

*Das erlösende Wort*  
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Wittgenstein was not easily distracted from his work. During the Great War, within two weeks of being stationed at Krakow, he was making philosophical entries in his notebooks. In his coded notebooks, he would comment on the adverse conditions, physical—extreme cold, unceasing cannon fire—and spiritual. He would also comment on how his philosophical work was progressing. Often the adverse conditions and the philosophical work went together, as he found such work a kind of consolation (GT p. 32, October 17, 1914): “Remember how great the grace of work is.”

After almost two months of philosophical entries, Wittgenstein took stock in his coded remarks (October 17, 1914): “Yesterday worked very hard. The knot is tightening more and more, but I have found no solution [*Lösung*]...Will the *erlösende* thought come to me, will it come??!!” A month later he returns to this concern (GT, p. 44, November 21): “Worked a considerable amount. But still I can never express the one *erlösende* word. I go round about it and get very close, but still I cannot lay hold of it itself.” And the next day: “The *erlösende* word not expressed. Yesterday it was right on the tip of my tongue. But then it disappears again.” But this concern, or perhaps we should say this way of putting the concern, didn’t emerge in his philosophical notebooks until January 20, 1915 (NB, p. 39): “The *erlösende* word—?” and then six months later, more articulately (June 3, NB, p. 54): “The *erlösende* word still hasn’t yet been spoken.”

When Wittgenstein’s philosophical notebooks from this period were first published and translated in 1961, Anscombe translated *erlösende* as “key.” There is no reason to suppose she paused over this translation—“key” makes sense in the contexts, though it is not a dictionary translation. But the word has resonances in German that are lost with that translation. For instance, when Job says (Job 19:25, KJV): “I know that my redeemer liveth”, Luther’s German Bible renders “redeemer” as *Erlöser*. Similarly, when the psalmist calls on the Lord (Psalm 19:14, KJV) as “my strength, and my redeemer”, Luther again has it as *Erlöser*.<sup>1</sup> And, indeed, the coded notebooks, where the word first arises, also show Wittgenstein calling on God regularly. So the search for the *erlösende* word takes on the status of something like a mission.<sup>2</sup>

Wittgenstein then drops the word from his work, and reflections on his work, up through the *Tractatus*. We never hear whether he found “the one *erlösende* word,” or even what it would have been. But, at least in this early period, it seems to have been, for Wittgenstein, something that would constitute a solution [*Lösung*] to his philosophical problems. We might conjecture that the *erlösende* word of the *Tractatus* turned out to be no word at all, but silence—as recommended in proposition 7! “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.”

When writing to Ludwig von Ficker, a prospective publisher for the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein explained (1919, pp. 94-5, and oft quoted):

I once wanted to give a few words in the foreword which now actually are not in it, which however, I’ll write to you now because they might be a key [*Kessel*] for you: I wanted to write that my work consists of two parts: of the one which is here, and of everything which I have *not* written. And precisely this second part is the important one. For the Ethical is delimited from within, as it were, by my

book; and I'm convinced that, *strictly* speaking, it can ONLY be delimited in this way. In brief, I think: All of that which *many* are *babbling* today, I have defined in my book by remaining silent about it.

Or, one might say, only silence can *redeem* such babbling.

But upon Wittgenstein's return to philosophical work in 1929, he resumed the search. In a notebook in 1929, he writes (WA, v. 1, p. 176): "The task of philosophy is to find the *erlösende* word." And then in another notebook from the same year (WA, v. 2, p. 68) he repeats this sentence, adding: "The *erlösende* word is the solution of a philosophical problem." In conversation with Schlick (January 2, 1930; WVC, p. 77) Wittgenstein comments: "Everything we do consists in trying to find the *erlösende* word."

On January 18, 1931, he elaborated (WA, v. 3, p. 156): "The philosopher strives to find the *erlösende* word, that is, the word that finally permits us to grasp what up until now has intangibly weighed down our consciousness." And then he uses my favorite comparison in all of his writing: "It is as if one had a hair on one's tongue; one feels it but cannot grasp/seize it, and therefore cannot get rid of it." Here the earlier description of having the *erlösende* word on the *tip* of his tongue, but not quite found, is reversed—now there is something to be gotten rid of, which usually lies near the back of the tongue. He continues: "The philosopher delivers the word to us with which one/I can express the thing and render it harmless."

Wittgenstein liked these three sentences from 1931 so well that they reappear in a typescript based on the manuscript (TS 211, p. 158), and are preserved among cuttings taken from that (TS 212, p. 1115). Then they are used in his so-called "Big Typescript" of 1933 (BT, p. 302; PO, p. 165), where Luckhardt and Aue translate as the "liberating" word. Portions or slight modifications of these sentences appear in typescripts (TS 220, p. 83; TS 238, p. 11; and TS 239, p. 84) that serve as early drafts of the *Investigations*, but the phrase does not make it all the way into the *Investigations*.

Yet I believe the idea retains a role in the *Investigations* nonetheless. Starting with the opening section of the *Investigations* (§1), Wittgenstein states "Explanations come to an end somewhere." In the later notes collected as *On Certainty* (§34) he reiterates: "But these explanations must after all come to an end." This is a truism—Wittgenstein might have called it a rule of grammar—but it is truism that, oddly enough, is easy to lose sight of. It's the kind of thing we need to be reminded of (PI §127): "The work of the philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose." What is that purpose? Well, we tend to push too far in our desire to understand. Yet not everything can get explained. (Z §315): "'Why do you demand explanations? If they are given you, you will once more be facing a terminus. They cannot get you any further than you are at present.'" "Explanations come to an end somewhere."

