

Relationship without projections

Guest: John Harper

Disclaimer: The contents of this interview are for informational purposes only and are not intended to be a substitute for professional psychological advice, diagnosis, or treatment. This interview does not provide psychological advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified health provider with any questions you may have regarding a medical or psychological condition.

Alex Howard - [00:00:09]

Welcome, everyone to this interview where I'm really happy to be talking with John Harper. Firstly, John, welcome, and thank you for joining me.

John Harper

Thank you, Alex. Good to be here with you.

Alex Howard

So John and I were going back and forth on something else recently, and he shared some work he was putting together around object relations theory, which we're going to get into. And it reminded me that this work had been one of the most helpful things for me in my own relationship, of really separating out the different pieces getting in the way, the ways that perhaps my wife and I were relating to each other, but actually, we weren't relating to each other, which will make more sense as we get into this subject. I think this is a really important piece, though.

Just to give people a bit of John's background. John Harper is an entrepreneur, content creator and blogger with a personal philosophy focused on truth and fierce compassion. He's been on a spiritual path for 50 plus years. John's initial interest in spirituality was sparked at 19, and his curiosity about life has never ceased, from spiritual mysticism to conceptual psychological knowledge. John brings candid and pragmatic insights to the interplay between spirituality and psychology. His practical understanding of spiritual knowledge helps untangle the ego knots that are deeply tied into our friendships, families, work relationships, and our most intimate relationships.

So, John, we're going to talk about this concept of object relations or object relations theory. Probably already sounds a little intimidating for some of the audience. So maybe you can just say a little bit about what is an object relation, or what is object relations theory?

John Harper

Sure. Let me start with saying that when I started getting interested in the psychological side of things, I had always thought that psychology was a bunch of crap. I came from a family, a military family, where you man up, and emotions and all that just get buried, and what have you.

So the thing about object relations is pretty simple, it's just one way that the mind organizes information. And our physical mind, what we normally consider our mind, is a comparative mind. It's always comparing what's going on right now with what happened in the past, and that's how it understands and defines things in the moment.

So, object relations are based upon this duality we find ourselves in, where there's me and there's you, and there's a relationship between us that has an affective, a felt sense, an emotional sense, or

an energetic sense between us. And these start happening from the moment or before we come out of the birth canal, because the brain is forming and these impressions are coming in. And even though we don't have a sense of being a separate individual yet, the impressions are being laid down.

So it gets a little subtle and challenging at times to kind of grok it all. But it's basically a simple organizing system that says, I'm me, I have a sense of me, I have a sense of you, the other. And there's a relationship between us. And because the mind does understand things by comparing to the past, something happens in the present, it triggers a sense of, this is familiar, this is how I know this. And now instead of you being Alex, you're my father, because the object relation is defining the relationship. And the real fun part, as you know, is that the same thing is happening over there.

And so what happens is you get this dance happening between these ideas from the past and very little real interaction based upon who this individual is right here in the moment.

Alex Howard - [00:04:48]

I mentioned at the beginning that it was a very helpful framework for me in my own relationship. I remember I was doing some couples therapy, when my wife and I were in couples therapy together, and it was either her or the therapist accusing me of being defensive, because I felt like I was being judged or criticized for certain things. And I was being defensive towards my wife, which is something that is certainly a pattern of mine.

And what I realized in that moment was, I wasn't actually relating to my wife. I was relating to my grandmother. And when I was growing up, my grandmother was very critical, very dominating, and a very strong character. And so when I felt that anyone was challenging me, I went into this sort of scared little boy that was sort of defending and fighting. It was such a helpful realization in the dynamics of our relationship. And that's really what you're speaking to.

John Harper

Well, and you point to another aspect of our mental process that comes in here. And that is the inner critic. These object relations are intimately involved with this voice of judgment in our head, and how we should be and how we shouldn't be. And that inner critic, you're damned if you do and damned if you don't. Alright, so there's a whole teaching around how to work with that, to just get it out of the room, so you can explore exactly what is going on here.

Why am I being defensive? If I'm trying to satisfy my inner critic, it's trying to keep me in a box. It's trying to keep me locked into the object relation. And what I need is space and curiosity and love. If you look back on that experience and others, you'll see that love is the motivation for yourself and your wife where you want to get beyond this. You want to get beyond having the past lay itself and obscure and it's like looking at your wife through a dirty window. You'd like to see her just...

