

Article

A Claim Forfeiting Its Own Right. Why Job Got It Wrong—and Why This Matters for the Rationality of Religion

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Abstract: The article aims to uncover a deep ambivalence in the figure of Job, as it is presented in the book of the same title, especially in the latter’s “poetry” or dialogue section. This ambivalence corresponds to and in fact emerges from what appears to be a pragmatic paradox: Job is in the wrong (i.e., guilty) in relation to God, precisely by *claiming* to be right (i.e., innocent); conversely, he can be and must be considered right, if and to the extent that he honestly *renounces* the latter claim. Accordingly, he cannot both *be* right (or wrong) and *claim* to be right or (or wrong)—a special case of what is observed, within epistemology, as an incompatibility of truth and assertibility conditions. In the present text, this core thesis is developed in four steps: the first introduces and briefly contextualizes the claim; the second tries to demonstrate that it provides at least sufficient means for making narrative sense of the book as a whole and, in particular, the controversy between Job and his friends; a third paragraph tackles the (philosophical and/or theological) presuppositions and implications of the thesis from a Christian standpoint, whereas the conclusion addresses the question of if and how the previous findings bear upon the rationality issue. Here, a final paradox emerges: that which would appear to be most rational from a Christian perspective (the task of sin consciousness) must be deemed humanly impossible to fulfill; considering the latter possible renders the task futile, hence irrational.

Keywords: Job; Job’s friends; Kierkegaard; truth; assertibility; paradox; sin; retribution principle

1. Introduction

Let me start by suggesting the extension of a familiar distinction—an extension that in my opinion especially law-scholars and lawyers seem to have a hard time considering, much less taking seriously. When it comes to speaking of “rights” there are from their perspective just four options and two parameters to be reckoned with—in other words, they rely on and rest content with a fundamental dichotomy:

<i>Being in the Right</i>	<i>Being Considered Right</i>
1. Yes	Yes
2. Yes	No
3. No	Yes
4. No	No

Hence, when dealing with a client, lawyers will normally just ask themselves two questions: (a) *is she right?* (b) *will I win, if her case is taken to court—that is, will she be considered right, by the judge and/or the jury?* At times both answers—whether affirmative or negative—coincide. More often they

do not, however: either the person accused is judged to be wrong, although she *is* actually right—for instance, in the case of someone being sentenced to death despite her actual innocence. Or she receives an acquittal, although actually with committed the crime she has been accused of in the first place. Hence, a conceptual and frequently also actual wedge must be driven between both parameters.

Now, in reality there is always an additional complication to be reckoned with: although the accused may in fact be innocent, nobody, except herself, *knows* that she is—for all others involved her innocence can only be believed based on testimonies or other pieces of evidence. A lot more could be said about this, but at present my only point is: even if ex hypothesi this complicating factor did not exist, the suspicion remains that if one asked a counsel of defense or an attorney to choose; and if he were honest (which is perhaps a big “if”) he would probably, say in nine cases out of ten, gravitate towards option no. 3 (being considered right at the expense of being right) instead of 2 (being right at the expense of being considered right).¹ And this may be at least one of the reasons, why (not only, but primarily) in juridical contexts any suggestion to extend the dichotomy just described will probably meet with much reluctance.

I dare to make a plea for such extension nonetheless, as I am of the opinion that despite the relative complexity of the “combinational logic” just described there is, indeed, yet another highly relevant distinction—admittedly one that seems to escape those involved in legal (and/or moral) affairs: *claiming* to be right or *renouncing* that very claim. Thus conceived, there are actually eight options and three parameters on the agenda; for, at least to the best of my knowledge, there exists no right whatsoever that simultaneously binds or compels its addressee/s to lay claim to it.² For instance, humans possess an unalienable right to pursue happiness; yet, they are never and in no way obliged to this pursuit and hence also to claim the corresponding right. Accordingly, we arrive at the following list of options:

(1) <i>Claiming</i> to be right;	<i>being</i> in the right;	being <i>considered</i> right
(2) <i>Claiming</i> to be right;	being in the wrong;	being considered right
(3) <i>Claiming</i> to be right;	being in the right;	being considered wrong
(4) <i>Claiming</i> to be right;	being in the wrong;	being considered wrong
(5) <i>Renouncing</i> to be right;	<i>being</i> in the right;	being <i>considered</i> right
(6) <i>Renouncing</i> to be right;	being in the wrong;	being considered right
(7) <i>Renouncing</i> to be right;	being in the right;	being considered wrong
(8) <i>Renouncing</i> to be right;	being in the wrong;	being considered wrong.

Or as a chart:

<i>Claiming to be Right</i>	<i>Being in the Right</i>	<i>Being Considered Right</i>
1. Yes	Yes	Yes
2. Yes	Yes	No
3. Yes	No	Yes
4. Yes	No	No
5. No	Yes	Yes
6. No	Yes	No
7. No	No	Yes
8. No	No	No

¹ We all know the pertinent jokes, as they have become almost idiomatic, cf. the following, pars pro toto: “You find yourself trapped in a locked room with a murderer, a rapist, and a lawyer. Your only hope is a revolver you have, with two bullets left. What do you do? Shoot the lawyer. Twice.” (Cohen 1999, p. 74) Jokes aside, it hardly needs mentioning that no. 4 is (rightly) considered the least, no. 1 the most desirable option—even by lawyers.

