

A Serious Man

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A Serious Man cinematically deconstructs the life of a mid-twentieth century physics professor named Larry Gopnik. A Job-like theodicy ensues in which the paradoxes of quantum mechanics are haunted by questions of good and evil as well as the spectre of an un-named God. Although a number of commentators have suggested the film is based on the biblical book of Job, the following paper argues for its place within a longer history of commentary. To this end, the film provides a radical if not farcical interrogation of theodicy in the after-math of quantum mechanics.

In one of the early scenes of the Coen brothers' film, *A Serious Man*, a physics professor named Larry Gopnik giddily finishes off a mathematical proof for the counterintuitive implications of quantum mechanics.¹ "And that's Schrödinger's paradox, right? Is the cat dead or is the cat not dead" (Coen and Coen 2007)? Soon after he has filled his chalkboard, we are taken to his office to listen in on a meeting he has with a student named Clive who has failed the exam. Evidently Clive simply recounted the story of Schrödinger's cat,² but failed to do the math. As Larry will say, "But ... you ... you can't really understand the physics without understanding the math. The math tells how it really works. That's the real thing; the stories I give you in class are just illustrative; they're like, fables, say, to help give you a picture... I mean – even I don't understand the dead cat" (Coen and Coen 2007, 19).³ Although the math is the real thing, it provides a paradoxical account of the world in which we actually live. Herein lies the dark irony of the entire film, which provides a fable in quantum mechanics' after-math. How do we live in the light of quantum theory? The film narrates this question in a Job-like theodicy where an un-named God haunts the film's protagonist as if to suggest that such a deity may yet be lurking in the paradoxes of quantum mechanics. Although a number of commentators have suggested that the film is based on the biblical book of Job (Denby 2009; Turan 2009; Corliss 2009; Persall 2009; McCarthy 2009; Scott 2009), a closer reading of the two makes the precise nature of the relationship difficult to discern (Tollerton 2011).⁴ However, in what follows I argue that the film stands in a long tradition of commentary on the book, and, in so doing, provides a radical interpretation of theodicy in the after-math of quantum mechanics.

1. AFTER JOB

In order to contextualize the film's relationship to the book of Job,⁵ a brief account of its particular form of theodicy and subsequent commentary will be useful. Job begins with an accuser, *hasatan*,⁶ arguing that Job is only righteous because God has treated him so well. With a bit of loss, he would not be anything of the kind of good man he seems to be. After this prefatory scene of cosmic ambivalence, Job then loses all his possessions, but seems to accept this fate with simplicity, "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away" (1.21, NRSV). But when the accuser returns to test Job's flesh, to take his health, Job is left sitting in the

ashes scraping the very skin on his body, trying to repair the boundary between the inner and outer man which has been torn open by boils. At this, Job cries out, “Let the day perish in which I was born” (3.1 NRSV). After Job had lost his possessions and health, his friends came and “sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great” (2.13, NRSV). However, these opening scenes of comfort turn out to be a rather cruel joke, as the narrative quickly moves on to interrogate the inner nature of the protagonist’s suffering. For instance, despite various nuances, Job’s friends argue that he suffers because he deserves it (Clines 2004, xxxviii). In brief, Eliphaz argues that the wicked suffer but surely Job couldn’t have done much wrong so it should be over soon. Bildad argues that Job’s kids were the ones who died so maybe it was their fault and Job had been spared. Zophar argues that Job must be a sinner but in some secretive way, affirming that God’s wisdom is not different in kind to ours. By the time Job’s friends have finished, a young upstart named Elihu finally chimes in, a fourth voice, which doesn’t differ from the others, but argues that suffering can lead to God (Clines 2004, xlff). As we turn to the end of the book, all of these arguments (except maybe Elihu’s which gets no mention) are deemed inadequate by God (42:7-9), who shows up in a whirlwind (38.1ff). Having said that, the whirlwind doesn’t actually provide an explanation for why Job suffers, even if Job is eventually restored (42.10-17).