And the truism holds not just for explanations, but for reasons (PI §326): "the chain of reasons has an end"; justifications (OC §192): "justification comes to an end"; grounds (OC §204): "giving grounds...comes to an end"; and definitions (Jackson's Notes in Geach, p. 236): "There must be some indefinable things." In each case the press for further...explanations, reasons, justifications, grounds, definitions leads us ultimately either in a circle or into an infinite regress. That is the truism.

Being truisms, these claims are apt for inclusion in Wittgenstein's philosophical remarks. He holds (PI §599): "Philosophy only states what everyone admits." And as a preface to his 1941 discussions with Robert Thouless (PPO p. 382): "Wittgenstein started by saying that all statements he would make would be obviously true. If I could challenge any of them he would have to give way. Might seem trivial and unimportant because so obviously true. But going over things already known to and accepted by me, he would make me see things in a new way."

If we accept these truisms, then we will come to realize that it is untenable to feel that there *must* be a further...explanation, reason, justification, ground, definition in every situation. And so we can relax, content that, say, some words cannot be given essentialist definitions. But Wittgenstein's use of the truisms is generally more ambitious than this. For he usually wants to insist that justification, say, ends not only *somewhere*, but *sooner than we expected*. It ends...here. "If I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: 'This is simply what I do' " (PI §217).

For Wittgenstein, it is important not only *that* we stop, but *where* we stop. In a lecture on April 28, 1947, Wittgenstein is reported to have said (Geach's notes, p. 90): "It is important in philosophy to know when to stop—when not to ask a question." (Edwards' version, p. 128-9): "One of the great difficulties in philosophy is to know where to stop." Or, more famously: "The difficulty here is: to stop" (Z §314).

Stopping at the right place—acknowledging bedrock—is crucial. This is the *erlösende* word: "Genug!"—"Enough!" Or rather, the *erlösende* word is *whatever gets us to stop*. The temptation to push further "has intangibly weighed down our consciousness." If I can say "Enough!" I "render it harmless." Enough...explaining, justifying, defining! Wittgenstein writes (MS 115, p. 30): "Ease of mind begins in philosophy when the *erlösende* word is found." I have done all I need to do. I can rest content where I am now. I am redeemed, liberated, from misguided temptation.

But, given our temptations, *where* I reach bedrock is not any kind of truism. And, indeed, Wittgenstein's places to halt can be quite controversial. For example, it seems as though we need a private experience of pain to justify the expression of pain. Wittgenstein would have us do without a private experience of pain. Well, Wittgenstein might say, justifications have to end somewhere. "To use a word without justification does not mean to use it without right" (PI §289). But why should *that* be the point where justification comes to an end? "We are inclined to say there must be a reason where there *is* no reason. If I say 'How do you know that you see red?'—there *is* no justification" (lecture May 20, 1936, PO p. 355). "He looks for a justification of his description [of an object as brown] where there is none. (Just as in the case when a man believes that the chain of reasons must be endless...)" (BB p. 73). "As if giving grounds did not come to an end sometime" (OC §110). The claim that "there is none" *right there*, is much more ambitious than the claim that the chain cannot be endless. It is no truism.

A parallel dispute is played out in Wittgenstein's infamous discussion of the seeds.<sup>3</sup> Wittgenstein's case evokes our feeling that there *must* be a difference between the seeds, which would explain their producing different plants. "But must there be a physiological explanation here? Why don't we just leave explaining alone?" (RPP I §909 = Z §614). Well, granted, we *could* leave explaining alone here—after all, explanations have to come to an end somewhere. But why *here*? No doubt it is some modern

mechanistic scientific urge that drives us beyond this point, but to label it as such is not to undermine or delegitimize it.

Where we are willing to halt the chain is a matter of temperament. That Wittgenstein can rest content with halting the chains sooner than many of us is an important respect in which his (C&V pp. 6-7/8-9) “spirit is...different from that of the prevailing European and American civilization.” For “the typical western scientist...will not in any case understand the spirit in which” he writes. His “way of thinking is different from theirs.” That Wittgenstein can say “enough!” when he can is an important respect in which his temperament is at odds with ours.

Suppressing the urge to explain, justify. We might say it is a natural urge, but Wittgenstein sees it as a cultivated urge (or rather, a civilized urge—in a bad sense). But it is clearly this urge that he sets himself against. “People who are constantly asking ‘why’ are like tourists, who stand in front of a building, reading Baedeker, & through reading about the history of the building’s construction etc etc are prevented from *seeing* it” (C&V p. 40/46, July 3, 1941). “It often happens that we only become aware of the important *facts* if we suppress the question ‘why?’; and then in the course of our investigations these facts lead us to an answer” (PI §471). “...attempts at justification need to be rejected” (PI II p. 200/171). This is certainly not a modern approach to things!<sup>4</sup>

Wittgenstein’s later mentions of the *erlösende* word recognize an element of contingency (MS 124, p. 218; and also MS 179, p. 3v; both from the mid-1940s): “Whoever does not have these assumptions, for that person it is not the *erlösende* word.” As Wittgenstein put it in a May, 1938, lecture (PO, p. 411): “Now (today) we have every reason to say there must be a difference [between the seeds]. But we could imagine circumstances where we would break this tradition.” The *erlösende* word does not work in the face of all temptations—in all traditions—and can only be effectively spoken under the right circumstances. It cannot easily be understood by us. Perhaps “only a small circle of people...to which I turn...because they form my cultural circle, as it were my fellow countrymen in contrast to the others who are foreign to me.” Or: “perhaps in a hundred years people will really want what I am writing.”