Alex Howard

But the wrong kind of dirty, John.

John Harper

Well, it depends on your mood, I guess.

All this stuff gets very complex, until at some point you kind of get the whole gestalt of it. And then it's very simple. It's like, oh, wow, here's my dad. And it goes back to that old saying of, like Freud, that people freak out about everybody marries their mother. Well, it's true in a basic sense of how the mind organizes and relates, because your first object relation and what lays the ground, the primary ground for all of it, is the infant's relationship with the mothering figure. That lays down the pattern. And then, of course, the father comes in, siblings come in and it keeps building up. So it's very true in one sense that we're always interacting with our mother.

Alex Howard - [00:08:17]

And, of course, that becomes a real block to our relationships in life now. Because we're not actually cleanly in relationship with that person. We're in relationship with the projections we have of our unresolved history.

John Harper

And it gets a little mind boggling in a way, because if you're really in the moment, and you're in the moment, totally vulnerable, open and as what you really are, which is awareness and consciousness, what's in front of you is a complete mystery.

But we tend to overlook the good object relations, the ones that have a good side, that we just say, well, this is normal, this is what I want. Okay. So part of what needs cleaning up also is looking at the idealization of the other. Because we want the ideal, we want the goodies. But if you're going after the goodies, you're still not seeing what's really there.

Alex Howard

And I think part of what makes this so difficult is that, all of these projections, all of these object relations that play out, they're generally unconscious. It's like, so we're having an argument with our lover, our spouse, whoever it is. But are we actually arguing with them, or are we arguing with the stuff that we're acting out internally?

John Harper

Exactly. And that's part of, you know, what took me a while to realize, taking me from, this is a bunch of crap, to, holy cow, this is really interesting! We're constantly dancing with our past and not just with others. But it's how we know ourselves from our normal mind. It's carrying this thread of familiarity through time. And this is me.

But if we really look into that sense of this is me. Most of it is ideas in a string of memories and impressions of subjectiveness within the body, and what have you. And there's a much deeper and more subtle level to what we are than that. And that's what brings people to, like, a spiritual path, or wanting some form of deeper truth or perspective on something.

Alex Howard

It's like that feeling that a lot of people have that something is fundamentally wrong. It's like I remember the original movies when *The Matrix* first came out, and I think one of the reasons why that resonated with so many people is it was such a powerful metaphor for this idea that we're not actually living in a real world. We're living in all of these projections and all of this unresolved material. And that's what we're often in relationship with.

John Harper

We're in the matrix. We are, if speaking of relationship, what is it that we want out of a relationship? People say things like love or companionship, but that is just a surface explanation. That's something the mind will offer up right away. Why do we want love?

And if we really look into that, we come to something that you are pointing to, which is, there's a sense that there's some kind of absence in me of love. And if I look at the ways I go about trying to find that love, what I will see is all of that is being patterned and controlled by these object relations, by the past. This is how I go about trying to fix myself. And there's a very radically different way, which is, you're not broken. And how do you discover that? That's the spiritual work.

Alex Howard - [00:12:46]

Can we speak a little bit to some of the history of how these object relations get set up. We mentioned, for example, that in Freud's original work, one of the fundamental ideas being that most of our stuff is our relationship to our mother, for example, that unprocessed, unresolved stuff. Say a bit about how these object relations are getting created in infancy in the first place.

John Harper

Well, we'll take something kind of like six months out, or something like that. You know, when we're more infants, early on, what's most important to us biologically is getting fed. So a lot of the early lay down track has to do with our relationship to that feeding process, whether it's a bottle, whether it's the breast, and then the quality of the nurturing that comes. Alright?

And I should back up and say all of this is based on this phenomena that happens in our psyche called splitting, which is one of the first things that happens. Our experience starts getting split into good and bad, and that's one way that things get organized.

And so if I'm feeding, if I'm sucking on the breast, and I'm not getting enough, like me, I'm a ravenous, little guy, at six or eight months old and mom can't produce enough. Alright? Then my experience in my body starts being frustrated, psychologically.

