishes to observe as an observer observes, then the problem arises that a number of distinctions must be made. On the one hand one must distinguish between the observer and his "object", but at the same time one must determine the manner in which this "object" has been generated; that is, what sort of distinction the observed observer uses to mark his object.

Frederik:

(putting out his cigarette with annoyance) I can't believe this. You should see yourself, the way you're talking. You're like a completely different person. What did you do, borrow some scientist's brain?

Frieda:

(only slightly annoyed by this) I gather, from what you've just said, that you have not been observing me properly up until now.

Siebenschwan:

But you were quite right in what you were saying. Second order observation has to juggle several distinctions simultaneously. And, as you pointed out, among these are (at the very least) the distinction between observed observer and his "observation object", and that a second order observation can distinguish the observation-operation it's observing from other occurrences.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

So there are, if I understand this correctly, various types of observation, and you have withheld from us the definition of the more sophisticated orders?

Siebenschwan:

No ... Observation remains observation, it remains a marking within the context of a distinction. Things are more subtle than you think, here.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

It is most irritating to be accused of non-subtle thought.

Siebenschwan:

Excuse me ... You have misunderstood me.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

How do you know what I have done?

Frieda:

He doesn't know it, he merely observed how you observed.

Frederik:

Just tell us how things are more subtle than we think, for Pete's sake!

Siebenschwan:

Well, I'm talking about the two = one-issue, about the idea that something is itself and at the same time something else, at least to the observer.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

(resigned) I knew logic would be our next victim here.

Siebenschwan:

It will be so frequently throughout our meetings. Classical logic is inadequate in dealing with problems in which time is implied ... But let's put that aside for the moment. I was saying that we are confronted with the two = one-issue. What I mean by that, and this is extremely important, is that all observation, regardless of the level, always remains observation – a basic operation that occurs...

Frieda:

Occurs blindly...

Siebenschwan:

Occurs blindly, correct! Every observation-operation is bound to a distinction that it updates with the marking thereof. Each and every observation-operation is, furthermore, a first order observation. Even if it's a hundredth order observation, it is - without exception - a first order observation as well. Any sort of hierarchy is thus avoided, any "better" and "worse" cancelled out. It is both impossible and impermissible to talk about observation-operations in terms of inferiority or superiority.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

(muttering) So that's why you were bringing up God a few minutes ago.

Frederik:

(rolling himself another cigarette, the window is still open) Okay, but the distinction - what about that? The distinction between observations of the first and second order, for example!?

Siebenschwan:

A second order observation, which observes observers doing the observing, sees more ... It sees (and I quote from memory here) what the observer sees and how he sees what he sees. It even sees what the observed observer doesn't see, and sees *that* he doesn't see what he doesn't see.

Frieda:

My, my, Dr. Beben, you certainly are jittery!

Dr. Hasso Beben:

I am not jittery.

Frieda:

I don't know ... I don't think your glasses will take all that twisting around much longer.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Huh, I didn't even notice.

Frederik:

Frieda, you interrupted the discussion ... (in a hopeful tone) You don't feel like talking much longer? You do look kind of tired.

Frieda:

No wonder, with all that smoke you're puffing into the air over there ... Apparently you don't even realize how much you're bothering those around you and sooting up your environment, or if you *do* notice it, it certainly doesn't seem to make a difference to you. It appears that you need your cigarettes so bad that you couldn't care less about your surroundings.

Siebenschwan:

I see that everyone's nerves are a bit frayed. I told you from the start that this is quite a complex affair.

Frederik:

If you could just give us an example...

Siebenschwan:

Well, for example you could observe someone in terms of that which he himself does not observe. The most common distinction made here is conscious/unconscious. You observe someone with the help of a distinction that achieves the result that what is seen is *not* that which happens. Someone picks his nose, and right away sexual intentions are attributed to him. Someone lights up a cigarette, and right away he's showing signs of his oral regression ... Someone speaks up, and there is immediately an insinuation that he's not talking about what he's talking about, but is only attempting to hide his light under a bushel.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

I may also assume, therefore, that you deny the existence of the subconscious.

Siebenschwan:

I don't know what distinction you're laying before us when you say "deny". In any case it is a term rather reminiscent of the Inquisition. It is certain, however, that I believe the subconscious could be described as a construction of observation. I can talk about existence only if I am working with the distinction between Being and Nothing.

Frieda:

There we are again. That's what this was supposed to be all about. Wasn't it?

Siebenschwan:

Indeed ... I only wanted you to understand the distinction and non-distinction between observation-operations of varying orders. I wanted you to grasp their form.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Form?

Siebenschwan:

By form I actually do mean something specific, namely an either/or-distinction used to help mark a difference ... Just a minute, just a minute! I'm going to explain that!

(The door has been cracked halfway open. A dark blond shock of hair and the 12 year old girl it belongs to peeps in around the edge, sniffing and whining a bit)

What is it, Merlin? ... What do you want? ... Come on, now! ... All right, but you either tell me now or...

Mrs. Siebenschwan-P.:

(appears behind Merlin) Don't let her go to work on you, Martin. I told her she either cuts those bangs herself right now or I take her for a hair-cut tomorrow. There is no third alternative. She was thinking you would come to her aid, but she didn't remember that you have company. That's why she's standing in the doorway and the cat's got her tongue.

Siebenschwan:

(in a gentle tone) Your mother is right, you know. What is it you want?

Merlin:

I want to dye my hair with henna!

Siebenschwan:

Henna?

Mrs. Siebenschwan-P.:

Absolutely out of the question. You can put that idea out of your head for now. Come back in five years.

Merlin:

All the girls in my class have...

Mrs. Siebenschwan-P.:

If all the girls in your class jumped off a bridge, would you do it, too?

Frieda:

(in a low voice) My mother always used to say that, too.

Siebenschwan:

I can't do anything to help you. You heard the alternatives your mother has given you, and we need to get back to work here. (Mrs. Siebenschwan-Pichel vanishes with Merlin in custody.)

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Where were we? ... Oh, yes. The concept of form. You were saying that this concept marks the employment of a distinction that only allows us to mark one of its sides at any given time.

Siebenschwan:

Precisely so. Thank-you, Dr. Beben. With reference to ontology this means that we are dealing with a form of observation or description that differentiates between Being and Non-being, a form that forces us to mark one of the two sides. If I mark "Being" then I have ruled out that which would mark Non-being, and vice versa. The positive marking of the value "Being" fades in or molds itself, so to speak, to the inner side of a form outlining the excluded outer side's contours.

Frieda:

But still, the only thing you can really mark is "Being", because you can never reach that other side.

Siebenschwan:

If you wish to pass over that boundary – Spencer-Brown calls this act 'crossing' – you are then forced to mark the other side.

Frederik:

Yep. Baby's got to have a name.

Siebenschwan:

Ah, yes. If you will! ... At any rate, whatever is beyond the marking "Being" becomes "Non-being" the moment you cross over the border.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

And? What is gained by that?

Frieda:

But don't you see ... ? Only now have we achieved the clear distinction.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Eureka!

Frieda:

Can you not or will you not understand? At first, before we crossed the border, we just had "Being" and an unnamed remainder. Now we have a distinction, a clear-cut difference: Being and Nothing. I don't know where this will take us, but we have made a distinction apart from ... from...?

Frederik:

Hoo, now you're stuck again, huh?

Dr. Hasso Beben:

The ground we're standing upon is more akin to quicksand than solid earth. Actually, we're not even standing, we're suspended above it.

Siebenschwan:

That's not far from the truth, but we'll be faced with this problem again and again throughout our meetings. For the moment it is enough to see that the marking "Being" brings the distinction Being/Nothing within range ... a distinction that dominates observation abilities in Europe at least, and which thus begins its career somewhat paradoxically.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

What, then, do we know thanks to that which we now know?

Siebenschwan:

For example, how time comes about.

Frederik:

Phhfft...

Siebenschwan:

You heard me correctly. The form - the distinction between inside and outside - is always simultaneously present, but if you switch sides for some reason, it takes up time. This can be particularly well observed in the realm of art, but I'm sure we'll return to that later, as well.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

You make plenty of promises, but one thing is for sure, regardless: I haven't the foggiest notion what any of this has got to do with sociology. It may well be that you have a weakness for metaphysical and ontological issues, but there all I can say to you is "Fuge Satanas"! There is no such rubbish in the field of sociology.

Frederik:

Seems that way to me, too. Maybe you could wrap it up here by explaining that a little.
(yawns)

Siebenschwan:

I don't know, perhaps next time we should...

Dr. Hasso Beben:

I insist on some indication of the sociological relevance of your philosophical expositions, otherwise a next time for me is highly unlikely.

Siebenschwan:

All right, if you like. But I will be saying several things that don't necessarily make any sense yet. One thing that I think we'll all be able to agree upon is that a central issue of sociology is the manner in which modern society observes or describes itself. The point here is, how does society do that? If we see the world in ontological terms - or, to more precisely adopt the ontological pattern - if Being/Nothing is observed, then the question of society's identity takes on the form of a question seeking something that exists in a very certain way. The question seeks something that is made up of

definite and definable parts, and which has a hard kernel at its center - a certainty beyond all the soft observation-operations - that should be able to be discovered. One just has to be looking in the correct way in order to grasp the manner-of-being of society, and one only misses this manner-of-being if one is not looking correctly. In other words, one needs substance and subject, the realm of "Being" and its observers ... and these observers ("Being" themselves) occupy a somewhat external position.

Frieda:

They observe things, identities.

Siebenschwan:

Yes, but if we...

Frieda:

Let me try, please. If we assume that reality is dependent upon observation, that is, that everything depends upon the distinction set before us when one marks something...

Frederik:

(cynically) Then it must be Miller time...

Frieda:

In short, when we begin to realize that in the observation of observers...

Siebenschwan:

Precisely! You've got it. As soon as society realizes that it is forever observing observers, and that there are numerous observers and observations in which various distinctions are being updated and which cannot be seen in terms of any generalized distinction ... At that point, the simple pattern of Being/Nothing becomes obsolete, all observation-results become contingent, that is: they are no longer inevitable, only identifiable. There are no safe points of observation anymore, and a mere majority of observers who are looking in one direction and working with the same pattern in no way guarantees any solid authenticity.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Deo Gratias. The truth is out. You're a post-modernist!

Siebenschwan:

No, I don't think so, but if you wish to observe in this manner, then I shall observe back. And I should do so by drawing the distinction between European and Old European, or antiquated and modern, or conservative and progressive ... and you yourself may then choose the way in which I am doing my marking.

Frederik:

Whew! That's it for me, folks.

Frieda:

Huh! I thought a man would have a little more stamina than this!

Frederik:

Certainly is interesting to see how you apply the distinction between woman and man when it serves your purpose.

Mrs. Siebenschwann-Pichel enters the room and begs them to wrap up their session since it's getting quite late. Frieda and Frederik begin to say their good-byes and leave together, but not hand in hand. Dr. Beben announces that he'll attend the next meeting after all - albeit under protest. Siebenschwann apologizes to all for having overtaxed them to such an extent. His spouse, sensing the tension in the air, suggests that perhaps their next meeting ought to take the form of a picnic outdoors, weather permitting.

IV. Communication about identity and meaning

Two weeks later, on a balmy and inviting early summer day, the next session does indeed convene in the form of a "walk" in the country. The Siebenschwans are the owners of a spacious mini-van: in this vehicle the little group heads off to a reservoir in the **Sauerland** countryside. The drive is not a particularly relaxing one, as several of the Siebenschwans's young brood have come along with them. The children sing raucous tunes like "100 bottles of beer on the wall, 100 bottles of bee-er, you take one down and pass-it-around, 99 bottles of beer on the wall ..." or "One little, two little, three little Indians ..." and constantly go into fits of hysterical giggling after each verse. Dr. Hasso Beben is unable to put forward his objections to racial discrimination, Frederik is not allowed to smoke, and Frieda attempts to sing along with the children. Siebenschwann joins in, too, and his wife is no less than radiant. There is one further guest along on the excursion, one brought by Dr. Beben: his name is Fredemar Woltersbeck, a student of theology. He makes a slightly worried, anxious impression, apparently unsure whether he's at the right party. After a loud, sauna-like hour in the van, the group reaches its destination. They park above a stone dam wall of historical appearance. The lake, shaped like a sickle, sparkles regally where it lies between the mountains. Rural monocultures are reflected in the water along its shores.

Siebenschwan:

Dismount, everybody! Here we are!

The sliding door at the side opens and the children tumble out and scatter, followed somewhat more deliberately by the adults. Frederik lights up a cigarette. The group falls into formation and begins to amble off down the path. Mrs. Siebenschwann-Pichel calls the children back to her side and explains to them that the trail they are on is a circular one. Because of this, they can't really get lost. They just have to keep on going straight ahead and eventually they'll end up back at the van. They are to wait there if they should make it around the reservoir faster than the adults, and there is to be no fooling around or getting into trouble under any circumstances.

Frieda:

What a gorgeous day.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Hmm...

Frieda:

Look at those ducks, there. Seems like they want to get out from under the shadow of these overhanging trees and swim in the sunshine.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Unless I'm mistaken, you have just drawn a distinction resulting in the assumption that the ducks "want" something.

Frederik:

Which brings us back to our original subject ... more or less, anyway. If I remember correctly, we were talking about how observations that deal with the distinction Being/Nothing are inappropriate within the conditions of modern society.

Frieda:

You learned that by heart.

Frederik:

It was easy, you wrote everything down.

Siebenschwan:

I would be quite satisfied for now if you would go along with the idea that the observation pattern "Being/Nothing" leads us to the conclusion that there are such things as observation-independent identities.

Woltersbeck:

(shyly) Theology has always had its doubts there.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

So, I suppose that means that if we go along with what you suggest, then identities are something constructed artificially?

Frieda:

Sure! If everything that passes for reality is bound to the distinctions drawn by each respective observer, then the question that obviously arises is how identities are generated.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

In other words, we're walking straight into constructivism.

Siebenschwan:

We don't need to take it quite that far at this point. It is enough to say that the mere act of differentiation alone is not yet reliant upon the issue of identities. The identity problem only rears its head when we try to perform further operations on or with whatever has already been marked in a distinction.

Saskia:

(comes running up breathlessly) What kind of a bird is that? (She points at a tiny speck in the immeasurable expanse of sky above.)

Woltersbeck:

A buzzard...

Frederik:

It's a falcon, that's easy to see ... look at the wingspan...

Woltersbeck:

The tips of the wings are rounded, ergo...

Mrs. Siebenschwann-P.:

An eagle, sweetheart, it's surely an eagle. (Saskia takes off, a cry of "Eagle!" on her lips, racing to catch up with the other children. They are way ahead of the group by now.)

Frederik:

I hope you'll excuse me, Mrs. Siebenschwann-Pichel, but there aren't any eagles in this region.

Woltersbeck:

A buzzard, it's easy to see it's a buzzard ... I was a boy scout at St George's long enough to know that much.

Mrs. Siebenschwann-P.:

An eagle is nicer for the children. (Siebenschwann kisses her lightly on the cheek.)

Siebenschwann:

I would like to emphasize once again that the important point here is that the need for identification can be described as the problem of being able to continue or further associate operations. This is the condition for the possibility and necessity of forming a system.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Aha, the magic word at last! ... System!

Frederik:

Well, at least I understood *that*. I can see that one has to be able to refer to something if one is making a reference to something. It has to be defined, somehow ... but how does that happen?