² Well, almost, for there is at least one exception to the rule: the right to act morally. What is at stake here is a right, the claiming of which no one can legitimately deny or refuse; it is, positively speaking, simply mandatory to lay claim to it and to act accordingly.

Other lessons notwithstanding, the chart primarily teaches us that one may settle a moral or legal conflict simply by renouncing to be right—instead of either appealing to or invoking some moral principle or legal court supposed to settle it in one’s own favor (and this regardless of whether one is in fact right or only *considered* to be so.).³

And this takes us straight to the story of Job, since, hermeneutical details and intricacies aside, the story seems to suggest⁴ that Job’s situation is best described as a shift between option (4) and (5), *nota bene*, in a very special way: Job is in the wrong (i.e., guilty) in relation to God, precisely by *claiming* to be right (i.e., innocent) [i.e., (4)]; conversely, he can *be* and must be *considered* right, if, whenever, as soon as and to the extent that he *renounces* the latter assertion [i.e., (5)]. This is the chief claim of the present article. As for preliminary textual evidence, compare Job 9:20 (“I am innocent” i.e., (4)) to Job 42:6 (“I . . . repent in dust and ashes”⁵) and Job 42:7 (“Job has spoken of me what is right”); taken together the two latter references seem to point to either option (5) or (7)⁶ Now, before unpacking the—in particular, philosophically and theologically significant—presuppositions and implications of the thesis let me take a brief comparative look at both Job’s and his friends’ views, as they are laid out in the “poetic” or dialogue section of the book, in order, first, to highlight the main differences between them and, second, to spell out the overall dramaturgical structure of their narrative presentation.

2. Job against his Friends: A Narrative Comparison

1. There is a broad and exegetically nuanced discussion in recent scholarship about the overall unity (or lacking unity) in the views of Job’s friends—Eliphaz the Temanite, Zophar the Naamathite, Bildad the Shuhite (cf. Job 4–25) plus, towards the end of the dialogue section, Elihu the Busite (cf. Job 32–37).⁷ I will not inter into this discussion, though, mainly because it does not affect my overall argument which largely turns upon Job’s standpoint and its narratological consistency alone. Suffice it to emphasize at this point that Job’s interlocutors seem to endorse, more or less in unison, one version or other of what has aptly been dubbed the principle of conduct and fortune or, in short, the retribution principle. As will become clear below the principle comes in many different, weaker and stronger variants (not only) within ancient Israelite thought, such that also Job himself may be counted among its spokesmen; therefore, I will return to the principle again later, in order further to sharpen the contrast-profile between Job and his friends. For the time being I restrict myself to quoting a passage from Elihu’s speeches, which nicely summarizes the view, as far as it is jointly supported by Job’s friends:

[H]ear me, you men of understanding: far be it from God that he should do wickedness, and from the Almighty that he should do wrong. For according to the work of a man he will repay him, and according to his ways he will make it befall him. (Job 34:10–11)

³ From which follows, among other things, that it takes (a) two or more (b) conflicting (c) interests or claims (either within one and the same or more than one person) for a legal and/or moral conflict to arise. If Peter denies Thomas the right to X, whereas Thomas himself does not lay claim to X, then Peter is legally and/or morally disarmed (and presumably also being put to shame): an imminent conflict has been dissolved or avoided, simply because one or more of its constituents (i.e., conflicting claims or interests) are missing.

⁴ At least as far as its extended dialogue section (including Job’s final answer to Yahweh) is concerned: cf. Job 3–42:6.

⁵ I must admit beforehand that the viability of my reading depends upon a controversial translation of the term *nihanti* in Job 42:6 as “[and] I repent”; I will return to the issue below.

⁶ See also Job 31:6; 27:2–6; 23:3–7; 19:6.16.19ff. Please note that for the sake of simplicity I will largely ignore the—theologically important and far-reaching—difference between option no. (5) and (7) in the following. This difference closely resembles, in any case it can easily be mapped onto the distinction between “forensic” (i.e., 7) and “effective” (i.e., 5) types of justification, both of which are, theologically speaking, supposed to happen *sola gratia*, yet *per fidem* (that is in the *medium* of faith, the first and indispensable expression of which would be sin consciousness).

⁷ As for a brief survey of the various arguments put forward by Job’s friends cf. Clines (1989, pp. xxxix–xlvii).

For Job's friends fortune (human well- or ill-being) is basically an effect or function of conduct. Accordingly, suffering mostly, if not always⁸ indicates some hidden or obvious guilt on the part of the sufferer. As such it must be considered a retribution qua punishment, inflicted upon the sufferer by a just world-order, established, sustained, and represented by Yahweh. Accordingly, the friends would endorse, at least they tacitly presuppose and build upon the following inference:

- (1) All suffering is God-inflicted.
- (2) All God-inflicted suffering is punishment.
- (3) All and only the guilty (sc. those who violated divine law /s) are being punished by God.
- (4) Job suffers.
- (5) Job is guilty.