And as you know, if you look at children when they're very young, there's no separation yet between their body, their energy, their emotions, and their brain. When you see an infant doing its thing, that's what's happening throughout that organism in all of its parts, brain, heart, belly, everywhere. That's the experience you're seeing, alright.

So when I get frustrated, that starts creating a sense of a particular type of experience in me. And at some point, I start, biologically, I start gravitating towards, no, I like the tit when it's full. I like the tit when it has, because when that happens, I go, ah, and I go into that blissed out state.

And so that is how things start laying down, the sense of being a separate individual from the other starts emerging. And then, this thing of, I prefer this over that. And that ties into Freud's pleasure, pain principle.

And the frustration, speaking to that specifically, there are three fundamental object relations. One is the frustrating object relation, and that has to do with what Freud called the libidinal impulse, which is the aggressive impulse within our biological self to get what we want, whether it's sex, food, a career, the right lover, whatever it is. Okay. And if I'm not getting that, it frustrates me. And there's a lot of that in life because our ego self is oriented toward getting, which means it's future oriented, that I don't have what I want right now. And so frustration is a major theme that runs through object relations.

The other is the rejecting object relation, which has to do more with what you might call the anti-libidinal forces, which is saying no, this is not what I want. No, this is not good. You're not good, my mom or whatever. And I'm saying, no, you can't have the tit today. I'm busy or whatever. And so that feels like to an infant who is so sensitive and impressionable, that just feels like anti-life, death.

And something must be fundamentally wrong with me, which is something that in working with people, you run into all the time. People feel like there's just something fundamentally wrong with me. There has to be, because biologically, I mean, when a baby deer is born, the mother takes care of it. I don't get why my mom and dad aren't taking care of me. And so those types of holes and emptiness exist within our psyche.

The other object relation is the most difficult to work with. It's called the central object relation, and that's the one that we normally take to be us, the sense of us. That's where all the good stuff gets stored. I get my milk just the way I want it. I get my butt wiped and clean, and I'm all cozy, and I like that. And so when I grow up and I go into the world, I have this sense of, here's the good, here's the

bad, which consists of fundamentally, it's frustrating or it's rejecting. I just like to be over here in the good camp. But all of that interaction from the good still has a filter over. It's still not seeing what's really there. It's seeing it from the past. So, is that basic enough?

Alex Howard - [00:18:51]

I think it's really helpful. And I think people, I'm sure, can recognize themselves in those energies in life now. The wanting, or the feeling that I'm rejecting, or the feeling that there's something wrong. Maybe say a little bit about how those dynamics can actually play out in our intimate relationships now. So, if we have those object relations, how might they impact our ability to stay in healthy connection?

John Harper

No, I'm not going to do that right now. I thought of something else. Bring me back to that, because I think it's important for people. What is an object relation? Okay. So if you look at a basic diagram of an object relation, there's me, and I'm usually small. I'm a small person because these things get formed when I'm small. And there's the other, which is usually a big other, which could be a big person. It could be an idea. It could be my car. Okay. It could be God.

But it's me in relation to something. And if I'm really down at the core of object relations, I'm small because I was small when all this got laid down. And then the really important part is the effect or the energy. And the way to work with things, work with object relations effectively, is to be able to recognize that effect, and that's what will disconnect everything. That's what will lead to...The resolution is in the dissolving of the object relation.

But the challenge for people is the little one wants to be around to experience the healing or to get bigger or whatever. But it's all one thing. The idea of what I am in that object relation also has to disappear. Me, the other, and the effect. And that is a process which, psychologically we call disidentification, which is how you would describe the basic means of dealing with all of this. How do I get into it, and investigate it in a manner that it dissolves, and I disidentify from it. I get distance from it.

Alex Howard

If we take that example of, I feel small and you feel big, and what I long and need for, you have, but you're not going to give it to me. So let's take that as a dynamic. And then someone's in an intimate relationship with someone, and they may well find themselves attracted to and attracted by someone that fits that pattern.

If someone's used to being on the other side where I need to be big and you're small, you're going to have two people that potentially have this sort of functionally dysfunctional relationship, where they're playing out the different ends of that object relation. That might feel familiar to both of them. But ultimately, that's going to be a source of pain and be a block to connection.

