

God Speak

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Abstract. Nicholas Wolterstorff has recently defended the acceptability of the belief that God speaks and examined various implications of such a belief. This paper examines several of his major hermeneutical and epistemological theses. Among the issues discussed are the following (i) I examine Wolterstorff's claim to 'honour' the results of biblical criticism, and argue that excavative biblical scholarship challenges the plausibility of various crucial assumptions necessary for believing authorial-discourse interpretation of the Bible to be possible. (ii) I dispute his peculiar view that God's speech should not be included under the rubric of divine revelation. (iii) Contrary to Wolterstorff I claim that miracles would have to play an essential role in divine discourse. (iv) I critically examine and reject his claim that – in the case he describes – 'we are entitled' to believe God is speaking.

INTRODUCTION

In *Divine Discourse*¹ Nicholas Wolterstorff defends the acceptability of the belief that God speaks (i.e. God performs illocutionary acts). This paper examines several of Wolterstorff's major hermeneutical and epistemological theses. I argue that, although Wolterstorff is correct about the significance of truth claims for adequately interpreting the Bible, those theses should be rejected.

Against Ricoeur, Hans Frei, and Derrida, Wolterstorff argues that interpreting texts generally, but the Bible in particular, to find out 'what the author was saying' (i.e. authorial-discourse interpretation) is desirable. Against Derrida in particular he argues that it is, of course, possible. Wolterstorff's principal aim is to endorse the 'practice of reading sacred texts to discern divine discourse' – a 'specific version' of the 'practice of authorial-discourse interpretation' (p. 152). In elaborating what he means by authorial-discourse interpretation Wolterstorff says, 'The myth dies hard that to read a text for authorial-discourse is to enter the dark world of the author's psyche. It's nothing of the sort. It is to read to discover what assertions, what promising, what requestings, what commandings, are rightly ascribed to the author on the ground of her having set down the words that she did in the situation in which she set them down' (p. 93).

It seems to me that in trying to discover what Wolterstorff claims we are trying to discover we are trying to 'enter the dark world of the author's psyche'. But as a larger question in the philosophy of language, this aspect

¹ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). Page references in text refer to this book.

of Wolterstorff's understanding of authorial-discourse interpretation is not especially pertinent to the distinction that really exercises him – the one between authorial-discourse interpretation and 'textual sense interpretation'. It suffices that by 'authorial-discourse interpretation' we understand interpreting 'for what the author was saying'. While in 'textual sense interpretation' one is interpreting the meaning of the text ('textual sense') in a particular context with little or no regard for what the author was saying. What the author may have been or still is saying, if anything, is regarded as, to greater or lesser degrees, irrelevant. 'Textual sense interpretation' should not be confused or conflated with either literal interpretation, or with the structuralist view that aims 'to treat the sense of a text as a self-contained entity' (p. 152).²

Authorial-discourse interpretation is, according to Wolterstorff, not only preferable to textual sense interpretation but to 'performance' interpretation as well. Musical scores are interpreted in different ways, and following Ricoeur (p. 175), Wolterstorff suggests that some readers engage in a performance interpretation equivalent when reading. Although 'the presuppositions of performance interpretation are coherent and tenable' he rejects its utility for scriptural interpretation. A religious community should not be 'content to practice performance interpretation on its sacred texts' instead of interpreting 'for what the author was saying'. To do so is to lose something of importance – a concern with truth (p. 169). '[W]hen it is performance interpretation in which one is engaged ... then one defends it by reference to its value ... [But with authorial-discourse interpretation] the issue ... is whether one's conclusions are correct, whether they are true' (pp. 180–1).