While Wittgenstein’s utterance of the *erlösende* word is not easily understood by us, it does fit into a certain trajectory of thought. I would like to conclude by tracing some notable points in this trajectory—texts that raise the issue, and people or characters who have been willing to say “enough” before the rest of us. You will likely find them to be somewhat alien, but that is precisely my point.

#### *Divine-Command Theories.*

Wittgenstein’s concern about explanation goes back to his early work. The night of May 5-6, 1916, Wittgenstein served his first night-duty at an observation post, by his own request (GT p. 70, May 4, 1916): “Perhaps the nearness of death will bring light into my life. May God enlighten me...God be with me. Amen.” The morning after (May 6) he recorded in code on the left side of his notebook: “In constant danger of my life. By the grace of God the night went well. From time to time I despair. This is the fault of a false view of life.” On the right side, in plain script (NB, p. 72):

At bottom, the whole *Weltanschauung* [world-view] of the moderns involves the illusion that the so-called laws of nature are explanations of natural phenomena.

In this way they stop short at the laws of nature as at something *impregnable* as men of former times did at God and fate.

And both are right and wrong. The older ones are indeed clearer in the sense that they acknowledge a clear terminus, while with the new system it is supposed to look as if *everything* had a foundation.

(These passages are then carried over with only very minor changes into the *Tractatus* 6.371-6.372.)

The “false view of life [*falschen Lebensauffassung*]” seems readily connected with the “whole world-view of the moderns.” In contrast there is the view of “former times...the older ones” that God and fate are a stopping point, and a spiritual resting place. Wittgenstein says “both are right and wrong,” though he characterizes the modern view as an “illusion” that “is supposed to look” a certain way. Yet he clearly sees the differences as matters of temperament. He makes his own temperament clear, but he has no argument against the other temperament. He finds it to be a “false view of life,” but only in the sense that it lets him down in his time of need. Not that it is incorrect. Not that it could not serve someone else.

On December 17, 1930, while in Vienna between terms, Wittgenstein met with Moritz Schlick to discuss Schlick’s just-published book *Fragen der Ethik* [Problems of Ethics]. Waismann’s notes of the meeting record (W&VC, p. 115):

Schlick says that in theological ethics there used to be two conceptions of the essence of the good: according to the shallower interpretation the good is good because it is what God wants; according to the profounder interpretation God wants the good because it is good. I think that the first interpretation is the profounder one: what God commands, that is good. For it cuts off the way to any explanation ‘why’ it is good, while the second is the shallow, rationalist one, which proceeds ‘as if’ you could give reasons for what is good.

The first conception says clearly that the essence of the good has nothing to do with facts and hence cannot be explained by any proposition. If there is any proposition expressing precisely what I think, it is the proposition ‘What God commands, that is good.’

It would be hard to find a clearer statement of Euthyphro’s position.<sup>5</sup>

In that dialogue, after Euthyphro has proposed the view (9e) that “the pious is what all the gods love,” Socrates asks him this question of conceptual priority (10a): “Is the pious being loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is being loved by the gods?” It is clear what Euthyphro should say—that it is pious because it is being loved by the gods—just what Wittgenstein asserted. But Euthyphro does not understand the question. After a marginally helpful explanation, Socrates returns with the question (10d): “Is it being loved then because it is pious, or for some other reason?” This is clearly a trick question, for it builds in the presupposition that it is being loved *for some reason or other*. Euthyphro does not notice the trick, and quickly answers “For no other reason.” After all, if you have to come up with a reason, that seems the most plausible one. When Socrates draws out the implication for his view, Euthyphro responds “Apparently.” Euthyphro sees something has gone wrong, but can’t put his finger on it.

The trick that Socrates plays, the presupposition that he builds in, is precisely the hidden assumption that many of us would accept—that the gods act for reasons, that

commands can be explained. Euthyphro should have responded “For no reason at all, Socrates.” That response “cuts off the way to any explanation ‘why’ it is good.” Socrates is so gripped by the urge to justify that either he does not himself see that he is presupposing that, or else he is cynically using but concealing that presupposition against Euthyphro. Here we see the accuracy of Wittgenstein’s remark (made to Schlick and recorded by Waismann in *VofW*, p. 33): “I can characterize my standpoint no better than by saying that it is the antithetical standpoint to the one occupied by Socrates in the Platonic dialogues.” Wittgenstein here stands with Euthyphro and the divine-command tradition in ethics.

### *Job’s Suffering*

The book of *Job* in the Hebrew Bible tells the story of a righteous man who suffers greatly, and how he responds to that.<sup>6</sup> While the details will be part of our discussion, it appears that God is goaded by Satan into allowing Job to be tested, to see if his righteousness is deeply ingrained, or whether it is only a result of his healthy and prosperous life. Thus, his health and prosperity are taken from him to see if he will remain faithful to God, or will instead curse God. The bulk of the story is taken up with conversations between Job and his friends about the meaning of his suffering. Finally God says some things, and then the story concludes with God rewarding Job for his faithfulness. The story is very rich with ideas and yet difficult to understand. It is often seen as relevant to the popular question “Why do bad things happen to people?” That seems like a natural question. A traditional answer is that people who suffer must have done something wrong to deserve their suffering.

