In his response (40:3–5) to the first divine speech of Job 38–39, brief though it was, Job said that he stood by what he had previously argued in his speeches, but he will not reiterate his case: ‘I have spoken once, but I shall not speak again, twice, but I shall say no more’. Now his response to the second divine speech of Job 40:6–41:34 goes one step further, in saying—not only that he has nothing to add, but—that he is abandoning his suit against Yahweh (which is how I will argue that we must read 42:6a). Just as in 40:3–5, he does not withdraw a word he has said, he does not admit that God is in the right or that he is in the wrong, he does not confess to any sins or apologize for what he has said.

In my translation, this second response of Job to Yahweh reads:

1 Then Job answered Yahweh, saying:
2 (A) I know that you can do anything, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.
3 (B) ‘Who is this who obscures the Design without knowledge?’ you ask.2
   To be sure, I made my depositions—without understanding—
   [concerning] things too wonderful for me—[things] I did not know.
4 (C) ‘Listen, and I will speak’, you said;3
   ‘I will question you, and you shall let me know [your answers].’
5 I have heard you with my ears, and my eye has now seen you.
6 So I submit—and I accept consolation [offered to me] for my dust and ashes.

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1 The Hebrew, without the article, could mean ‘counsel’ in general, as RSV, NJPS. But it seems likely that the reference here is to the divine counsel or plan, which I understand to be Yahweh’s design for the universe. Other translations that take the term in this sense include: NAB ‘divine plans’, NJB ‘my intentions’, NIV ‘my counsel’, and NEB, JB ‘my design(s)’; similarly Robert Gordis has ‘my plan’ (The Book of Job: Commentary, New Translation, and Special Notes, New York 1978, 491). I give the term a capital letter because it is a grand design, of universal scope.
2 I add the phrase ‘you ask’ to make clear that Job is quoting Yahweh's previous words; a similar addition is made by NIV, TEV and REB.
3 ‘You said’ is not in the Hebrew, but added also by NIV, TEV and REB to indicate that what precedes is a quotation of Yahweh’s words.
It is an unprepossessing response, without a trace of the passion and rhetorical verve of his other speeches. But it is a crafty conclusion in that, while his speech appears quietly reasonable and even submissive, it amounts in reality to a cool dismissal of all that Yahweh has been saying. I don’t think the commentators have really appreciated that, and this is the reason why I make a paper out of it.\(^4\)

There are three elements in Job’s speech. In the first, Job acknowledges the omnipotence of Yahweh (v. 2); in the second, he accepts that he has intruded into an area in which he has no competence (v. 3); and, in the third, having heard Yahweh’s speeches, he abandons his case against God and determines to resume his normal life (vv. 4–6). Put like that, Job’s intentions seem rather straightforward. But there is a subtlety in each of these responses.

1 You Can Do Anything

First, when Job acknowledges Yahweh’s omnipotence, there is nothing new in that, for he has always done so, and there is none of his companions who would deny it. But this avowal of Yahweh’s omnipotence stands here as a response to Yahweh’s speeches, which have by no means had that as their central theme. If this is Job’s response, it means that he has failed (perhaps, deliberately failed) to understand much of the divine speeches, whose purpose was rather to lay out the principles behind Yahweh’s creation and maintenance of the world. Though Yahweh never mentioned justice, Job has not failed to notice its absence. Job declines to accept any worldview that does not prioritize justice, and so he effectively says, It is as I always said, Might is right with you!

There no doubt a concessive note here: he accepts that he is a mere mortal, unfitted by capacity or knowledge for the management of the universe; as he has said already, in comparison with Yahweh, he is of little account (40:4). And yet, if demands for justice and a questioning of God’s manner of governing the universe are only ever to be answered by an invocation of the divine almightiness, it is a sorry state of affairs, and every bit as bad as Job had been complaining all along (cf. 23:13–14). In short, Job’s words are both a capitulation and, in a way, a reiteration of his complaint.

There is yet more to this response by Job. However we state the purpose of the divine speeches, there are few who would argue that they intend only to

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\(^4\) Much of what follows is to be found in one place or another in my commentary, *Job 38–42* (Word Biblical Commentary, 18B), Nashville 2011, esp. 1204–24. I thought it would be useful nevertheless to bring together my interpretation of these verses in a more manageable compass.