Wolterstorff argues that the topic of divine speech has largely been ignored by philosophers and theologians because it has been wrongly assimilated to divine revelation (pp. 9–10). Perhaps in an effort to delineate a novel topic, he claims 'it's plausible so to treat it [divine speech as a species of revelation] only if one stretches the concept of *revelation* beyond recognition' (p. 10). He is mistaken. While it is true that speech is not usually revelation, it is not a mistake to regard alleged divine speech under the rubric of divine revelation. He bases his claim on an analysis of what it means to 'reveal' something and how speaking differs from it. But this argument is as unconvincing as it is inconsequential. It is unconvincing since there is nothing mistaken in regarding speech, in certain circumstances, as a type of revelation and usage is not contravened. It is inconsequential because whether or not divine

² The distinctions I have set out between authorial-discourse interpretation and textual sense interpretation suffice for present purposes. But the issue does get more complicated in particular cases. For example, Wolterstorff says, 'Ricoeur's theory of interpretation, eventually revealed that his advocacy of textual sense interpretation, for interpreting texts at a distance, was not based, strictly speaking, on a rejection of authorial-discourse interpretation, but rather on the claim that to discover the sense of the text *just is* to discover the content and stance of authorial-discourse interpretation; those have been fully incarnated in the sense' (p. 153). But again, the main issue for Wolterstorff is the one between authorial-discourse interpretation and textual sense interpretation and his defence of the former.

speech is properly regarded as a type of revelation, the issues that Wolterstorff raises in connection with divine speech remain unchanged. God's alleged speaking has historically been taken as a typical and primary type of divine revelation. It is not possible to show that regarding divine speech as a type of revelation is mistaken on conceptual or definitional grounds. It is Wolterstorff who contravenes usage, and he can make his surprising claim only by ignoring aspects of the meaning of revelation and speech in favour of others. This is discussed further in the section on Speech-Action Theory below.

REBURYING 'EXCAVATIVE' BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP

Neither the findings of redaction criticism, nor anything in the past two centuries of what Wolterstorff, after Robert Alter,³ calls 'excavative' biblical scholarship, presents any problem for Wolterstorff seeing the Bible as 'mediated divine discourse' through disparate forms of 'mediating human discourse'. Excavative biblical scholarship attempts to determine various things about the 'origin of the Bible: who composed these various books, when and where, for whom, with what pre-existing texts in hand, with what traditional genre's as patterns, with what historical events in mind, to make which "ideological points", and so forth, on and on' (p. 16). Does such scholarship present *any* difficulty in claiming, as Wolterstorff does, that 'the Bible must be interpreted as one book' (p. 218) – though this is an assumption that some who favour textual sense interpretation (e.g. Hans Frei) share?⁴ Apparently not for Wolterstorff. Yet it is an assumption that such scholarship shows to be gratuitous apart from theological suppositions or rationalisations – many of which believers themselves reject. It is clear that authorial-discourse interpretation of the Bible is impossible without a host of other theological assumptions as well. As Wolterstorff himself says,

[I]nterpretation of a biblical passage for the divine mediating discourse cannot proceed without the interpreter appealing to convictions she has as to what God would and would not be likely to have intended to say by appropriating this passage within the whole text of the Bible. And such convictions, I said, will depend crucially on what the interpreter believes about the nature and purposes of God. Naturally interpretation does not require that the interpreter be traditionally Christian in these latter beliefs. But if she is, then she will in fact, in the course of her interpretation, appeal tacitly to what Frei calls the *sensus fidelium*, and to what Swinburne calls 'the teaching of the Church' [pp. 221–2].⁵

The more general question then is whether excavative scholarship challenges 'assumptions about the accessibility of authorial intentions and their

³ Robert Alter, *The World of Biblical Literature* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

⁴ Hans Frei, *Types of Christian Theology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); 'The "Literal Reading" of the Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition: Does it Stretch or Will It Break?', in Frank McConnell, ed., *The Biblical and the Narrative Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

⁵ Cf. Richard Swinburne, *Revelation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

relevance to interpretation' (p. 219)? Surely this is one of the concerns motivating the move from authorial-discourse to text sense interpretation. Excavative scholarship challenges the plausibility of various crucial assumptions necessary for believing authorial-discourse interpretation of the Bible to be possible. Wolterstorff denies this while at the same time claims to 'honour' the results of biblical criticism (p. 73). In fact, such criticism plays no substantive role in his book. If he does not ignore it, then he heavily discounts or quarrels with the implications of excavative biblical scholarship far more than do contemporary modes of scripture interpretation like 'biblical theology' and 'literary studies' – modes that focus on the text (see pp. 16–18). For example, he says

