

The Existential Threat of the Accurate  
Account:  
Why the Systems Thinker's Explanation  
Triggers  
the Observer's Deepest Defences

*How Yalom's Four Ultimate Concerns—Death, Freedom,  
Isolation, and Meaninglessness—Explain  
the Rejection of Systemic Causation  
in Legal and Investigative Contexts*

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## Abstract

**Background:** Prior papers in this series have identified cognitive biases—the fundamental attribution error, availability bias, the far-fetched heuristic—and motivated biases—the just-world fallacy—that cause systems-oriented accounts of accidental events to be rejected in legal settings. The present paper goes deeper, drawing on existential psychotherapy (Yalom, 1980) and Terror Management Theory (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986) to argue that the resistance to the systems thinker’s account is not merely cognitive or motivational. It is *existential*. The systems thinker’s account—describing a world of distributed causation, environmental determination, probabilistic outcomes, and the absence of controlling intent—directly confronts the observer with all four of Yalom’s “ultimate concerns”: death (harm can happen to anyone, including me), freedom (with its terrifying corollary of groundlessness), isolation (no cosmic order guarantees my safety), and meaninglessness (suffering can occur without purpose or design). The just-world fallacy, previously identified as the foundational bias, is revealed to be itself a defence mechanism against existential anxiety—one of many strategies humans use to avoid confronting the terrifying truth that the world is not orderly, not controllable, and not just.

**Method:** Integrative review drawing on Yalom (1980), Terror Management Theory (Greenberg et al., 1986; Becker, 1973), and the framework established by the prior OMXUS studies.

**Results:** The systems thinker’s account activates all four existential concerns simultaneously, making it one of the most psychologically threatening communications an observer can receive. Each element of the account maps onto a specific existential threat: environmental causation threatens the sense of freedom and control; distributed causation threatens the sense of order and meaning; probabilistic outcomes threaten the sense of safety from death; and the absence of a blameworthy agent threatens the sense of connection to a moral universe that protects against isolation. The observer’s rejection of this account is therefore not a judgment about the account’s accuracy. It is a defence mechanism against existential anxiety.

**Conclusions:** The systems thinker’s account of an accidental event is resisted

at the deepest level of human psychology—not because it is wrong, but because it is existentially threatening. Recognising this dynamic is essential for justice, because it reveals that the pressure to convict in accidental harm cases may be driven not by evidence of guilt but by the observer’s need to defend against awareness of life’s fundamental uncertainty, randomness, and uncontrollability. The courtroom, in such cases, becomes a theatre of existential defence rather than a forum for truth.

**Keywords:** existential psychotherapy; Yalom; terror management theory; death anxiety; just-world fallacy; systems thinking; existential defence mechanisms; legal psychology; groundlessness

# Key Points

- Yalom (1980) identified four “ultimate concerns” that generate existential anxiety: death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness
- The systems thinker’s account of an accidental event activates *all four* simultaneously—making it one of the most psychologically threatening explanations an observer can encounter
- The just-world fallacy (Lerner, 1980), previously identified as the foundational bias, is itself a defence mechanism against existential anxiety
- Terror Management Theory (Greenberg et al., 1986) demonstrates that reminders of mortality and randomness trigger defensive cognitive distortions—including harsher moral judgments and increased punitiveness
- The observer who rejects the systems account is not making a judgment about evidence. They are defending against the existential implication: that the world is not orderly, harm is not deserved, and they themselves are not safe
- The courtroom, in accidental harm cases, risks becoming a theatre of existential defence rather than a forum for truth—and this must be recognised for justice to be possible

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Beyond Bias: The Existential Dimension

The prior papers in this series have traced a chain of mechanisms that operate against the systems thinker in legal and investigative settings:

- **Cognitive biases:** the fundamental attribution error, the far-fetched heuristic, availability bias, psychological distance (OMXUS, 2026d, 2026e).
- **Motivated biases:** the just-world fallacy, the need for blame, the preference for conspiracy simplicity (OMXUS, 2026e, 2026f).

But there is a question that the prior analyses have not fully answered: *why are these biases so powerful?* Why do they resist correction even when the evidence clearly supports the systemic account? Why does training in systems thinking, risk perception, and cognitive bias not reliably overcome them?

The answer lies in a domain that psychology has long recognised but that legal scholarship has largely ignored: **existential anxiety**.