2. As opposed to this relatively simple and coarse-grained picture some greater hermeneutical skill and effort is required for spelling out Job's standpoint. For what is apparently at work here, beneath the narratological surface-structure, is a remarkable dynamic in the development of Job's assessment of his own situation vis-à-vis God and his friends. This development comprises, roughly, six steps or stages, which I will subsequently explain with the help of some pertinent quotations from Job's speeches.⁹

2.1 The first stage might be described as Job's pious acceptance of and praise for God despite his suffering; cf., for instance, the most (in-)famous verse in the entire book:

Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall return again. Yahweh gave, Yahweh has taken back. Blessed be the name of Yahweh. (Job 1:21)

Here we find Job piously submitting himself and surrendering to Yahweh as divine creator whom, precisely for this reason, he takes to be deserving unconditional praise, blessing and, in particular, thankfulness—no matter what he expects Job to bear.

2.2 A second stage, which clearly reflects (parts of) the increasingly bitter dispute with his friends, reveals a different Job. He is now seriously questioning a firm and apparently unshakeable presupposition of the first stage: Yahweh's distributive justice, supposedly being the latter's primary and unfaltering motivation for granting either happiness and well-being or for inflicting misery and suffering upon his creatures, depending on their conduct. Instead a radical suspicion—God's arbitrariness!—awakes in and takes hold of Job. We might describe this second phase as Job's skeptical inclination to the idea of a God of complete indifference, a description, which perfectly meshes with the widely accepted claim that Job's overall standpoint amounts to no less than a "crisis of wisdom", which as such reflects a growing skepticism regarding the comprehensibility of Yahweh's ways with and relation to the world.¹⁰ The adequacy of this description could be supported by many of Job's sayings—I just quote two of them:

⁸ An anonymous reader of the present article argued that it mis-represents the friends' position as "always" one of retributive theology and has suggested instead to consult [Newsom \(2003\)](#) for a more nuanced account. Having done so it appears to me that the critique is justified. However, since my emphasis is on Job it seems to leave my overall argument largely unaffected. Moreover, the book itself (in particular, the dialogue-part) evidently implies that both Job and his friends take their respective views to be radically different: they agree in their mutual disagreement (whether such agreement be justified or not), and this narratologically decisive factor must not be dismissed.

⁹ Please note beforehand that the following survey is narrative rather than exegetical; as such it builds upon the assumption that it is both possible and meaningful to look for an overarching unity in a given text, such that the latter is being read as a coherent narrative, even though there may exist considerable historical, literary and/or linguistic tensions, perhaps even inconsistencies in its micro-structure. In Job's case the various tensions between the poetry of the dialogue section [Job 3–42:6], sandwiched between the two parts of the framework-narrative in prose [Job 1–2 plus 42:7–17], and the latter themselves is certainly the most striking and widely debated example (cf. [Clines 1989](#), pp. xxxiv–xxxvii and lviiff.). I am far from calling into question the fruitfulness of applying exegetical (in particular, historically-critical) methods of understanding a text; in my opinion, however, such application does not *prima facie*, much less *a priori* rule out the hermeneutical promise of alternative and complementary, at least supplementary approaches to history and critical exegesis like, for instance, the narrative model pursued here.

¹⁰ Recently [Katherine Dell \(2013\)](#) has presented a comprehensive account of the book in its entirety as a piece of "skeptical literature".

It is all one . . . : he destroys innocent and guilty alike. (Job 9:22)

[O]ne person dies in the fullness of strength, in all possible happiness and ease . . . Another dies in bitterness of heart, never having tasted happiness. They lie together down in the dust, and the worms soon cover them both. (Job 21:23–26)

2.3 Now, it is obviously one thing to complain about an arbitrary god; it is another to do so in the latter's presence—as is the case with Job.¹¹ And yet, complaining, admittedly vis-à-vis God, about the latter's arbitrariness, does not per se imply any claim to God's injustice on the part of the one/s complaining; it could simply indicate a double conviction: (a) the actual reasons of and motives for God's acting (in particular, his infliction of suffering) are and must remain inscrutable for the human intellect; (b) at any rate, striving for justice is not among those reasons. The resulting attitude would then be one of suffering in resignation. Yet, the critical stage of Job's attitude towards Yahweh is much more radical: it is one of protest and rebellion. Contrary to what he perceives, on the part of his friends, as rash and in fact false conclusions to his guilt he firmly, perhaps stubbornly, insists on his claim to innocence, thereby simultaneously and correspondingly protesting what he takes to be God's injustice:

[H]e . . . crushes me . . . for no reason, wounds and wounds again . . . If I prove myself upright, his mouth may condemn me; even if I am innocent, he may pronounce me perverse. (Job 9:17–20)¹²

I take my stand on my uprightness, I shall not stir: in my heart I need not be ashamed of my days. (Job 27:6)

2.4.1 It is interesting to note that Job's rebellion, not only against his friends' rash logic of retribution, but also against a seemingly arbitrary God, does not happen prior to and independently of what is next, but rather parallel to it, both in logical and temporal terms:¹³ a stage of growing awareness and belief on Job's part that despite his innocent suffering—in fact, because of and in correspondence to it—God himself will come to his assistance, both by attesting to his innocence and by ending his state of misery. Moreover, from Job's perspective any such attesting must invariably be first hand and as such a case of immediate divine revelation, since the retribution principle (a) fails and (b) hinges upon the idea that a mediated or second-hand knowledge of God's relation to the world is sufficient and/or at least possible, the conclusion must be that either there is no hope for a convincing answer to Job's predicament at all or any such answer must come directly from God. Taken together the last two steps form part of a syllogism, which neatly summarizes Job's stance so far:

- (1) All suffering is God-inflicted.
- (2) Some God-inflicted suffering is punishment.
- (3) Some, but not all being guilty (sc. those who violated divine law/s) suffer.
- (4) Some, but not all sufferers are guilty.
- (5) Either a God who inflicts suffering upon those *not* being guilty (sc. the innocent) cannot be a just God or he himself must explain to them the meaning of their suffering.