[perhaps] John... was not asserting, in contrast to Matthew and Luke, that the temple cleansing took place early in Jesus' ministry, nor did the ancient church take him as asserting that [O]ften where many see error in the gospel narratives, they and we ought instead to spy the workings of an unfamiliar illocutionary stance... [p. 242]. If we can understand the workings of this 'element of imaginative "creative reconstruction" of the truth' in at least some ancient biography – *not fiction, but biography* – perhaps we will also understand the illocutionary stance of the biblical narrative [p. 245] ... perhaps the gospel narratives are best understood as *portraits* of Jesus, designed to reveal who he really was and what was really happening in his life... and perhaps they achieve that goal by, at certain points, going beyond and even against the available chronicle... [claiming that] they might well have gone thus and so. And as to the divergences among the implied chronicles of the gospels: though some of those may reflect somewhat different understanding of the identity and significance of Jesus, it's likely that others do not... one author claims that Jesus' cleansing of the temple occurred late in his ministry, the other claims that it might well have occurred earlier... No conflict there. And one last point: both portraits may have been inspired [p. 259].

Are there any discrepancies, for there are no longer 'inconsistencies' or 'conflicts' on Wolterstorff's view, that cannot be accommodated by this account of the illocutionary stance of gospel narratives (i.e. like that of ancient biography of which 'the gospels were specimens of the genre', p. 260)? He says, 'For the purposes of the modern historian' it might be important to 'sort out where the writers were claiming actuality... But there are other purposes that these portraits of Jesus serve... other purposes that the early church embraced – which would explain why they sat so lightly on the discrepancies' (p. 259). Indeed, 'other purposes' would explain it.

Biblical scholarship plays a role in authorial-discourse interpretation according to Wolterstorff in 'the work of scholars who open up to us a better grasp of what the human authors of Scripture were saying [and this] is of indispensable importance for the discernment of divine discourse' (p. 188). But this is a procrustean view of the matter. It misrepresents excavative biblical scholarship and what it tells us. Such scholarship is not fundamentally or even peripherally concerned with the noematic and designative content of the biblical speakers' illocutionary acts.

Wolterstorff claims that excavative biblical scholarship aids us in interpreting human discourse that is ‘deputised’, appropriated, or inspired divine discourse. But the assumption that human discourse in scripture ‘mediates’ divine discourse plays no role in excavative biblical scholarship. The way the Bible came to be redacted, its sources, and how it attained its present form, are irrelevant for Wolterstorff except insofar as they may shed light on what the human authors were saying. The principal way in which he sees biblical scholarship as aiding better interpretation of mediating human discourse is ‘in the flow of new and better modern language translations’ (p. 188). This does not ‘honour’ the result of excavative biblical criticism but at times ignores it and at other times subverts it. Contrary to what he says, Wolterstorff sees his assumption that scriptural discourse is humanly mediated divine discourse as immune to the findings of biblical criticism – and he is right. Such findings for Wolterstorff are relevant only to interpreting the human authors. But biblical criticism, and its implications, are not primarily about translation or such interpretation. His claim that ‘our interest as authorial-discourse interpreters is indeed in what the speaker said – not in what he intended to say’ (p. 199), and presumably not in what excavative scholarship has shown that texts reveal unintended by the author, makes his view of authorial-discourse interpretation pristine but especially narrow.