John Harper

Now I think that's a pretty good example. If you have an object relation where I'm small, and say, I feel weak, it's around strength, and the other looks big. Okay. And you have another person with the exact same object relation around that, and they feel big and I look small to them. Okay. Then for the one that is feeling big, that's their object relation. That's actually a form of compensation that's taken place within their psyche, where the mind is very limited in how it works with things. It's either-or, you know.

So when I'm feeling small, I have two choices, basic choices. I either figure out how to get big, so the relationship changes, or I bury the whole thing, and cover it up, and keep it out of my awareness. Alright. So I can compensate for that weak object relation by creating a character structure and personality where I'm big, I'm grand, I'm strong. And if you get those two object relations dancing

together, then you have a real mess that usually would involve something like, not just codependency, but abuse.

Alex Howard - [00:23:53]

But the strange thing is, it feels familiar to both of those. It almost feels like love because that's their blueprint.

John Harper

Well, not only is that the blueprint, but if I'm feeling weak, and I'm missing this sense of my own inner strength, I'm looking for strength to fill up that hole. So I met Mr. Wonderful or Mrs. Wonderful or Miss Wonderful out there. It could be Mrs. Wonderful, who knows?

Alex Howard

She's more complicated.

John Harper

And that's what I want. I want that strength to help fill up my sense of deficiency and lacking strength. So I want to kind of merge and partner up, and that gives me a sense of completeness. But my entire sense of strength and completeness is situational, dependent upon another. And I really am not going deep enough to find my own inherent strength that actually exists in what we might call the soul or the deeper nature of an individual.

Alex Howard

And it's also worth saying, I think, in that example, there's the individual which feels small, but the one who is big, if they are feeding off the one that's small, there's probably an inflated bigness, which is a compensation for their own deficiency.

John Harper

Exactly. I'm kind of one of those character structures where bigness and strength have been central to me. But what's interesting is when you look at why, why did I spend so many years looking at, oh well psychology is a bunch of crap. Well, it's a good avoidance from actually looking into this, because what I'm going to find out, and what I did find out, under all this bigness and competency and can do and independence, and all of that, is a dependent person, is a person that has issues with vulnerability, is a person that if you look at the aggression in my personality type lends itself to developing a character structure that is okay with anger.

And a lot of people are not okay with anger, and they can pick up on that right away, there is an angry individual or whatever. But if you look under that anger, anger is known to be a secondary emotion. The primary emotion is hurt. If you dig into the anger, you're going to find down in there, you're going to find a little one that's hurt, and using street smarts has decided to get big and invulnerable and deal with it that way. So I don't know if that answered your question.

Alex Howard

It does answer the question. I think it's helpful for people to recognize that, because I think sometimes people can think that big is good, but actually over inflated big is as problematic as small. Sometimes it's more problematic, because there's more layers in a sense.

John Harper

And let me just point out, juxtapose that or compare that to, which a lot of people don't get, because it's easy to look at aggression and anger, and that type of thing, as that's the problem. Aggressive

people and all that stuff, they're responsible for everything in the world. And very little attention is given, in my view, to people that are more of the withdrawn type. They withhold connection, and they withhold the type of nurturing resources, even if it's just a tension.

But if you look into the experience of an infant, a young being, the violence from aggression and withdrawal, withholding myself from that, is just as impactful on that impressionable, little being. One may leave more obvious bruises and banging on the outside, but the internal wounding is just as great.

Alex Howard - [00:28:33]

I'm really glad you shared that. I think that's a really important point, and it's almost because the wounding, perhaps, is a little more subtle, it gets less attention. And it's less likely to get the care that it needs in healing.

John Harper

Yeah.

Alex Howard

So let's talk a bit about the healing side of it. You spoke a little bit earlier about the importance of disidentification from these object relations, in a sense, penetrating the pattern with our awareness in such a way that it loses some of its potency. Say a bit more about how we do that.

John Harper

What we are really is a beingness whose primary foundational aspects are awareness and consciousness. Those are operational right now. We couldn't be having this conversation if awareness and consciousness, knowingness, wasn't here. Okay. That's always happening. We lose the fundamental intouchness with that, as our body and our emotions and our brain and our psychological sense of self start developing. But it's there.