Job is notably passive in his response to the whirlwind, which leaves space for millennia of commentators to fill in their own remarks and explanations. However, the structure of the book as a series of dialogues between Job, his friends and God, raises questions about the degree to which Job itself is a commentary on a wider tradition of theodicy literature in the ancient near east (Clines 2004: xxxv).⁷ This may be one way to explain the rather un-Hebraic nature of the religion in the book. For instance, “Job himself does not know God by the Israelite name Yahweh. Nor does the book refer to any of the distinctive historical traditions of the Hebrew people” (Clines 2004: lvii). Although this could equally be another literary device to conceal the author’s Hebraic thought akin to what we find in the book of Esther, there is no doubt that the book fits within a wider ancient near eastern tradition of texts which depict a wealthy and generally righteous man who contests his loss and suffering:

From the realm of Canaanite culture, we have the poetic epic of Keret ... From Egypt, a text with some analogies to Job is the Dispute over Suicide, otherwise known as the Dialogue of a Man with His Soul ... [and] From Babylonia, the most interesting parallel to the Book of Job is the work known as I Will Praise the Lord of Wisdom (*Ludlul bēl nēmeqi*), in which a pious man is struck down by disease; he is mocked by his friends as a wrongdoer, and his family has become hostile to him (Clines 2004: lix-ix; Cf. Vicchio 2006a).

On the one hand, this context should not distract us from the innovation and independence of the book of Job. However, on the other, the polyphonic relationship between its disparate voices and sub-sections could be understood as its distinguishing feature (Newsom 2003: 234ff, 259ff). In this sense, Job’s lasting impact may be about inspiring this kind of exegetical innovation.

It is in this light that a number of prominent Jewish, Christian and Muslim responses to the book’s complex paradoxes can be heard. As Stephen Vicchio notes in his history of the image of the biblical Job, Jerome’s early Vulgate translations in the fifth century helped to foster Christian interpretations of the patient, *Jobus Christi* (Vicchio 2006b: 4ff), a tradition which would continue in Gregory the Great’s *Moralia*, in the sixth century, where Job is a kind of virtuous wrestler for God (Gregory 1845: v, cf.; Vicchio 2006b: 30ff). So too, the Islamic Job, or Ayyub, is depicted as a saintly prophet in the Qur’an (Vicchio 2006b: 2, Cf. Burrell 2008: 51ff). Furthermore, and maybe most importantly for our interest in the Jewish

nature of the film and book, there is a rich set of rabbinic and targumic literature on Job in the Jewish tradition (Mangin 1994; Kraemer 1995), not to mention more thoroughgoing interpretations such as *The Testament of Job*.⁸ The Jewish literature on Job seems most willing to contemporize the various tensions in the book. For instance, as Vicchio notes, Rashi's Job is pious, but ultimately epistemologically prideful, and this explains his suffering (Vicchio 2006b: 100-101). A similar sentiment can be felt in Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed*, where Aristotle's distinction between moral and intellectual virtues is employed to exegete a just, but not wise Job (Vicchio 2006b: 114). Wisdom comes through Job's questioning, and through this reading we arrive at the philosophical meaning of the book. Maimonides' basic premise for understanding the book may be the most relevant to the film in this regard, for he is explicit in his attempt to avoid an historical infatuation with the location of Uz, or the date of his life and times (Maimonides and Friedländer 1946: 296). Rather, he will sum up his approach as follows: "But whether he existed or not, that which is related of his is an experience of frequent occurrence, is a source of perplexity to all thinkers" (Maimonides and Friedländer 1946: 296). As we have seen, this perplexity goes back to a wider genre of theodicy literature before Job was likely redacted, but it also stretches to include many contemporary commentators as well.