As Wolterstorff notes, neither Ricoeur (pp. 132–3) nor Derrida deny that author-discourse interpretation is appropriate and necessary in some cases.⁶ But Ricoeur opts for textual sense interpretation of the Bible because he believes that in the case of the Bible discourse interpretation faces insurmountable difficulties – a view consonant with an acceptance of excavative biblical scholarship. Wolterstorff says, ‘The person who engages in the practice of interpreting Scripture for theological content, and the person who engages in the practice of interpreting Scripture for literary qualities, each looks around for allies in their attempt to resist the hegemony of excavative scholarship. What they see at first is each other. But if they continue looking, eventually they’ll spy... the practice of interpreting Scripture for divine discourse’ (pp. 17–18). However, competing types of approaches to scriptural interpretation such as ‘biblical theology’ and ‘literary studies’ are at ease with excavative biblical scholarship in a way that authorial-discourse interpretation is not. Wolterstorff is therefore seriously mistaken in viewing authorial-discourse interpretation alongside these as being against ‘the hegemony’ of excavative biblical scholarship. In short, Wolterstorff’s claim to honour the results of biblical scholarship since the 19th century is either naive or disingenuous.

⁶ Cf. Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory* (Forth Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976); *Hermeneutics and The Human Sciences*, ed. and tr. J. B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, tr. and ed. by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); *Writing and Difference*, tr. by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978); *Of Grammatology*, tr. by G. C. Spivak (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

RICOEUR AND TEXTUAL SENSE INTERPRETATION

Since the principal target of Wolterstorff's critique of textual sense interpretation is Paul Ricoeur, it is worth looking at that critique in some detail. What is the matter with textual sense interpretation according to Wolterstorff? After expositing Ricoeur's views on text sense interpretation Wolterstorff says, 'discourse proper has disappeared, and all that remains ... is the sense of the text ... and the mental life of the agent which gave rise to the text ... We are then asked to decide which of these to concern ourselves with, when interpreting texts at a distance. But why accept this disjunction? Why not practise authorial-discourse interpretation' (p. 149). Ricoeur has reasons for the disjunction that Wolterstorff quotes at length (e.g. p. 146) but does not examine. His query is thus largely heuristic. Instead of discussing Ricoeur's reasons, Wolterstorff attempts to summarize the crucial assumption behind those reasons. He says, '[Ricoeur's] assumption, never-quite-spoken, was that, for an interpreter of a text in a distanced situation, everything of significance in the act of discourse, of which the text was the medium, has been lodged in, and is therefore recoverable from, the sense of the text which was composed. Though the act of discourse is indeed distinct from the sense of the text, that distinctness, to the interpreter at a distance, makes no difference' (p. 149). The reason it 'makes no difference' for Ricoeur is because in interpretation at a distance, as in the case of the Bible, it can make no difference. The text is autonomous with respect to the intention of the author (p. 146). At any rate, Ricoeur need not agree that 'everything of significance in the act of discourse ... has been lodged in, and is therefore recoverable from ... the text'. Textual sense interpretation requires no such assumption.

In examining this assumption Wolterstorff cites examples in which Ricoeur himself 'hesitates' as to whether one 'must exit the sense of the text' and attend to the act and context of discourse (p. 150). This does not undermine Ricoeur's position, but qualifies it in ways in which he apparently recognizes. Ricoeur allows that there are cases in which interpretation may require information outside the sense of the text—cases Wolterstorff cites as counterexamples where the meaning of a text may, by itself, be indeterminate (pp. 150–2). But the important question, and the one on which Wolterstorff and Ricoeur are fundamentally at odds, is how relevant these qualifications are to interpreting the Bible. Wolterstorff's quarrel is with Ricoeur's claim that, in Wolterstorff's words, 'those acts of discourse performed by the composition of texts which are, in his terminology "poetic" texts ... do not refer, nor does the writer of a religious text. The text produced has a sense, and that sense projects a world; but the discourse of which the text is a medium is devoid of ostensive reference' (p. 150). Wolterstorff claims that 'In the case of non-"poetic" texts, [and he regards religious texts as non-

poetic], there is something in the act of discourse which is of significance to the interpreter but is not lodged in, and hence is not recoverable from, the sense of the text – namely, the designative content and the references’ (p. 151). If so, then the proper method of interpretation must be authorial-discourse interpretation. There seems to be common ground between Ricoeur and Wolterstorff here but there is not. Ricoeur does not claim that although there is, or may be, designative content and references in the Bible, it is irrelevant for purposes of interpretation. He claims instead that there is no ostensive reference in religious texts. But if there were, would authorial-discourse interpretation rather than textual sense interpretation be required? Ricoeur denies this. Interpretation at a distance must be textual sense interpretation.