¹¹ Theologically speaking Job would have had no alternative, anyway: one can *only* complain about God in God's presence, thus with the latter witnessing (and judging) the complaint.

¹² According to an anonymous reader the present article argues that Job is right to *retract* his insistence on his own innocence and his corresponding protest against God's injustice; it does so mistakenly, though, since (also) from a narratological perspective Job is absolutely *right* in his protest: Job 9:17–20, namely (the passage cited above), is actually a repercussion and confirmation of Job 2:3, where God *himself* claims to have swallowed Job up "for no reason". My response is, first, that Job simply does not *know* of God's claim (which is made in the prose introduction) and therefore "is right" to retract his rebellion on his *own* premises—and this also and in particular from a narratological perspective. Second, he is or appears to be right to do so from a theological vantage-point also—in a way to be explained below.

¹³ Note that Job 16:19 (to be quoted shortly) does not follow, but actually precede Job 27:6 (quoted before): obviously Job's demand for and belief in a *god* witnessing to and confirming his innocence goes hand in hand, both logically and temporally, with his insistence on such *innocence*.

- (6) I suffer and I am innocent.
- (7) Either God cannot be a just God or he himself must explain to me the meaning of my suffering.

2.4.2 At this point a brief side-glance at the so-called retribution principle may shed some additional light on the contrast between (among others) Job’s and his friends’ views and, in particular, may help sharpen the contours of the former’s rebellious attitude towards Yahweh, as it corresponds to stage four in my reading. Upon closer scrutiny it turns out that the principle comes in many different forms and is in fact much more sophisticated than is usually assumed. For heuristic purposes I start by invoking a pertinent remark from Kierkegaard’s pen, which nicely summarizes the predominant reading of the principle (here regarding the Aqedah, cf. Gen 22):

From the external and visible world there comes an old adage: ‘Only one who works gets bread.’ Oddly enough, the adage does not fit the world in which it is most at home, for . . . here it happens again and again that he who does not work does get bread . . . even more abundantly than he who works. In the external world, everything . . . is subject to the law of indifference . . . It is different in the world of the spirit. Here an eternal divine order prevails. Here it does not rain on both the just and the unjust; here the sun does not shine on both good and evil. Here it holds true that only the one who works gets bread, that only the one who was in anxiety finds rest, that only . . . the one who draws the knife gets Isaac. (Kierkegaard 1983, p. 27 (my emphasis))

To avoid misunderstandings we should keep in mind beforehand that for both Job and his friends the distinction between an “external world” and a “world of the spirit” makes no sense: there is but one world and in it either an “eternal divine order” (i.e., the friends’ standpoint) or a sheer “law of indifference” prevails (i.e., Job’s own view, as per option (4) above). Either way, nine alternatives, including as a corollary some corresponding divine attributes, remain, if we aim at a complete list of possible types and stages of the retribution principle—including those instantiated by Job and his friends:

God Predominantly Appears as	The Type of Retribution Principle Concerned Can be Formulated as Follows	The Principle in Job and his Friends
1. Envious	1. No Pw ¹⁴ and no Pnw ¹⁵ gets bread. ¹⁶	1. - ¹⁷
2. Malevolent	2.1 ¹⁸ All and only Psnw ¹⁹ get bread. 2.2 Only, but not all Psnw get bread. 2.3. All, but not only Psnw get bread. 2.4 Only, but not all Psw ²⁰ get bread.	2. -
3. Indifferent	3. Some Psnw and some Psw get bread.	3. Job’s “skeptical view”: cf. Job 9:17.22; 12:23; 21:7–15.23–26; 23:13.
4. Rigorous	4. All and only Psw get bread. ²¹	4. The “dogmatical” view of Job’s friends: cf., e.g., Job 34:10f.
5. Merciful	5. All, but not only Psw get bread.	5. -
6. Generous	6. All Psnw and all Psw get bread.	6. -

There are various lessons to be learned from the matrix, but for present purposes I must restrict myself to mentioning only those, which directly pertain to a comparison between Job and his friends. First, the skeptical Job shares with his rigoristic friends the fundamental conviction that it is God himself—instead of some kind of anonymous *fatum* or plain necessitarian causal nexus—who is responsible for and bestows the (either good or bad) fortune upon every human being. Second, and perhaps unexpectedly, Job's standpoint represents a stronger form of "retributionism" than the one supported by his friends, since he alone has given up all hope for ever being able to understand God's ways with the world: Yahweh does and can do (also to human beings) whatever he sees fit, but for human beings the reasons and motives for such acting must eternally remain inscrutable, to the effect that the latter constantly frustrates their expectations, especially in the midst of suffering. Third and finally, both Job's and his friends' views are to be placed approximately in the middle of a downward scale comprising two stronger (1/2) and two weaker types (5/6) of retributionism; accordingly, both accounts, despite their being (and rightly being perceived as) typical or even paradigmatic, are far from (a) providing a complete picture of possible theoretical alternatives and (b) representing the strongest variants among these.²²

