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Object Relations and Job: Suffering as a Parallel

Process Toward Individuation

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## Abstract

This article explored Job's suffering as a progression through the object-relations stages of symbiosis, differentiation, and individuation from God. The tripartite structure of the prologue, dialogues, and epilogue in Job is said to parallel the evolving growth of an individual's evolution from a symbiotic view of God, through differentiation and an acceptance of God's dual capacity for goodness and affliction, and into an individuation marked by a new representation and relationship with God's complexity. Ministry and counseling with suffering individuals may consequently involve fostering their differentiation and individuation, as well as legitimizing anger, ambivalence, and perhaps even appropriate doubt.

### Object Relations and Job: Suffering as a Parallel Process Toward Individuation

Job is everywhere, transcending culture, gender, and personality. Knowing this, the field of psychology, including object-relations theory, may benefit from trying to cast an interpretive light on the book of Job and its understanding of suffering, God, and growth. Using an object-relational lens, it may be that the evolving relationship between Job and God is analogous to a child's differentiating relationship with his or her parent, such that the progression of Job's suffering represents his development through the object-relations stages of symbiosis, differentiation, and individuation. More directly, it may be that the tripartite structure of the book's prologue, dialogues, and epilogue parallels the psychological stages of Job's evolution from a symbiotic view of God, through differentiation and an acceptance of God's dual capacity for goodness and affliction, and into an eventual individuation characterized by a more realistic relationship with God's complexity and multidimensionality.

#### Object-Relations Theory and Religion: An Overview

In order to better understand how the suffering of Job may represent his development through the three stages of object-relations theory, perhaps we should first begin by exploring how the developmental principles and stages of object-relations theory may inform our changing relationship with God. In a manner reminiscent of a child's initial attachment with its mother, individuals frequently commence their relationship with God in a symbiotic mindset, looking to God to satisfy their basic needs for health, trust, and security. They generally perceive few boundaries between themselves and God, expecting that their actions elicit His direct responses, which fosters a sense of omnipotence and a cognitive belief that God is inherently good and incapable of harm (McDargh, 1983). However, not unlike the mother who fails to meet the child's expectations, God will invariably defy individual prescriptions and our internal

representations, reflecting His own limitations and maybe His own darker side, a side that silences the world with a flood and that is capable of slaying a man's family (1: 6-19). This forces us to become aware of the reality of God's separateness, limitations, and darker qualities. Much like the infant feels alienated by the independence of the caregiver, this experience of God's antinomy may feel like abandonment or alienation, which gives rise to ambivalence and anger (Nimmo, 1994; Singer, 1963). To cope with this pain, the self must gradually differentiate itself from God, discarding an outdated object representation of God as symbiotic and flawless, and adopting a new relationship characterized by a more accurate internal representation that accepts God's separateness and complexity. This, then, allows us to integrate the darker side of God into our divine representations, just as we must accept both the positive and negative polarities of our primary caregivers. As a result, the suffering that follows from God's abandonment awakens the initiative to differentiate, such that the self accepts the loss of one's narcissistic view of God and internalizes a new representation of God that is no longer blinded to His paradoxical nature and multidimensionality (Quillo, 1984). In essence, this frees God to be completely God, liberated from the symbiotic box and allowing us to become fully individuated, accepting His true nature and able to more fully relate with His multidimensionality. Perhaps this is the process of suffering and growth presented in the book of Job, a process where the narrative structure of the book's prologue, dialogues, and epilogue portrays the evolving growth of a man's evolution from symbiosis with God, through differentiation, and into an eventual individuation and new relation with his Creator.

#### Prologue: The Symbiosis of Job and God

When the prologue is cast against the mirror of object relations theory, the image that is reflected may be one of Job's symbiotic and undifferentiated union with the divine. From the

beginning of the epilogue, Job shares an intimate relationship with God, a relationship marked by a diffusion of boundaries between himself and God. He is utterly dependent upon God for his prosperity and well-being (1:3,10), thus sharing a symbiotic union where he experiences the maternal milk of God's protection and security (1:10). The representation of God for the infant Job is one of stimulus-dependence, where the self omnipotently believes that he can effect the blessing or condemnation of God by his behavior. Hence, Job's theology is one of retribution, where uprightness and blamelessness are rewarded with prosperity (1:10; Singer, 1963). The natural result of this symbiosis and God's perceived malleability is an internal representation of God as universally good, incapable of wounding His creation, and thus designed only for human service. Even when Job's family is violently slain, Job is unable to deviate from a unipolar conceptualization of a charitable God, attesting only that "the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (2:21).