Wolterstorff thinks the Bible cannot be interpreted properly apart from the assumption that it has designative content and references. ‘The Bible is a rich and subtle letter from a friend of ours to a group of us’ (p. 185). This is crucial because he sees the assumption as linked to the (more or less) literal truth claims in the Bible and therefore as requiring authorial-discourse interpretation. ‘I have assumed ... that the noematic and designative content are true or false; and that what makes them true or false is ... whether the facts are as the designative content represents them as being’ (p. 155).⁷ I agree with Wolterstorff on the significance of truth claims for adequately interpreting the Bible. On this most fundamental matter Ricoeur is mistaken. Ricoeur thinks that even if scripture did have designative content and references, which it does not, they are irrelevant to interpretation. For Ricoeur, the ‘truth’ or at least the meaning of the Bible is not and cannot be linked to ‘whether the facts are as the designative content represents them as being’, since so far as the text and so any possible mode of interpreting the text is concerned, there is no designative content or ostensive references. The differences between Wolterstorff and Ricoeur on how to interpret a text pale in comparison to their disagreement about whether the Bible has designative content and ostensive references. But their differences about how to interpret a text are not, at least not in any straightforward way, a function of their differing views on designative content and ostensive reference.⁸

But Wolterstorff argues, unconvincingly, that ‘[T]here is no such thing as *the sense of a text*, as Ricoeur and those in the general tradition of New Criticism understand that [p. 171] ... textual sense interpretation assumes that every text has one sense – or, in recognition of ambiguities, a rather limited number of senses. That assumption is false ... though we may profess to be engaged in textual sense interpretation, we all of us, surreptitiously or openly, engage in authorial-discourse interpretation’ (p. 173). The assump-

⁷ The noematic content of illocutionary acts is the same if the thought is the same ‘and toward that thought’ the same illocutionary stance, for example, assertion, is taken. See pp. 138–9.

⁸ It is, incidentally, more natural to suppose that Ricoeur’s view about the lack of designative content and reference in religious texts is dictated by his theory of interpretation rather than a result of that view.

tion that every text has one or a limited number of senses is based on the idea, as Wolterstorff put it, ‘that linguistic context both eliminates many ambiguities of literal meaning and forces and determines non-literal meaning’ (p. 172). Wolterstorff claims ‘it does nothing of the sort; and that, accordingly ... there is no such thing as the sense of a text’ (p. 172). He asks, ‘Why *must* we come up with a consistent interpretation? Why can’t texts have inconsistent senses?’ (p. 172). And the answer to his query is that textual sense interpretation *does not* rule out the possibility of a text having inconsistent senses. This can be a conclusion of textual sense interpretation. That other interpretations are possible given suitable intra-textual assumptions, and certainly given extra-textual assumptions (‘some people *are* insane’ (p. 173)); or that one may be (utterly) wrong in one’s interpretation of the sense of the text, *does not* show, as Wolterstorff claims, that the assumption that a text has one or a limited number of senses is false, or that the ‘concept of *the sense of a text* is an incoherent concept’ (p. 172). For that assumption is based on ruling out the kind of extra-textual suppositions that while crucial to authorial-discourse interpretation (e.g. that the author did or did not intend to deceive) *are irrelevant to textual sense interpretation*. However, even if the assumption is false, textual sense interpretation may, as Ricoeur thinks, be the only option.