*Job* opens with an unnamed narrator stating that Job (1:1 KJV<sup>7</sup>) “was perfect and upright...and feared God and eschewed evil.” Then God brags to Satan that Job is (1:8 and 2:3) “a perfect and upright man, one that feareth God and esheweth evil.” So from the omniscient perspective there is no question of Job having sinned. The suffering is only a test—an experiment, really. And even after the suffering commences, the narrator assures us that (1:22) “Job committed no sin,” (2:10) “uttered no sinful word.” Of course, Job and his friends do not occupy an omniscient perspective, and are not privy to this information. Nevertheless, even after he suffers the loss of his children, his estate, and his health, Job himself is confident that he is sinless (10:7 NJB): “You [God] know very well that I am innocent”; (27:5-6): “I shall maintain my integrity to my dying day. I take my stand on my uprightness”; and (31:6): “Let him weigh me on accurate scales: then he, God, will recognize my integrity.” It sounds arrogant—but we know it is true. Job does not, though, claim certainty (9:2, 21): “How could anyone claim to be upright before God?...But am I innocent? I am no longer sure.”

Job’s friends, however, see things differently. He is visited by three friends, ostensibly to “offer him sympathy and consolation” (2:11). But the friends, rather than offering compassion, raise the question why Job is suffering, what he has done wrong, and what he can do about it. They are full of advice. Eliphaz asks (4:7) “Can you recall anyone guiltless that perished? Where then have the honest been wiped out?” He insists that no one is perfect, and Job should repent and learn from this lesson. Bildad insists (8:20): “God neither spurns anyone of integrity, nor lends his aid to the evil.” When Job will have none of that, his friends become more adamant. Zophar (11:4-6): “These were your words, ‘My conduct is pure, in your [God’s] eyes I am free of blame!’ Will no one

let God speak, open his lips and give you an answer, show you the secrets of wisdom which put all cleverness to shame? Then you would realize that God is calling you to account for your sin.” And Eliphaz again (22:4-5): “Do you think he is punishing you for your piety and bringing you to justice for that? No, for your great wickedness, more likely, for your unlimited sins.” He goes on to conjecture a number of common sins.

Finally (32:1) “These three men stopped arguing with Job, because he was convinced of his uprightness.” But reminiscent of Thrasymachus, who (Republic, 336b): “couldn’t keep quiet any longer. He coiled himself up like a wild beast about to spring, and he hurled himself at us as if to tear us to pieces”, a fourth person enters the discussion:

Elihu...became very angry. He fumed with rage against Job for thinking he was right and God was wrong, and he was equally angry with the three friends for giving up the argument and thus putting God in the wrong. While they and Job were talking, Elihu had waited, because they were older than he was; but when he saw that the three men had not another word to say in answer, his anger burst out. (Job 32:2-5)

Elihu insists (34:11) “he [God] pays people back for what they do, treating each as his own conduct deserves.” “Avoid any tendency to wrong-doing, for this is why affliction is testing you now” (36:21).

None of Job’s friends can name any wrong-doing of his. Rather, their conception of life is that Job *must* have done something wrong. Job is suffering while God is just and all-powerful, therefore Job must be sinful. Though Job differs from his friends in maintaining his innocence, he actually agrees with them in supposing that there must be *some* explanation for his suffering. The difference is that he is ready to blame God. Job is suffering while God is all-powerful and Job is innocent, therefore God must be unjust. So it is that Job seeks a trial—really to put God on trial, as it were (13:22-3): “Then call me forward and I shall answer, or rather, I shall speak and you will answer. How many faults and crimes have I committed? Tell me what my misdeed has been, what my sin?” Although Job realizes (9:33) “there is no arbiter between us, to lay his hand on both,” he draws his own verdict (27:2): “I swear by the living God who denies me justice.”<sup>8</sup>

Suffering can always be explained. There must be an answer to “why?” Carol Newsom writes, in a Commentary on Job (p. 422):

That impulse remains intensely strong in many people. The words that echo in the mind of a person to whom a catastrophe has occurred are frequently ‘Why? Why did this happen?’ Even those who do not want to claim that ‘sin’ is always the cause of suffering nevertheless may be heard to say, ‘Everything happens for a reason’.

Either Job’s guilt, or God’s injustice. Or, more commonly, God’s mysterious ways—mysterious in the sense that there is a rationale, only not one accessible to us.

So far we have the following parallels to Wittgenstein’s seed case: There is the assertion in the description of the thought experiment that there *are* no differences. Then there is the more plausible description that *as far as we can tell* there are no differences. There is the omniscient assertion about Job that there is no sin. Then there is Job’s more plausible but fallible claim that he is innocent. In any case, no sins by him are ever revealed. We respond that there must be a difference between the seeds. Job’s friends insist there he must have sinned. Job insists God must be unjust.

Then, finally, God appears on the scene. It is not a very satisfying appearance—for Job and his friends, or for scholars! “Then from the heart of the whirlwind [*Wettersturm*] The Lord Yahweh gave Job his answer” (38:1). Essentially his response is: Who are you to ask these questions? I’m in charge here! He asks Job a series of rhetorical questions, not meant to be answered. In sum: “Enough!” To which Job replies (40:4) “What can I say?” (42:2, 6): “I know that you are all-powerful...I retract what I have said.”

Perhaps the best way to understand this is to see God as rejecting the search for explanation or justification. Bad things happen—get used to it. Stop trying to explain it; stop asking for a justification. This may leave open the possibility that there is some explanation—perhaps beyond us. But it makes clear that we have no business looking for it. Who are we to...? Here, God’s display of power is the *erlösende* word. Job’s response is silence (40:4-5): “I had better lay my hand over my mouth. I have spoken once, I shall not speak again.” And (42:3, 6): “You have told me about great works that I cannot understand...I retract what I have said, and repent in dust and ashes.”