Siebenschwann:

Very simply ... through repetition. Something occurs, and then it occurs again, or in other words: a system performs an operation and then repeats the operation.

Mrs. Siebenschwann-P.:

(very loudly) Kids!!! Watch out for those bike riders!

Siebenschwan:

I don't think they heard you.

Mrs. Siebenschwan-P.:

(much louder) Kids!!!! Watch out for those bike riders!! ... Now they heard me. Sorry about that...

Siebenschwan:

There are a couple of benches up ahead. Let's sit down there ... Back to what we were saying. A system executes an operation and then follows up by repeating this operation. In Spencer-Brown, this series of events is termed 'condensation' ... Ah, here we are ... Let's all have a seat...

Frieda:

(sitting down) Something repeats itself, and by means of this repetition it is fused or condensed into an identity. Right?

Siebenschwan:

Right!

Frederik:

(Frieda has laid her finger alongside her nose and appears to be thinking hard) You look like Pippi Longstocking, hatching some clever plan.

Frieda:

I've told you a thousand times how much I despise all those dumb expressions and allusions you use. Just let me think in peace for a second, will you? It seems logical to me that an iteration of whatever's in question would 'gather' or condense identities, but there must be some kind of a trick there ... some sort of movement has to come into play somewhere.

Woltersbeck:

If I might add a word here...

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Please! Please do so.

Woltersbeck:

It really depends on the phrasing, I mean, on the one hand, repetition is repetition, but that which has been repeated is at another point in time, if I may put it that way ... it is not actually equal, it is only the same.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

There we are again with our two = one principle. Something is something and yet it is not.

Frieda:

When I tell Freddy...

Frederik:

I've told you before not to call me Freddy.

Frieda:

When I tell Frederik to spare me his dumb expressions, then I *am* always repeating myself, but always in a different situation. I may be repeating - and thus condensing an identity - but it's always within various contexts.

Siebenschwan:

You are doing something that Spencer-Brown calls 'confirmation'. You confirm what you've already said once before, but the confirmation occurs within a different framework.

Woltersbeck:

The identical is virtualized.

Siebenschwan:

Ah, that is why I esteem theologians.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

I believe I can guess what you're driving at: meaning.

Siebenschwan:

Naturally. The difference between condensation and confirmation has to do with the genesis of meaning.

Frieda:

I don't understand.

Siebenschwan:

Well, when operations are repeated, then something like a stability or identity 'condenses' - a recognizability - but since this stability, shall we say, arises in ever changing contexts, its identity becomes a virtual one, linked to the horizon.

Mrs. Siebenschwan-P.:

Oh, look ... The water here is such a fascinating greenish blue color. It reminds me of some sort of gemstone.

Siebenschwan:

Why do you say that just now? How am I to understand your comment? I mean, what is the meaning behind your bringing it up just at this point..?

Mrs. Siebenschwan-P.:

Nothing special ... I thought it would do us some good to look out and admire the water for a moment.

Siebenschwan:

Most clever!

Frieda:

I've never seen the water this color before. It reminds me of the water in some ocean grotto, or of pictures I've seen of lagoons in the South Seas.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Algae, my dear, common algae.

Frieda:

And why do you say that just now? Are you trying to disillusion me?

Dr. Hasso Beben:

(not quite convincingly) Not at all ... I've simply always taken an interest in the flora and fauna of our German central mountain region.

Woltersbeck:

Haven't we rather strayed from the subject? I believe we were just getting into the form of meaning.

Siebenschwan:

Yes, in addressing that issue I think I expressed myself clearly but perhaps in a manner somewhat too complicated. I said (and we are moving now into the Husserl tradition), I said that the difference between condensation and confirmation - the various phrasing of repetition - constitutes the genesis of meaning.

Frederik:

Okay, so what is meaning?

Frieda:

You must have figured out by now that you can't ask "what is?"-questions.

Siebenschwan:

I reply to your question by saying - with the help of Luhmann - that meaning can be understood as the union of relevance and possibility. When we mark something current or relevant, we can look at this marking as one part of a distinction: the other (or 'flip') side of this distinction is that which is possible, which is non-current. When we observe in this way, we are doing so in the form of meaning. I might also, in reference to our subject, formulate it thus: an identity that we define in our thoughts or through communication can be grasped or identified by means of where it's situated within a horizon of possibility.

Frieda:

Then what, may I ask, is the meaning of life?

Woltersbeck:

Good, a very good question!

Siebenschwan:

The description or observation of its current relevance - with the help of a distinction made between its relevance and its virtuality. Or the indication of the horizon in which it appears as a particular and distinct life, delineated from all its other possibilities.

Woltersbeck:

And if I were to say that the meaning of life is God?

Siebenschwan:

Then I can understand that statement by seeing the selectivity of this claim in relation to that which is excluded by it.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

So, you're saying that a statement of this nature is a product of observation as well?

Siebenschwan:

Certainly ... One can define the meaning of life in many various ways - as truth, as the love of cactus-breeding, as the joy of having children ... and not one of these observations is in a position to claim absolute validity.

Frieda:

And if I were to assert that life has no meaning? That it's meaningless?

Woltersbeck:

As awful as such an assertion would be, it doesn't change the fact that in making this claim, you would actually have made use of the form of meaning. There is meaning to the statement, and this is because it excludes all the possibilities with which it might be replaced: children or cactus-breeding, God or apple trees.

Siebenschwan:

Splendid!

Dr. Hasso Beben:

In short, there is no non-meaning.

Frederik:

I have to contradict you there. I'm perfectly capable of formulating meaningless sentences, for example: The greener the shuttlecock, the harder the horny horse marks the naphthalene balls.

Frieda:

(in a low hiss) You've got such a one track mind!

Siebenschwan:

Well, I certainly won't deny that it is difficult to make any sort of meaningful associations with your sentence - although I am in the process of doing so at this moment - but there can be no doubt that we all understand what you were trying to say with this 'example'. We have comprehended its selectivity perfectly well, which is to say: it was operated in the form of meaning.

Mrs. Siebenschwann-P.:

(anxiously) I'm sure the kids would have thought it was pretty funny, anyway ... But where are they? We ought to go on and try to catch up with them.

Siebenschwan:

(They have stood up, stretched their limbs a bit and are now moving along at a somewhat faster pace than before.) The important thing is this: our description of the genesis of meaning and, thus, the construction of identities does not restrict us to an observation-dominant distinction, and most certainly not to that of Being/Nothing. This, you see, is the deciding factor in dealing with observation and description of society within society.

Mrs. Siebenschwann-P.:

I hear the kids ... There they are.

The children are standing in a bunch around an old-fashioned ice cream truck, eagerly awaiting the arrival of their parents. The adults buy themselves some ice cream cones, too.

Ice cream man:

Have you heard the news? (They reply in the negative, rather sheepishly.) The mayor of **Frankfurt** resigned...

Dr. Hasso Beben:

It's no wonder, that city is ungovernable.

Ice cream man:

(sighing) That's the truth!

Frieda:

Well, what *is* governable at this point? Maybe one or two little towns in the country, but other than that...

Woltersbeck:

The whole world is falling apart at the seams ... It's all breaking down, and there's nothing to grasp onto anymore.

Ice cream man:

Things used to be simpler. Now everything is so, how should I put it...

Siebenschwan:

Too complex? Incomprehensible? Too complicated?

Ice cream man:

Yeah, something like that. Nobody can figure our society out these days.

Siebenschwan:

(In a tone of understatement, as he munches the last bits of his ice cream cone) There we have it!

V. A very complex communication about complexity

Taking friendly leave of the ice cream man, they resume their walk in a somewhat muted atmosphere. The children plunge into the woods left and right of the path, lobbing pine cones and pieces of bark at one another. They can hear the buzzing of chainsaws from somewhere far off in the forest. Traces of the heavy spring storms of the previous year are unmistakable.

Woltersbeck:

It's very strange. We're walking along conversing about meaning and identity, Being and Non-being, observation and description, and that ice cream salesman there manages to cut right to the core of it all ... Everything's too complicated, and there are real problems.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

One does lose touch with reality to a certain degree when delving into highly abstract theories.

Mrs. Siebenschwan-P.:

I don't know. Just rolling up your sleeves isn't the answer either. (She is rewarded with a grateful look from her husband.)

Frieda:

I haven't read very much by or about Luhmann yet, but I've already gotten the impression that the concept of complexity plays an extraordinarily important role in his work...

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Reduction of complexity, I believe that was the formula with which he set out. So, come on then, Mr. Siebenschwan ... Reduce the complexity of the concept 'complexity' for us.

Mrs. Siebenschwan-P.:

(calls the children to heel once more) Listen! I want you to stay out of the woods from now on. Stay on the path, that's what it's here for. (The children disappear into the woods again.)

Siebenschwan:

First of all, I don't think that we should use that concept in a tautological sense, like: anything that exceeds the observer's ability to put it into order is 'complex'. That would make the concept socially employable but unfit for use in theory.

Frederik:

What is 'socially employable'?

Siebenschwan:

We could say, for example, that unsolvable problems are simply too complex ... the city is too complex, society, the world ... and by arguing in this way, we are pushing responsibility away from ourselves. We unburden ourselves. And the word complexity then comes to function socially, it is employed, and of course we could describe that, as well. But it is only a non-concept at that point, held up to scientific standards. In daily use, complexity becomes synonymous with complicated, and thus extremely diffuse.

Frieda:

I'll bet that a less diffuse definition, on the other hand, will amount to a distinction.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

There's certainly nothing like a bet you can't lose.

Siebenschwan:

Yes, naturally we are heading for a distinction again. It's actually quite easy to construct. We imagine the facts of some case, or rather no, 'the facts' presupposes too much complexity. Let us instead think of a group of elements that are to be put into relation to one another. If the number of elements is not large, then each element can be linked to each other one - perhaps not in every respect, but in certain respects at least.

Frederik:

One man and two women...

Siebenschwan:

With an increase in the number of elements, the number of possible links climbs dramatically. And it is clear, then, that all the possibilities for empirical links can no longer be realized by the empirical elements simultaneously.

Frieda:

One woman and ten men ... Oh, excuse me!

Siebenschwan:

And there we've got our distinction; that is, the one between complete and selective relatability of elements.

Woltersbeck:

Seen as the distinction between complete/selective, this distinction thus has the form of form.

Siebenschwan:

Have I mentioned that I love theologians?

Mrs. Siebenschwan-P.:

You're repeating yourself, dear.

Siebenschwan:

But that was quite correct. Complexity's form is marked by the distinction between complete and selective relation. If one wishes to relate in a complete manner, one must decrease the number of elements, whereby if one switches over to selective relation, the number of integratable elements can be greater.

Mrs. Siebenschwan-P.:

(whistling the children to her side once again) All right, that's it. Hold each other's hands, all of you! (The children form a circle, laughing) Not like that ... (The children laughingly form a line which spans across the trail) Not that way, either, you bunch of monkeys! (They now form a long chain parallel to the trail, giggling heartily) I'm going to get angry in another minute! I want you to march in two lines ... just like in kindergarten. *Not* everybody holding everyone else's hand ... Okay, that's right. (The children run off together into the woods) I give up.

Siebenschwan:

You won't be able to get them all to obey. Just let them go for now.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Sometimes I'm glad I don't have any children. But back to our discussion! If I understand you correctly, you are attempting to suggest to us that the opposite of complexity is not 'simplicity'.

Frieda:

On the one hand that does seem surprising, but on the other hand it's actually quite clear if you take reality to be dependent upon observation - as we have been doing. It's not possible to decide whether the something (or whatever) is simple or complex. It all comes down to the way you observe the object put before you. Which is also to say that it depends upon what distinction you use to work it over or to produce it. (Frederik applauds.)

Woltersbeck:

The consequence is that we no longer have to assume that there are different objects in the world - the world itself, for example - which may be simple or complex or even very complex. Rather, we create descriptions of objects within the scheme of a complete versus selective relation of elements.

Frieda:

And since the scheme is a form, both sides are always present. One side can't be understood without the other. The difference is the decisive factor.

Woltersbeck:

That makes sense!

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Now, why did you say that?

Woltersbeck:

It just occurred to me and I don't mean anything in particular by it. We theologians have a good sense of hidden analogies.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Whereas I, on the other hand, hate mysterious riddling.

Siebenschwan:

Do calm down! ... Mr. Woltersbeck ... I've got your name right, haven't I? ... I believe that Mr. Woltersbeck was only trying to say that we might see the forms of meaning and of complexity as two things quite similar to one another. That which is captured in a meaningful grasp of the world - or can be described as having been captured in such a way - can be seen as a selection from out of a horizon of currently non-updated connections or possibilities. But let's steer clear of all that for the time being.

Woltersbeck:

I would, however, like to note that it would be interesting to investigate the distinctions produced, respectively, depending on whether one observed units in the form of meaning or in the form of complexity.

Mrs. Siebenschwan-P.:

And for my part, I would like to note that we have arrived back at the parking lot.

Siebenschwan:

But where are the kids now?

They cast about, and to the general consternation of the group the children are observed to be on top of the steep, **30 meter** high dam wall. There they sit, lined up like ducks in a shooting gallery - although there is actually more energetic rough-housing going on than sitting. The observers watch anxiously from below as Siebenschwan and his wife slowly approach the scene of the action, hiding all appearance of haste, and pluck the children firmly from the wall.

Mrs. Siebenschwan-P.:

(thundering) Have you lost all your senses!?

Siebenschwan:

But dear, the children were just being creative.

The ensuing argument, which unfolds in a manner most amusing to the listeners, is continued inside the mini-van on the way back. The children join in lustily as well, and thus no opportunity to resume the day's scientific discussion presents itself. They manage to agree to call each other during the next few days about when to meet again, and Siebenschwan is just barely able to make himself heard above the roar - something about system and environment - and then all attempts at further discussion are swallowed in the din.

VI. Communication about system and environment in view of complexity, etc.

Two weeks later the group meets at Woltersbeck's residence, a small utility apartment in the house of his not unwealthy parents. Nadine, Siebenschwans oldest daughter, is babysitting the other children so that Mrs. Siebenschwans-Pichel is able to attend the session, too. Woltersbeck's living room is sparsely but tastefully furnished, the walls are a white plaster finish, the exposed wooden beams polished to an ebony shine, here and there a potted plant, here and there a book. Against one wall stands a cherrywood writing desk, in the center of the room is an umbra-colored, buffalo leather seating arrangement that proves to be comfortable and broken in to just the right degree. Woltersbeck's mother, a rather round woman in her fifties, has brought them coffee and cookies. His father (head sales rep at a diaper company), a large, powerful man with a face tending to blue and red hues, greets the visitors briefly and then returns his attention to the more important things in life. Frederik and Frieda have exchanged looks saying plainly to one another that their own home does not, at present, offer the fitting ambience for one of these meetings. Mrs. Siebenschwans-Pichel engages in pouring the coffee and passing the cookies around, much to the annoyance of Frieda, to the satisfaction of Frederik, an act tolerated by Siebenschwans, and barely noticed by Woltersbeck and Dr. Beben.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

(rubbing his hands together eagerly) It seems to me that we didn't quite finish dealing with complexity last time!

Frederik:

Is it always so loud here?

Woltersbeck:

Unfortunately ... I'm sure you noticed as you came in that this house is right on the main road through town. But you don't even notice the noise after a while. You only hear it when something unusual happens ... a police siren, a cry for help ... or when it's suddenly quiet.