More recent commentators have focused upon the construction of Job's social reality, which is set out in terms of agrarian and patriarchal structures. We mustn't gloss over too quickly all those cattle and servants listed in Job's household in Job 1.1-5, for they are the backdrop and contrast for the monstrous creatures, Behemoth and Leviathan, which appear later in the book, the former evoking *undomesticated* cattle or a hippopotamus,⁹ and the latter something more reptilian of the chaos of the sea.¹⁰ As Job's world falls apart he inevitably begins to contemplate the Leviathan (3.8), identifying even himself as the chaotic monster that God has turned against (7.12). As Carol Newsom and Timothy Beal have noted (Newsom 2003: 253; Beal 2002: 35, Cf Geertz 1973: 49; Berger 1989: 5ff), a focus upon Job's social construction of reality is helpful when trying to understand the significance of Job's "world" and the various ways it is undermined through the events and dialogue in the book. David Clines for instance notes the patriarchal ideologies implied by the book of Job's social world (Clines 1994: 8ff). A network of symbols are employed to indicate the "way" the world is. We can find a similar sentiment in Mary Douglas's work on the purity laws of the Torah, which contextualize the significant links between the social and cosmic order in the Hebrew Bible (Douglas 1970: 51ff). As Timothy Beal sums up in his *Religion and its Monsters*, "that which defiles purity endangers not only the person or the community but the entire cosmos" (Beal 2002: 42, Cf.; Douglas 1970: 113). In other words, it is not just cattle and children who die in the book of Job, much less the suffering of one righteous man, but rather, the most treasured assumptions and beliefs about the way the world works are called into question. The very fabric of reality itself seems to be torn by Job's loss. It is the radicality of this breakdown of reality, which led Rudolf Otto to associate the book with the sublime, *mysterium tremendum*, and an uncanny (*unheimlich*) monstrosity (Otto 1958: 12, 28, and 77). These analyses open further to note the dominant critique of the theology which underwrites Job's culture: God blesses the righteous and curses the wicked. This is precisely what Slavoj Žižek identifies as the fundamental ideology of Job's day (Žižek 2003: 125, Cf. Žižek and Milbank 2009: 52ff).

We might find this rather odd to see Job, a religious figure, as a genuine critic of ideology. But Žižek radicalizes Marx's idea that the critique of religion is the foundation for all other culture critique (Marx 1843: 131), precisely because so much of religious discourse is already oriented towards critical questions about reality and truth. Žižek aims his critique of ideology, not simply at a change of mind, but rather, at a change in lived reality (Žižek 1994: 8ff).¹¹ It is in this sense that theological discourse supplies the necessary procedure for the materialism Žižek will advocate, precisely because of its critical reach. The horror of Job is

not to be limited to the philosophical categories of a Kantian sublime or noumenous *mysterium tremendum* as described by Rudolf Otto (Otto 1958: 28ff and 77ff).¹² Rather, Žižek suggests that the book should be interpreted as a radical interrogation of the theology, which underwrote Job's understanding of his material world. For Žižek, Job is not a wrestler so much as a persistent protestor who never accepts that his suffering has any meaning. He never accepts the theological flippancy of his friends who try to maintain the ideological simplicity of the materialist status quo: Job suffers because he deserves it. As such, the divine whirlwind points beyond its failure to explain Job's suffering, and evokes a shocking atheism. As Žižek will summarize:

So what we get is neither the good God letting Job know that his suffering was just an ordeal destined to test his faith, nor a dark God beyond Law, the God of pure caprice, but, rather, a God who acts like someone caught in a moment of impotence – or, at the very least, weakness – and tries to escape His predicament by empty boasting (Žižek 2003: 125).

This is the message Žižek takes from the book of Job. God shows up in a violent bit of boasting, but no real explanation. Yes, in the end, Job's health and wealth are restored (Job 42: 10-17), but why should he, nor we the readers, be satisfied with this? What we are really left wondering is whether this is not a rather impotent deity or a kind of wizard of Oz unhidden from behind his curtain.