2.5 A penultimate stage of Job's inner development is reached when the latter finds himself drawn to a final, perhaps desperate and in any case paradoxical move: he makes an appeal to God himself,²³ against the very same—or at least, allegedly same—God, crying out for (and simultaneously passionately confessing his faith in) the former, as a witness to his own innocence, against the latter:

I have a witness in heaven, my defender is there on high. (Job 16:19)

I know that I have a living Defender and that he will rise up last. After my awakening, he will set me close to him, and from my flesh I shall look on God. He whom I shall see will take my part: my eyes will be gazing on no stranger. (Job 19:25ff.)²⁴

2.6 Now, we all know how the story ends. On the one hand Job's demand is being fulfilled: he is granted a direct answer from Yahweh, in two lengthy, if somewhat tedious discourses (cf. Job 38–41). On the other hand, however, his corresponding hope for a plausible explanation of his predicament, which as such would do without any reference to guilt or sin as a reason or motive for inflicting that predicament, remains unfulfilled.²⁵ Instead, Yahweh puts Job to shame by pointing to and boasting

¹⁴ Pw = person working = person obeying or acting in accordance with the divine law.

¹⁵ Pnw = person not working = person ignoring or consciously transgressing the divine law.

¹⁶ Getting bread = being blessed with good fortune, viz. overall well-being.

¹⁷ Nos. (1), (2), (5) and (6) are left empty here on purpose, not because I want to suggest that there are actually no proponents of the respective views to be found, but, rather, that these views do not fit either Job or his friends.

¹⁸ Please note that 2.1–2.4 are meant to describe a downward scale, 2.1 designating the highest, 2.4 the lowest degree of malevolence in God. It is telling that we intuitively tend to consider any attitude corresponding to 2.2 less malevolent than the one corresponding to 2.1: fairness and justice seem to require that "getting bread" must in some way be linked to "working", such that a God who appears to comply with that requirement, at least to some degree, must be considered less malevolent than one who does not.

¹⁹ Psnw = persons not working.

²⁰ Psw = persons working.

²¹ So that in turn *no* Pnw gets bread.

²² Please note that precisely two conditions, one ontological, one epistemical, must be met en ensemble for any given account to be considered strong: the account insinuates (and rightly so) that (a) there is an unailing and indissoluble causal link between conduct and fortune, such that the latter does not only follow, but does rather follow *from* the former; (b) the way, in which both are linked, is and remains either completely unknown or else appears at least counter-intuitive, if not outright absurd or offensive. By contrast, if an account fails to meet one or both requirements I speak of a weak/er type of the retribution principle.

²³ Though still indirectly rather than face to face with Yahweh (cf. the quotations below).

²⁴ That it is actually *God* to whom Job appeals as a redeemer is controversial, though, as an anonymous reader of the present article has rightly pointed out to me; cf. also [Hankins \(2015\)](#), pp. 135–56).

²⁵ It is telling in this respect that up to the very end (cf. Job 42:7–17) both Job and his friends are kept utterly ignorant about God's initial arrangement with Satan (cf. Job 1:6–12). As is well known the Septuagint-version of the book has a considerably different ending. A comparison between both would require a separate treatment, though; for an in depth account cf. [Geiger et al.. \(2018\)](#).

with (cf. Job 38f.; 40:6–41:26) the extraordinary, unsurpassable, and humanly unfathomable works of the almighty creator and sustainer—indeed, as he asks rhetorically: “who could ever stand up to him [sc. God]?” (Job 41:1) and which critic could have “thought up an answer” (Job 40:1) to his “arguments”? Not Job, in any case: overwhelmed and humiliated by the presence and power of Yahweh he abandons, once and for all, his attitude of protest and rebellion; instead, he unconditionally surrenders and decides to keep silent from now on:

My words have been frivolous: what can I reply? . . . I have spoken once, I shall not speak again; I have spoken twice, I have nothing more to say. (Job 40:4f.)

Moreover, having encountered the Almighty face to face and having learned about both the greatness and the incomprehensibility of the latter’s works he cannot help but repent his sinful hubris of challenging God by stubbornly insisting on his innocence:

You have told me about great works that I cannot understand, about marvels which are beyond me, of which I know nothing . . . Before, I knew you only by hearsay but now, having seen you with my own eyes, I retract what I have said, and repent in dust and ashes. (Job 42:3–6)²⁶

2.7 Ignoring the epilogue of the book (Job 42:7–17) leaves my “narrative argument” concerning the dynamic of Job’s development vis-à-vis his friends and Yahweh largely unaffected. However, for present purposes at least Job 42:7 must be taken into account, if only in passing, since it does not only contain the latter’s rehabilitation through Yahweh (who simultaneously brings a passionate verdict of guilty against Job’s friends), but also and in particular, because the former rather unexpectedly praises Job:

I burn with anger against you [sc. Eliphaz of Teman] and your two friends, for not having spoken correctly about me as my servant Job has done. (Job 42:7)

Now, in what sense could Job have “spoken correctly” about Yahweh—namely in the previous dialogue section of the book? The question has stirred much controversy among scholars over recent decades, since different options are obviously available (Cf. Clines 2011, pp. 1231 and 1240f.). Again, I am not entering the discussion, as my account is not exegetical and as such does not stand and fall with (any lack of) historical accuracy. Instead, I return to my initial thesis, which in my opinion provides an equally possible and meaningful, perhaps narratologically even most fitting explanation by comparison. Remember I suggested at the outset that Job’s standpoint is best interpreted as a shift between options (4) and (5) within the overall scheme introduced above, though in a special way: Job is in the wrong (i.e., guilty) in relation to God, precisely by insisting or claiming to be right (i.e., innocent) [i.e., (4)]; conversely, he can and must be considered right (i.e., justified by and in the eyes of God), if and to the extent that he renounces the latter claim [i.e., (5)]. This being said, I find it striking indeed that we can make perfect narratological sense of Job 42:7—*nota bene*, not only, but at least always and perhaps also most easily—if we take God’s praise for Job to refer to the very dialectic just described or, more precisely, to option no. (5); in turn, such reference would only (if not always, much less primarily) make sense, if it were part and parcel of the very dialectic required by and implied in my overall thesis.

²⁶ “I repent” is “the traditional translation” (Clines 2011, p. 1208); other renderings are equally possible, though, since the root *nacham*, especially in its *niph*-form, covers a variety of meanings including “to be moved to pity [someone]”, “to console [oneself]”/“to be consoled” or even “to revenge [oneself]” (cf. Gesenius et al. 2013, p. 804f.; Clines 2011, p. 1208f.). Barth and Barth-Frommel (2018) have recently made a case for the second rendering (“to console oneself”) and has based a novel approach to reading the book as a whole on it. Although the translation itself is “well attested” (Clines 2011, p. 1208) throughout the Old Testament, I do not find the reading based on it very promising, much less compelling. Accepting consolation would imply the decision (on Job’s part) “that his period of mourning has come to an end” (ibid.); but that hardly makes sense considering the formulation “in dust and ashes” (Job 42:6), which directly follows the term in question: not only does the latter express a “common gesture of sorrow and repentance” (1990, p. 807); it is also an explicit and apparently strategic repercussion of Job 2:8 (“Job took a piece of pot to scrape himself, and went and sat among the ashes”).

3. A Claim Forfeiting Its Own Right: Why Job Got It Wrong

1. For starters, let me emphasize again that I do not want to evoke the impression as though I considered my previous reading of Job's dialogues to be without possible, perhaps equally or even more convincing alternatives, much less to be exhaustive and/or compelling. All I am saying is that it makes intrinsic or narratological sense at least—and as such addresses and hopefully also overcomes certain hermeneutical difficulties. Now, let us suppose for the sake of the argument that my account can indeed pass for adequate, at least in hermeneutical terms; then the problem still looms large how to make sense of its core thesis: Job is in the wrong in relation to God, precisely by claiming to be right (4); he is or might, under certain circumstances, be (5) or at least be considered right (7), if, whenever and to the extent that he renounces or is willing to abandon the latter claim. How can this be? Again, many different answers are or might be possible. Drawing in part on Kierkegaardian resources I will in the following focus upon a Christian or theological one, preceded by a very brief epistemic observation.

First, we must reckon with a need for distinguishing between truth and assertibility conditions. Both are not coextensive and in fact contradict each other at times.²⁷ For instance, the proposition "all knowledge is perspectival" or "all knowledge is framework-dependent" can only be true at the expense of possibly being asserted as such; for otherwise one ends up with a pragmatic inconsistency. Accordingly, there are propositions, the assertion of which renders them false; in turn, avoiding asserting them must be considered necessary for their possibly being true.

Something analogous holds for the realm of religion—at least from a Christian perspective. What is at stake here is the paradox of sin and sin consciousness. Christianly speaking one can only deny one's own sinfulness by virtue of being or becoming a sinner through that very denial; conversely, one can only—and yet always—cease to be sinning by honestly confessing one's sin. Hence the two propositions "Peter is a sinner" and "Peter confesses and/or believes to be a sinner" form a complete disjunction: Peter can either be or admit of being sinful, *tertium non datur*; for sin and sin consciousness preclude and annihilate each other, conceptually, psychologically, and ontically. Likewise, "I am innocent"²⁸ runs into and expresses the very untruth of what is claimed, whereas "I am a sinner", honestly uttered, implies and generates its own contradiction. Hence, we end up, once again, with an unbridgeable gap between truth and assertibility. Or put differently, in certain rare cases the genetical trumps the epistemic and likewise the pragmatical the semantic; depending on the way in which a given proposition is being entertained the latter is doomed to be true or false, respectively, contrary to what its own semantic content has us expect.