Siebenschwan:

Back on our trip home in the van last time, I suggested that we would need to introduce a new motif into our discussion if we want to understand complexity correctly.

Frieda:

System and environment, right?

Frederik:

...And contestant # 2 has ninety-nine points!

Dr. Hasso Beben:

These cookies are absolutely excellent. I would like to have this recipe.

Woltersbeck:

My mother can give it to you. But it is (as she tells me) a fairly complicated one.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Well, you know, I have a sort of passion for cooking and baking in my spare time. For me, there is no such thing as a complicated recipe.

Frederik:

Recipes are all Greek to me. They go in one ear and out the other.

Frieda:

That happens to you in statistics class, too.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

I feel that a background in empirical social research is indispensable.

Mrs. Siebenschwann-P.:

I was never very good at math either. I think the children inherited that from me.

Frederik:

Is it all right if I smoke here?

Woltersbeck:

I'm afraid not, but whenever you feel the urge, you're welcome to go out onto the balcony.

Siebenschwan:

(gives the table a sound rap with his knuckles) What's going on here? Are we going to piece together loose fragments or are we going to carry on a discussion? I didn't come here to waste my time.

Mrs. Siebenschwann-P.:

(embracing him briefly) Calm down, Martin! We're just making a bit of sparring small-talk - the calm before the storm - or should I say before the subject?

Dr. Hasso Beben:

System and environment, then. Is that a distinction, too?

Frieda:

What else?

Siebenschwan:

We had better ease into this slowly. We are dealing, naturally, with a distinction that refers to a difference - and it follows, as we now know, that neither one side nor the other exists of and for itself.

Woltersbeck:

Wait a moment! That would mean that the world is not a system, since it can't be observed using the distinction between system and environment. It *has* no environment at all.

Frieda:

Not bad. And that would also mean that it wouldn't be sensible to talk in terms of ecosystems, because what would the environment of the environment be?

Frederik:

You're all thinking too fast for me. I'm going to step outside. (He goes out onto the balcony, lights a cigarette and continues listening through a crack in the door.)

Siebenschwan:

All quite correct, but let us slacken our pace of thought a bit. Once again, the distinction between system and environment is indeed a distinction, and can only be understood as such.

Woltersbeck:

Let me guess! We're back to dealing with the form of complexity.

Siebenschwan:

Please, one step at a time. If we choose to observe the world using the scheme system/environment, certain consequences follow, for example, the fact that we must then state from what system the observer is marking what as the environment.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

We don't even know what a system is.

Frieda:

We're not capable of knowing that. You're still trying to work ontology in here. Just wait and see what happens!

Dr. Hasso Beben:

You have apparently become entangled in the Siebenschwanian net. You don't even realize that he is slyly introducing ideas which suddenly - before you even know it - take on the significance of structural elements in his argumentation.

Frieda:

You really are so stubborn. Mr. Siebenschwan introduces distinctions of system and environment, for example, or of current or virtual, or of complete or selective relation, or that of differentiation and marking ... and whatever is being marked in these distinctions is something we'll only be able to see by looking backward over our shoulders, as it were. In retrospect, if you see what I mean.

Frederik:

(exhaling smoke into the room) Well roared, my little lioness!

Dr. Hasso Beben:

This sounds familiar indeed. First faith, then knowledge: isn't that the motto of most religious sects?

Woltersbeck:

That may be, but I'm sure we'll all agree that one has no choice but to begin by introducing a distinction - and if we wish to mark the sides of this initial distinction, then we simply have to start and take up with other distinctions, which would then be the first ones, and so forth.

Siebenschwan:

Let's not get into any argument here. As soon as you view system and environment as a distinction, it becomes perfectly clear that you can't have one without the other. You will permit me the following formulation: this distinction makes it clear that system and environment belong to each other, that they are as mutually dependent upon one another as the two sides of a coin.

Woltersbeck:

So, the form of system is differentiated, double-sided, in other words. The system *is* itself by means of the non-itself, a trail left in the world that can only be recognized by what it is not - the Beyond of its border, its negative profile.

Frederik:

(having returned in the meantime and taken his seat) Could we try that once again in a somewhat less grandiose style?

Frieda:

The environment of a system is the whole world minus the system. And environment and system added together is always the world.

Woltersbeck:

You end up with a lot of worlds by supposing the existence of many systems.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

I would say you end up with a plural ontology. It's just a complicated re-working of the old saying that beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

Frieda:

In any case, I think I understand better now why the distinction between Being and Nothing seems structurally weak compared to this.

Siebenschwan:

You're jumping ahead. I must beg you all to slow down a bit. Our young student here, of course, is quite right. The distinction between system and environment implies, first of all, that any marking of a system - and it may mark itself so - sums up the unmarked side instantaneously: environment is simply all of the whole world (with the exception of the system) that exists, in turn, in *reference* to that system.

Woltersbeck Senior:

(wearing a straw hat and a green apron) Excuse the interruption, just a word with my son ... Fredemar, I'll be in the garden. If I'm wanted on the phone, I'm not home. (His son nods, slightly annoyed, as the father withdraws and is heard moving down the hallway singing, " He's got the whole world, in his hands ... He's got the whole, wo-orld....")

Dr. Hasso Beben:

I didn't see a garden anywhere.

Woltersbeck:

That's because it's two blocks away from here, in a sort of a community garden-colony. But it does belong to us, and perhaps we could all hold one of our sessions there sometime. That garden is father's world, his heart and soul. I think that everything else, in comparison, only exists in a very diffuse way for him, even his job.

Mrs. Siebenschwann-P.:

I can certainly understand that! Everything that is so complicated everywhere else is simple there.

Siebenschwan:

(impatiently) Come, come now. The important thing is that an environment, as we have now seen it, is not a unit which is capable of action. (They suddenly hear the melodious tootle-tootle-ootle of a modern telephone.)

Mrs. Woltersbeck:

(calling through the door) Mrs. Siebenschwann-Pichel, it's for you!

Mrs. Siebenschwann-P.:

It's probably Nadine with something about the children! (She hurries to the phone)

Siebenschwan:

I was saying that the environment of a system - its negative correlation, to use Luhmann's words - is not a unit capable of action ... and ...

Mrs. Siebenschwann-P.:

Martin, excuse me, but Nadine can't get the children to go to bed. I'm going to have to go and see about it.

Siebenschwan:

That's a pretty long drive, though, from here. It won't be worth it for you to come all the way back, and then how am I going to get home?

Dr. Hasso Beben:

I can give you a ride.

Mrs. Siebenschwann-P.:

I'm sorry, but what else can I do about it? You know how the little ones are...

Siebenschwan:

Nadine probably just wants to get out of there because she's bored and tired of sitting around... (His wife leaves)

Dr. Hasso Beben:

All right. I can see that the environment is not able to act as the rest of the world can, but on the other hand ... it can't be a mere chimera.

Siebenschwan:

No, of course not. We have to see, at the same time, that there are other systems in this 'rest of the world' – in a system's Other – that are ever making their *own* mark on the world, whereby the system in whose environment they occur also occurs, in turn, in *their* environment. There is thus plenty of turbulence and more than enough opportunity for disturbance.

Woltersbeck:

I would say that such relationships are unimaginably intricate. Each system dissects the world, and in that system's environment, which itself exists in reference to that system, exist other systems that dissect the world and for which the same is also true ... a practically unsolvable puzzle.

Frederik:

I need a cigarette.

Frieda:

When I listen to all this, when I try to imagine the intricate image it presents, I have to wonder what –other than a mere diagnosis – we can derive from the results.

Siebenschwan:

That the environment is always more complex than the system, that is the result.

Woltersbeck:

And thus, if I may speculate to a small degree, the system/environment-distinction has the form of complexity.

Siebenschwan:

Certainly .. There is something that exists between system and environment that Luhmann called the complexity-difference, and if you insist on knowing exactly what a system is, my good Mr. Beben, voilà, it is the stabilization of this difference, the stabilization of a fundamental asymmetry.

Frieda:

That appears nearly trivial to me.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Bravo!

Siebenschwan:

But the results, you're forgetting about the results! If we assume that a difference exists, we will always have something on both sides. In this case, we have the difference between outer-system and inner-system complexity. The system is not able to link all of its elements with all of its other elements, with all of its possibilities, at least not simultaneously. It takes on the form of complexity itself again, and likewise cannot make internal allowances for everything that occurs externally. A human being cannot think of everything that might be thought of with regard to his external self.

Frederik:

Exactly. Like I forgot to get a new pack of cigarettes.

Frieda:

(throwing a venomous look his way) And if *I'd* had any idea what kind of a "I-think-I'll-interrupt-the-flow-of-thought-when-ever-possible" trivialist you are...

Frederik:

(challenging) Yeah, what then?

Frieda:

Forget it...

Dr. Hasso Beben:

We ought to stick to the rules of scientific discourse here. They are tried and true ones ... and, I might also add, they reduce the complexity that would arise if everyone here could say anything he liked whenever he felt like it.

Frieda:

You're right. The decisive factor is, I guess, that a system is able to develop clever means of dealing with both 'complexities'.

Siebenschwan:

Quite true! It is in a position, if it's complex enough, to process the difference between system and environment and to observe, differentially, each of the complexities involved.

Woltersbeck:

Would you mind closing the door to the balcony? Then it won't be so loud in here and we can concentrate a bit better.

Frederik:

Sure! I don't have anything else to smoke out there anyway.

Woltersbeck:

So ... a ruling political party can describe its own, too-high complexity as an effect of liberality, and can describe the spectrum of opinion it allows internally as its political seal of approval. But it can also reduce the complexity of its environment by means of censorship, or blame the causes thereof on previously ruling parties, and so forth...

Siebenschwan:

Something like that. The social system in which our group is participating at this very moment is able to regulate its internal complexity on the basis of dividing up our speaking-time, observation and choice of fitting contributions regarding the subject, etc. But, for now, it can treat as irrelevant the regulation of traffic, the transportation of corpses, the production of goods, the treatment of sicknesses and so on and so forth.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

I can't help noticing that although it may be that a system's environment is always the rest of the whole world, you all appear to be treating 'environment' in a more specific way at the moment. Am I wrong there?

Siebenschwan:

No,...it's quite clear in principle that the environment of a system, seen in the abstract, is the rest of the world minus itself. But it is just as clear that a system needs to restrict itself – within the enormous arena of all that is left over - to a more narrow range of environmentally related aspects, if I may put it so.

Woltersbeck:

That's what I'm saying ... Systems must determine what is relevant for them and put these things into selective relation, from out of the mass of non-system occurrences.

Mrs. Woltersbeck:

I don't want to bother you, but if any of you have a car with an open top or sunroof... some dark clouds are moving in and it looks very much like rain. (They indicate to her that no one is in possession of such a vehicle) All right, then. You never know ... and then somebody would have been in for a nasty surprise later. (She withdraws again)

Frieda:

So, you're saying that there is, in the environment of a system, something like a distinction between less important and much more important possibilities. An unimaginably huge number of things are always happening in the environment, but not all of them are relevant. Most of them are not even necessary for the system to register, but certain things have to be taken into closer consideration.

Siebenschwan:

Right. On this 'operative' level, as it were, there is something like a proximate-environment within the environment. Or, to avoid any spatial associations, let us say that there are things that require consideration, things that are only noteworthy, and things that may be ignored.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

I wouldn't be surprised if you came up with some further levels to which the problem of complexity-difference could be applied.

Siebenschwan:

Well, the level of structure formation comes to mind. That is the level at which the relationship to the outer-system-related environment is abstracted or generalized, so to speak, and (in the words of Luhmann) respecified. But I'm sure we'll be getting back to structures another time.

Frederik:

Okay, so let's say that in every society there's going to be a certain accumulation of corpses, and you can't dispose of them in an ad hoc way by burying them out in the back yard or dumping them in the sewer or whatever. But society is able to realize that this presents a problem, is able to address this problem and adopt appropriate measures, like authorizing undertakers, building

cemeteries, hiring people to dig the graves – creating some leeway for possible events and setting some limits.

Frieda:

Boy, you're really in your element when you think of something macabre to say. When are you going to grow up?

Frederik:

You can send me to kindergarten if you want, or to an institution for troubled youths.

Frieda:

It's a good thing there are such places. Or maybe I should say, too bad there aren't any places like that for people like you.

Woltersbeck:

We've already looked at the level of process – the ,operative' level – and then the level of structure. And now I believe another is fast approaching, one which I have a feeling I'm going to like.

Siebenschwan:

Your feelings will be confirmed. Next is the level of reflection, in which a system's identity is defined by the system, by its difference from that which it excludes, in other words.

Woltersbeck:

One could also say that complexity-difference itself will be observed.

Frederik:

(kicking the balcony door restlessly) Isn't there a little store or someplace where I could buy some cigarettes around here?

Frieda:

Even if there was, it would probably be closed by now!

Woltersbeck:

I don't know where the closest cigarette vending machine is, either. I'm afraid I can't be of much help to you. All of us are fanatical non-smokers.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

What is all of this? Is this some kind of a friendly social get-together or are we holding a scientific discussion here?

Woltersbeck:

I, myself, am not very clear on the status of these sessions either. They seem to me to be more along the lines of a class or a lecture, but I assume that they will develop more of a scientific discussion character when we begin to understand system theory better.

Siebenschwan:

Class ... lecture ... I must say I don't like those words. They have such an official ring to them. I find the term 'private forum' much more appropriate.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

I would say we are conducting a sort of relaxed dispute – sometimes too relaxed – but in any case without the restrictions that arise from exams, the obligation to earn credits, or any other similar procedures.

Frederik:

On the other hand, we are all here on a voluntary basis, and so I think it ought to be permitted to enquire after the closest source of cigarettes! Or to make a joke! It should at least be a little more possible than in your average university lecture hall.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

And yet we should avoid the atmosphere of evening courses at the community hobby center.

Woltersbeck:

I think we ought to just keep going.

Frederik:

I think we ought to just call it a night. I've taken in all I can for now ... I'm at full capacity.

Frieda:

I'll bring along a reserve pack of cigarettes next time.

Siebenschwan:

You apparently see your environment as a source of supply for your cigarettes. That certainly renders you extremely dependent. The contingency of environmental occurrences is reduced, for you, to cigarettes or non-cigarettes.

Frederik:

Hey, hey ... The situation is not as dramatic as all that.

Frieda:

But on the other hand, that difference does make a difference to you.

Siebenschwan:

I suppose I must admit that I would rather stop here for today, too. I don't know what sort of difficulties my wife might be having with the children, I simply lack that information here, and I find that it is making me feel somewhat uneasy. Which, in turn, is also having an adverse effect on my intellectual presence. I can't manage to tie all these loose threads of discussion together any longer.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Gray, dear friend, is all theory...

After saying their polite thank-you's and taking leave from one another, they all begin to make their way home, but not before agreeing to meet again soon and dive into the material with new energy. Dr. Beben expresses his earnest wish that they approach things in a more sociologically well-founded manner next time: he has had enough of all these distinctions. Siebenschwann promises him that it will indeed be more sociological next time, but not entirely without distinctions: surely he can't expect anything otherwise, since it's obviously impossible to obtain information without making some reference to differences, to distinctions. Frieda and Frederik, too, are suddenly in a hurry to go – it is not entirely clear whether they have felt the call of the golden tree of life, whether Frederik is yearning for something smokeable, or whether Frieda wishes to attempt resuscitating their momentarily frosty relationship. Woltersbeck, in a pensive mood, remains there and becomes absorbed in the writings of Cusanus. Dr. Beben delivers Siebenschwann to the doorstep of his home, where it turns out that the situation is completely under control.