Žižek's critically materialist interpretation contrasts itself with the legal structure of the book, and therefore distances itself from many of the standard commentaries, i.e. that Job enacts a lawsuit against God, and God speaks to Job's claims in such a way as to be satisfied, if for no other consideration than that he encountered God. As Clines sums up, "Suffer patiently if you can, but if not, direct yourself to God and hope for an encounter to be satisfied" (Clines 2004: xxxix). The only theological encounter Žižek accepts is the critical, and unmasking one, and it is in this sense that he makes an explicit link between Job and Christ. Žižek recognizes the ambiguous silence of Job, but rather than interpret this as satisfaction, he risks an anachronistic suggestion that Job understood the perverse core of Christianity in his face off with the whirlwind (Žižek 2001: 144-45, Cf.; 2003, *passim*). Thus the death of God on the cross is not a substitutionary atonement, but rather a materialist critique, which fully displaces the spectre of transcendent divinity whirling through the end of the book. This, Žižek argues, is Job's profound a-theological wisdom which accepts the human predicament as fully and immanently material. Although Judaism can be seen to re-order itself as a community without location in light of this materialism (Žižek 2003: 128), Christianity proves to be the religion of full atheist revelation.

2. JOB: A SERIOUS MAN

By focusing on *A Serious Man's* critique of ultimate reality we can begin to discern how it provides its own radical interpretation of the book of Job. Although the film is not a precise allegorical retelling of the book, a number of features loosely relate to Job. For instance, both have prologues which set up a series of encounters with three sagacious men before ending with a whirlwind. A further list of commonalities are worth noting: 1) the masculinity of their protagonists implied by their titles, Job and *A Serious Man*;¹³ 2) their panopticism as a divine eye is implied by the narrative and camera alike;¹⁴ 3) just as Job looks back to the times of the saintly patriarchs of Abraham, *A Serious Man*, asks its audience to look back to the post World War years of baby boomer 1960s America; 4) even though the dialogue concerning why Larry suffers is never directly addressed in the way it is for Job, the film nonetheless maintains the basic ideology outlined in the book above by implying that if your

life is falling apart in this American land of plentiful success and enjoyment then it must be your fault.¹⁵

The film is prefaced by a nineteenth century eastern European Yiddish home, something akin to fiddler on the roof. This is based on a parable which the Coens wrote themselves and provides both a sense of cultural Jewish antiquity to the rest of the movie as well as a seemingly simple framework for understanding choices between good and evil. A man gets home to his wife and says he met a nice rabbi named Traitle Groshkover. She seems convinced that “God has cursed us” (Coen and Coen 2007: 2), because this rabbi died some years ago. She claims to have seen his dead body with her own eyes, and that therefore this must have been a dybbuk, a devil, which her husband met. The rabbi ends up visiting this couple and at one point the wife stabs him in the chest. He gets up and walks out into the snowy night. It is never clear whether he is in fact a dybbuk, nor whether he lives or whether he dies. Like Schrödinger’s cat, it remains a mystery. But so too, it is interesting how the ambivalence between good and evil are introduced into the story, before the story itself. While the book of Job is prefaced by a peculiar debate between an accuser and God, the film begins with the ambiguity of the knife in the rabbi/dybbuk’s chest. There is a clear sense of good and evil introduced in both, or as the wife says after the rabbi/dybbuk walks out into the night: “Blessed is the Lord. Good riddance to evil” (Coen and Coen 2007: 8). However, the opening parable emphasizes the contradiction between this simple good/evil dichotomy and the ambiguity of the identity and life/death of the rabbi/dybbuk himself.

Hence, the opening quotation from the film, “Receive with simplicity everything that happens to you” (Coen and Coen 2007: 1), can be taken as a dark joke. This is a quote from the late eleventh century French Rabbi, Rashi’s commentary on Deuteronomy 18.13 (Rosenberg 2004), “Be blameless before the Lord, your God” (NRSV). The word for blameless (tamim) here is slightly difficult to translate, it has the idea of being whole and complete (Köhler et al. 1994: 1752), and in some versions of this passage it is translated as wholehearted. Interestingly for the connections made to the book of Job in the film, The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible has it as “You must remain completely loyal to the Lord your God”. The narrative context here is Moses giving the law which shall guide the Israelites in the new land which they will inhabit, and in particular the role of priests and proper worship. Rashi connects this word for wholeheartedness to a call to devotion and almost naïve or “unadulterated” simplicity, as the translators of Rashi’s commentary on the Torah have it. As Rashi puts it, “depend on him, and don’t inquire of the future” (Rosenberg 2004). What is so interesting about this quote then is that the call to simplicity comes precisely before the Coen brothers go about making it apparent in the film that the real world is not simple, and, in fact, exasperatingly impossible to figure out.