In a contentious summation of Ricoeur’s views, Wolterstorff claims Ricoeur’s ‘[A]dvocacy of textual sense interpretation, for interpreting texts at a distance, was not based, strictly speaking, on a rejection of authorial-discourse interpretation, but rather on the claim that to discover the sense of the text *just is* to discover the content and stance of authorial-discourse interpretation; those have been fully incarnated in the sense. It was, strictly speaking, an argument against the *autonomy* of authorial-discourse interpretation’ (p. 153). Ricoeur would of course reject this along with the claim that he attempts ‘to assimilate it [authorial-discourse interpretation] to textual sense interpretation’ (p. 171). The assimilation is Wolterstorff’s own.

SPEECH-ACTION THEORY AND A NORMATIVE THEORY OF DISCOURSE

Wolterstorff regards speech-action theory as central to his overall thesis concerning authorial-discourse interpretation as the only proper method for interpreting the Bible. He employs Austin’s distinction between locutionary and illocutionary acts. ‘Locutionary acts are acts of uttering or inscribing words. *Il*-locutionary acts are acts performed *by way* of locutionary acts, acts such as asking, asserting, commanding, promising, and so forth’ (p. 13). One can perform illocutionary acts not just by way of ‘uttering or inscribing sentences ... [but] by producing a blaze, or smoke ... [or] one can tell somebody something by deputising someone else to speak on one’s behalf’

(p. 13). He claims that ‘contemporary speech-action theory opens up the possibility of a whole new way of thinking about God speaking: perhaps the attribution of speech to God ... should be understood as the attribution of *illocutionary actions*, leaving it open how God performs those actions – maybe by bringing about the sounds or characters of some natural language, maybe not’ (p. 13). The idea that this distinction ‘opens up the possibility of a whole new way of thinking about God speaking’ is mistaken, for the simple reason that the distinction has always been implicitly recognized. See, for example, the opening page of the Koran. Austin did not invent the distinction as Wolterstorff seems to think, but described it.

Nevertheless, let's look at how Wolterstorff employs the distinction. Wolterstorff's first application of the distinction goes astray. He discusses a version of Maimonides's view that God cannot speak since he has no mouth etc. But in seeing it as directed wholly against the idea of God performing locutionary acts Wolterstorff (arguably) misunderstands Maimonides. It is not that God does not speak because he does not have a mouth. It must have occurred to Maimonides that God might make sounds occur without a vocal apparatus. God does not perform such actions because the idea of such speech is anthropomorphic. Maimonides does not (I think) rule out illocutionary acts – though he does critique the idea of God performing miracles as again anthropomorphic.

In arguing that divine speech is not a type of revelation Wolterstorff relies heavily on the locutionary and illocutionary distinction.

Let us then analyse God's illocutionary act of commanding [Augustine to open his book], into *propositional content* and *illocutionary act*, yielding these two components: the propositional content, *that Augustine sometime soon opens his book*, and the illocutionary act, of commanding Augustine *to do what would make that proposition true*. Now the content ... was in fact true; and since God would have foreknown it, it was ... a candidate for divine revelation ... But obviously God's *commanding* Augustine to do what would make that content true, is not to be identified with God's *revealing* its truth to Augustine; nor is that act of revealing in any way involved in the act of commanding [p. 20].

Two objections are in order. First, the analysis of an illocutionary act into two components as Wolterstorff does is not, so far as I know, a distinction of J. L. Austin's, but one R. M. Hare makes. At any rate, his analysis of the illocutionary act of commanding into separable is as suspect as it is awkward. The illocutionary act of God's commanding cannot be broken down as Wolterstorff supposes because the propositional content of God's illocutionary act of commanding is an inseparable part of God's illocutionary act; or alternatively, the propositional content of God's illocutionary act is not what Wolterstorff takes it to be but must contain reference to what Wolterstorff wants to separate (i.e. the illocutionary act part of God's illocutionary act of commanding Augustine) as part of it. Second, the more

straightforward difficulty with Wolterstorff's argument is that it leaves the claim that divine speech is a type of revelation untouched. No one says divine speech is identical to divine revelation – only that it is a type of revelation. God reveals various things through speech. Wolterstorff claims 'it makes no sense to suppose that God revealed to Augustine to *open his book*' (p. 20). But in context it makes perfect sense.