Now, whether or not something analogous holds for the epistemic paradox just described, there are, in any case, at least two necessary preconditions for its religious sibling to emerge: first, sin must be deemed more than just a singular isolated act—an act, furthermore, which as sinful calls for an equally isolated act of punishment on God's part (and *nota bene*, both Job and his friends seem to share this inadequate view). Rather, it must refer to a quality, claimed fundamentally and, humanly speaking, irreversibly to distort the relationship between God and man—a "totality concept", as we might say invoking Kierkegaard. Second, and more importantly, the unwillingness, in fact the inability to perceive and recognize oneself as a sinner must be considered part and parcel of the concept, hence also of the facticity of being sinful. Only, yet also whenever these two conditions are met the paradox described will emerge.

²⁷ In any case both notions should not be conflated, much less so by claiming that truth-conditions can be *reduced* to assertibility conditions, as some proponents of deflationism hold. Instead of entering into the current debate (cf. [Stoljar and Damjanovic 2010](#) for a detailed survey), I frankly admit that I take sides with Putnam at this point: "[D]escribing assertibility conditions for 'This sentence is true' ... does not preempt the question 'What is the nature of truth?' ... If a philosopher says ... that knowing the assertibility conditions is *knowing all there is to know* about truth, then ... he is denying that there is a *property* of truth ... , not just in the realist sense, but in *any* sense. But this is to deny that our thoughts and assertions are *thoughts* and *assertions*." (Putnam 1983, p. xv).

²⁸ *Nota bene*, in a genuinely religious, not in a purely moral and/or juridical sense.

Accordingly, at least one thing speaks in favor of the previous reading of Job: the fact that it makes logical and narratological sense of an otherwise hardly explainable tension between the framework- and the dialogue section of the book. In the former Job is praised for being “a sound and honest man who feared God and shunned evil” (Job 1:1), in the latter he is found guilty before God. On my interpretation both accounts go together well—*nota bene*, if, as long as and to the extent that we are willing to admit that (a) the guilt meant here is sin (i.e., infinite guilt in relation to God as opposed to an isolated act of misdemeanor) and that (b) the latter requires its own denial, on the part of the sinner, to be among its conceptually necessary components.

2. The consequences—and I repeat, from a Christian vantage-point—for Job’s case are the following: first, Job is right in his reluctance to perceive and interpret his suffering as a single, isolated act of punishment on God’s part. Thus conceived he is justified in considering himself innocent. Accordingly, he is right in demanding a first-hand answer from God holding fast—against the temptation of taking his suffering to be a divine punishment—the idea of an ordeal. In addition, here the doubt as to whether or not it really *is* an ordeal would be part and parcel of the possibility and facticity of the latter itself. As Kierkegaard puts it:

Job is not a hero of faith [sc. like Abraham]; he gives birth to the category of ‘ordeal’ [Prøvelse] with excruciating anguish precisely because he is so developed that he does not possess it in childlike immediacy . . . This category, ordeal, is not esthetic, ethical, or dogmatic—it is altogether transcendent . . . and places a person in a purely personal relationship of opposition to God, in a relationship such that he cannot allow himself to be satisfied with any explanation at second hand. (Kierkegaard 1983, p. 210.)

Secondly and by contrast, Job is wrong in ignoring, disregarding or denying a much more radical form of guilt (i.e., sin), which, as a “totality concept”, entails an unbridgeable ontological and ethical gap between God and man. As Kierkegaard puts it:

Job . . . suffers as one who is innocent, humanly speaking; he has no blame, no crime for which to upbraid himself . . . Yet Job was continually in the wrong with God. (Kierkegaard 1993, p. 284.)²⁹

Hence, as long as he goes on declaring himself innocent in this latter respect, he is and remains guilty in relation to God—in other words, as a sinner. Only, yet also whenever and as soon as he revokes this claim, which he does, as we have seen, after receiving a first-hand response from God, he ceases to be guilty or sinful—precisely by appropriating his guilt qua sin, and for that very reason. In conclusion, one might say that Job occupies both position (4) and (5) (alternately, ⁷³⁰) within the matrix, so that—contrary to his friends who are unanimously found guilty (cf. Job 42:7)—his position remains deeply ambivalent:

²⁹ As an additional argument for my claim that the present reading of Job is (of course not without alternatives, but in any case) genuinely Christian I would like to draw attention to the fact that the former is mentioned only once in the entire New Testament: cf. James 5:11, where “the perseverance of Job” is praised. Sure enough, this almost complete absence from the corpus can be interpreted in different ways; however, in my opinion the most natural explanation is that according to the New Testament there is only one who truly merits the description “innocent sufferer”, Jesus Christ.

³⁰ The repenting Job is to be rubricated under (7), if and only if one defends a view, according to which God might *justify* the (repenting) sinner without actually *making* or rendering him just, much less innocent again. If one holds instead that considering or declaring the sinner just is *ipso facto* ontologically efficacious no. (5) applies. Cf. footnote 6 above.