Irvin Yalom, in his foundational work *Existential Psychotherapy* (1980), identified four “ultimate concerns” that generate the deepest forms of human anxiety: death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness. These are not specific fears about specific threats. They are the background conditions of human existence itself. Every person, simply by being alive and conscious, must find a way to manage the anxiety generated by these four facts:

1. **Death:** I will die. I do not know when or how. My existence is finite and can end at any time.
2. **Freedom:** I am the author of my own life. There is no predetermined script, no guaranteed outcome, no external authority that ensures my safety. With freedom comes what Yalom calls “groundlessness”—the dizzying awareness that the ground beneath one’s feet is not solid.
3. **Isolation:** I am fundamentally alone in my subjective experience. No matter how deeply I connect with others, no one can fully share my consciousness, my suffering, or my death.

4. **Meaninglessness:** There may be no inherent meaning in the universe. Whatever meaning my life has, I must create it myself, in a cosmos that does not care whether I succeed or fail.

Yalom argues that much of human behaviour—both healthy and pathological—represents attempts to manage the anxiety generated by these four concerns. Defence mechanisms, belief systems, cultural institutions, and social rituals all serve, in part, to buffer the individual against the full force of existential awareness.

## 1.2 The Thesis

This paper argues that the systems thinker's account of an accidental event activates all four of Yalom's ultimate concerns simultaneously, and that this is the deepest reason it is rejected. The biases identified in prior papers—the FAE, BJW, the far-fetched heuristic—are not independent cognitive errors. They are *existential defence mechanisms*: strategies the observer uses to avoid confronting the terrifying implications of the systems account.

The systems thinker describes a world in which:

- Serious harm can happen to anyone (confrontation with **death**).
- Outcomes are not fully controllable (confrontation with **freedom/groundlessness**).
- No cosmic order guarantees that good people are protected (confrontation with **isolation** from a moral universe).
- Suffering can occur without purpose, design, or deserving (confrontation with **meaninglessness**).

This is, existentially, one of the most threatening messages a person can receive. And it is delivered in a context—the courtroom, the investigation—where the observer has

the institutional power to reject it and replace it with a narrative that restores order, meaning, and safety.

## 2 Yalom's Four Ultimate Concerns and the Systems Account

### 2.1 Death: "This Could Happen to Me"

The first and most primal of Yalom's concerns is death—the awareness of mortality, of vulnerability, of the possibility that one's existence can end without warning. Yalom and other existential psychotherapists propose that death anxiety is the primary neurosis underlying all others: the awareness that we will die, that we do not know when, and that we cannot prevent it.

The systems thinker's account of an accidental event is a direct reminder of mortality and vulnerability. It says: this harm occurred not because someone chose to cause it, but because conditions converged in a way that could not have been predicted or prevented by any individual. The implicit message to the observer is: *the same could happen to you*. Not because you are careless or reckless, but because you, too, exist in a world of interacting conditions, and the convergence that produced this harm could converge around you at any time.

This is unbearable. The observer's psychological system responds with a defence: if the harm was caused by a *person's choice*, then I can avoid it by making better choices. If it was caused by a *person's character*, I am safe because my character is different. The fundamental attribution error is, at this level, a defence against death anxiety. It converts a random, uncontrollable event into a controllable one by attributing it to an agent who could have acted otherwise.

## 2.2 Freedom: “The Ground Is Not Solid”

Yalom’s second concern is freedom—not freedom as a political value but freedom as an existential condition. Freedom means that we are the authors of our own lives, that there is no guaranteed script, and that with authorship comes what Yalom calls “groundlessness”: the awareness that the structures we rely on—order, predictability, cause and effect—are not given by the universe but constructed by us.

Yalom describes groundlessness as potentially more terrifying than death anxiety itself. It is the awareness that “nothing is as it seemed. The very ground beneath one seems to open up.”

The systems thinker’s account produces exactly this sensation. It describes a world in which outcomes are not determined by identifiable choices but by the interaction of conditions that no single individual controls. The causal ground is not solid. The simple narrative—“this person did this, and that happened”—is replaced by a complex web of interacting factors in which agency is distributed, control is partial, and outcomes are probabilistic.

For the observer, this is groundlessness. The legal system is built on the assumption that events have identifiable causes and that individuals are the authors of their actions. The systems account dissolves this ground. It says: the event emerged from conditions, not from a choice. The person involved was embedded in a web of factors they did not create, did not control, and could not have fully predicted. This is existentially terrifying, because it implies that the observer, too, is embedded in such a web—and that their own sense of authorship and control is less complete than they believe.

## 2.3 Isolation: “No One Is Protecting Me”

Yalom’s third concern is existential isolation—the fundamental aloneness of the individual in their subjective experience. But isolation also operates at a broader level: the question

of whether one is embedded in a moral universe that provides protection and guarantees fairness.