Again and again, the Coen’s cinematically emphasize the certain uncertainty which follows after Schrödinger’s cat. At one point Larry’s brother Arthur develops what is referred to as the Mentaculus, an equation which allows him to win at gambling. This is an obvious problem for the distinction between math and the rest of reality in Larry’s worldview. As Arthur is taken into custody by what appears to be the gambling authorities Larry yells, “It’s just mathematics. You can’t arrest a man for mathematics” (Coen and Coen 2007: 112). However, the mathematics keep bumping into the chaos of life. The rabbi and cat are just fodder before the bribe/gift from Larry’s student, the diagnosis of disease/health from his doctor, the infidelity/faithfulness of his wife, the whirlwind’s threat/end to his son’s life, much more the sinister/good intentions of the un-named deity, Hashem. The Coens weave paradox after irresolvable paradox into the narrative. A Serious Man, not unlike Job, sets out the various parameters through which its audience will consider the sometimes unintelligible consequences of reality.

As the film develops its three rabbinical encounters, it begins to break with any direct theological echo of the dialogues in Job. Although Larry does question his suffering similarly to the way Job does, none of the responses he receives in the film articulate the sentiment of the dialogues in the book. Rather, the first two rabbis in particular offer something more akin to Harry Kushner's, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (Kushner 1983: 136). The first rabbi suggests that Larry has lost track of Hashem, and simply needs a new perspective on life (Coen and Coen 2007: 67ff). The second Rabbi suggests that Larry needn't ask why these things are happening. "These questions that are bothering you, Larry – maybe they're like a toothache. We feel them for a while, then they go away... Hashem doesn't owe us anything Larry. The obligation runs the other way" (Coen and Coen 2007: 89). In other words, there is nothing Larry can do, he must simply accept his obligation simply to be a good man. However, with the third rabbi, Rabbi Marshak, we return to the critique of ideology that makes up the central coinherence between the book and the film.

Throughout *A Serious Man*, everyone has encouraged Larry to visit Rabbi Marshak. However, Marshak, it seems, has more or less retired to study and only meets with bar mitzvah initiates. Hence, after finishing his bar mitzvah, Danny, Larry's son, arrives at Marshak's office where we are allowed to listen in on his sagacious advice:

When the truth is found. To be lies (He pauses. He clears his throat.) And all the hope. Within you dies. (Another beat. Danny waits. Marshak stares. He smacks his lips again.) Then what? (Danny doesn't answer. It is unclear whether the question was directed at him.) ... Be a good boy (Coen and Coen 2007: 129-30, adjusted to match the film.).

In some ways Marshak almost stands in for God as the common image of a wise old bearded man, and this scene could thus be interpreted as slightly anti-climactic. In another sense, however, Marshak's reiteration of the lyrics of the Jefferson Airplane song which can be heard in one of the opening scenes of the film, concretizes the ideological critique at work in the film's use of quantum mechanics, "accept mystery" (Coen and Coen 2007: 61).¹⁶ "Then what", evokes the profound probabilities which haunt Larry's life after quantum mechanics. The tension in the film is that although Larry knows the math, he can't understand the cat, and thus continues to act as if the world is a stable Newtonian thing. The resultant cultural mystification explains the open-ended way the film ends.