This certainly upsets our conceptions of justice and of God. But if this upsets our concepts of justice and God, it is high time they were upset! Must there be a moral explanation here? Why don’t we just leave explaining alone? Today, in case we actually discovered a case like Job’s, we should look frantically for an explanation.—But in other circumstances we might give this up. God, by overawing Job and his friends, is trying to move them to those other circumstances.<sup>9</sup>

If we look at the story wholly from the human point of view of Job and his friends, the “moral” would be that the universe is amoral, even with God in it. This is not a conclusion that would sit easily with many people—suffering as a tragic fact of life. Newsom (p. 625, 630-1) writes:

What Job has been confronted with in the divine speeches will have rendered his old moral categories no longer adequate to his new perception....They insist that the presence of the chaotic be acknowledged as part of the design of creation, but they never attempt to justify it....When that happens, it is as though a spell is broken. Job is released from his obsession with justice and can begin the process of living beyond tragedy.

An earlier commentator (Scherer, pp. 1192-3) writes:

Job is no longer asking ‘why?’...There is now for him a place where the problem is not solved, but it is beginning to dissolve....It does not disturb him any longer at the point where it first disturbed him. He is willing to leave it....

Whether this is something one can accept is a matter of temperament.<sup>10</sup>

But we still haven’t quite reached the end of the story. In an epilogue, God inexplicably turns to the Eliphaz (42:7): “I burn with anger against you and your two friends for not having spoken correctly about me as my servant Job has done.” The sudden endorsement of Job leads scholars to suppose the God of the epilogue is a different voice from that in the whirlwind. Then (42:10-17) Job gets everything back, “double what he had before.” (To replace his seven sons and three daughters, he gets seven new sons and three new daughters. There is no attempt to explain how that works as consolation. We’ll leave that aside here, but return to it presently.) This complicates the picture, since now it turns out that God seems just after all—rewarding innocent Job for his faithfulness. And, in fact, the reader has known all along that things were not

what they seemed. So it is possible, in this fuller context, to read the story as an affirmation of all the old categories. And an affirmation that there really is an explanation—only not one that is always accessible to us.<sup>11</sup>

To complete the comparison then, the voice of God from the whirlwind in *Job*, though not the conception of God conveyed in the introduction or epilogue, occupies a position on the same trajectory that Wittgenstein travels.

### *Ivan and Suffering*

Unlike the book of *Job*, with which he was probably familiar, Wittgenstein was certifiably obsessed with Dostoevsky's great novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*. A friend of Wittgenstein's from the Great War reports (McGuinness, p. 235): "In [March] 1916 Wittgenstein suddenly received orders to leave for the front....He took with him only what was absolutely necessary....Among a few other books he took with him *The Brothers Karamazov*. He liked this book very much."<sup>12</sup> In 1929 or 1930 Wittgenstein told Drury (p. 86, cf. pp. 102 & 108): "When I was a village schoolmaster in Austria after the war I read *The Brothers Karamazov* over and over again. I read it out loud to the village priest." On August 5, 1949, Bouwsma reports (p. 11): "this led him to talk of *The Brothers*. He must have read every sentence there fifty times."

In Book 5, Ivan Karamazov meets with his brother Alyosha, a novice at the local monastery and disciple of the Elder Zosima, to talk. In Chapter IV, "Rebellion," the rationalistic Ivan marshals several forceful examples of innocents—mostly children—suffering, and rejects God's world in which such things can happen. "I cannot understand why the world is arranged as it is" (p. 224). Ivan rejects all possible justifications for such unmerited suffering: retribution, or counterbalancing goods, or some greater harmony. We could say that Ivan carries on the case of *Job*, only with stronger evidence. *Job* is in the inherently problematic situation of proclaiming his own innocence, but Ivan makes use of the unquestionable innocence of children who suffer. Ivan is driven by the need to understand, but has no resources to do so.

Dostoevsky made the strongest case he could for Ivan. In a letter he wrote (Letters, p. 758): "Everything my hero says...is based on reality. All the anecdotes about children took place, existed, were published in the press, and I can cite the places, I invented nothing." Indeed, Pobedonostsev, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, wrote to Dostoevsky (Rosen, p. 884) to find out what refutation was possible. (The novel was being published serially.) Dostoevsky insisted: "My hero chooses a theme I consider irrefutable." Or, at any rate, irrefutable from Ivan's rationalistic perspective. There is no rational answer to the question "why?" here.

But Dostoevsky did have a carefully planned response (Letters, pp. 761-2): "...will it be answer *enough*? The more so as it is not a direct point for point answer to the propositions previously expressed...but an oblique one. Something completely opposite to the world view expressed earlier [by Ivan] appears in this part, but again it appears not point by point but so to speak in artistic form." Dostoevsky's answer is Part Six of the novel, "The Russian Monk." Here we are told the life and teachings of Father Zosima. These are presented as a *zhitie* [a Saint's Life, in Church Slavonic]—what we might call a hagiography.

Dostoevsky's strategy (well explained in Rosen) is to appeal to the reader's emotions in a way that calms the urge to ask *why*. Three incidents from Zosima's life

before becoming a monk are related, in which, at crucial points, transformations take place that are not explained, but simply presented. Between the first and second story there is a retelling of the Job story (Brothers, pp. 270-71) that Zosima recalls from childhood. Much is left out of the retelling, but he focuses on the question of how getting *new* children could be any consolation to Job for the loss of his original children (p. 271): “But how could he love those new ones when those first children are no more, when he has lost them? Remembering them, how could he be fully happy with those new ones, however dear the new ones might be?” No answer, but rather: “But he could, he could. It’s the great mystery of human life that old grief passes gradually into quiet tender joy.” Of course this does not always happen. Some people are eaten up by old grief—it consumes them: “Why? Why me?” Such people are not *wrong* to ask these questions, but such questions are not obligatory. Some people have the temperament to let them go.