VII. Communication about double contingency and so forth

The next session takes place on a gorgeous, sunny day at Dr. Hasso Beben's. He, like Siebenschwann, lives in a small, very nice development on the outskirts of **Frankfurt**. He resides in a superbly renovated half-timbered house replete with an ornamental herb garden (a la cloister) facing the street, and equipped with a rather overgrown yard-like area in the back of the building. Although Beben informs them that this area is a 'biotope', it appears to be more like a patch of uncleared jungle than a spot for human gatherings. At any rate, there are a myriad of insects – many of them are ones which are rarely seen – and the guests hear at times the croaking of toads or frogs. Even dragonflies dart to and fro on occasion, flashing through the green and golden light beneath the unkempt picnic area's leafy canopy. Because there is a popular adventure-playground not far from Dr. Beben's, the Siebenschwanns have brought several children along with them. Frieda and Frederik are accompanied this time by a young man who is introduced as Jakob, but who seems to be an extremely quiet type. This phenomenon is soon explained by Frieda's casual mention of the fact that Jakob is deaf and dumb. She adds that he is a master in the art of lip-reading as well as being an excellent listener, as it were. They have all taken their seats on lawn furniture, Beben's housekeeper serves them lemonade. Woltersbeck arrives in a sweat, apparently excited or upset about something.

Frieda:

What happened to you?

Woltersbeck:

I just had a strange experience. Or, not actually strange, but disturbing, I would say.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Tell us about it!

Woltersbeck:

(after downing a large glass of lemonade) Well, here's what happened! (Jakob turns his chair in Woltersbeck's direction and stares directly into his face) What's going on? Why are you staring at me that way?

Frieda:

No, Jakob isn't staring at you, he's deaf and dumb: he just wants make sure he gets the whole story. He's reading your lips.

Woltersbeck:

Ah, well, this is a very strange situation. What am I supposed to do? I'm sorry, but I've never done this before...

Frederik:

Just start talking!

Woltersbeck:

(visibly confused and taking pains to speak as clearly as possible) Well, I went down **Radevormwald Street** on my way here.

Frederik:

Hey, so you were practically in the red light district, huh? And isn't that the part where all the underage hookers are?

Frieda:

Frederik!

Mrs. Siebenschwann-P.:

Oh, that's okay, we're all adults here, and the children are at the playground.

Woltersbeck:

As a matter of fact, it does have something to do with the place you referred to ... Usually one manages to navigate along **Radevormwald Street** and escape unscathed, at least at this time of day, but today...

Frederik:

You were scathed?!

Woltersbeck:

Yes and no. A very young girl, or perhaps I should say a very young woman was standing against the wall, or rather leaning on the wall, and it was plain to see that she was a ... well, that is, she had an extremely short leather skirt on – more like a bit of apron than a skirt – but the point is that she was simply crying her eyes out, and her arms hung down at her sides, and her make-up was all smeared and running in streaks and...

Mrs. Siebenschwann-P.:

And you didn't know what to do!?

Woltersbeck:

Precisely. I pitied her, naturally, as is only proper, and which is required by my beliefs as a Christian ... But how is one to approach such a woman? Or the other way around, what sort of expectations would the girl be likely to have regarding a man who addresses her in that street? What is she to expect of what I expect from her? And is she in a position to recognize the dilemma in which I find myself? That I cannot know what she expects of me?

Mrs. Siebenschwann-P.:

All right, all right, but what did you do?

Woltersbeck:

Nothing, for a while. I've never felt so undecided about anything in my life before, and the girl apparently felt the same. She had noticed me, and was looking me up and down as she stood there with the tears running down her face. And we simply stood there...

Mrs. Siebenschwann-P.:

You're making me nervous.

Woltersbeck:

So, we simply stood there and waited, I suppose one could say, for some initial, decisive event to occur. Like two children from entirely different worlds ... and then she said, "D'you have a Kleenex?", and I handed her one, saying, "You can keep it!", and she started to laugh, and I tried to laugh, too. Then I moved along down the street as quickly as I could, and when I turned around at the end of it to look back, she had vanished.

Frederik:

(showing signs of disappointment) That's it?

Frieda:

(sharply) What were you expecting?

Mrs. Siebenschwann-P.:

I have to say, your story wasn't a particularly satisfying one.

Woltersbeck:

You asked me what happened, and that was it – that was what happened, and I won't soon forget about it.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

It appears to me that theologians are frustrated poets.

Siebenschwan:

Come now, everyone, leave Woltersbeck alone. This kind of thing doesn't happen every day, and it can pose a problem for anyone with a sensitive nature.

Mrs. Siebenschwann-P.:

Are you being ambiguous on purpose?

Jakob:

(writing on a slate) Maybe we could get started now?

Siebenschwan:

I would say we already have ... but I know what you mean. First, would you mind telling me, ah, excuse me, would you mind letting me know whether you are familiar with system theory?

Jakob:

(on the slate) Yes!

Frieda:

You could have just nodded. Oh, and just so everyone knows, Jakob studied under Luhmann himself.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Saints preserve us, a real, live pupil! What a pity that you can only express yourself in writing. But let's get on with it and start!

Siebenschwan:

Fine! I believe I promised you, Dr. Beben, that we would try to take a more sociological approach today. I intend to achieve this by more closely examining the issue of 'double contingency'. It marks, if you will, the starting point of social systems.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Heaven knows Luhmann didn't invent *that* concept. If my memory serves me correctly, Parsons spoke of 'double contingency' and used it to mean ... Well, let's say you have two people, Alter and Ego. If they meet one another and both of them try to gear or adapt their behavior to the behavior of the other, then nothing happens at all.

Frederik:

Let me see if I got that right. Each one waits to see what the other one does, and both of them want to follow up on whatever the other one does?

Frieda:

That reminds me of those scenes where two people are alternately trying to allow the other one to go through the door first.

Mrs. Siebenschwan-P.:

That's pretty funny in Japan, sometimes.

Siebenschwan:

In any case, we find ourselves faced with a circle, a tautology, if you like. One might also say that we have identified a basic problem here. And the question is how we can solve this problem, or, to be more precise: how it is solved. It's obvious that we don't all sit around in a state of paralysis and stare endlessly at each other trying to figure out who's going to do what first.

Jakob:

(slate) Chance!

Siebenschwan:

Of course. Any occurrence at all can destabilize the circle: it is sensitive to chance.

Frieda:

I can understand that in the abstract sense, but I would have to say double contingency doesn't occur in reality, at least not anymore. Maybe in the jungle, when a researcher and a native meet eye to eye and stare at each other for a while like creatures from two separate worlds ... And the second that one of them reaches up and scratches his ear, things can start moving, something...

Jakob:

(slate) Too simple!

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Well, I suppose that would've been too much to expect! Our 'defender of the fundamentals' here is becoming rather a nuisance.

Siebenschwan:

I think he means that we have described the circle in terms of Parsons, for the time being, but that we find another version of the circle in Luhmann, of course.

Two of the children brought along by the Siebenschwans come crashing towards them through the biotope, one of them black as ebony, a neighbor-child of the Siebenschwans – from Somalia – and the other the usual white, although well crusted with mud at the moment.

What's wrong with the two of you?

Child, black:

He hit me.

Child, white:

He was throwing mud.

Mrs. Siebenschwan-P.:

Why were you doing that?

Child, black:

He said I thought he was dumb.

Child, white:

I didn't think *you're* dumb, but you thought that I was dumb.

Siebenschwan:

You can't know what another person thinks!

Child, white:

You can tell, though. He looked at me like I was.

Child, black:

Bullshit, I did!

The Siebenschwans:

What???!!!

Mrs. Siebenschwan-P.:

Don't let me hear you say that again, you hear?!

Siebenschwan:

I don't care who knew or didn't know what the other thought, but the result of it was fighting and throwing mud at each other. And if it happens again, you'll stay here with us and listen to what we're talking about ... Have I made myself clear?

Woltersbeck:

A terrible threat! (The children leave, drooping and downcast)

Dr. Hasso Beben:

At any rate, *we* were just being threatened with the prospect of Luhmann having modified the concept of double contingency. Well? How did he do that?

Siebenschwan:

Alter and Ego are presented as impervious, opaque systems to which no external entity can gain access.

Jakob:

(slate) In the deepest sense of things, there are systems which absolutely no other systems can have any grasp of whatsoever; their meaning cannot be reached.

Siebenschwan:

(a little impatiently) Right!

Woltersbeck:

Meaning! Naturally! I believe I would have been surprised if meaning didn't come in here somewhere. But now we are obliged to alter our concept of contingency.

Siebenschwan:

To extend it! Contingency marks that which is neither necessary nor impossible. What happens, happens, but it can only be comprehended or (meaningfully) associated if the updated 'given' in question appears within the horizon of the could-be-otherwise.

Frieda:

In that case, every human being ... if you don't mind, I'll just say human being here ... every human being is, to the observer, someone who could actually be different – even if it appears for the

moment that he is doing what one might expect of him, it's possible that he has ‚faded in‘ another meaning-horizon internally ... He can lie, deceive, be deceived, misunderstand...

Woltersbeck:

So, you're saying that social systems are characterized by the problem of difference, or of some possible different perspectives on the world? They are not formed because points of view agree and one only needs to reiterate that fact to oneself, but perhaps – most probably - because they do not agree, and solutions must thus be found.

Frederik:

If I could add something here ... The problem can't disappear, it's always there ... like a motor.

Siebenschwan:

And that is why it is wisest to call the concept of double contingency a problematic one.

Frieda:

This is the way I imagine it, and I already know that it's an oversimplified version, but one needs to picture it *some way* ... anyhow, I imagine that people meet and perceive –or maybe even observe - each other mutually, and naturally they have some sort of expectations...

Jakob:

(slate) Naturally?

Frieda:

I already said that I was just going to try to express this, although I know by now that we don't have any "naturally" or "obviously" in this theory – and no expectations, either. But, I mean, on the level of daily-life I think you'll understand what I mean when I say that people who meet one another are bound to have some expectations and previous experience in other situations and with other types of communication. But the important thing is that – thanks to double contingency – it is impossible for the people to comprehend one another fully, unless they happen to be extremely telepathic ... and it is this very impossibility, this could-always-be-otherwise, that forces people to communicate and yet does not eat into the double contingency.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

It behaves as a catalyst, so to speak, and cannot be used up.

Frederik:

Well, I imagine something like two black boxes that are sort of circling and eyeing each other up, but which are going to have to deal with one another in some way and there is a mutual assumption made that they can or do define themselves. By that I mean that both of them select their behavior, internally, from a horizon of possibilities, and that this horizon isn't the same for both boxes. What one box sees of the other is really a kind of reduction, an abbreviation, an instance of shorthand – that's what they see of each other and that's what they try to adapt themselves to. What happens next might be a chain of trial and error-like mutual attempts to exert influence, but the experimental character soon fades as they learn from their successes and gain the ability to predict one another's behavior ... So, there's a sort of stabilization happening of something that's actually

made up of nothing more than assumptions – assumptions that are drawn, one could say, from out of the complexity of systems, but which are never really in *control* of that complexity.

Frieda:

(after everybody has been surprised into silence for a moment) Holy cow!

Frederik:

(smugly) How about *them* apples?

Siebenschwan:

Ah, yes, a certain order arises - one we might call ,emergent‘, inasmuch as it cannot be reduced to whatever may be going on in each individual head.

Jakob:

(slate) Structures!

Siebenschwan:

Structures, yes. Limitations or demarcations of behavioral possibilities: restrictions that produce a reality *sui generis* in a manner utterly characteristic to themselves.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Social systems, what else?

Woltersbeck:

Is that another way of saying that different associations can be made within our heads than are made on the level of the social system? That would practically be a daily occurrence: communication taking its own course and consciousness doing the same.

Frieda:

Within our heads? That sounds odd.

Woltersbeck:

But you see, I couldn't have expected that you would say what you said, anymore than I could expect that I would say what I'm saying right now. And that was because I was already somewhere else in my head, having forged ahead, in this case, because I was anticipating that our communication would take a different course than it actually did.

Frieda:

”That is not it at all, That is not what I meant at all.”, eh?

Woltersbeck:

There you have it!

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Indeed, that is a most wonderful poem you've just quoted.

Housekeeper:

(approaching them) Excuse me, Dr. Beben, but I just wanted to tell you that I have to get going now.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

You have to?

Housekeeper:

Well, yes, you know, I can only ever work three hours on this day of the week...

Dr. Hasso Beben:

But why? Why do you have to? What does 'have to' mean?

Housekeeper:

I have to pick my kids up from the day care center, but you know that already.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Well, I simply wished to know what you mean when you say 'have to'?

Housekeeper:

I don't understand what...

Mrs. Siebenschwann-P.:

Mr. Beben, what are you doing to this poor lady?

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Am I expressing myself so unclearly?

Frieda:

Your message is not getting through.

Housekeeper:

Anyhow, I have to get going.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Then go on and do what you can't help doing. Good-bye!

Frederik:

I don't see what you did that for.

Jakob:

(slate) Experiment!

Mrs. Siebenschwann-P.:

Not very clever, your experiment, and certainly not very humane.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

I just wanted to try out a little double contingency.

Mrs. Siebenschwann-P.:

And that woman will be wracking her brains the whole evening trying to figure out what she did wrong.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Oh, come now. She's made of more tougher stuff than that!

Mrs. Siebenschwann-P.:

I would say that you're not exactly in a position to know that, at least not according to everything I've heard here today.

Siebenschwan:

Evie, you are wonderful!

Mrs. Siebenschwann-P.:

I know.

Siebenschwan:

You know that I know that you know.

Mrs. Siebenschwann-P.:

I know that you know that I know that you know.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Are we going to play little word games now?

Woltersbeck:

It seems to me that double contingency ought to lead us to expect that *no* one can anticipate that the things he does will be done in such a way that someone else could forge a link with them, a meaningful one, of course. After all, the concept 'double contingency' makes it clear that all the participants could behave differently than one thinks or expects they will, and that all the participants know that about each other. It is very improbable that anything like a social order will arise.

Jakob:

(slate) Improbable, and thus normal!

Frieda:

Why normal? What do you mean by normal? I freely admit that if we see things in terms of double contingency, every occurrence is in a position, at least, to gain a sort of structural value. And so I can also imagine that an order comes into being, but a normal order? Normality?

Siebenschwan:

I would say that double contingency typically or normally produces orders – correlations of events – that don't just occur in some arbitrary way. I would also say that our feeling in daily life that

some of these structures are normal is a result of the fact that they repeat themselves, that we're used to them. But all we're really trying to say here is that social order, whether we want it to or not, arises as soon as contact occurs between systems that have to make an assumption of mutual non-transparency.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

May I conclude from this that you would describe conflicts, wars, slums etc. as social order?

Siebenschwan:

Certainly. It's quite obvious that conflicts realize a very unique type of structure; and if we were to approach the problem of social order from a normative standpoint, it would prove most difficult to explain and describe such structures.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

I have some serious doubts on that.

Siebenschwan:

You'll just have to trust me.

Frederik:

Trust is good, control is better.

Jakob:

(laughs heartily; slate) Now *there's* something pretty important!

Frieda:

What does he mean?

Siebenschwan:

Well, he means that the word 'trust' happens to fit in here very well; but I don't want to get into that any further now. You can look it up.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

I'm counting on being able to.

Frederik:

I don't know if I would count on it.