In the last minutes of the film, the Coens rehearse some of the main themes of the epilogue of Job where his family and possessions are returned to him in greater measure. Although, neither Job nor Larry get any real answers, they both move on with their lives. In the film, Sy Ableman has died in a fluke car crash, Larry's wife has returned, he seems to have succeeded in tenure, and Danny has successfully completed his bar mitzvah. What was Larry so concerned about? Maybe Marshak was right not to see him. Things work out in the end. So too, Marshak seems content to simply reiterate both the lyrics and the band members of Jefferson Airplane, summing up the Torah in the terms of the 1960s. And yet, although Danny's walk past Caravaggio's *The Sacrifice of Isaac*,¹⁷ on his way to Marshak's desk foreshadows the monstrous *Hashem* who has haunted the rest of the film, this mysterious if not sinister deity has not made an appearance. Then, out of the blue comes the final scene. No sooner has Larry received a phone call from his doctor asking him to come in to discuss some tests (the results can't be given over the phone), do we find Danny outside his classroom as a tornado approaches. It is here that one of the most profound reversals of the order of the book takes place in the film, a cinematic redaction if you like. The restoration *precedes* the tornado.

It is precisely here that the film's exploration of intersection between quantum mechanics, ethics and religion, most profoundly echoes Žižek's materialist interpretation of

Job. Žižek recognizes that he must go beyond a simple negation of materialism, which would have left open a non-materialist [spiritual] possibility. Rather, he proposes what he refers to as an open-ended ontological non-all.¹⁸ This leads him to suggest an affinity between his materialism and the interpretation of quantum mechanics espoused by Niels Bohr (Žižek and Milbank 2009: 89).¹⁹ Contrary to Einstein then who insisted that quantum theory was itself an incomplete account of reality (Einstein, Podolsky, and Rosen 1935),²⁰ Žižek affirms the Copenhagen school, with all the cats Schrödinger can cram into his little box. This allows him to account for reality in a way that is ontologically total, yet epistemologically skeptical. Žižek will imagine a God who seems to have created the universe such that the stars do not exist until our telescopes find them. If this were to be developed as a computer simulation of a suburban neighborhood, the houses would not have to be furnished until someone opens the door and enters. So too, the internal organs wouldn't need to be functional until the murderer plunges the knife beneath the skin's surface (Žižek and Milbank 2009: 89). Žižek is aware that this open-ended ontology is indeed extremely weird, and may not be current with new developments in quantum mechanics today. Obviously, he can only analogize here and does not do the math. Nonetheless, he affirms that this concrete example of an ontological totality can be coupled with an epistemological skepticism. Or, as Larry finishes off another chalkboard full of equations which demonstrate Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, "It proves we can't ever really know ...what's going on. But even though you can't figure anything out, you *will* be responsible for it on the mid-term" (Coen and Coen 2007: 104).

In this after-math of quantum mechanics the film tries to confront its audience with this certain uncertainty. The whirlwind tornado at the end of the film gives Larry no consolation, but rather an even more abrupt reminder of life's chaos. It is in this light that I believe we are meant to interpret Jefferson Airplane at the start of the film, as it later comes from the mouth of the tired old Rabbi Marshak: "when the truth is found to be lies and all the hope within you dies... then what?" Should we fill in this blank with the rest of the song, "you better find somebody to love?" Or maybe we should take it as a genuine question from the rabbi asking it of himself? Maybe he doesn't really know what? So too, neither the doctor's test results nor the tornado itself provide any clear conclusions. They could be taken as another near miss, or as devastation. The film does not end with the death of God at the end, any more than the death of the rabbi/dybbuk at its beginning. For most watching the film, I suspect that it is not the God of Abraham, much less Jesus who is questioned, but rather the real target is the God of Newton who was distant, but at least had left an ordered universe for physicists to quantify and understand. Charles Taylor's suggestion, however, that contemporary scientific interpretations of the universe, "awakens a sentiment of mystery, even among non-believers" (Taylor 2004: 6),²¹ should be tempered with the more nihilist consequences of a life lived in the certain uncertainty of quantum mechanics. Is there a moral law that we can look to after the starry skies have so let us down? I'd suggest that this is the question, which best sums up *our* perplexity today. Just as Voltaire wrote his poem after the Lisbon earthquake (Voltaire et al. 1977), Žižek writes in the wake of a western culture still coming to terms with the falling of the twin towers and near collapse of the global financial system. In this sense, it is fitting that the book of Job continues to inspire critical commentary and radical theodicy.

ENDNOTES

¹ For the purposes of this essay, “quantum physics”, “quantum theory”, and “quantum mechanics” will be used interchangeably.