Ivan will be eaten up, if not ultimately destroyed, by his inability to let go of his questions. The appeal of traditional Orthodox belief will not work with him. He would not understand where Zosima and Alyosha, and for that matter Dostoevsky stand on these issues. The *erlösende* word does not work for everyone.

Readers of the novel in English have little chance of experiencing Dostoevsky’s “reply” unaided. But it is possible to imagine parallel experiences that might resonate with English speakers who grew up in the United States—that might constitute the *erlösende* word for them. Dostoevsky uses Church Slavonic and other forms of speech reminiscent of religious experiences. One might think of favorite Bible passages rendered in the King James Version, such as the Twenty-Third Psalm, or favorite traditional hymns, such as “Jesus Loves Me,” or “Amazing Grace,” sung in church as a child. Even if you are not religious, what recollections from childhood can still bring tears to your eyes? The memory of Thanksgiving dinner or Christmas morning with now-gone relatives present. Looking through a box of treasures from your childhood. A lullaby your mother sang you. “There, there...” Any experiences that can help you recapture a lost sense of innocence or reverence—these can be the *erlösende* word that Dostoevsky offers.

Is this a fair “answer”? Should Job have backed down and accepted the new children, as he did? Should Ivan have taken on Alyosha’s temperament? Who can say?

When Wittgenstein met with Russell after the war to explain the *Tractatus* to him, Russell wrote to Ottoline Morrell (Monk, pp. 182-3): “He has penetrated deep into mystical ways of thought and feeling, but I think (though he wouldn’t agree) that what he likes best in mysticism is its power to make him stop thinking.” In another context and much later Wittgenstein wrote (C&V, p. 48/54; August 14, 1946): “...only if I could be submerged in religion might these doubts be silenced.” In 1949, when he told Drury (p. 79, and cf. p. 160) that “my type of thinking is not wanted in this present age,” Wittgenstein went on: “I am not a religious man but I cannot help seeing every problem from a religious point of view.” The trajectory of thought I am tracing here helps to give a plausible sense to this remark. Wittgenstein stands in the same trajectory of thought as Dostoevsky and his character Father Zosima.

*The Mormons*

Drury reports (pp. 104-5) that in 1929: “In the train on the way back to Cambridge we talked about Dickens....Another book of Dickens that was a favourite of his was *The Uncommercial Traveller*.”

*Wittgenstein*: This is a very rare thing—good journalism. The chapter [XXII] ‘Bound for the Great Salt Lake’ was particularly interesting. Dickens had gone on board the emigrant ship prepared to condemn, but the happiness and good order he found on board made him change his mind. This showed what a real common religious movement could achieve. It was striking that when Dickens tried to draw them out as to what exactly it was they held in common, they became embarrassed and tried to avoid answering.<sup>13</sup>

This provoked Wittgenstein to learn more about the Mormons.

Though there is no indication that he ever met any Mormons in person, Wittgenstein did eventually read more about them. On November 28, 1944, he writes to Rhees that he has been reading a history of the Mormons. Eduard Meyer’s *The Origin and History of the Mormons*, written in German, later translated into English, makes for a striking contrast to Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*. Frazer interpreted the religious ceremonies and beliefs of so-called primitive people as proto-scientific activity, which presupposed mistaken explanations about how the world operated. Wittgenstein took Frazer to task for his understanding, or rather, his failure of understanding. Basically Wittgenstein sees Frazer as attributing to these people an implicit concern to ask “why” certain things happen, and then to give mistaken answers (“Remarks on Frazer,” PO, p. 129):

...it is nonsense for one to go on to say that the characteristic feature of *these* actions is the fact that they arise from faulty views about the physics of things. (Frazer does this when he says that magic is essentially false physics or, as the case may be, false medicine, technology, etc.)<sup>14</sup>

Whereas this concern is Frazer’s own concern, but not theirs, or Wittgenstein’s (p. 119):

The very idea of wanting to explain a practice...seems wrong to me. All that Frazer does is to make them plausible to people who think as he does. It is very remarkable that in the final analysis all these practices are presented as, so to speak, pieces of stupidity.

Students of Wittgenstein are generally well-aware of these comments on Frazer.<sup>15</sup>

It is in contrast to the condescension of Frazer (and other late-Nineteenth and early-Twentieth Century historical anthropologists) that Wittgenstein appreciated Meyer’s history. While Meyer says of Mormonism that (p. i) “among revealed religions, it is one of the most unsophisticated and least intellectual,” he criticizes another writer, W. A. Linn, for being (p. v) “unable to place himself in the position of the Mormons, and to penetrate their own way of thinking” and for “having passed judgment on them...from the standpoint of the typical American.” Wittgenstein must have appreciated just this willingness to try to step out of the modern temperament. Meyer’s account is (p. 15): “much closer to such a point of view than a rational or mechanistic philosophy of nature...” In sum, Meyer offers an honest account of the Mormons which takes them seriously. He clearly is not convinced, but neither is he condescending.

This rather limited acquaintance with Mormonism still had an impact on Wittgenstein. On August 5, 1949, Wittgenstein talked with his friend Bouwsma about

the Mormons (p. 11): “They fascinated him. They are a fine illustration of what faith will do. Something in the heart takes hold. And yet to understand them! To understand a certain obtuseness is required. One must be obtuse to understand. He likened it to needing big shoes to cross a bridge with cracks in it. One mustn’t ask questions.”

