

# THE INNER TYRANT AND THE LABYRINTH OF CONTROL: MEANING-MAKING AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN OBSESSIVE FUNCTIONING

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## SUMMARY

*In this paper I will bring some reflections from a post-rationalist constructivist phenomenological perspective on the Obsessive-Compulsive-Prone Style of Personality (tOCD), a style that can typically lead to an Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), but not exclusively so.*

**Key words:** tDOC – control – obsessiveness – OCD - scrupulousness

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## INTRODUCTION

*“He had everything neatly arranged: pens ordered by length, books aligned to the millimetre, clothes ironed and hung by colour. Just one shoe out of place and he'd feel his heart racing.”* (Bernhard 1986).

This excerpt from “The Loser” by Thomas Bernhard illustrates the commonly held view of obsessive personalities - those excessively concerned with order, control, rules, and perfectionism. While accurate, this depiction doesn't fully capture the complexity of obsessive-compulsive-prone style of personality. Nor will this paper offer an exhaustive account, it is intended simply as a tool for reflection. In this personality type, thought is not merely a tool for understanding reality; it becomes a regulator of identity. Here, impersonal rules orient the sense of self, in a continuous tension between internal coherence and control over uncertainty.

## THE INNER TYRANT

In this style of personality, the sense of self is determined by a stable anchoring to an external system of coordinates that is a source of certainty and stability. The variability of subjective experience is thus reduced to absolute, impersonal coordinates that become internalized, to the point of being able to become a real internal tyrant.

For the tOCD individual, the essence of being oneself lies in aligning current experiences with a set of universal principles (rules). Adherence to these rules is absolute, not just for oneself, but also in judging others. People are criticized, valued, or dismissed depending on their proximity to this regulatory system. The system of “rules” is constitutive and also the lens through which the Self, the Others, and the World are viewed in order to feel stably situated. In this making of co-determination of Self, centred on the constant adherence to a given order, the Other has no value in itself, but only if he's entered in the system.

We can deduce that when one's actions no longer align with these internalized principles, the self is put in check. The person begins to experience a negative self-evaluation, perceived as objective. It follows that the alteration in the sense of Self and in the feeling of stability situated is not the result of the experience disturbing in itself, but the result of new coincidence between experience with the system itself.\*

The tOCD phenomenology is highly varied and is based on the dialectic between the ongoing subjective experience and its compliance with the regulatory system. At extremes, this may result in a complete merging with the system (as in paranoid structures) or in a drastic disconnection from it, up to identity fragmentation.

## THE LABYRINTH OF CONTROL

What becomes of primary importance is not questioning the system but sustaining certainty about it. Certainty in the validity of reference system maintains the control necessary for emotional stability.

When there is a discrepancy between experience and meaning, and the experience cannot be reframed within acceptable system parameters, certainty collapses. Personal security is then compromised, and experience becomes alien. The issue isn't the accuracy of the rules but the system's rigidity. A rigid system cannot integrate the variability of human experience. Instead, it demands conformity without adapting to reality, turning control into a labyrinth. A flexible system, on the other hand, will recruit cognitive resources to integrate life events into a unified self-narrative, maintaining balance between internal principles and life's inevitable disruptions.

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\* The non-coincidence of the experience with the system is so disturbing that through the pursuit of perfection, the tDOC tries to fully conform to the system of rules in order to ensure stability. The perfectionism of the obsessive personality is structural.

## THE ROLE OF THOUGHT

Thought generates certainty by mediating access to the system and ensuring alignment between one's own system of meaning and experience. Through thought, actions are justified and made acceptable, producing a sense of personal reliability, control, and thus stability. If there is a mismatch, thought loses its anchoring power, leading to insecurity and a sense of incompleteness.

The gap between what should be and what is, breeds guilt, shame, embarrassment, and even self-contempt. When certainty cannot be achieved through thought, the person may cling to it even more rigidly, entering a loop that blocks the perception of alternatives.

## CENTERING ON ACTION

The central theme of the obsessive-compulsive-prone personality style is being action-centred. And this explains a way of feeling, being, de-compensating. The action has two characteristics: it must be anticipable and explainable. Neither being able to anticipate a sequence of actions nor being able to explain the events, trigger a self evaluation of system's Self. Every action, as already said, is governed by an internal reference system that judges its correctness. If an action doesn't fully align with its originating rules, a breakdown occurs.

When something discrepant happens that defies explanation, either one's own behaviour or someone else's, the tOCD individual feels they've lost control over action, not over emotion. Emotions are seen as secondary. Thus, attention is redoubled on behaviour and its details. Actions become dissected in an attempt to restore control, leading to ritualistic symptoms. Repetition of a gesture, now devoid of practical function, is a desperate effort to restore order to a disrupted system. The ritual becomes a means of regaining certainty through control, repeated until the person feels it was done "just right." And if interrupted: "I start over because I'm no longer sure." This style of functioning becomes rigid and concrete, often leading to paralysis.

In some cases, failure to adhere to the system results in a major depressive episode. An unanticipated action may trigger evaluative emotions - guilt, shame, failure - leading to a total assumption of blame. What is intolerable is not the experience itself, but the uncertainty stemming from the failure of one's predictive system, and thus of all possible future scenarios.

## EMOTIONS

Emotion always derives from action, from whether action aligns with the meaning-making system. In tOCD, very relevant are self-evaluative emotions such as guilt, shame, embarrassment, and pride; emotions stemming from how one evaluates their own behaviour. When attention is focused on others, external behaviour

is similarly judged, leading to emotions like anger, contempt, and disgust.