Mrs. Siebenschwan-P.:

You can count on it.

Dusk is falling, the air has become cool, the sky is turning a cold, watery-blue color, the guests begin to shiver. Dr. Beben invites them to continue their discussion inside the house, but the Siebenschwans mention that the children must be brought home, Woltersbeck has promised his parents to attend the theater with them this evening, and Frederik and Frieda had assured Jakob that the session would not go on for too long. In short, they begin to disperse: there is a hint of irritation in the air of the group – but this may be due to the quantity of mosquito bites they have all suffered. Siebenschwan

indicates that they weren't entirely finished with the double contingency issue, but that they examined it enough that one could pursue it on one's own. He claims that they have now reached the point from which social systems spring, and that the next task would be to define the unity of social systems. Communication theory, he informs them, will be their next focus. Jakob nods a 'Bravo', and Frieda assures them that communication has always been important to her. Dr. Beben suggests that they call each other to determine the time and place of the following meeting.

VIII. Communication about communication

Some time has passed. Agreeing on when and where the next session should take place has proved to be fairly difficult. Sometimes somebody couldn't be reached, sometimes somebody expressed doubts as to whether he or she would even participate anymore, and thus had to be persuaded to continue on. In the end, however, the private forum does reconvene. Summer is in full swing, and their meeting place this time is a Greek restaurant that has established itself in an old courthouse building. A table has been reserved for them, all the participants have arrived. The Siebenschwans have hired a professional baby-sitter, so there is actually a good chance of conducting their discussion without any child-related interruptions. The group has decided to order a round of Greek wine first and eat later.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

(apparently in a splendid mood) I must say that I have been looking forward most eagerly to today's session. The subject of communication has always interested me.

Woltersbeck:

One could almost say it's booming. The whole world is talking about it, everyone uses the word constantly, but I'm not so sure that the phenomenon we'll be discussing today theoretically is the same thing as what you've been looking forward to, Dr. Beben.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

And I'm not so sure that you are in a position to know what I've been looking forward to. But the fact is, this time we'll have the pleasure of talking about something in which we are actually engaging at the moment, by the very talking we're doing – and even when we are silent, as well. We are communicating, and that itself is our subject.

Woltersbeck:

I don't know if you're going to get your money's worth.

Jakob:

(slate) He won't get his money's worth.

Frederik:

What's that supposed to mean? After all, Dr. Beben is right when he says that we're doing what we intend to discuss.

Frieda:

Unlike you, I've been trying to stay on the ball, here, and have continued to browse through Luhmann's works now and again. As one might expect, I didn't understand everything I read – that's why we're here, of course – but the message I believe I got out of it was this: no human being communicates.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

That's ridiculous ... Who else can communicate besides us and a few intelligent chimpanzees and dolphins?

Siebenschwan:

Communication, my dear Dr. Beben, communication communicates, and nothing else.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

That is just another instance of conceptual mumbo-jumbo.

Frederik:

And I see what I see.

Frieda:

And what do you see? You see a bunch of people who are opening their mouths and producing sounds. Like the balloons in a comic book.

Woltersbeck:

Yes, but the sounds do appear to be coordinated among themselves in some way. Somebody or something is reacting to someone or something.

Siebenschwan:

Yes, and there we already have more than one person.

Frederik:

Maybe we should start with something more like the basics?

Dr. Hasso Beben:

D'accord!

Siebenschwan:

Yes! If you say that someone is communicating, then you mean the following: he is sending a message, getting some news across, he is packing some sort of information into words, gestures or whatever else and sending it off. There is also, on the other hand, somebody who receives that package, unwraps it, takes note of it, and is now the one who will do the sending. Sort of like a transmission...

Frieda:

That may well be, but then you need more than one person, in any case. As soon as you say that someone is communicating you automatically think of someone else being on the receiving end.

Actually, you could only really say that someone is *taking part* in communication ... and so then communication would be something that exists between people?

Dr. Hasso Beben:

(grumpily) I guess I'll go along with that.

Mrs. Siebenschwann-P.:

May I refill your glass, Dr. Beben?

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Very kind of you! Yes, please!

Siebenschwan:

This sender-receiver model, or I could also call it the transmission or pipe model, behaves as though the information is a kind of substance to be transported. One has to be careful that nothing happens to the substance along the way – that it's not disfigured, distorted or lost – but once its safety is guaranteed, a message passes from the person saying it to the one listening to it; a message which is self-identical at its core, if I may put it that way.

Frieda:

But it *can't* be ... like, ,cause of observation, complexity, meaning and contingency.

Frederik:

Your English sure used to be better.

Frieda:

Just what do you mean by that? And what are you trying to prove by making such a comment at a time and place like this? I think you want to express your wish that I wouldn't act like I understand what you don't.

Frederik:

What I wanted was to say exactly what I said, but apparently you misunderstood me.

Mrs. Siebenschwann-P.;

Now, kids ... There's no use getting into a fight about it.

Siebenschwan:

But what is true is that the reasons she mentioned force us to question, at least, whether it is wise to use the transmission metaphor. Any dialogue - anything at all that is said - proves that metaphor wrong. It is quite obvious that the message is constructed, I think you would have to admit to that, Dr. Beben.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

I don't have to do anything ... and may I ask why you are applying to me in this matter? Am I the only one here who you need to convince?

Siebenschwan:

I really didn't think about it at all.

Jakob:

(slate) Information! Utterance! Understanding!

Frederik:

Wow, with exclamation marks and everything!

Mrs. Siebenschwan-P.:

He wants to signal the importance of his intervention. He's trying to tell us that...

Siebenschwan:

That we can circumvent the problem of the transmission metaphor by conceiving of it in a different manner.

Woltersbeck:

Yes, I think so, too. We must somehow see communication differently, so that the rigid mechanics of sending and receiving can be avoided. And Jakob, if I understand him correctly, is suggesting that we turn to the three concepts, "information, utterance and understanding".

Dr. Hasso Beben:

It seems to me that this move is not entirely without tradition ... We find, at any rate, similar distinctions in speech act theory, in Bühler - and even in Humboldt, in a way.

Frederik:

Okay, that may be so, but since I'm not quite familiar with those theories it would be nice if someone could explain to me on a very simple level – hey, I'm not proud – what this is all about, this trinity of information, utterance and understanding.

Woltersbeck:

Trinity ... not bad.

Siebenschwan:

All right, then I'll begin with something that's incorrect or oversimplified, but I ask you to keep in mind that I said so.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

I will keep in mind, in any case, that you said you would start with a mistake.

Siebenschwan:

Very well! Not only are we system theorists of the opinion that one cannot begin without already having made some distinction; we are also of the opinion that one can begin in an incorrect way and still achieve a plausible form of theory. But that's another story, reserved for another time.

Frederik:

This *is* a little like the neverending story, I'll say that much.

Siebenschwan:

How could it be anything different? But back to business! Let us imagine that a morsel of information has undergone incubation in someone's inside – whatever "inside" may constitute – and this someone chooses and marks a condition of system, or makes a selection. Let's say it's a woman and that she is caused by an unidentified restlessness inside to say to herself internally (to register), I have a craving for pickled herring.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

The way system theorists work with examples is driving me insane.

Siebenschwan:

The woman wishes to communicate that which she has hatched inside of her, if I may put it that way. She has to select – and again, I'm simplifying; it will be more complicated later – a behavior through which she will communicate the information. She might yell, "I demand pickled herring this very instant!" She might whisper, "Sweetheart, I have the feeling that a serving of pickled herring would do me good." Or, "Goddammit, I've got to have some...!" Or, "Gee, I wouldn't mind a little snack right about now!" Or...

Frederik:

Okay, okay, there's no limit to the ways she can say it.

Frieda:

Allow me to recapitulate. The woman chooses one possibility from a horizon of many, namely "hunger", and she chooses one form of communication from a horizon of many, for example "Sweetheart, I have the feeling..."?

Siebenschwan:

Yes, so there we have two selections now.

Woltersbeck:

The form of meaning requires it.

Mrs. Siebenschwan-P.:

Now don't tell us again that you love theologians.

Siebenschwan:

Thank-you, dear! I was just on the verge... The third selection, the third choice is based upon the difference between these selections. It distinguishes the utterance from the information, and ... understands!

Frederik:

What?

Frieda:

Ahh, I get it!

Frederik:

When you say it like that, I always get the feeling you mean that I'm stupid.

Frieda:

Oh, come on! That's not at all what I meant. I just wanted to say that I can see that the difference is the deciding factor. The husband hears his wife saying what she says. It's not in what she's said, because she only says it once and in those words and in that tone and with that facial expression – it's not in what she's said that utterance and information are differentiated. It's that an observer, in this case the husband, uses this distinction – projects it, so to speak, onto the occasion.

Woltersbeck:

Exactly, he now faces the problem of asking himself what she was trying to tell him by saying it in the way she did.

Mrs. Siebenschwann-P.:

For example, that she is pregnant.

Woltersbeck:

Or that she hates him because he's too insensitive to her needs and wants.

Frieda:

Maybe she's just joking and really means French fries with ketchup...

Woltersbeck:

In turn, the best he can do is make a choice, which is what is meant by the third selection. Understanding, too, is a choice. It is not the importing of the contents of someone else's head, foreign intentions in one's own head – how could it be? It's a result of observation, based upon the distinction between information and utterance. It uses them, so to say, to interpolate what is happening over there in the unattainable world of another person's skull.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Plausible, I must say, very plausible.

Jakob:

(slate) But wrong!

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Well. I would have been surprised if I had understood something correctly for once.

Siebenschwan:

But you have, in a way ... only in an abbreviated, rather oversimplified form. All we did in our example was work through what might be happening in the heads. The system-reference - the system we were alluding to - was consciousness, not the social system.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Yes, and so ... where's the mistake?

Siebenschwan:

We have to think our example all the way through. Let's assume that the man, his internal understanding having figured "pregnancy", says something like...

Mrs. Siebenschwan-P.:

Well, he might gaze at her with stars in his eyes and say, "Are you trying to tell me that you're expecting a baby?"

Woltersbeck:

Sure, and as such he would be describing his wife's remark as an ambiguous, hidden message.

Siebenschwan:

Which it was not, necessarily. The woman might just really be hungry.

Frederik:

And then what?

Mrs. Siebenschwan-P.:

She begins crying and can't seem to stop.

Frieda:

And the husband keeps saying, "What are you crying for? What did I do? Just tell me what..." and so on. Typical for a man!

Frederik:

We ought to talk about the use of distinctions again.

Siebenschwan:

The important thing is that the woman wasn't thinking of pregnancy, only of announcing her hunger. The man, on the other hand, was thinking of pregnancy. But the communication took up a course that was not represented in either of their heads.

Mrs. Siebenschwan-P.:

I can imagine that the man thinks that his wife is crying because pregnant women are always incredibly moody – at least that's what his mother told him, and he can find it written in any number of books, too.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Isn't it true?

Frieda:

In the woman's head, though, something completely different is going on. Something like: he's accusing me of failure, or: he doesn't really want me, he just wants a baby, or: nothing can save our marriage at this point.

Woltersbeck:

After a while the man might say, "Come on, now, and stop crying. It's starting to get on my nerves!"

Mrs. Siebenschwann-P.:

And then the woman, sniffing and sobbing, says, "Is that all you have to say to me?"

Dr. Hasso Beben:

All right, I can see that we could carry this on a good deal further. Jakob is getting impatient, too.

Siebenschwan:

We can grasp what this example teaches us if we simply see that the possibilities for association and the realities *in* the heads are different than they are on the communication level. Each and every statement scatters forth possibilities for association, but the associations are made differently – different in each type of system – and simultaneously.

Woltersbeck:

That's quite exciting, because that would mean that as soon as something that's my intention (or that I think is my intention) makes it into communication, it becomes something strange or foreign. Maybe somebody happens to cough at a dinner, I raise my eyebrows, and in that split second the cough has been turned into a faux pas, an embarrassment: the next communication might then brand my behavior as arrogant, and describe the cougher as a pitiful case for pathology. The same thing goes, as a matter of fact, for returning to communications that have taken place in the distant past. Every communication is in a position to describe another (any other) previous communication as a particular one. You kiss a head of state from the Middle East, with all the proper diplomatic assurances at the moment, and two years later you are informed that the person you kissed was a mass murderer ... but then again, centuries later, he might come to be seen as an indispensable figure in the history of civilization...

Mrs. Siebenschwann-P.:

I'm hungry ... or should I say, "Gee, I wouldn't mind a little snack right about now"? (Siebenschwann kisses her on the ear lightly.)

Frederik:

(after the waiter has been called over and their orders have been taken) A second to relax, that'll do us some good.

Frieda:

Are you implying that we all need to relax?

Dr. Hasso Beben:

That may well be.

Mrs. Siebenschwann-P.:

It is.

Frederik:

I didn't want to imply that this theory is boring, but you can't pay such close attention and try to comprehend something without any kind of break at all.

Frieda:

I can, my dearest.

Frederik:

Well, you happen to be obsessed with theories. And I would like to know how you got that way. Forgive me for saying this, everyone, but as much as these sandbox games of ours interest me, they don't have anything to do with life in the real world.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

I'll agree with you there, to a certain extent.

Woltersbeck:

Do you mean fifty-percent yes and fifty-percent no?

Dr. Hasso Beben:

That is not what I said.

Frieda:

But it's what you meant!

Dr. Hasso Beben:

I only wished to let you know that I cannot help appreciating the elegance of the theory, despite any misgivings I may have.

Frieda:

Why did you say that in such an affected way?

Woltersbeck:

It was not affectation, perhaps, but the result of a mobilization of the last defenses.

A man, blond, not very tall, gets up from the table next to theirs. He looks to be about forty and wears glasses and a mischievous smile on his face.

Stranger:

Please excuse the intrusion ... I accidentally overheard your discussion, it's most fascinating, and I would like very much to participate – in the receptive sense, naturally, and without any intention of interrupting you. My name is Georg Hauer, I am a sociologist – but anything but a theoretician. I'm a dyed-in-the-wool empiricist, one might say.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Reinforcements, at last. (Siebenschwann cordially invites Hauer to sit down with them.)

Pd. Dr. Hauer:

Ah, no, no... (The waiter brings the meals they ordered) I would just like to know what one can accomplish with all of this. The communication concept which you have addressed and discussed here is, I must say, not a bad one, but the question is: can it be operationalized? I mean, I would be interested to know whether one can observe communication?

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Of course. One only has to look.

Frieda:

PPhhhttt ... I thought we'd already been through all of that. Looking is not the same thing as observing, for one thing; and for another, you don't *see* communication at all. You hear soundwaves, you register lightwaves and so forth. But you can't look into heads, and you can't see the social system which develops a selectivity all its own.

Siebenschwan:

First of all ... just a moment, this is some rough terrain ... first of all we have to split the question into two parts. Can communication observe communication? And: Can conscious systems observe communication?

Woltersbeck:

Communication can observe communication; I mean, after all, it applies a distinction between information and utterance and then calculates the possibilities for marking. Besides that, it can treat itself as a subject, and so on.

Frieda:

And it seems to me that conscious systems can observe communication, too, but with only one, single conscious distinction. I don't know how much good that is.

Jakob:

(slate) Action!

Siebenschwan:

Yes, indeed, we'll get to that. Don't worry. But let's eat first, shall we?

Pd. Dr. Hauer:

Why did he say action ... uh, write it? I'm most intrigued.