The just-world fallacy (Lerner, 1980) is, from an existential perspective, a defence against isolation. It provides the comforting sense that the individual is not alone in a random universe but is embedded in a moral order: good behaviour is rewarded, bad behaviour is punished, and the universe itself “cares” about justice. This belief provides protection against the terrifying alternative: that the universe is indifferent, that no cosmic order guarantees your safety, and that you are, in the deepest sense, alone.

The systems thinker’s account threatens this belief directly. It describes a universe in which harm occurs not because of moral failure but because of the interaction of conditions—a universe in which the moral order does not determine outcomes. The observer feels isolated: if the world does not punish wrongdoing and protect innocence, then no external force is safeguarding me. I am alone in a universe that does not care whether I am harmed or not.

The psychological response is to restore the moral order by assigning blame. If someone is punished for the harm, the moral universe is intact, and the observer is not isolated. The courtroom becomes the instrument through which the observer restores their sense of being embedded in a just and protective cosmos.

## **2.4 Meaninglessness: “This Suffering Has No Purpose”**

Yalom’s fourth concern is meaninglessness—the challenge of creating purpose in a universe that may have no inherent meaning. When suffering occurs, people have a deep need to assign it meaning: it happened for a reason, it serves a purpose, it teaches a lesson, it is deserved.

The systems thinker’s account strips suffering of all these comforting meanings. It says: this harm occurred because of the convergence of conditions. It was not deserved. It was

not a punishment. It does not teach a lesson about anyone's character. It was not part of a plan. It was, in the most fundamental sense, meaningless—an emergent property of a complex system, not the expression of a moral order.

This is existentially devastating. If this suffering is meaningless, then my own potential suffering is also meaningless. There is no purpose to be found in it, no lesson to be learned, no guarantee that it will not happen to me. The universe is not a narrative with a moral; it is a system with dynamics.

The observer's response is to *create* meaning by constructing a narrative of blame: this happened because someone chose to do something wrong. Now the suffering has a cause, a moral, and a resolution (punishment). The meaningless event has been converted into a meaningful one. The existential anxiety has been managed.

### 3 Terror Management Theory: The Empirical Evidence

The existential analysis presented above is not merely philosophical. It is supported by extensive empirical research conducted within the framework of Terror Management Theory (TMT), developed by Greenberg, Pyszczynski, and Solomon (1986) building on the work of anthropologist Ernest Becker (1973).

TMT proposes that the awareness of death has the capacity to cause paralysing anxiety, and that humans manage this anxiety through two primary mechanisms: (1) cultural worldviews that provide a sense of order, meaning, and permanence, and (2) self-esteem derived from meeting the standards of those worldviews. When these defences are threatened—for example, by reminders of mortality—people respond by *strengthening* their commitment to their worldview and by judging more harshly anyone who threatens it.

The key empirical findings of TMT research, drawn from hundreds of studies across multiple decades, include:

- **Mortality salience increases punitiveness.** When reminded of their own mortality, mock jurors set significantly higher bail amounts and recommended harsher sentences for moral transgressors (Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon, 1989).
- **Mortality salience increases worldview defence.** Reminders of death cause people to react more positively toward those who validate their worldview and more negatively toward those who challenge it (Greenberg et al., 1990).
- **Mortality salience increases preference for simple, orderly explanations.** When confronted with reminders of mortality, people prefer explanations that restore a sense of order and control (Landau et al., 2004).
- **Mortality salience increases the fundamental attribution error.** Reminders of death increase the tendency to attribute others' behaviour to dispositional rather than situational factors—because dispositional explanations preserve the sense that the world is orderly and controllable (Hirschberger, 2006).

These findings have direct relevance to the legal context in which a systems thinker is explaining an accidental event that caused serious harm. The courtroom itself is a context saturated with mortality salience: the jury is confronted with evidence of serious injury or death, testimony about suffering, and the emotional weight of harm that cannot be undone. Under these conditions, TMT predicts that jurors will:

1. Become more punitive.
2. Prefer explanations that restore order and meaning.
3. React negatively toward anyone who challenges the belief that the world is just and orderly.
4. Increase their reliance on the fundamental attribution error.

The systems thinker does all of the things that TMT predicts will trigger the harshest response: they challenge the orderly worldview, they deny that the harm was caused by a simple, blameworthy choice, and they describe a universe in which suffering is probabilistic rather than deserved. They do this in a context—the courtroom—that is already primed for mortality salience by the very nature of the case.

