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Divine Discourse, by **Nicholas Wolterstorff**. New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 1995. Pp. x, 326. \$18.95

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Based on Wolterstorff's 1993 Wilde Lectures at the University of Oxford, *Divine Discourse* is a wide-ranging but philosophically detailed exploration of (primarily) six questions: 1. What is it for someone to speak? (chs. 2-5) 2. Is it coherent to suppose that God speaks? (chs. 6-7) 3. Is it legitimate to interpret a text in order to determine what the author is saying via that text? (chs. 8-10) 4. How ought one to interpret a text in order to determine what God is saying via that text? (chs. 11-14) 5. Are we entitled to believe that God speaks? (ch. 15) And 6. Is there good reason to suppose that God has spoken via the Bible? (ch. 16)

Contemporary speech-act theory posits a fundamental distinction between "locutionary acts" (uttering or inscribing words) and "illocutionary acts" (such as making an assertion, asking a question, or issuing a command). According to Wolterstorff, this distinction enables us to see that it is possible for a person to speak (i.e., perform an illocutionary act) without uttering or inscribing words. Wolterstorff sees this as an effective response to theologians who claim that God cannot speak since God does not possess a body.

Wolterstorff provides an interesting and detailed exploration of the variety of modes of discourse. While one can say something without using words (e.g., by using flags or morse code), Wolterstorff concentrates on exploring the variety of ways of speaking with words. Some of the ways he identifies are the following: 1. One can say that p by uttering or inscribing that p. 2. One can say that p by dictating and signing a letter, or by merely signing a letter composed by one's secretary. 3. One can say that p by one's *deputy* uttering that p (a deputy is someone who has been deputized to "speak in the name of" of another). 4. One can say that p by *appropriating* someone else's utterance or inscription that p. For example, one person might appropriate another's discourse by saying "I agree with what she just said." Although all deputized discourse is appropriated discourse, the converse does not hold.

Wolterstorff proposes that while some portions of the Bible can be understood as deputized discourse (viz., biblical prophecy), the overall claim that the Bible is God's Word is best understood in terms of appropriated discourse. His basic idea then is that God has appropriated the words of the human authors of the Bible, so that God has spoken via their words. While this appropriation claim (i.e., the claim that God has appropriated the words of the biblical authors) is logically consistent with the traditional doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture, I think the former is a considerably weaker claim than the latter. The appropriation claim and the traditional doctrine of inspiration both entail that the Bible is God's Word.¹ However, as Wolterstorff points out, a doctrine of inspiration answers the causal question: "how is the author's writing what he did to be accounted for?" (283) By contrast, the appropriation claim implies nothing about how to account for the author's writing what he did.

In chapters 5 through 7, Wolterstorff argues that it is coherent to suppose that God speaks. He begins with a discussion of the general question: What is it for someone to speak? Wolterstorff notes that merely uttering or inscribing some words is not sufficient for speaking. For example, I might utter the word “electrical” over several times without having said anything in Wolterstorff’s sense. (Wolterstorff acknowledges that his usage of “speech” may be a regimentation of normal English usage.) What additional conditions are required for a particular utterance or inscription to count as an instance of speech? Wolterstorff’s answer is that speaking entails that one acquires a normative standing. If I promise you something, this entails that I am subject to a *prima facie* obligation to keep my promise. If I tell you that *p*, this entails that you are subject to a *prima facie* obligation to believe what I have told you. An interesting (perhaps even surprising) consequence of Wolterstorff’s account is that the existence of speech entails the existence of morality, since speaking involves one in “the texture of moral rights and duties.” (95)

Thus, God can speak only if he can have rights and duties. Of course, there is no question that God can have rights, but it is controversial whether God can have obligations. If God cannot have obligations, then he cannot perform speech actions such as promising (since making a promise involves taking on an obligation). If God cannot have obligations, his participation in discourse is restricted and idiosyncratic. (103) The divine command theory of moral obligation (DCT) is attractive to many theists. But many philosophers hold that DCT implies that God has no obligations—they hold that it is problematic or even incoherent to suppose that God could issue commands to himself. So if the DCT is true and these philosophers are correct, then God’s participation in discourse is restricted and idiosyncratic.

Wolterstorff offers two possible resolutions of this problem. First, he claims (correctly, in my judgment) that it is unclear that DCT genuinely implies that God has no obligations. Since human legislators can issue legislation which applies to themselves, why cannot God issue legislation which applies to himself? Wolterstorff’s second resolution is to argue that even if God does not have obligations grounded in his own commands, God might be subject to what Wolterstorff calls *character-requirements*. The basic idea here is that having a certain character requires one to act or not-act in certain ways. Thus, if God is to have the character of *being a loving God*, then he might be subject to certain requirements, even if he cannot (for whatever reason) issue commands to himself. In ch. 7, Wolterstorff completes his argument for the coherence of divine discourse by arguing that it is possible for God to directly intervene in human history and bring about discourse-generating events. Thus, modern theologians who argue that contemporary science precludes the possibility of divine intervention in history are mistaken.