<i>Claiming to be Right</i>	<i>Being in the Right</i>	<i>Being Considered Right</i>
1. Yes	Yes	Yes
2. Yes	Yes	No
3. Yes	No	Yes
4. Yes	No	No
5. No	Yes	Yes
6. No	Yes	No
7. No	No	Yes
8. No	No	No

4. Conclusions: Why Job’s Paradox Matters for the Rationality Issue

The first pertinent lesson to be learned from the previous analysis is rather simple and straightforward: sometimes it can be (wise and) rational, both inside and outside of religion, to shun a claim to truth or to stay away from believing or asserting a given proposition, lest one is willing to pay the price of intrinsic pragmatic inconsistency. At times, however, it may be no less irrational to refrain from such claim—and this for the very same reason. In other words, under certain conditions it may be rational to believe what, precisely by believing it, renders false the very same belief; moreover, it may be rational to believe it, *because* what you believe has that property (as in the case of “I am a sinner”). Yet, by the very same token it may be irrational to hold a belief with the same paradoxical property, and to hold it, because it has that property (as in the case of “I am innocent/no sinner”). At the same time, a second lesson emerges: if Job’s predicament belongs in the category just described, then it occupies—once again—a very specific place within a more general scheme. According to this latter scheme we do not, as above, have to drive a wedge between truth and assertibility, but rather between the former and pertinent rationality-conditions: apparently there are beliefs, or so at least my argument goes, the uttering and/or holding of which may prove justified (and hence rational) despite their being wrong.³¹ A combinational logic of all possible options (plus some paradigmatic examples) yields the following picture:

	True³²	False
Justified	Example 1: “That’s Washington D.C.” Situation: classroom, pupil responding to teacher’s question about the capital of the U.S.	Example 3a: “I am in danger of losing my life.” Situation: cf. Harold Lloyd, “The Climbing Scene,” in his movie <i>Feet First</i> (1930). ³³
		Example 3b: “[I am a sinner and] I repent.” (Job 42:6). Situation: Job before God, surrendering to him after the latter’s first-hand response.
Unjustified	Example 2: “Your father is an alcoholic, right?” Situation: classroom, teacher compromising a pupil in front of the whole class. ³⁴	Example 4a: “That’s New York.” Situation: classroom, pupil responding to teacher’s question about the capital of the U.S.
		Example 4b: “I am in the right [and hence no sinner]” (Job 9:20). Situation: Job before God, defending himself and his innocence against the latter and his own friends.

³¹ Elsewhere I have tried to show that in order for this to be possible, two specific requirements, one phenomenological, one epistemical, have to be met: cf. Schulz (2012, p. 239f).

For our present purposes only Job's situation needs to be considered: it is obviously a special, in fact quasi-paradoxical instance of either false and justified (i.e., 3b) or false and unjustified (i.e., 4b) beliefs. Either Job believes and confesses to be a sinner (3b); then, precisely in doing so, he renders false the very same belief. However, in relation to God he is still—and from a Christian perspective, always—justified to believe in and confess his fundamental sinfulness. Or he insists on being innocent and in the right before God (4b); then the truth of his claim is likewise forfeited by making it. Worse still, and for the same reason (here being couched in Christian terms), he must be considered unjustified in doing so.

At this point there is just one final issue left to be addressed: why accept the rather restrictive and painfully dogmatic Christian premise/s, which lead/s to the paradox described, in the first place? My answer invokes Richard Swinburne's notion of a good C-inductive (i.e., confirmation-inductive) argument (Cf. Swinburne 1987, p. 16ff.): considering some background-knowledge, hypothesis (H) is confirmed, if and whenever there is some evidence (E), such that the facticity of the latter is more likely to be expected, if H—rather than any actually and/or possibly competing hypothesis (CH)—obtains. Accordingly, one might argue as follows: it is rational for me to believe that I am (and perhaps also every other human being is) a sinner (i.e., H), if and whenever any fundamental inner disunion I experience (i.e., E)—be it as a human being or as the specific individual that I am—is more likely to occur and to be expected, if the sinner-hypothesis, rather than any competing one (for instance: disadvantageous social conditions of my upbringing i.e., CH), obtains. Whether or not this condition actually applies can ultimately not be determined from a third person-perspective; when all is said and done we must decide for ourselves. Nevertheless, we should not be rash in ascribing any serious apologetic cash-value to this “subjectivistic” result. In fact, I believe there is actually very little room for being overly optimistic in this regard, and this, in particular, for consequential reasons. For suppose, Christianity is right, then we can hardly expect the sinner to do what would be most rational for him to do, namely to believe *that* he is a sinner; if, by contrast, he proved capable of adopting such a belief, the latter would cease to be rational. Hence, we end up once more with a fundamental (and in my opinion, irreducible) paradox: the task is being established precisely by rendering impossible its own fulfillment; when taken to be possible the latter refutes the task.

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³² Both pairs of parameters (true/false, justified/unjustified) primarily pertain to judgments about beliefs, though in most cases they hold for utterances also.

³³ The example is discussed at greater length in Schulz (2012, pp. 240–43) (cf. also Schulz 2013, p. 294f. for related cases). The point here is that there may be situational circumstances (such as those in Lloyd's movie-scene), where generating and holding certain beliefs, like the one ascribed to the latter in the matrix, might be justified, even though they are clearly false.

³⁴ The example is used and explained in Bonhoeffer (1981, p. 390f); it presupposes *ex hypothesi* that the teacher's utterance is in fact true; still, it must be deemed unjustified, since for Bonhoeffer it is uttered in a fatally misplaced situational and institutional context (school instead of family). For a more detailed (and partly critical) account of Bonhoeffer's view cf. Schulz (2000).

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