This could stand as a characterization of certain of Wittgenstein’s own thoughts. From our civilized point of view, a certain obtuseness is required...one mustn’t ask questions. Wittgenstein stands on the same trajectory as the Mormons, as he understood them.

In sum, in Wittgenstein’s later philosophy, the *erlösende* word is whatever will get one to stop asking questions when they threaten to go too far. It will vary from case to case, depending on who is asking the questions. Whether it will work depends on the temperament of the questioner—nothing is sure to work. Wittgenstein shows an affinity with certain figures in cultural-intellectual history—Euthyphro, the God from the whirlwind of Job, Dostoevsky and Father Zosima, the Mormons—because of their willingness to stop questions where they do. We likely feel very little affinity with them. Wittgenstein similarly is a distant figure from us.

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## Endnotes:

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<sup>1</sup> Wittgenstein apparently used both the Authorized Version of the Bible, an English translation also known as the King James Version, and Luther's German translation. Drury reports a conversation with Wittgenstein in 1939 (p. 143): "On the whole I prefer the English Authorized Version of the Bible to Luther's translation into German. The English translators had such reverence for the text that when they couldn't make sense of it they were content to leave it unintelligible. But Luther sometimes twists the sense to suit his own ideas."

<sup>2</sup> In a letter to von Ficker (July 24, 1915, p. 91) Wittgenstein uses the term in a more religious sense: "I understand your sad news all too well. You are living, as it were, in the dark, and have not found the *erlösende* word."

<sup>3</sup> See my 1999 discussion.

<sup>4</sup> While it may seem unnatural to suppress the urge to ask "why?", it is worth remembering that we engage in this sort of suppression ourselves when we deal with two-year-olds. While two-year-olds may suffer from the delusion that everything can be explained, the more pressing problem is that they push the request for explanation or justification too far. Too far, that is, given the temperament of their parents. More patient parents may be willing to engage in the explanation game longer than impatient parents, but sooner or later parents reach the point of saying "That's just how it is," or "Because I said so." Here we are teaching our children to know when to stop. To rest content with things at a certain point. Accepting this is an important step in maturation.

Drury relates the following anecdote (Danger, p. xi):

At one time I told Wittgenstein of an incident that seemed to interest and please him. It was when I was having my oral exam in physiology. The examiner said to me: 'Sir Arthur Keith once remarked to me that the reason why the spleen drained into the portal system was of the greatest importance; but he never told me what that importance was, now can you tell me?' I had to confess that I couldn't see any anatomical or physiological significance in this fact. The examiner then went on to say: 'Do you think there *must* be a significance, an explanation? As I see it there are two sorts of people: one man sees a bird sitting on a telegraph wire and says to himself "Why is that bird sitting just there?", the other man replies "Damn it all, the bird has to sit somewhere".'

<sup>5</sup> Also PPO p. 83, May 6, 1931: "'It is good because God commanded it' is the right expression for the lack of reason [*Grundlosigkeit*—absence of justification]."

<sup>6</sup> Wittgenstein never discusses the book of *Job*, but he does mention it once in his writing, indicating his familiarity with it. On January 2, 1948 (MS 136, p. 47b) he is writing about the importance of circumstances or context for our understanding of concepts. If the circumstances were quite different, the concept might not "work here any longer." And then he adds, parenthetically: "Just as in a situation in which the hippo [*Nilpferd*] and the crocodile [*Krokodil*] have been created, moral concepts can no longer be used. Job [*Hiob*]." In God's answer to Job, in Chapter 40, he mentions the Behemoth (40:15) and the Leviathan (40:25 & cf. 3:8). These are traditionally understood to be huge wild creatures, beyond our control. The details suggest the first is a kind of hippo, the second a sort of crocodile. Luther's German translation gives these suggestions in footnotes. The point is that in a world which resembles, say, Hobbes' state of nature, our ordinary moral concepts, such as kindness or justice, could no longer be used.

<sup>7</sup> In my discussion of *Job* I use not only the King James Version—which has problems with both editing and translation—but also the New Jerusalem Bible (NJB). In fact text and translation are especially problematic in *Job*. But this is not a work of Biblical scholarship. My concern is not to provide an exegesis, or to show exactly what points Wittgenstein may have seen in the story, but rather to show how elements of the story fit on a trajectory that helps us to place Wittgenstein's thought.

<sup>8</sup> Such a trial was witnessed in Auschwitz by Elie Wiesel. He wrote a play based on this, but set in Seventeenth Century Ukraine, following a pogrom—*The Trial of God*.

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<sup>9</sup> The fact that this message comes to them out of the “whirlwind” is eerily similar to Wittgenstein’s scenario (RPP I §903 = Z §608): “But why should the *system* continue further in the direction of the centre? Why should this order not proceed, so to speak, out of *chaos*?”

<sup>10</sup> While Wittgenstein did not discuss Job, he did discuss human suffering in similar terms. In a conversation in 1951 with his friend Drury, the last conversation they had, Drury (pp. 169-70):  
mentioned some passages in the Old Testament that I find very offensive. For instance the story [2 Kings 2:23-4] where some children mock of Elisha for his baldness: ‘Go up, thou bald head.’ And God sends bears out of the forest to eat them.

*Wittgenstein*: (very sternly) You mustn’t pick and choose just what you want in that way.

*Drury*: But I have never been able to do anything else.

Here Drury endorses and Wittgenstein rejects a moralistic understanding of God. Drury only focuses on the passages that fit his moralistic conceptions. Wittgenstein rejects the application of moralistic conceptions here.

*Wittgenstein*: Just remember what the Old Testament meant to a man like Kierkegaard. After all, children have been killed by bears.