Unlike basic emotional reactions, anger in tOCD arises from cognitive appraisal. For example, if another person obstructs an action or acts unpredictably, the tOCD person may lose control of their anger, and afterward, feel paralyzed by shame and self-distrust. Losing control of anger may constitute a psychiatric emergency in these individuals.

## LOGICAL COMPLACENCY

After having explored two defining features of the obsessive personality style, impersonal adherence to a coordinate system and the tendency to assume personal responsibility, we turn to what current scientific literature defines as "logical complacency."

This occurs when rules are not abstract but embodied in another person. The "Other" becomes the physical embodiment of the reference system: someone to emulate, but also to resist. The tension between identification and opposition to this Other triggers guilt and shame. The demarcation due to the excessive invasiveness of the Other occurs through opposition, induces a sense of guilt or shame (connected to the moral evaluation of oneself), unworthiness (linked to opposition) since the Other is also a system of con-sensus to which one adheres.

For example, disobeying a parental request may be experienced as evidence of personal ingratitude. Deviations from the Other's principles generate uncertainty, doubts, and even self-pity when choices don't align with the model. As Kafka teaches, guilt, shame, and uncertainty become stable features of a person unable to liberate themselves from the Other. In *The Burrow*, the protagonist encloses himself in a labyrinth to stay away from the Other.

*"I've built the burrow, and it seems to have turned out well. From the outside, there's only a big hole, which doesn't lead anywhere - just a few steps in, and one hits hard rock. I don't want to boast that this was intentional; it's what remained after countless failed construction attempts. But in the end, I found it advantageous to leave that one hole unfilled... Yet some tricks are so clever they destroy themselves. I know this better than anyone."* (Kafka 1961).

Here we see a compulsive need to construct a protective structure - the burrow - as an extreme symbol of control. But the burrow doesn't protect. Despite the repeated attempts ("countless failures"), anxiety persists, a near-obsessive reflection on the failure of self-made defences.

In *Letter to His Father* (1919), Kafka portrays the relationship with a dominating father figure. The son, overwhelmed by the father's authoritarian presence, internalizes guilt, shame, and a deep sense of inadequacy. He cannot free himself from the Other, who embodies an unyielding value system. Kafka ultimately loses confidence in himself:

"I would probably have become an unsociable, anxious man in any case, but the journey from that to where I ended up is longer and darker... I lost my self-confidence, replacing it with a vast sense of guilt." (Kafka 2014).

## SCRUPULOUSNESS

"Adult men scare me because I see in their gaze a potential desire for me. But this fear also makes me feel beautiful. Older men surely have more experience than boys my age. My fears are mixed with curiosity... At the root of my fears are men and attraction. Losing control during sex isn't necessarily bad, and I need to accept that the body feels sensations that shouldn't be suppressed." (Cloe, 18 years old, obsessive personality structure, decompensated into full-blown OCD, during the onset of her emotional and sexual life).

This theme-specific in Cloe personality is called scrupulousness - a subtype where the reference system is composed of moral or religious rules that define one's personal integrity. This is a form of structural perfectionism through which the person gives meaning to his experience. Discrepancy between experience and meaning is interpreted as immorality or sin. The person feels alienated from their own experience, resulting in confusion and anxiety. The body becomes central-seen as the seat of unrecognized experience because it contradicts the regulatory framework.

"I'm afraid of my body feeling pleasure. I wish I could control it. I understand that pleasure is natural and not controllable, but I haven't internalized that yet. I can set limits, yes. Since starting therapy, I've brought the two parts of me closer together." (Cloe 2022).

The body is experienced as something to discipline, restrain, or punish. It is impulsive and unpredictable. If it defies the normative framework, it becomes foreign, guilty, a disturbance - and may be somatised or implode into symptoms.

Given the assumption of one's own immorality, the gap between desire and rules leads to hypervigilance over thoughts, perceptions, and actions - especially those that can be morally evaluated. This intensifies the need for control. The uncontrollability of actions, sensations, thoughts, and emotions results in guilt, shame, worthlessness, failure. To bridge the gap between experience and rules, the obsessive individual tightens their grip on those rules - worsening the gap and entering a vicious loop. From this arise doubts, ruminations, and rituals - attempts to regain immediate and preventive control.

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## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In obsessive-compulsive-prone style of personality, thought, action, and the body are shaped by the imperative to maintain control. When control becomes an inner tyranny, it undermines life's fluidity and leads to psychopathology. Decompensation occurs when uncertainty emerges and is expressed through heterogeneous symptoms. Ultimately, OCD is characterized by two main elements: obsessions and compulsions, which can manifest in various combinations.

This has led experts to speak of an OCD spectrum. The concept was developed in the 1990s, particularly in North American psychiatry. Notably, psychiatrist Eric Hollander helped formalize the idea of "OCD spectrum disorders" based on shared phenomenological, neurobiological, and pharmacological traits. The DSM-5 formalized a category called Obsessive-Compulsive and Related Disorders, which includes: OCD, Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD), Trichotillomania, Excoriation (skin-picking), Hoarding Disorder.

However, the DSM-5 does not use the term "spectrum" officially, though it remains clinically useful.

"The space between the lines is the void - and that's where the monster is born. Beneath it lie the emotions; above, rationality. Rationality holds no power. Emotions and the void are connected, and I am the one who generates the monster. I left with fear - but more so, with curiosity to make this monster speak." (Cloe 2022).

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