Crucial to Wolterstorff's notion of revelation is that it informs us of something we do not know. 'Speaking consists not in communicating or expressing knowledge ... but in taking up a certain sort of *normative stance* ... The attempt to treat discourse as a species of revelation ... founders on the inherently *normative* character of discourse ... The intended function of promising and commanding is not to inform us of what we don't know but to take on duties *toward* us and to require things *of* us' (p. 35). But the function of promising and commanding can be, and often is to inform us of what we do not know. This is especially true in scripture where God reveals all sorts of things through promises and commands. Whatever their interest or purpose might be, the various distinctions Wolterstorff calls attention to between revealing and speaking (chapter 2), do not support his claim that divine discourse is not (sometimes) a type of revelation.

To the question 'Could God Have and Acquire the Rights and Duties of a Speaker?', Wolterstorff gives a qualified 'yes'. God has rights and obligations – though his obligations are 'character-required of God ... not the consequence of something's being imposed on God from outside' (p. 111). He claims to establish this without endorsing any divine theory of moral obligation, and without raising the issue of whether such a theory is even true (p. 113).⁹ Although he does not mention 'compatibilism', Wolterstorff's view appears to be a defence of the compatibility of freewill and determinism with regard to God – a view he would undoubtedly reject with regard to persons, and elsewhere, with respect to God (cf. pp. 118, 122).

As a precursor to his claim that God has the rights and duties of a speaker, Wolterstorff elaborates a normative theory of discourse. 'To institute an arrangement for the performance of speech actions is to institute a way of acquiring rights and responsibilities' (p. 84). The central part of his analysis of the relation of 'counting-as'. What is it for A to count as B? He says,

[W]hereas the action of hitting a home run is *constituted* by a particular set of rules, surely an action like assertion is not so constituted. There are many different ways of asserting; there could be more ... By contrast, one cannot devise alternative actions which will count as hitting a home run ... If asserting is to be compared with anything in games, it is best compared with *winning*, not with such game-embedded, rule-defined, actions as hitting a home run. For of winning we have a concept

⁹ His view involves a modification of R. M. Adams's 'modified' divine command theory. See R. M. Adams, 'A Modified Divine Command Theory', in R. M. Adams, *The Virtue of Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987). For a critique of Adams's theory see my 'Adams's Modified Divine Command Theory of Ethics', *Sophia* 33 (1994), 63–77.

independent of any particular game ... The concept of home run *fits* the action; the action *satisfies* the concept of a home run ... in all these cases, counting-as is merely concept-satisfaction ... by contrast ... to say such-and-such action counts as winning, is not just to say that they satisfy the concept of winning. So too, to say that uttering a certain sound counts as asserting so-and-so, is not just to say that that act of uttering *satisfies the concept* of asserting so-and-so. Uttering so-and-so is one thing; asserting such-and-such is another [pp. 81–82].

The distinctions drawn do not show a significant difference between cases in which ‘counting-as is merely concept-satisfaction’ and those in which he claims it is not. The notion of ‘winning’ may require a more specific context before we can say that such-and-such an action satisfies the concept ‘winning’. But this does not show a fundamental distinction between actions such as winning and hitting a home run. He has not shown why or how ‘uttering a certain sound counts as asserting so-and-so’, is to say something more than that ‘that act of uttering *satisfies the concept* of asserting so-and-so’. One might even argue that Wolterstorff’s account ‘of one’s utterance of a sentence counting as one’s performance of some speech action’ (p. 84), his ‘normative theory of discourse’, is compatible with, or even subsumable to, John Searle’s theory of concept satisfaction – the theory he objects to.¹⁰

More importantly, although his normative theory of discourse elaborates some of what is involved in discourse, it is problematic and baroque. He says, ‘The judge’s uttering of some words *counts* as his pronouncing the defendant guilty ... [T]he only thing the judge brings about causally is the utterance of those words: what then is it for his doing that to *count as* his also performing the very different action of pronouncing the defendant guilty?’ (96). This is not right. In those circumstances the judge does more than causally bring about the utterance. That is the least significant of the things he causally brings about. However, the more basic problem with his theory is that it is counter-intuitive to suppose that the rights and duties that Wolterstorff thinks are imposed on a speaker in asserting something are imposed. Since the normative theory of discourse he champions is, as he presents it, necessary to his defence of authorial-discourse interpretation of the Bible, the theory is a stumbling block – though not the most serious one.