After defending the legitimacy of authorial discourse interpretation (i.e., interpretation aimed at determining what the author is saying via the text) against Ricoeur and Derrida, Wolterstorff explores in chs. 11 and 12 the question of how to interpret the biblical text for divine discourse. Two levels are involved here: on the first level we aim to determine what the

human author said; at the second level we aim to determine what God said. According to Wolterstorff, the fundamental principle of the "second hermeneutic" (i.e., second-level interpretation) is that we should interpret God as having said what the human author said, unless we have good reason for thinking otherwise (204). Clearly, we do sometimes have good reason for thinking otherwise. For example, unlike the psalmist, God has never said "I have sinned" (Ps. 51). According to Wolterstorff then, interpreting for divine discourse requires two sorts of beliefs: 1. beliefs about what the human authors said via the text, and 2. beliefs about the sorts of things that God would or would not say via a particular text. Of course, if Wolterstorff is correct, there is an important question to be explored: viz., how is it that our category 2 beliefs are grounded or warranted?

While I agree with Wolterstorff's fundamental principle for the second hermeneutic, I question some of his conclusions about particular cases. For example, Wolterstorff claims we have good reason to believe that God has not said with the human author of Psalm 93 that: "He [the Lord] has established the world; it shall never be moved." According to Wolterstorff, the psalmist here expresses a geocentric cosmology and asserts that the earth is immobile—an assertion which is false, since the earth orbits the sun. Wolterstorff concludes that while God spoke the psalmist's main point (viz., that God is worthy of praise), God's speech does not include or embrace the psalmist's particular way of making that point: "So we attribute that main point to God, and discard the psalmist's particular way of making the point as of purely human significance." (210) Now if the psalmist is asserting that the earth is physically immobile, then given the assumption that God would not assert a falsehood, it does of course follow that God has not asserted what the psalmist asserted.² But given the poetic character of the Psalms, I think it is at least unclear that the psalmist is making an assertion which is falsified by the fact that the earth orbits the sun.

In chapter 15, Wolterstorff asks whether well-educated citizens of the modern West are ever entitled to believe that God speaks. He begins with an account of entitled belief quite similar to some proposed accounts of so-called "deontological justification." Wolterstorff rejects the claim that we have voluntary control over our beliefs, but affirms the more modest thesis that we have voluntary control over *practices* which influence what beliefs we hold. According to Wolterstorff, "A *doxastic practice* is a way of steering one's doxastic constitution." (271) The core idea of Wolterstorff's account is that being entitled to a particular belief depends on whether one has fulfilled one's obligations with respect to the relevant doxastic practices:

a person S is entitled to his belief that p just in case S believes p, and there's no doxastic practice D pertaining to p such that S ought to have implemented D and S did not, or S ought to have implemented D better than S did. (272)

Wolterstorff completes his discussion of entitlement by considering an acquaintance he calls "Virginia" who had an experience which resulted in her believing that God had spoken to her. On the assumption that she was entitled to her prior Christian beliefs, Wolterstorff judges that

Virginia fulfilled all relevant doxastic practice or DP-obligations (e.g., she seriously entertained the possibility that her experience was a symptom of mental disorder), and therefore she was entitled to her belief that God had spoken to her.

Now for all I know, Wolterstorff may be correct in judging that Virginia was entitled to her belief that God had spoken to her (I will abbreviate the propositional content of this belief as "Gv"). But the significance of this judgment is context-relative. If we are interested in assessing Virginia's character as an epistemic and moral agent, then it would certainly be important to take account of the fact that she was entitled in her believing that Gv, for this implies that she fulfilled all DP-obligations pertaining to that belief.

But suppose our interest is not in Virginia's character, but rather in the theological question of whether God speaks. In this case, whether Virginia is entitled is relevant only if we have some reason to believe that her being entitled to believe Gv would constitute at least some degree of evidence that Gv is true. But it is unclear that we have reason to believe this. More relevant to the theological question is Wolterstorff's final chapter, where he asks whether we have good reason to believe that the Bible is a medium of divine discourse. Wolterstorff sketches the outlines of an historical argument, the basic idea of which is that if the apostles were deputized by God through Jesus Christ and all of the New Testament books are appropriately related to the apostles, then these books together constitute a single volume of divine discourse.

In closing, I commend Wolterstorff for stressing the importance of the biblical text for the epistemology of religious belief. He has provided a creative and philosophically rich discussion of discourse in general and divine discourse in particular. And his discussion forces the reader to grapple with questions of biblical interpretation that are both difficult and of great importance. Wolterstorff's book is crucial reading for those who desire to have a philosophically rigorous understanding of the Bible and biblical interpretation.

NOTES

1. Wolterstorff argues that *X inspires Y to say such-and-such* does not entail that *X says such-and-such*. (283) While this may in general be correct, I believe that the traditional doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture is properly understood as entailing that the Bible is God's Word: "On this subject the common doctrine of the Church is, and ever has been, that inspiration was an influence of the Holy Spirit on the minds of certain select men, which rendered them the organs of God for the infallible communication of his mind and will. They were in such a sense the organs of God, that what they said God said." Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, volume one (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) p. 154

2. In a footnote on p. 314, Wolterstorff indicates that while he has conducted his discussion (for the sake of simplicity) as if God would never assert a falsehood, he does not find this assumption obviously true. Wolterstorff remarks that it is often both praiseworthy and helpful for parents to tell their children things that are (strictly speaking) false. This may be correct, but I think it would be helpful to provide a fuller discussion of the assumption that God would not assert a falsehood.