² Although it is not the purpose of this paper to provide a sustained account of the history of the development of quantum mechanics, a few key events which led to the imagining of this mythical feline, Schrödinger’s cat, are needed in order to orient us to its possible cultural reception. Erwin Schrödinger was an Austrian physicist, who, in 1935, imagined a ridiculous experiment in order to explain how “in the world of quantum mechanics, the laws of physics that are familiar from the everyday world no longer work” (Gribbin 1984: 2). To do so, he imagined a cat in a box with a vial of poison, such that the cat’s life depended on the decay of a radioactive atom (Schrödinger 1935: 1980). Because quantum mathematics demonstrated that such atoms were governed by probabilities not fixed realities, the cat could not be said to be either dead or alive until the box was opened. That is, “it was possible to set up an experiment in such a way that there is a precise fifty-fifty chance that one of the atoms in a lump of radioactive material will decay in a certain time and that a detector will register the decay if it does happen” (Gribbin 1984: 2).

³ Gopnik’s character echoes a classic introduction to quantum mechanics by Richard Feynman, who notes, “In this chapter we shall tackle immediately the basic element of the mysterious behavior in its most strange form. We choose to examine a phenomenon which is impossible, *absolutely* impossible, to explain in any classical way, and which has in it the heart of quantum mechanics. In reality, it contains the *only* mystery. We cannot make the mystery go away by ‘explaining’ how it works. We will just *tell* you how it works. In telling you how it works we will have told you about the basic peculiarities of all quantum mechanics” (Feynman, Leighton, and Sands 2006: 1-1).

⁴ The discontinuities are exacerbated by the Coen brothers denial of the parallels between the book and film altogether (Working Title 2009).

⁵ Our engagement with Job simply takes the text as it is in modern Christian and Hebrew bibles, which was most likely redacted in the second temple period between the seventh and second centuries BCE (Clines 2004: lvii). The first mention of Job as a Hebrew figure is in Ezekiel 14.14, however this doesn’t necessitate a reference to the actual book of Job, so much as a holy figure in Ezekiel’s past. Regardless of composition, the book itself refers to an agrarian time like that of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but again this seems to be more of a literary construction than an historical account of facts. It is extremely difficult to draw many strong conclusions beyond saying that “the story of Job may be much older than the book” (Clines 2004: lviii). Further reading on the exegetical and historical critical concerns with the book of Job can be found in (Dhorme 1967). So too, Clines gives a summary of the literature on Job in the following (Clines 2004: lxiv).

⁶ This is best translated as adversary in the court, not the personal name of a demonic being against God. The word here refers to an accuser. See, (Köhler et al. 1994: 1317).

⁷ The dialogue of Elihu, for instance, sits slightly out of joint, as the fourth person to respond to Job’s predicament as a righteous sufferer. He gets no mention in the epilogue, which could be another indication that it is a later addition, or maybe nothing more than a purposeful omission given his junior status among Job’s friends.

⁸ For comment on the relationship between the Testament of Job and the Book of Job see Maria Haralambakis’ recent University of Manchester dissertation on The Testament of Job, 2010. Cf. (Wisse 2003: 35ff)

⁹ Behemoth is related to the Hebrew word for cattle or domesticated animals (*behemah*), the HALOT gives Hippopotamus as a likely meaning, (Köhler et al. 1994: 111-12).

¹⁰ Literally “twisting one” leviathan is associated with the chaos over which God conquers (cf. Isaiah 27.1) but in other places, a beast God seems to have formed to play with (Psalm 104.26). See, (Freedman 1992: 295, vol. 4) Cf. (Köhler et al. 1994: 524)

¹¹ Similarly Terry Eagleton helpfully rehabilitates the term ideology in terms of lived relations which takes it beyond an empirical concern for what is correct about reality (Eagleton 1991: 31).