## 4 The Defence Mechanisms: A Unified Framework

The biases and fallacies identified across the OMXUS series can now be understood as a unified system of existential defence mechanisms:

Table 1: Cognitive Biases as Existential Defence Mechanisms

<b>Bias/Fallacy</b>	<b>What It Does</b>	<b>Existential Threat It Defends Against</b>
Fundamental attribution error	Attributes behaviour to character rather than situation	<b>Death/Freedom:</b> restores sense of control (“I can avoid harm by being a better person”)
Just-world fallacy	Assumes people get what they deserve	<b>Meaninglessness/Isolation:</b> restores sense of moral order (“the universe is fair”)
Far-fetched heuristic	Rejects complex causal explanations as implausible	<b>Freedom/Groundlessness:</b> restores sense that causation is simple and controllable
Availability bias	Privileges vivid, immediate causes over diffuse ones	<b>Death:</b> focuses on identifiable threats that can be avoided
Conspiracy simplicity	Prefers narratives with identifiable agents over systemic ones	<b>Isolation:</b> restores sense that someone is responsible (the universe is not indifferent)
Severity-blame link	Attributes more blame when harm is more severe	<b>Meaninglessness:</b> severe suffering <i>must</i> have a proportionate cause

Each bias is not an isolated cognitive error. It is a strategy for managing one or more of Yalom's ultimate concerns. Together, they form a comprehensive defence system that protects the observer from the existential implications of the systems account.

This is why these biases are so resistant to correction. They are not failures of reasoning. They are *protections against terror*. To correct them is to remove the defence and expose the observer to the full weight of existential anxiety: the awareness that the world is not orderly, that harm is not deserved, that control is limited, and that they, too, are vulnerable.

## 5 The Courtroom as Theatre of Existential Defence

If the analysis presented above is correct, then the courtroom in an accidental harm case is not primarily a forum for establishing facts. It is a theatre of existential defence.

The jury has been confronted with evidence of serious harm. This confrontation activates mortality salience and existential anxiety. The jury *needs* to restore order. The prosecution offers a narrative that does this: an identifiable person made an identifiable choice that caused an identifiable harm. This narrative is psychologically soothing because it restores all four existential comforts:

1. **Death is controllable:** The harm was caused by a choice. I can avoid it by choosing differently.
2. **Freedom is grounded:** Causation is simple and linear. The ground is solid.
3. **I am not isolated:** The moral universe is intact. Justice will be done.
4. **Suffering is meaningful:** This harm was caused by a blameworthy act. It has a cause, a moral, and a resolution.

The defence offers the systems account: multiple factors converged; the accused did not

intend the harm; the outcome was probabilistic; the appropriate response is prevention, not punishment. This account, however accurate, threatens all four existential comforts:

1. **Death is random:** The harm could have happened to anyone. It could happen to me.
2. **The ground is not solid:** Causation is complex and distributed. I cannot fully control my outcomes.
3. **I am alone:** No moral order guaranteed the victim's safety. No moral order guarantees mine.
4. **Suffering is meaningless:** This harm has no moral. It teaches no lesson. It was not deserved.

The jury does not choose between two accounts of what happened. They choose between existential comfort and existential terror. The prosecution's account offers comfort. The defence's account offers terror. Under mortality salience—which the courtroom itself has activated—TMT predicts that the jury will choose comfort.

This is not justice. It is existential self-defence dressed in legal process.

## 6 The Systems Thinker as Existential Therapist

There is a deep irony in this analysis. In existential psychotherapy, the therapist's role is to help the client *confront* the ultimate concerns rather than defend against them. Yalom (1980) argues that psychological health requires the capacity to face death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness—not to deny them. The person who can sit with uncertainty, complexity, and the absence of guaranteed meaning is, in Yalom's framework, the psychologically mature person.

The systems thinker is doing exactly this. When they describe an accidental event in terms of interacting conditions, environmental factors, and probabilistic outcomes, they are demonstrating the capacity to face a complex, uncertain, and not-fully-controllable world without retreating into the comfort of simple blame. They are not making excuses. They are doing what the existential therapist would describe as *authentic engagement with reality*.

In Yalom's terms, the systems thinker is the person who has confronted groundlessness and not looked away. They have accepted that causation is distributed, that outcomes are not always controllable, and that the appropriate response to accidental harm is understanding and prevention, not blame and punishment. This is the orientation that existential psychotherapy seeks to cultivate: the capacity to live with uncertainty, to find meaning in engagement rather than in cosmic guarantee, and to respond to suffering with understanding rather than with the compulsive assignment of fault.

The courtroom punishes them for it.