Siebenschwan:

(eating) Because communication – in order to become observable and to be able to observe itself – must adopt a calculable form, must abbreviate itself as such. This form, then, might be called action.

Pd. Dr. Hauer:

Peculiar, very peculiar. You simply must explain that to me.

Siebenschwan:
In a bit!

They all eat. Frederik has lit himself a cigarette, Dr. Beben raises his eyebrows at this, and Frieda gives Frederik a nudge, causing him to put the cigarette out hastily. Frieda is quick to convey her irritation at his impolite behavior, and Frederik attempts to explain that he hadn't even noticed that a cigarette had found its way to his mouth – that it must be one of the inexplicable miracles of the modern day world. Pd. Dr. Hauer sits among them, practically on tenterhooks, obviously desiring a swift resumption of the discussion. But, as they finish their meals one by one, they all seem to slip into a comfortable, after-dinner state of drowsiness or relaxation. Siebenschwan himself has just as much difficulty continuing to lead the discussion as the others have listening to it. Jakob, alone, appears to be fresh and ready to dive in again. Only after a round of hot mocha and a general rallying of inner spirits and willpower are they able to carry on anything like a conversation.

IX. Communication about action and the like

Pd. Dr. Hauer:
And now, perhaps, back to the question I posed before dinner...

Frederik:
(groaning) Of course.

Woltersbeck:
My thought, or my conclusion, is this: if we see communication (as we just have) as an emergent level of system-formation, as a combination of three selections that present themselves differently both socially and consciously, then it will be difficult to reconcile communication and the classical sociological concept of action.

Frieda:
Oh, I get it ... sure!

Dr. Hasso Beben:
It is most annoying when it's constantly being trumpeted about that some participants in a discussion can find everything plausible, evident and logical, while others – who, I may add, have also offered some proof of their intelligence – are left standing there in the cold to feel extremely stupid. Perhaps this young lady would be so kind as to explain to me *what* it is that she feels so sure about.

Waiter:
May I bring you anything else this evening?

Frieda:
Well, you're asking for kind of a lot, there. Sometimes one simply experiences a revelation of plausibility ... suddenly, everything seems utterly clear. You recognize a pattern – like in chess –

where it becomes clear that a certain position *is* a position, or pattern. And then when someone requires you to explain what the pattern is all about, you run into trouble and have to painstakingly reconstruct all the thought processes that occurred at the time you thought you understood.

Waiter:

May I bring you anything else this evening?

Dr. Hasso Beben:

A mere reference to the plausible character of a pattern appears very diffuse to me. It's nothing more than a feeling, really, that says ,I understood such and such'.

Waiter:

Excuse me! Will there be anything else?

Mrs. Siebenschwan-P.:

Martin, hold on a minute! Stop for a moment. This gentlemen is saying something. (They order another round of mocha, hot and sweet as can possibly be)

Siebenschwan:

For now, it's enough for us to say that communication can't perform any direct observation; no observation of itself, either.

Pd. Dr. Hauer:

Just a moment! Please explain to me why not. Or are you just saying so – and I would think it pretty trivial – because there exists absolutely nothing that can be directly observed? But then we would be getting into Kant and the **"Ding an sich."**

Siebenschwan:

Well, to begin with, there are more selective occurrences combined and slurred together in a single unit of communication (if our model is correct) than can be read from the utterance. We only see and hear the acts of utterance that follow upon each other's heels and make reference to each other, or at the very least those that trigger one another. Apparently, we don't see the selectivities surrounding the information, utterance, understanding and their respective differentiability. All of this remains invisible, so to speak, and what is left is merely a series of occurrences that are somehow interrelated.

Woltersbeck:

So, you're saying that communication does not present itself to the observer as an object? Or as a process whose components are something like visible discontinuities of the world?

Siebenschwan:

That's right! The very thing that makes up its unity – the difference among the selectivities of the participating functional components – is precisely the phenomenon that eludes direct observability.

Frieda:

That doesn't really seem like a problem to me. If I'm standing behind one of those one-way mirrors and attempting to observe a communication currently under way, then naturally I'm able to do so by using distinctions that lend meaning to the things I perceive. But I do not have, at that moment, any opportunity to perceive anything in terms of the differentiability of the actual selections.

Woltersbeck:

But you said that the same thing goes for communication?

Siebenschwan:

Yes, an attempt to sound the depths of what is currently happening in the communicative sense can be made at any time during the course of communication ... but just such an attempt can only be made communicatively, that is, by applying the selections of information, utterance and understanding. Communication cannot, if I may put it this way, fall short of its own level of constitution. It cannot, in the words of a certain Mr. Wolfgang L. Schneider, atomize its "molecular" level without ceasing to exist. And whatever it understands about communicative occurrences long past or present, it understands them in the way communication understands.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

In short: nobody, neither a conscious nor a social system, can observe communication directly?

Jakob:

(slate) Bravo!

Pd. Dr. Hauer:

Forgive me for repeating myself, but this really does seem to be a trivial issue to me! I think there can hardly be any disagreement here. After all, you can't directly observe a living brain, either.

Siebenschwan:

It is the consequences that are of importance. If it is true that communication can neither be directly observed nor that it can directly observe itself, then we have just formulated the resulting problem.

Frederik:

Boy, I'll say! Communication could just wobble around like a drunken sailor, in that case.

Frieda:

Frederik!!! (The mocha arrives)

Pd. Dr. Hauer:

Just a moment. So, if I understand correctly, we're not looking at whether or not a researcher can or cannot observe communication, but at the formulation of a problem that needs solving with regard to the necessities of reproduction of communication – providing, of course, that we're thinking of communication in the right way here. Distinguishing among those necessities would be the task of, let's say, hermeneutists, conversation analysts, or even speech act theorists, who

attempt to decipher communication. ... (pensively) I think I'm starting to get a vague idea of what distinguishes a theory of social systems from a theory of method ... well, but never mind about that!

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Why should we never mind about it?! I think you've raised an important point there – one that we ought to pursue further.

Pd. Dr. Hauer:

I was only speaking paranthetically just now ... rather like talking to oneself. It seems to me that what I said at the beginning is of much greater importance.

Frederik:

What was that again?

Woltersbeck:

Mr. Hauer had just determined that the question of the unobservability of communication can be seen as the formulation of a problem which needs to be solved.

Frederik:

Well, that is what I meant when I said that if the problem isn't solved, communication would wobble around aimlessly.

Frieda:

Aimlessly? That's not the word you used.

Frederik:

But that is what I meant.

Frieda:

It doesn't make any difference to communication what you meant. What you *said* was...

Dr. Hasso Beben:

What has this little debate got to do with our discussion?

Siebenschwan:

The problem that arises due to the specific form of communication – that is, that it cannot observe itself – forces us to assume that it simplifies itself in some way, that it has to make itself accessible to itself. The price it pays is, of course, a reduction of its own complexity. And the solution can be characterized with the help of the concept, "action"-

Jakob:

(slate) Finally!

Dr. Hasso Beben:

(indignant) Is this ... Luhmann-disciple saying something here, or saying nothing?

Frieda:

I think they're comments about what is passing at the moment.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Well, whatever they are, they are always well on the arrogant side.

Jakob:

(slate) No!

Pd. Dr. Hauer:

Please do continue with your explanation!

Siebenschwan:

I shall now continue with my explanation. Please all take careful note of the fact that I am now continuing with the explanation.

Frederik:

How come ... ? I mean, why are you beginning in such a strange way ... Why are you saying something that is already so obvious? We would have figured out that you were explaining when you explained ... you don't have to go to the trouble of announcing it!

Siebenschwan:

And I shall now say that you will comprehend my odd manner of speaking in just a moment. Take careful note of the fact that I am the one who is claiming this.

Mrs. Siebenschwan-P.:

Martin! Stop playing games! (to everyone) I'm only intervening because I know what happens when he starts in on something like this. He never knows when to stop.

Frederik:

I don't understand a single word.

Siebenschwan:

Please be aware, all of you, that I will make my apologies now: I apologize!

Dr. Hasso Beben:

(utterly incensed) That was no apology, that was exactly the opposite. You are trying to provoke us.

Pd. Dr. Hauer:

Please, I entreat you to return to your explanation.

Jakob:

(slate) The explanation has already been undertaken.

Mrs. Siebenschwan-P.:

Martin, please...

Siebenschwan:

(rubs his hands across his eyes like a person who has been seeing double and attributes it to a physical malady) All right ... I'll try. It is possible (I think you'll all agree with me on this) to hold communication about actions, establishing for example who acted, who experienced, what sort of actions were performed and so on and so forth. This possibility is attached to the information side of communication, to the outside-reference side of communication, so to speak. The decisive point in terms of the reproduction of communication - in terms of the facilitation of further communication - is that the utterance itself is seen as an action.

Woltersbeck:

But that's quite obvious, I would say *that's* practically bordering on trivial. Somebody makes an utterance, and if you don't register it, if you don't immediately recognize, let's say, that somebody has done so and that the utterance is a product or an action of his, then...

Siebenschwan:

No, no ... slow down! You're jumping ahead to describing the manner in which a process that is actually complex presents itself as simple to the observer.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Exactly ... I would like to add something here. We also have to see that actions are ascribed or attributed.

Frieda:

Oh, yes, I read that. How did it go again? Actions come into being by means of the attribution of selections to *systems*, not to their environment.

Frederik:

You know, I don't know what makes you feel like you always have to draw attention to how much you've read about something. You must have had some kind of an experience in the past that has rendered you incapable of passing up any opportunity to...

Frieda:

And *I* don't know what makes *you* feel like you always have to draw attention to your claims that my studiousness is a product of a deviant socialization.

Mrs. Siebenschwan-P.:

Now, come on, kids! You won't get anywhere fighting!

Pd. Dr. Hauer:

Well, at least we're getting to somewhat more solid footing in our discussion now. Attribution theory and the empirical research associated with it have long since earned themselves a respectable name that can't be brushed aside lightly. I believe we can come to a swift understanding about the fact that the attribution of action represents an extreme simplification of the underlying circumstances.

Siebenschwan:

Quite right. A social system reduces itself to a simpler, observable form via action attribution. It creates from - or has as its source - occurrences that it ascribes (as utterances) to an "address" so to speak, to a person who said what he has said, and to a point in time at which what has been said was said. This occurrence-production, this series of acts of utterance is the only thing which is visible, if you will. It is the outside of a non-explorable inside.

Jakob:

(slate) Certainty and uncertainty!

Dr. Hasso Beben:

What? What's that supposed to mean now? I hate communication in fragments! I can see that he is saying something to us, pardon, has uttered something, but what is it?

Frieda:

That's exactly it! It all depends on what comes next, on what the follow-up proves to be, on the next act ... The certainty is that something was said, but the uncertain thing in any given instance is what the result of it will be - how the next occurrence will qualify the one that has just occurred. I assume that Jakob was trying to remind us of that very phenomenon. Yes, as a matter of fact I believe and shall now say that his remark was made with the aim of reminding us of what I just said - not with an intent to irritate Dr. Beben. And surely Mr. Beben's reply wasn't intended to irritate or provoke Jakob, nor to emphasize his disability, but rather to invite an explanation such as this from me, right?

Frederik:

Right or wrong ... whatever! I think the one you're trying to irritate here is me, Frieda, with your oh-so-clever speeches.

Siebenschwan:

Don't start in on another fight, let's try to stay on our subject, please. And as far as that subject goes, by the way, it ought to be noted that the remarks she just made were most accurate and appropriate.

Mrs. Siebenschwan-P.:

(speaking softly to her husband) Stop being so patronizing! (aloud) I suggest that we leave it at that for today, everyone. Otherwise this is going to end up being a scientific marathon tonight; and, after all, there's nothing stopping us from continuing our discussion at a later date. But for now, I think...

Frederik:

I'm all for that!

Frieda:

Of course you're all for that.

They members agree on the matter swiftly and set to calculating and paying their check. Pd. Dr. Hauer apologizes again for having interrupted the little group, but in practically the same breath he

asks to be permitted to attend further sessions. Nobody feels himself in a position to reject his request, and thus, before they know it, he is offering to host the next meeting at his own quarters. They agree to this plan, although the Siebenschwans add that the final decision will have to rest on whether or not they are able to find a babysitter. They assure Pd. Dr. Hauer that if they do find one, nothing else stands in the way of realizing his suggestion.

X. Communication about society

A sweltering summer day is slowly drawing to a close. Pd. Dr. Hauer's quarters prove to be a small, wooden house overlooking the bottle-green, sluggish **River Main**. This structure of his differs neither in size nor comfort from any of the other numerous wooden houses belonging to the sort of colony of gardens and cabins scattered prettily up and down the mountain's slope. After his guests have toiled their way up to the house – even the bushes and trees appear to be gasping in the heat – Pd. Dr. Hauer greets each of them with a large glass of cold **Franken** wine, the condensation already forming beads and dripping from the stems. They seat themselves on a patio from which they have a truly magnificent view of the river below as it meanders through the hills, catching the light and sparkling.

Frederik:

This sure isn't a day for science.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

(draining his wine) How fair the vine must grow, whose grapes are so luscious...

Frederik:

What?

Frieda:

Relax. Dr. Beben is just quoting something from a poem.

Mrs. Siebenschwan-P.:

(tugging at her white summer dress which, thanks to her perspiration, is showing off rather too much of her ample corporeality) Well, in any case, I can't imagine either how anyone can work on a day like today when he doesn't have to. Your residence is quite charming, Dr. Hauer.

Pd. Dr. Hauer:

It's a place to fall back on, nothing more. You know how it is with us **outside lecturers**. The rent is affordable, in any case, and the view from here truly lends the spirit wings.

Frieda:

Seems everyone's feeling poetic today.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Rather than speak: be silent.

Siebenschwan:

Oh, I don't know. How long would we be able to stand that? Our consciousness would constantly have to stimulate itself.

Jakob:

(slate) Music!

Siebenschwan:

Ah yes, that would be an alternative.

Pd. Dr. Hauer:

But not one that I can offer you. I have sworn off any and all technical gadgets that can produce or reproduce music. Music interferes with thinking.

Frieda:

I guess there's something to be said for that.

Frederik:

It doesn't bother me.

Frieda:

Well, when do you do any thinking?

Frederik:

I'm beginning to see these sessions as a threat to our marriage.

Frieda:

Oh, have a cigarette and stop getting riled up!

Siebenschwan:

It appears to me that the general interest in scientific work is at low ebb today. But I am of the opinion that we really ought to try to get something accomplished. A lot of other people out there have no choice *but* to work.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

What? Do I detect the heart of a leftist beating inside you?

Woltersbeck:

Pardon me, but I support the motion to continue our discussion, too.

Pd. Dr. Hauer:

Me, too, certainly. This business of communication and action was fairly plausible, even if I'm not quite sure yet how such considerations are to be empirically substantiated – or how, with the help of these considerations, one is to formulate sentences that can in principle be shown to be false. But aside from all that, I would be interested in hearing how we can put the things that we've discussed here to any use.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

That is something that would interest me, as well. A long while back you promised that all the abstract concepts we were delving into would in some way lead us to the concept of society.

Frederik:

This wine is fantastic.

Siebenschwan:

Yes, maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea to move from the conceptual terrain we've already conquered to the society-concept.

Frederik:

From whom do you purchase this wine?

Siebenschwan:

We can probably all agree that the concept of society is the furthest conceivable one at our disposal for describing social processes. Nothing that is social exists beyond the borders of society, and anything that takes place socially does so, as it were, in society as well. Society is *the* comprehensive social system in the theory I am representing here.