However, if Job's relationship with God is to truly grow and progress, this symbiotic state must be abandoned. Just as the infant child can only truly relate to its parent by accepting the limitations and heterogeneity of the parent, so too must Job abandon his one-dimensional and retributive representation of God in order to more fully relate to God's entirety. It is for this reason that the Accuser poses his question, "Does Job fear God for nothing?" (1:9). It is this question that challenges God and Job to see if the latter will be non-reductive, willing to know and integrate the multiple dimensions of God, including His darker side. As such, the question may be designed to instigate a crisis in Job's psychic development and may reflect a wager by God's darker side to see if His charitable side will rule omnipotently in the mind of Job, or if Job can tolerate and internalize the totality of God's opposites (Edinger, 1972). Perhaps, then, God's acquiescence to the suffering of Job is a reflection of His initiative to expose His dual nature and

to facilitate Job's internalization of a separate, mysterious, and multifaceted view of the Creator.

### The Dialogues: Job's Growing Differentiation from God

When Job's symbiotic view of God is confronted with the experience of his affliction, Job is thrust into the phase of differentiating from God. It is precisely when God turns His back on Job and denies the warmth of His blessing that Job is forced to recognize the separateness and unpredictable nature of God. In this moment, Job is violently confronted with God's unreliability, His capacity for inflicting pain, and the inadequacy of his own retributinal and symbiotic approach to God. Much like a child responding to a mother's failure or absence, Job experiences this divine distancing as alienation and abandonment. He searches for God, but God is absent, having removed the fence of security that once maintained the symbiotic state. Unable to reconcile this alienation with his prior representation of a universally charitable God, Job naturally responds with ambivalence and anger (Edinger, 1972; Vogels, 1981). In trying to reconcile God's indiscriminant affliction (9:17) with a hope in His goodness and justice (27:7-13), Job expresses his emotional conflict in surrendering his prior conceptualization of God to the disconfirming evidence of God's darkness. Hence, when his cries and supplications fall on theological and ontological silence, Job is forced to put to death his old God and consider a new one.

What ultimately results from Job's suffering, ambivalence, and anger is a process of internalizing a new and more accurate representation of God, the consummation of which is his individuation. It is only in God's turning away from Job that Job is truly able to see the back side of God, a side composed of a mutuality of opposites and rebelling against human categorization. Through God's infliction of a dark night of the soul, Job truly begins to differentiate himself from God, accepting the insufficiency of a retributinal theology. Having expressed his

ambivalence and anger, he surrenders to God's individuality, an individuality that destroys both the blameless and wicked (9:22) and often leaves the tents of robbers at peace (12:6). Confronted with the inadequacy of his former view of God as universally good, Job begins to see empty cries for justice (19:7), death denied to the elderly (3:21), and a God who refuses to withdraw His hand of affliction (10:20). In essence, Job sees God's shadow. As a result, the frustration of Job's symbiotic representation leads to a greater acceptance of the reality of God's polarity (Andresen, 1991) and a willingness to begin crucifying his retributive God for the adoption of a multidimensional one.

#### Epilogue: Job's Individuation

Having been wrought through the fires of differentiation, the Job that emerges in the epilogue is a fully individuated self who has displaced his primitive representations of God with the internalization of a multidimensional God. At the moment of Job's repentance in dust and ashes (42:6), he confesses the inadequacy of his undifferentiated and retributive representation of God. This is not a repenting of sin or wrongdoing per se, but the retraction of a symbiosis with the divine that neglected the darker side of God (Edinger, 1972; Nimmo, 1994). From this perspective, Job's despising of himself (42:6) is a reflection of his distaste for his former one-sided view of God, a view that has since collapsed following exposure to his wounding from God. In a sense, Job laments placing God in the straightjacket of retribution and charitable principles, finally recognizing what he has lost in failing to fully relate to the opposites in God. It is here that Job has accepted the "All" of God, in which resides the dualities of charity and pain, light and dark, prosperity and the ash heap (Hartley, 1988; Singer, 1963). Looking back from his theocentric view to the anthropomorphic view that now lies in dust and ashes, Job declares himself free from defining God according to his own needs and is able to finally accept God's

unique dimensionality, as well as the good and the bad (2:10). What results is that Job more fully knows the *Who*, which allows him to bear any *how*, though he knows not the *why* (Hulme, 1989). At the end of his suffering, then, Job engages in a new vision of God that initiates a more complete and authentic relationship with the fullness and complexity of God.

### Conclusion

Ultimately, the process of an individual's growth from symbiosis, through differentiation, and into eventual individuation may serve as an archetype for understanding the process of suffering in the book of Job. To this end, the tripartite structure of the book of Job may parallel the object-relational stages of Job's symbiosis, differentiation, and eventual individuation from the divine. For those who aspire to work with the many who suffer beside Job, this perspective may advocate a therapeutic approach that not only fosters clients' differentiation from primitive views of God, but also fosters their restlessness about God's ambiguity and complexity. In fact, true reconciliation and healing amidst suffering may be found only on the other side of a wrestling match with God, where we refuse to settle for old categories and demand to see God in His fullness. Without such struggling, we may find ourselves futilely clutching at an inauthentic relationship with a deity of our own construction, but who is never fully known.



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