## 7 Implications

- 1. The resistance to the systems account is existential, not evidential.** This is the deepest finding of the series. The biases identified in prior papers are not independent cognitive errors to be corrected with information. They are defence mechanisms against existential anxiety. Correcting them requires not merely better information but greater existential courage on the part of the observer.
- 2. The courtroom context maximises existential defence.** Mortality salience, vivid evidence of harm, and the emotional weight of suffering create precisely the conditions under which TMT predicts the strongest worldview defence and the harshest moral judgments. The systems account faces the strongest possible headwind in the very setting where it is most needed.

- 3. Expert testimony should address the existential dimension.** Explaining the FAE and BJW to a jury may not be sufficient if the jury’s resistance is driven by existential anxiety rather than cognitive error. Expert witnesses who can explain the psychological dynamics of mortality salience, worldview defence, and the need-for-meaning may help jurors recognise that their impulse to convict is serving a psychological function, not an evidential one.
- 4. The systems-thinking orientation reflects psychological maturity, not evasion.** In Yalom’s framework, the capacity to face uncertainty, complexity, and the absence of guaranteed meaning is a marker of psychological health and authenticity. The systems thinker’s account should be recognised as evidence of this capacity—not as evidence of guilt.
- 5. Justice requires existential courage.** To acquit in a case of genuine accidental harm is to accept that the world is not fully orderly, that suffering is not always deserved, and that there is not always someone to blame. This is existentially difficult. It may be the most psychologically demanding thing a jury is ever asked to do. But it is what justice requires.

## 8 The Full Chain

The complete argument across the OMXUS series can now be stated in its most compact form:

1. Environment shapes behaviour (language study).
2. Everyone already knows this (security expenditure study).
3. Prevention works better than defence (European peace study).
4. The person who articulates these truths is misunderstood (interpreter’s error).

5. The misunderstanding is driven by cognitive biases (“why systems thinking feels wrong”).
6. Those biases are motivated by the need to believe in a just world (just-world study).
7. **That need is itself a defence against existential terror** (present paper).

At the bottom of the chain is this: the systems thinker describes reality as it is—complex, interconnected, probabilistic, and not guaranteed to be fair. This description is existentially threatening. Every mechanism identified in the series—from the fundamental attribution error to the just-world fallacy to the far-fetched heuristic—is a strategy for avoiding the existential implications of the accurate account.

The systems thinker is punished not for being wrong, but for being right in a way that the observer cannot psychologically afford to accept.

Justice requires the capacity to accept it anyway.

## 9 Limitations

1. Existential psychotherapy is a clinical framework, not an empirical research programme with the same methodological rigour as cognitive psychology. However, Terror Management Theory, which operationalises key existential concepts, has been supported by hundreds of empirical studies.
2. The application of TMT findings to the specific context of jury decision-making in accidental harm cases is inferential. Direct experimental tests of this specific application would strengthen the argument.
3. The present paper does not claim that all legal judgments are driven by existential anxiety. It claims that in cases of accidental harm—where the evidence supports a systemic rather than intentional account—existential defence mechanisms may exert significant influence on fact-finders.

4. Individual jurors vary in their susceptibility to existential anxiety and their capacity for what Yalom calls “authentic engagement.” The present paper describes a general tendency, not a universal law.

## 10 Conclusions

The systems thinker who explains an accidental event in terms of interacting conditions, environmental factors, and probabilistic outcomes is not making excuses. They are describing reality. But reality, in this case, is existentially threatening.

It is threatening because it says: harm can happen without anyone choosing it. The world is complex and not fully controllable. Suffering is not always deserved. There is not always someone to blame. These are Yalom’s four ultimate concerns—death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness—activated simultaneously by a single account.

The observer responds with the full weight of their existential defence system: the fundamental attribution error converts randomness into controllability. The just-world fallacy converts meaninglessness into moral order. The far-fetched heuristic converts complexity into simplicity. The need for blame converts isolation into connection with a just cosmos.

Together, these defences reject the accurate account and replace it with a comforting narrative: someone chose to cause harm, they are blameworthy, and punishment will restore justice. This narrative is psychologically necessary for the observer. But it may have no correspondence with what actually happened.

In existential psychotherapy, health requires the courage to face the ultimate concerns without retreating into defence. Yalom calls this *authentic engagement with existence*. In the courtroom, justice requires the same courage: the capacity to face the possibility that the world is not orderly, that this harm was not deserved, and that the person in the dock is not guilty—even though every psychological instinct in the observer screams for the comfort of blame.

The systems thinker has already found this courage. The question is whether the courtroom can find it too.

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