¹² For Kant’s own approach to Job, cf. Kant’s 1790 “Über das Misslingen aller philosophischen Versuche in der Theodizee” translated in. (Despland and Kant 1973: 286ff)

¹³ Setting the film in the sixties, at the beginning of the post-patriarchal turn in American culture, so eloquently portrayed in TV dramas like *Mad Men* as well, allows the Coens to depict a similar space as that of the patriarchy of Job (Clines 1994: 7ff). Although Job’s wife hardly features in the book, and Larry’s wife does

request a “get”, a Jewish ritual divorce, both the book and the film share a relatively patriarchal view of the world that is being deconstructed.

¹⁴ The camera focuses in upon Larry and his son in the film, often from God like perspectives. An early scene in the film starts in the black void of Danny’s brain before exiting into the faint corona around the earpiece of his radio. The poster from the film captures Larry on the roof of his house, cowering under the eye of the sun. Each scene’s colors are overdrawn, like old Polaroids that’ve just been pulled from a shoebox in the closet. This is the precise sense of the uncanny that Otto suggests is at work in the book, as the Sublime otherness haunts Job (Otto 1958: 28ff, 77ff). The biblical account does indeed zero in upon Job under the inescapable eye of God (Beal 2002, 37ff). As Job will say, in chapter 3, “Why is light given to one in misery, and life to the bitter in soul... Why is light given to one who cannot see the way, whom God has fenced in” (NRSV 3.20-23)? In other parts of the Hebrew scriptures this relentless gaze tends to be regarded as one of lovingkindness. Psalm 139.5, for instance, uses a similar phrase, “You hem me in, behind and before”. In Job however, this eye haunts and taunts him like the eye of Mordor in J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*. In these subtle ways both the book and the film alert us to the awareness of an “other” who we cannot see, but nonetheless sees us. The film and book both share an interest in confronting this divine panopticism, first by denuding it from its lovingkindness, and second by recasting it in terms of the monstrous.

¹⁵ It’s almost as if the viewer is expected to have in their minds, Charleton Heston’s Moses, with all the American exceptionalism that the *Exodus* implied. The film therefore leaves the condemnation of Larry’s suffering to the historical setting of the movie itself.

¹⁶ At an earlier point in the film, the father of the failed student noted above will visit Larry at his home and threaten to sue him for defaming (shaming) his son. A similar cryptic exchange occurs where both men tiptoe around what is going on without accusing anyone of anything, or, said another way, they tiptoe around Schrödinger’s cat box without ever trying to peek inside. The father sums it up neatly: “Please. Accept mystery”.

¹⁷ *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, 1603, Oil on canvas, 41 x 53 1/8 in (104 x 135 cm), Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. Danny seems to have been cast to look much like Caravaggio’s Isaac.

¹⁸ Žižek will sum this up what he perceives to be a proper negation of materialism as follows, “The statement ‘material reality is all there is’ can be negated in two ways: in the form of ‘material reality *isn’t all there is*’ and the form of ‘material reality *is non-all*.’ The first negation (of a predicate) leads to the standard metaphysics: material reality isn’t everything, there is another, higher, spiritual reality. ... As such, this negation is, in accordance with Lacan’s formulas of sexuation, inherent to the positive statement ‘material reality is all there is’ has its constitutive exception, it grounds its universality. If, however, we assert a nonpredicate and say ‘material reality *is non-all*,’ this merely asserts the non- all of reality without implying any exception—paradoxically, we should thus claim that ‘material reality *is non-all*,’ not ‘material reality is all there is,’ is the true formula of materialism” (Žižek and Milbank 2009: 95).

¹⁹ Niels Bohr first put forward his views on this matter in a lecture to the International Congress of Physics at Lake Como, Italy in 1927, which was published the next year as (Bohr 1928).

²⁰ Einstein’s “God does not throw dice” was meant to encapsulate his concern with quantum theory.

²¹ Taylor goes on to associate this mystery with the enlightenment epistemology of Immanuel Kant, which, on the one hand, made room for faith, while on the other, developed a precognitive notion of the “sublime” (Taylor 2004: 7). Both were summed up perfectly on the epitaph carved into Kant’s tombstone: “Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the more often and steadily we reflect upon them: *the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me*” (Kant 1997: 133, 5:62).

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