Woltersbeck:

So that would mean that any talk of "societies" would not be very precise.

Siebenschwan:

Correct. That is, if we are assuming that modern society is a world society - which means nothing more than the fact that the boundary of communicative accessibility has to be seen in a global sense at this point. Or maybe I should even say: it has to be seen within the context of our planetary system. The boundary reaches to the moon, so to speak.

Pd. Dr. Hauer:

Communicative accessibility, you say?

Siebenschwan:

Yes, and by that I mean, of course, that the society I'm talking about here doesn't cease to exist when and where there are no more bodies, but rather where there is no more communication. Or, to put it another way, society is made up of communications, and nothing else. Or, yet another way: the elementary unit of society is communication, and only through communication can the distinction be made of what does and does not belong to society

Frederik:

You know, I asked you from whom you purchase this wine.

Frieda:

And what about if someone talks to a tree? I mean, it does happen – or at least it's something that happened in archaic societies, for example.

Siebenschwan:

In that case it would all depend on whether or not further communication could follow upon what has occurred, thus treating the foregone event as a communicative one.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

I wish to point out, gently but firmly, that that is an extremely soft concept of society. Society would exist – would be ever reproducing itself – on the basis of communication, and the world would be found in it *only* as communication, and never as anything else.

Jakob:

(slate) Excellent!!!

Dr. Hasso Beben:

(executing a rather sneering bow) Thank-you, my friend, thank-you!

Siebenschwan:

Hard or soft ... I don't know. The concept is hard, I would say, because it is highly selective. You know what you're referring to when you refer to society, and the only softness arises in the implication that there are no substantial firmnesses, as it were, found in society – no objects, bodies, no atoms or whatever.

Frederik:

(sullenly) Well, apparently, I don't exist either. Nobody is answering my questions.

Frieda:

Because they're utterly out of place. They're don't belong here in this discussion.

Mrs. Siebenschwan-P.:

Now, now ... don't be so hard on him, young lady!

Frederik:

Finally, a reaction from someone.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Did I understand you correctly? That beautiful, gracefully meandering river down there, with its deep and dusky olive green color, the vineyards clinging to the mountainsides, the far-reaching sky, glowing like a bronze shield – and all of us, too, sitting here and gazing at all these things – none of this belongs to society?

Frederik:

Oh, brother ... a poet. And he didn't mention anything about the wine, either.

Siebenschwan:

Yes, you understood rightly. Communications do not touch the river, don't carry the sky, have no contact with the vineyards and don't have the weight of the bodies sitting here ... They refer to all of these things (case in point), they talk about them, but they are only events that join information, utterance and understanding into a unit with which further occurrences of a similar nature

can then be associated, making it possible to associate further occurrences of a similar nature to *those* occurrences etc. – and nothing else.

Pd. Dr. Hauer:

I see, social reality is constructed communicatively. I can live with that.

Jakob:

(slate) Autopoiesis!

Dr. Hasso Beben:

There it is, that most awful of words!

Frieda:

What does it mean, anyway? I've heard it before, but I've never understood what it was referring to.

Siebenschwan:

Well, to offer you the canonical formulation if I may, it refers to any system that reproduces the elementary units of which it consists – with the help of the elementary units of which it consists – within a network of such units.

Frederik:

Oof!

Woltersbeck:

I had no trouble understanding him.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Well, that's because you're a theologian. God, at least, can't be conceived of in any other way than as an endlessly self-reproducing unit.

Mrs. Siebenschwan-P.:

I've never thought of him that way. That would be like talking about love purely in terms of hormonal processes. (Again, Siebenschwan gives her a kiss on the cheek)

Frederik:

Regardless of what theologians might or might not understand, since I don't happen to be a member of the holy brotherhood I hereby request a little enlightenment.

Woltersbeck:

What did he mean by that?

Siebenschwan:

We can clarify the idea of autopoiesis by looking at the example of consciousness. Obviously, the only things found in a consciousness are thoughts, nothing else; and yet it seems that these thoughts must somehow be producing further thoughts, otherwise the whole thing would come to a standstill...

Woltersbeck:

To death!

Frieda:

To feelings!

Siebenschwan:

Possibly ... it may well be that as soon as a consciousness runs into trouble, it registers physical occurrences and "thinks" them to be feelings, thus solving the issue of its continuation, its own reproduction. It can make reference to something with a thought, and further reference can be made to *that* thought, and so on...

Pd. Dr. Hauer:

Very interesting. If we apply the same problem to the issue of communication, we can understand immediately why silence - once it has exceeded a certain amount of time - is such an unbearable thing. A social system comes to a halt if no further event or next occurrence follows. And as soon as the silence itself is no longer interpretable as a communicative event, well, that would be the end of everything.

Siebenschwan:

Luckily, there's always society. If something comes to an end somewhere it's doesn't really matter much. You just move on to some other place where communication is taking place, or you break it off temporarily and can meet again later, or you fall back on the routines provided by society to avoid embarrassing silences.

Pd. Dr. Hauer:

And when something does end, it's possible to mark this phenomenon by means of communicative techniques. One can arrange things into episodes, recognizable as such by the turning points that arise. Conversation analysis has much to say on this subject.

Frederik:

Hmm, okay.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Okay.

Woltersbeck:

So, then....

Frieda:

That's it!

Mrs. Siebenschwan-P.:

Fine, and now?

The gap which has suddenly yawned in their discussion is bridged by Pd. Dr. Hauer. He fetches another bottle of wine and places bowls of pretzels and chips on the table in front of them.

Pd. Dr. Hauer:

Please excuse me for setting these frugal offerings before you, but my wife is in **Normandy** with the children and I'm kind holding down the fort alone, for the time being.

Mrs. Siebenschwann-P.:

That's perfectly all right ... One doesn't have much appetite in all this heat anyway. You say your wife is on vacation alone with the children?

Pd. Dr. Hauer:

Well, we're divorced, as a matter of fact.

Mrs. Siebenschwann-P.:

Oh, forgive me for asking such an indiscreet question.

Pd. Dr. Hauer:

Oh, not at all ... I don't see the whole thing in such a dramatic light. We simply grew apart at some point – there comes a time when one has to draw a line and start afresh while one is still capable of doing so peaceably. And then life goes on.

Mrs. Siebenschwann-P.:

And the children?

Pd. Dr. Hauer:

Hmm, well...

Jakob:

(slate) Autopoiesis!

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Unbelievable ... these system theorists have the sensitivity of a pack of mongrels.

Siebenschwann:

Please, now really. Jakob is only urging us to return to the subject at hand.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Oh, by all means! Let us begin again to play with our glass beads. And out of the corners of our eyes we can watch as the sun sinks slowly beneath the hills.

Frieda:

"...and her looks went everywhere. Sir, 'twas all one!" That's an old one...

Frederik:

What?

Frieda:

Oh, just a line from a poem. It goes on with "the dropping of the daylight in the West."

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Careful, my dear, I know the poem well, and quoting it in this situation was not exactly a kindness. (Jakob brandishes his slate and raps on it several times) Yes, yes, all right...

Siebenschwan:

Society, as the most comprehensive social system, is therefore an autopoietic system. It produces communications from communications, within a network of communications. All that it perceives of the world, it perceives exclusively in the form of communication, and not (for example) in the form of consciousness. And it is thus quite clear – and I think it nearly goes without saying to you, at this point – that consciousness moves within a sphere which is external from society. It is the environment of the social system.

Woltersbeck:

Or the social system is the environment of the conscious system.

Siebenschwan:

Yes, or like that ... That is a question of one's point of observation, a question of the reference one makes. Either consciousness is inside and society floats by outside, or society is inside and consciousness floats by outside.

Pd. Dr. Hauer:

Have I got it right that this isn't about preferences, but about references?

Siebenschwan:

Absolutely. Nobody is suggesting that human beings are unimportant, nobody is suggesting that society is more important than human beings, and nobody is marginalizing consciousness, exiling the psyche. It just all depends on what system reference you're working with. And if you make reference to society, then you're dealing with communication and nothing else besides.

Pd. Dr. Hauer:

Not only in theory; there is heuristic significance here, too. When you indicate the system reference you're working with, the question of what object it might be to which you're making reference is immediately settled. You might be talking about love, and you mean thoughts, with reference to consciousness and communications, with reference to society – and with each of these, respectively, there are strict limitations regarding what is or is not taken into consideration. You might be talking about marriage troubles, and the question of whether you're referring to psyches or to communication makes a big difference. Once you've made the decision concerning a system reference, you have a tableau from which things can then develop in certain directions – and not in others. I have to say that this is something I approve of: it's practical.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

In spite of such an (in my opinion) extremely premature testimony of approval, I would say that the problem remains that a connection has to exist between consciousness and communication – one that you don't get a glimpse of while you're switching back and forth between references. There

is a rather cloudy area there if one looks at it from a standpoint of precision regarding references ... which you seem eager to do.

Jakob:

(slate) Interpenetration!

Siebenschwan:

That cloudy area, as you have chosen to put it (taking an expression of Benjamin's somewhat out of context) is indeed addressed by a special theoretical concept: interpenetration, or structural coupling. But since we're just in the midst of talking about society, it would really be too early to get into that. Maybe you could read up on it in the meantime!

Frieda:

Yes, let's stick with society for now. This is what I've gleaned from our discussion so far: society can be seen as an autopoietic, self-reproducing system, whose elementary unit is communication, and nothing else. Can I file that under "Understood" and move on to asking about the consequences?

Siebenschwan:

Well, we've already made mention of one of them. To society, the world exists only in communication.

Woltersbeck:

And so it, too, can only get a glimpse of itself communicatively. It cannot reach itself in the way that one can reach something tangible.

Siebenschwan:

Well put! A fellow scholar of mine (not one to be taken terribly seriously) chose this very issue as the topic of his dissertation.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Oh?

Siebenschwan:

If I recall correctly, he claimed that society is constitutively transcendental, but that's just one of those phrases ... The thing that matters to us here is that the initial consequence of our society-concept is basically (assuming we accept the concept) that we renounce all claims to substantial firmnesses. The social construction of reality is radicalized over again, so to speak – something we've already determined in our discussion.

Frederik:

All right, but if you don't mind my saying so, that's a tidy way of looking at things - but what is it beyond just that? I mean, is that it, or is any of this going to take us anywhere?

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Good, a very good question! I often can't escape the feeling that system theory goes to a great deal of trouble to produce a few, select theoretical pieces of candy. They taste good when you

place them on your tongue, but after you've rolled them around in your mouth for a while they're melted and gone. A social theory that doesn't produce any sort of results would be a feeble one indeed.

Jakob:

(slate) Interaction and society!

Siebenschwan:

Yes possibly, my friend, that might be one direction we could pursue – doubtlessly fascinating and fruitful – but I suggest that we strike our course along the king's highway of social theory instead.

Jakob:

(slate) Tch..tch..hmmm!

Dr. Hasso Beben:

(to Pd. Dr. Hauer) Do you understand this cryptic dialogue?

Pd. Dr. Hauer:

I think I get the jist of it, at least. Our deaf and dumb system theorist here would prefer to discuss the society concept in terms of interaction versus society, including, perhaps, organization on the system level ... whereas Mr. Siebenschwan is opting to do otherwise.

Siebenschwan:

I would like our discussion of social theory to develop in the direction of functional differentiation. First, because it is a basic theoretical building block, if I may call it that, and second, because we're so far into summer break that our private forum will be coming to an end soon. And I am most reluctant to neglect discussing functional differentiation.

Mrs. Siebenschwan-P.:

Aha, the magic word "end" has come just at the right time as far as I'm concerned. There's no use getting up to our elbows in a new subject at this point today, and I'm starting to wonder and get a little restless about how the children are faring with their babysitter.

Frederik:

It's cooling off. The sun has gone down.

Frieda:

Not totally ... Can't you see that shining band of silver way back there along the horizon?

Frederik:

For Heaven's sake ... I'm cold and I want to go home.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Your husband isn't one for aesthetic categories, is he?

Frieda:

No, he doesn't think much of poetry and romance.

Frederik:

Last time I checked, I couldn't buy myself a sweater with a poem.

In spite of any temperature related objections they all remain seated, contemplating the silver band in the sky for another quarter of an hour. The moon has risen into full view, too, casting a spell upon the river below. How sweetly (says Dr. Beben) the moonlight slumbers on the banks. At this, Siebenschwans seems to snap out of it, stands up and begins to take leave of the others. They all follow suit, agreeing to meet at the Siebenschwans' house for one final, extensive session sometime shortly before the coming semester gets under way. For Frederik and Frieda, all the recent roughness of the realm of theory has disappeared under the gentle influence of soft moonlight. They hasten down the hill together, arm in arm. Mrs. Siebenschwans-Pichel heaves a sigh and feels a wave of warmth flood through her.

XI. Communication about functional differentiation

A day with the atmosphere of late summer or early autumn. Fine weather permits the little group to hold their meeting outside in Siebenschwans' yard this one last time. The sky, still crossed by the booming jet airplanes at irregular intervals, is a blue so blue that it's almost dusky. The grass of the Siebenschwans' yard – manicured down to putting green length – is a uniform dark-green color ... except for the well-trampled trails apparently trodden by the children. The swing moves back and forth in a light wind: a colder breath of air is now and then detectable. The roses are all aglow, etc. They can hear children's voices from inside the house. The patio they're sitting on has been freshly scrubbed. All the members are present, with the exception of Frederik:

Mrs. Siebenschwans-P.:

Where is your husband today?

Frieda:

He ought to be here by now. He just wanted to get some cigarettes. Oh, here he comes...

Frederik:

Sorry ... I didn't have any money on me, so I had to run all the way back to the car.

Frieda:

Well, I'm afraid your dashing good looks alone aren't enough to get you that awful weed.

Frederik:

(melting) Too bad you don't hoard cigarettes.

Frieda:

That would be even better ... Love in exchange for cigarettes! There's no way you'll ever look good enough to me for *that*.

Siebenschwan:

We ought to get started.

Frieda:

Here we go again.

Pd. Dr. Hauer:

Naturally I don't know exactly when a situation similar to this has arisen before, but I'm fairly sure that we already *have* started.

Frederik:

Is that a fact? Could somebody please explain...

Siebenschwan:

It will explain itself. We should actually begin somewhere way before this beginning. You may recall that we were intending to talk about the theory of functional differentiation. Our starting point was social theory, which claims that society – as *the* comprehensive system – is made up solely of communications. The question, of course, is how differentiations, or internal particularizations, can occur in such a system.

Jakob:

(slate) System/environment!

Frederik:

(muttering) Smart-ass!

Dr. Hasso Beben:

(also muttering) D'accord!

Woltersbeck:

It appears to me, unless my senses deceive me, that even among the few of us present here there are different groups: sort of a formation of systems within a system.

Siebenschwan:

I think you've got the key idea there. System-differentiation can only mean that the distinction between system and environment is applied again to the result of this distinction. New system/environment differences are introduced into the system of, let's say, society. The system that's the starting point functions as the environment of the subsystem, and the system and environment of the subsystem complement each other to make up the starting system.

Pd. Dr. Hauer:

So, that means that there are a number of starting systems.

Frieda:

Sure...

Frederik:

Pphhhhtttttt...