And one of the cool things about this is, it doesn't matter, because we can turn our attention to look at observing what is this. What's going on with our emotional state, with our psychological state? Which means that if the attention is there, then the awareness and the consciousness that's behind all this is actually looking into this. And it is in the process of what some in therapeutic circles or therapy circles, however you would say that, called "peeling the onion." Right. So as I'm looking at things like, let's take my example here, I'm looking at... I'm reacting, and I'm angry at you. You know, you did something, and I'm off the handle.

And remind me to come back to effective nuclei. Okay. Well, I'll just do it right now because this would be a good example.

Alex Howard

That saves me having to remind you.

John Harper

Yeah, affective nuclei is another way the mind organizes information. So everything that has a particular tinge of anger gets thrown into a file cabinet. And so when I get triggered, I'm not just dealing with this or with one object relation or something. The file cabinet gets dumped on the floor. Everything comes forward.

I was at my sister's years ago, and my father was there, the colonel, and I was explaining to him that I was thinking of quitting my job and doing something else, a job that I had been with for maybe 10

years at that time. And so, he started coming back at me, like, well, I don't know if that's a good idea. Have you thought about this? Have you thought about that? And it just triggered this object relation that was fundamental to my relationship with my father, which is, I'm not fucking stupid. Of course, I've been thinking about this thing! I came to this decision, thinking about all this.

Well, the file cabinet came out, the shit dumped on the floor, and I just went ballistic on my father to the point where the aggression and the attack and the anger that came for my father was so intense. And my father was a big guy. He was kind of a manly man, too, that you could say had some of the same underlying aggression issues. And it brought tears to his eyes because I just laid into him and laid him wide open with this whole thing.

And that, of course, was shocking to me that I had hurt my father. Because up to that point, I would have thought I can't hurt this guy. First of all, this guy doesn't care enough about me that I could hurt him.

Alex Howard - [00:33:07]

And that's all part of the object relation, right?

John Harper

And so then, that kind of, that object relation kind of dissolved, disappeared, and gets replaced by one where the effect is more about hurt. Okay. So now I'm in an object relation where I've hurt another. And I'm kind of a bad boy because I've been too big, which is a running theme in my character structure's life, and what have you. And so if I go into that and go deeper into that, ultimately it will bring me to a place where the object relations disappear. And I'm just extremely vulnerable.

And the feeling of that is challenging to us at first, because I interpret it that I could be knifed in the back or something like that, blind sided by something. And quite often that's the case when we get into vulnerability.

But real vulnerability is just openness, just none of this bullshit in the way. And I'm just here, and I'm here sensitive. And in that place, I can see my part and what went down here with my father and everything that was going on with that. And I can see my father as he is. He's as screwed up as I believe he is, you know. Yeah. But under all of that is a human being that is his whole life dealing with all this, trying to do the best he is. And so what comes forward is a type of appreciation or love that has a particular subjective sense of a glow in it. Where I am just kind of this glowing location of awareness and consciousness who's presenting, or more forward, a sense of itself is this love and appreciation.

Alex Howard

And the journey to that place is a journey of exploring and going into and allowing it to unravel, right?

John Harper

Yeah. But it also starts with the mental component of having enough, some basic knowledge of the thing and going, oh, well, I didn't know about that. And so then you can recognize it when it comes up. So the mind plays a part in helping us to go, oh! But the more fundamental part is the effect, as I said, the effect and the triggering. It's like, oh, here's my sense of me. Here's the sense of the other. Here's what's going on.

And I can say, is this the first time in my life I've experienced this? No, no, no. This is a recurring theme. This shit goes back forever.. So one way of peeling the onion and going to the past is to... You could take two tacks. Like, what is an example in the past where this was really intense? And I can go there. And I can start actually feeling that place, remembering that, recalling that, and seeing that this is exactly like this. So this challenges and takes me back there.

Or I can just say, when is the earliest time in my life I actually remember this? I was three years old, and this happened. So the closer I get to the primary object relation where it was laid down, then that creates a thing of like a situation where, well, I'm not this three year old, you know. I'm not little and weak. I mean, objectively, everybody is telling me I'm too big. I'm too much. How can I be little and weak now? That's not an objective...