*Drury*: Yes, but...ought [we] to think that such a tragedy is a direct punishment from God for a particular act of wickedness: In the New Testament we are told the precise opposite—the men on whom the Tower of Siloam fell were not more wicked than anyone else [Luke 13:4-5].

So said Jesus, defending God against the charge of injustice.

*Wittgenstein*: That has nothing to do with what I am talking about. You don’t understand, you are quite out of your depth.

Wittgenstein (“you are quite out of your depth”) sounds much like the voice of God out of the whirlwind in *Job*. There is no moral meaning of suffering, either for humans or for God. Stop searching for such explanations. Wittgenstein later said: “I must write you a letter about that.” But he never did.

<sup>11</sup> Another story about the possible meaning of human suffering is Franz Kafka’s *The Trial* (p. 1): “Someone must have been telling lies about Joseph K., for without having done anything wrong he was arrested one fine morning.” Readers and scholars alike look for what Joseph K. has done that would justify his suffering: original sin, pride, mistreating women, jumping to conclusions, etc. But this is because of a desire to see things as making sense—*something* must explain his suffering. I believe Kafka’s point is to present us with a world that does not make sense in this way. We are told from the beginning that he has done nothing wrong, and yet all of this happens to him. Suffering sometimes has no meaning, in the sense of justification or explanation. The story, I believe, stymies our attempt to find it. And, unlike the “happy” ending of Job, this story ends with Joseph K’s execution.

<sup>12</sup> Wittgenstein in fact refers to it in his notebook (NB, p. 73; July 6, 1916). In the mid-1930s, when Wittgenstein studied Russian, one reason (Redpath, p. 28) was that “he was intent on being able to read Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky in the original.”

<sup>13</sup> Dickens describes the confusion of boarding the ship (pp. 218-9):

But nobody is in an ill-temper, nobody is the worse for drink, nobody swears an oath or uses a coarse word, nobody appears depressed....Now, I have seen emigrant ships before this day in June. And these people are so strikingly different from all other people in like circumstances whom I have ever seen, that I wonder aloud, 'What WOULD a stranger suppose these emigrants to be!'

In fact, the emigrants were Mormons, new adherents of a relatively new religion (p. 221):

I...had come aboard this Emigrant Ship to see what Eight hundred Latter-day Saints were like, and I found them (to the rout and overthrow of all my expectations) like what I now describe with scrupulous exactness.

And Dickens concludes (p. 228):

I went on board their ship to bear testimony against them if they deserved it, as I fully believed they would; to my great astonishment they did not deserve it; and my predispositions and

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tendencies must not affect me as an honest witness. ...some remarkable influence had produced a remarkable result, which better known influences have often missed.

<sup>14</sup> And eliminative materialists do this to folk psychology when they take it to be false physics.

<sup>15</sup> Wittgenstein took a general interest in so-called primitive peoples and modern interpretations of them. For example, in addition to Frazer's account of the practices of ancient peoples on the British Isles, Wittgenstein was also familiar with Prescott's *History of the Conquest of Mexico*, and had a somewhat similar reaction. In 1934 Drury read aloud some of this to Wittgenstein (p. 127): "During the reading he would from time to time stop me and exclaim at Prescott's condescending attitude towards those whom he referred to as 'the aborigines of the American continent'. Wittgenstein found this superior attitude very offensive..."

And we know from his notebooks in 1930 (C&V, p. 5/7) that Wittgenstein read at least some of Renan's *History of The People of Israel* (published beginning in 1887) in French. Renan's condescension comes through in passages where he characterizes ancient Hebrew beliefs as a (v. 1, p. 22): "tissue of deception," "errors," and (p. 27): "confusion of ideas." He remarks on (p. 34): "the childish conceptions of men incapable of making a serious analysis of their ideas." "The fundamental error of the savage...is spiritism, that is to say the stupidly realistic opinion which leads him to believe that in everything complex there is a spirit which forms its unity." Renan in fact specifically contrasts Semitic or Hebrew ways of thinking with what he calls "Aryan," and associates these differences with their languages (pp. 7-8, 12):

The Aryan Language was immensely superior [to the Semitic] especially in regard to the conjugation of verbs. This marvelous instrument, created by the instinct of primitive men, contained in the germ all the metaphysics which were afterwards to be developed through the Hindoo genius, the Greek genius, the German genius...Philosophy and science, which are the capital creations of humanity, could not spring from this [Semitic] source.

This is bound to have bothered Wittgenstein, who sees metaphysics as more a problem than achievement. And he certainly did not see philosophy as a capital creation of humanity! Renan continues (pp. 41, 50, 86):

The difficulty of explaining in Hebrew the simplest philosophical notions in the Book of Job and Ecclesiastes is something quite astonishing....The inroad of the scientific mind within the last century has made a great change in the relation of things. What was an advantage has become a drawback. The Semitic mind and intellect have appeared as hostile to the experimental science and to research into the mechanical causes of the world....A quiver full of steel arrows, a cable with strong coils, a trumpet of brass, crashing through the air with two or three sharp notes, such is Hebrew. A language of this kind is not adapted to the expression of philosophic thought, or scientific result or doubt, or the sentiment of the infinite.

In commenting on some of Renan's ideas, Wittgenstein wrote (November 5, 1930, C&V, p. 5/7): "...it is precisely the people of today & Renan himself who are primitive, if he believes that scientific explanation could enhance wonderment."

In fact, in the Preface (p. xxiv) Renan calls his book a "Hebraic history." It is no wonder that, given how Renan characterizes the Hebraic point of view, Wittgenstein could say to Drury in 1949 (p. 161): "my thoughts are one hundred percent Hebraic."