Frieda:

Sure there are ... Just look at us, for example, sitting here as we are. I can distinguish a whole slew of subsystems without any trouble. There's the two of us as a married couple, the Siebenschwans as a married couple, Mr. Siebenschwan and Jakob as system theorists, Mr. Beben and you as the opposition, Mrs. Siebenschwan and Mr. Hauer as relatively neutral parties ... and so on and so forth. Depending on what the reference is aimed at – I could also say, depending on the standpoint from which one observes and with a view to what, exactly – the unity of system that emerges through our communications is a different one, another one. And it almost seems to me that there can't be any way to formulate the valid or true unity of this system, because it's only possible to do that as an observer who has to rely on the distinctions at his or her disposal.

Siebenschwan:

Something like that ... the boundaries of the system "private forum" are operatively determined, and all we can do is make an attempt at descriptions that everyone can more or less use as orientation points. To be more precise, I would have to say that we must orient ourselves by the system's self-description, by its imagination of itself.

Pd. Dr. Hauer:

In any case, we face a difficult dilemma when we realize that internal differentiation leads to a multiplication of system and environment differences.

Jakob:

(slate) System-to-system-relationships!

Siebenschwan:

Right. If a differentiated system wanted to order itself internally with reference to the intricate system/environment differences through which that differentiation has come into being in the first place, it would soon reach the outer limits of its ability to process information. It has to simplify itself in view of this differentiation...

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Reduction of complexity! We know!

Siebenschwan:

...as I was saying, it has to simplify itself. And according to the theory it does so by concentrating on system-to-system-relationships. The question is how the various partial systems (and there are an unimaginable number of these in society), how all of these partial systems can be gathered together into some sort of a clear correlation. Or, to put it better: how they themselves can grow or develop into this clear correlation.

Pd. Dr. Hauer:

Hmm, evolution theory ... If I understand you correctly, dominant forms emerge - in the course of social evolution – for the relation between the partial systems of society.

Frieda:

This is the way I picture it. You throw a whole bunch of people in a big pot, and in time (sort of shaken or stirred by time, so to speak) you would see that certain forms of differentiation have emerged that function better than others, and which tend to last somewhat longer for that reason. Those might be forms, for example, that arise from gender differences, or from being members of a family or something like that.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Now we're back on familiar ground. There is segmental differentiation, based on the sameness of social partial systems: families, tribes, clans, villages, etc. Then there's central/peripheral differentiation, with its unequal distribution of life chances and participation opportunities, depending on how close or far one is from the center. Oh yes, and then there's stratificative differentiation, which organizes partial systems hierarchically according to points of view of rank.

Siebenschwan:

All right. And then of course there is the (we'll venture to say that this is the form our society actually has), there is the functionally differentiated society. In this society, and with regard to important social functions, systems emerge (one could also say they are "differentiated out") that are equal and unequal at the same time: functional systems such as...

Frieda:

... such as science, art, religion, economy, politics, health care, love, law, education and so on. That's something I read.

Frederik:

I did, too!

Frieda:

Great!

Woltersbeck:

Consequently, we have the picture of a system that forms subsystems – internally – along central functions. And the subsystems serve the functions in an exclusive way.

Siebenschwan:

Economy makes reference to the regulation of scarcity, science to the conditioning of truth-tested experience, love to the facilitation of hyperpersonal communication, politics takes care of collectively binding decisions, education reduces the risk of runaway socialization...

Dr. Hasso Beben:

A tidy image, indeed ... too tidy for my taste!

Pd. Dr. Hauer:

We mustn't forget that we're dealing with communication here, and not with a spatial creation that can be neatly parcelled out.

Frieda:

But that's exactly the central problem. Society, we said, is an autopoietic system that communicatively – and only communicatively – reproduces itself ... How can communications distinguish themselves from other communications in such a way that some of them appear to be assigned to the economy, others to science, the next ones to love, etc.? Unless I'm mistaken, the functional systems of society would have to be made up of communications, too?

The discussion is interrupted by the arrival of a horde of children who burst onto the patio, shouting and fighting.

Mrs. Siebenschwann-P.:

Hey ... what's the matter? I told you that today we ... what? Settle down, all of you ... I can only understand one at a time, please. Jörg, what's going on?

Jörg:

We got into a fight. Gaby said that Daniel loves Iris, and I said that Iris doesn't love Daniel, and then Gaby said that it's true, that he does too love her!

Gaby:

I saw them kissing. That proves it.

Jörg:

Eva paid you to say that Daniel and Iris were kissing, just so I would think that Daniel and Iris are in love.

Gaby:

Eva didn't give me any money, she said she would punch me if I didn't say that Daniel and Iris were kissing.

Mrs. Siebenschwann-P.:

Eva?!

Eva:

That's not true, that's not true!

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Looks like we're in need of a lie detector.

Frieda:

A court of law might not be a bad idea, either.

Siebenschwan:

If you're all going to stand here and tell lies, then all I can say is that we made some serious mistakes in your upbringing. Now you get back into the house and work it out among yourselves, dammit!

Mrs. Siebenschwan-P.:

Don't swear when you're talking to the children. (The rabble beats a hasty retreat.)

Frieda:

But it made for a wonderful picture, somehow – all those hot little faces. It ought to have been captured in a painting.

Frederik:

Pphhhhtttt....

Jakob:

(slate) The problem!

Siebenschwan:

Right. This young lady here was in the process of identifying an important problem for us when we were interrupted. How do we decide what communication belongs to what functional system? How, indeed, can an operative "short-circuiting" of communications making up a system be achieved – when that system's entire environment consists solely of communication?

Jakob:

(slate) Binary coding!

Dr. Hasso Beben:

He's becoming truly talkative!

Woltersbeck:

(sharply) Dr. Beben! You really should make up your mind. Are you here for reasons of pursuing science or merely to air your prejudices? I find the manner in which you discriminate against the disabled absolutely unbearable.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Hold up there, please! I have been under the impression that it would be discriminating against the disabled if I pretended to positively acknowledge everything they say simply *because* they're disabled. I take Mr. Jakob quite seriously, but an inherent part of that – in this scientific context – is my right to state things clearly when I hold an opposing opinion.

Mrs. Siebenschwan-P.:

Well, it's just that your choice of words always seems to be emphasizing the fact that he can't speak or hear. To say that a deaf and dumb person is talkative is nearly as tactful as telling a blind person to go look for something, or accusing a wheelchair-bound person of moving at a snail's pace. I myself can't see what it has to do with science at all.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

(sits in obstinate silence)

Jakob:

(slate) Onward!

Siebenschwan:

We had just come to binary coding, I believe. By this we mean the use of a strict, bivalent pattern which a system uses as a means of dealing indifferently with the strenuous demands of information processing that arise from contact with patterns other than its own.

Frieda:

So, if I'm understanding this correctly, we're back to observation. A system has sort of a main or guiding distinction that it goes by, and everything the system encounters is encountered within the framework of this distinction.

Frederik:

I don't understand a word ... not a single word of any of this.

Siebenschwan:

Let's just look at our economic system, then! It divides the world into two possible conditions: having and not-having, or even better: payment and non-payment. This distinction is the only one that's relevant, and if you attempt to get some cigarettes without paying for them, you'll eventually run into trouble. The other way around, too, if you should decided not to buy any cigarettes – again, not to pay out your money – this would be a decision of economic significance. To the economy, you exist only as a payer or a non-payer. Anything else that you might be is not registered by that system, or it's only registered if it can be observed in terms of the code.

Pd. Dr. Hauer:

Or take science, for example, where everything boils down to truth and non-truth in the end. Or religion, where it comes down to faith and non-faith...

Woltersbeck:

...to salvation or damnation...

Jakob:

(slate) Immanence/transcendence!

Woltersbeck:

Forgive me for pointing out that this business of codes apparently has to do with forms again ... forms in which, by grasping one side of something, the rest of the world (everything that has been excluded) is treated as a negation of the position.

Siebenschwan:

Certainly ... That's the tricky part. Codes duplicate the world in that they provide a counter-value for every marking of one side of a distinction. Payment and non-payment, power and powerlessness, beauty and ugliness, immanence and transcendence, sickness and health, etc.

Frederik:

Zero and one with computers ... Saves you a lot of time. You just have to switch back and forth ... Pretty clever, I have to say. Now I'm beginning to get an idea of why we've been experiencing some minor yet perceptible problems in our marriage recently.

Frieda:

???

Frederik:

I mean ... the codes weren't separated clearly enough, or no, I guess they were, but they were sort of too close together. We've been communicating scientifically with one another, I would say, but there were also certain non-scientific interests being broadcast at the same time...

Mrs. Siebenschwan-P.:

(sagely) I know it well!

Frieda:

I don't know why you're bringing this up here in public.

Frederik:

See what I mean? I try to say something scientific here (to the extent that my humble understanding allows), and you take it as something that has to do with our personal and intimate communication. Maybe it would be correct to say that you have made an association other than the one I intended you to make.

Pd. Dr. Hauer:

What we have obtained, in any case, is a picture of a society that is functionally differentiated: a society made up of functionally oriented communication systems that operatively "short-circuit" by means of their respective codes. That is, they apprehend the entire world according to their central distinction.

Woltersbeck:

It seems to me that such a picture is not entirely positive. If I recall correctly, some time ago we were assuming that distinctions employed for the purpose of observation actually *create* reality. It would then follow that modern society is not a matter of one, single reality, but of many. Could we say, perhaps, that it is poly-realistic?

Jakob:

(slate) Polycontextual!

Siebenschwan:

It cannot, in any case, be reduced to a communicative reality.

A girl of about seven years – Martha – steps out onto the patio. She is holding a notebook in her hand.

Mrs. Siebenschwann-P.:
Where are you off to?

Martha:
Creek inspection!

Siebenschwan:
What is that?

Martha:
You know that muddy-looking, smelly creek behind the school? ... Our biology class is working on finding out where the pollution is coming from, what exactly is in it, and what kinds of effects it's having...

Mrs. Siebenschwann-P.:
Very good!

Dr. Hasso Beben:
But no monetary advantage in it!

Mrs. Siebenschwann-P.:
Well, I think the school is absolutely right to be taking their ecological responsibility seriously.

Dr. Hasso Beben:
It may be of pedagogical value, I'll grant you, but it won't change the condition that creek is in. (Martha leaves, shrugging her shoulders.)

Mrs. Siebenschwann-P.:
Maybe. But it helps the children to become more aware of the problem.

Dr. Hasso Beben:
Will that do anything for their grades?

Frieda:
It's not the grades that matter.

Frederik:
Oh, no? Then what does? School education has an obvious selection function. Regardless of what happens to the creek ... if you don't get good grades, your career won't go anywhere fast.

Siebenschwan:
That may be so. But let's generalize that question a bit! How does society perceive the polluted creek?

Pd. Dr. Hauer:
In different ways! In quite different ways! If everything we've discussed up until now is true, then there is no such thing as a society that perceives things. There are only communications, and

these might have the creek (among other things) as their subject. They make reference to it, but the way in which they do so is conditioned very differently.

Frieda:

If the creek becomes a topic of scientific communication, the communication might revolve around such questions as: whether or not the creek is truly polluted, what is polluting it, whether the semantics of pollution are actually applicable, or (as in the case here) how a polluted creek can surface in communication and what the results are.

Frederik:

From a political standpoint, it might appear as a condition for the improvement or worsening of a candidate's chances for election. Its economic relevance can be seen in terms of the payment or non-payment of pollution prevention measures. And in terms of law, there are all the creek-related legal decisions made in the past that may have left the situation open in such a way that legal action is required at present.

Woltersbeck:

The creek could serve as a background for the apocalyptic visions of artists, it could serve them as a symbol for pollution of the soul ... and as far as religion goes, it could be seen as a confirmation of original sin, an instance of faulty creation, or whatever...

Siebenschwan:

The point is that it is not really *a* creek, but rather many creeks (to put it concisely); and that communications concerning it (or them) will produce different associated communications depending on the functional system from which one is observing. These associated communications are not inter-transferrable, at least not without difficulty. An artist might show a piece of his work to the chairman of the board – a work with the creek as its subject – and the chairman of the board might even be able to appreciate it. But he would be doing so within the framework of art, applying art distinctions, and none of this would have any effect or influence on the company's balance sheet ... unless perhaps the company buys the artist's work in order to boost its image; an act that can be translated into profit (payment power) further down the road. It could be that the head of the company is a man of religious faith: his pastor might preach to him about the immorality of polluting the creek, and he himself might be gravely concerned about his chances for personal salvation, but the fact is that preservation of the company depends on whether the measures he might undertake to change the creek situation, for example, are economically profitable or not. In a similar way, it is in a politician's best interest to closely observe public dialogue (the communications) with regard to creek – he must determine whether pursuit of the measures at his disposal will or will not endanger retainment of his position. In a democracy, this is simply an issue of chances for election, an issue of the possibility or non-possibility of holding a political post...

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Well, I must say, that's certainly a very cold way of looking at things. What about morality?

Siebenschwan:

To remain on the cold side for the time being: morality regulates the conditions for regard or disregard in terms of the individual – of course the conditions are social ones, local ones, if you will ... there are multiple moralities...

Jakob:

(slate) Digression!

Woltersbeck:

As much as this particular question interests me, I have to admit that he's right. We're talking about the *form* of functional differentiation, here ... there's no use in lamentation of any sort. It seems to me that this form rules out the possibility of there being any occurrences that society could agree upon about how they are to be evaluated. And even this finding - this diagnosis - is tied to a certain position.

Mrs. Siebenschwann-P.:

I never like hearing such a thing - it pains me. I wish it were different: maybe another theory...

Siebenschwan:

Eva!!!

Mrs. Siebenschwann-P.:

I just mean...

Siebenschwan:

I know what you mean, but theories don't exist in order to rose tint the world for us. We can leave consolation to theology, and leave moral emphasis to educational theory. We are dealing with theory here, and not social welfare work (to borrow a Markowitz phrase).

Frieda:

I would like to remind everyone that at the beginning of our sessions, we said that we would be playing a game, attempting in a playful way to see what would happen if we made certain theoretical distinctions. But the air here seems to have turned a bit chilly...

Jakob:

(slate) A fine wit is a dry one!

Siebenschwan:

It's a good thing that you're reminding us, Frieda, of the decisions we made at the outset. We involved ourselves in a series of distinctions and then tried to determine what we could see. The theory itself states that any usage of distinctions must occur in unavoidable conjunction with the creation of blind spots. And the same, naturally, goes for us. We do not see what we do not see, because we see what we see.

Dr. Hasso Beben:

Now all we need is an ‚Amen‘ from Mr. Woltersbeck.

Mrs. Siebenschwann-P.:

I'll say the ‚Amen‘, and ask you all to join us in the house for a farewell dinner – at which I don't want to hear a single word more about science. Not one, do you understand?

They all agree to comply with this and begin to move slowly into the house, where the oldest daughters have set a lovely table for them. Siebenschwan can't pass up the chance (after a fine dessert mousse) to officially announce the conclusion of the private forum. The group and its members had been able to proceed only in an impressionistic manner, he says, but there was really no other way to go about it. Much would now depend on the initiative of those who had found themselves fascinated by the thinking of system theory: these individuals might read and work on, for themselves. As for the others; they would just have to offer more capable or efficient theories ... and nobody was more anxious than he to see if they would be successful in doing so. Mrs. Siebenschwan-Pichel reminds him that science was to have no place in their discussion anymore, and the rest of the evening is thus spent in a friendly and sociable atmosphere. As each guest is departing, Siebenschwan informs him or her that he's considering organizing similar non-official group sessions for the next semester break. But these, of course, would no longer have an introductory character.