Now, and I've gotten that a lot in my life. And like you, I'm sure, I don't feel big to me. It feels normal to me. I mean, it's been a lot of work to bring myself forward, to see myself through the other's eyes that, oh, you know, this is not what's in front of this person, it's somebody that's big. I never think of myself as big.

And I remember one time being in the gym with my brother, we're on these elliptical machines, and there's a mirror wall and my brother who's a year and a half younger but has been financially more successful than me, has always kind of appeared big to me in a certain way, even though I'm physically bigger than him. And he would say more accomplished in many, many different ways than him. And I'm looking in the mirror. And, I go, my God, I am huge to him. I remember us saying... And I'm 71 now, okay. And I've lost a lot of muscle mass. But I remember my mother one time when I was visiting her, and she said to my father, My God, look at the shoulders on that guy. So when I'm looking in the mirror at my brother and I, I'm seeing this and I'm going, oh, my God, I am huge.

And it's taken a lot. When you're in front of somebody that's 5'6", maybe of the opposite sex, maybe not, to keep in mind, what's this person seeing? How is that affecting the relationship?

Alex Howard - [00:39:20]

And what I think is so important in what you're saying is that, what gives the object relations the power is the lack of awareness they're playing out. The fact they're unconscious so that they're almost running the show. And the more awareness that we have, the more we can see through them, the more that we can drop into being more present in the moment and not relating through them. That's really the path to freedom from these patterns.

John Harper

We can just go back to your couples therapy. And you're sitting there, and you're feeling attacked, or whatever. Why the hell are you there in the first place? You know, now you might say, well, I want to work on my relationship with my wife. Why? So I'm asking that question. Why do you want to work on your relationship with your wife?

Alex Howard

I was sure it was rhetorical. Well, I'm there because in that instance, I love my wife. But what's happened at that point is we've had, I think we were a couple of kids in, and we've just been in the sort of hamster wheel of doing, and we're not as close as we were. And then suddenly there's this stuff in the way. And that's an example of something that's in the way that my wife's trying to give me feedback, and I'm getting defensive. And there's obviously other dynamics that are playing out. But I'm there because I love my wife and I want to be closer.

John Harper

Exactly. So in that moment when you realize that, that supports the process of looking at the situation. To be in touch with what it is you really want, and to be in touch with it in a way that I don't want it to fill up the hole. I want it so that this part in me, my own love can come forward and dance with this other being of love over here. Because there's nothing more enjoyable and loving than love doing its thing, which is love loving.

And I like to say, love doesn't care who it kisses next. Whoever is in front of it is the next victim. It's like that, you know. And if you're... If things have cleared up, and there's just me and the other, you and your wife, and there's just love there. Your experience is one where you're feeling love. It gets more intimate than that, because you are the love. And that's how you're experiencing it. I'm just loving. And I'm loving her. And she's loving me. And there's this kind of merge space that happens too, there's me, there's her, there's this thing.

And it really is a dynamism of loving this just happening. And then what happens is we have that moment and the mind goes, oh, that's really good. I want that all the time. And it goes back to doing what it does, which interprets it through comparative, and files it away, such and such, puts it in the good object relation file, creates a memory and an interaction between me as an object, her as an object, this great time between us. I want more of that.

Alex Howard - [00:42:39]

That's a good place to end.

John Harper

Maybe.

Alex Howard

It's such a big subject, but I think what's important is that people, in a sense, we've broken it down, I hope, in such a way that people can just start to recognize in themselves how some of these dynamics can be playing out.

John, do you want to say a bit more about how people could find out more about you and your work? I know you've done a series of blogs on this, which I think are a really nice way of bringing this to life more as well.

John Harper

Okay. Well, I have a website, a blog site that I just repurposed. I've had it for years, but when I decided to write that series of articles, I thought, well, I'm going to repurpose this blog. And it is open-secrets.com. If you don't put the hyphen in, you wind up at some right wing American political website.

Alex Howard

Not to be confused with your website, then.

John Harper

That's right. So open-secrets dot com. It will put you in touch with that.

Alex Howard

John, thank you so much. It's been such a pleasure to spend time with you, as always.

John Harper

Thank you, Alex. Thanks for inviting me and this summit that you're doing.