NOSES OF WAX

Suppose one accepts authorial-discourse interpretation as the proper mode for interpreting texts generally and the Bible in particular. Can one know that one’s interpretation is correct? ‘[A]s John Locke puts it, the outcome of biblical interpretation threatens to be “that the scripture serves but, like a nose of wax, to be turned and bent, just as may fit the contrary orthodoxies of different societies. For it is these several systems, that to each party are the

¹⁰ John Searle, *Speech Acts*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

just standards of truth''' (p. 226). Wolterstorff's treatment of the 'wax nose' problem is indicative of the admittedly deep theological presuppositions of authorial-discourse interpretation of the Bible, and also of how problematic such interpretation is. It is odd that he does not notice that the wax nose problem, or a version of it, is just as applicable to text sense and most other modes of interpretation. Nevertheless, his suggestions for overcoming the problem in connection with authorial-discourse interpretation are unacceptable.

Wolterstorff says that 'there is no way to avoid employing our conviction as to what is true and loving in the process of interpreting for divine discourse – no way to circumvent... the wax-nose anxiety... [O]nly with awe and inspiration... only after prayer and fasting, is it appropriate to interpret a text so as to discern what God said... The risks cannot be evaded. But they can be diminished' given certain presumptions and tactics (p. 236). What are these presumptions?

[i] the presumption that the appropriator says what the person whose discourse is appropriated said... given our convictions as to what the appropriator would have wanted and not wanted to say... [ii] a presumption... that the speaker says what his sentence means. There may be good reason... for departing from... that presumption; but that then is what we are attentive for... [iii] one minimises the risk by doing one's best to remain genuinely open to the possibility that the beliefs with which one approached the enterprise of interpreting for divine discourse are mistaken... awareness of this diversity of interpretations remains relatively useless unless one also struggles to become self-critical... so as to be able to listen to those alternative interpretations, genuinely listen. Parochialism, especially arrogant parochialism, makes it inevitable that scripture becomes a wax nose in our hands... [iv] one minimises the risk of missing or misinterpreting the divine discourse by cultivating knowledge of ourselves and of the world... [and by] coming to know God better [pp. 237–9].

The ways in which he claims the risks can be diminished do not diminish Locke's anxiety but attenuate it – and none more than the admonition to avoid 'parochialism'.

The most arresting consideration is in point iii. Locke's point is surely that parochialism, in one way or another, is the issue that logically – not just psychologically – generates wax-nose anxiety. His worry is *that all interpretation of scripture is necessarily parochial*. Wolterstorff, however, psychologises all of the above points and in so doing he disregards the epistemological problem that Locke is concerned with. Along with neglecting the genuine wax nose problem (i.e. the epistemological problem), Wolterstorff posits ways of dealing with parochialism that are as naive as they are themselves parochial. He does not recognize that the parochial, especially the 'especially arrogant' parochial (and what serious parochialism is not arrogant?) never see themselves as such. Is there ever a question that as a result of biblical authorial-discourse interpretation one will conclude something one does not already

believe – let alone something that conflicts with what one already firmly believes?

Consider literalism and parochialism for a moment. This issue is not going to turn out as Wolterstorff would like. Bertrand Russell's authorial-discourse reading of Jesus's teachings on Hell is vastly different and far more literal than that of Richard Swinburne's. Whose reading is more acceptable given the criteria Wolterstorff cites? 'The mind is its own place, and in it self Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n' (Milton, *Paradise Lost* 1, 254–5).¹¹ And reading Plantinga on the problem of evil one could easily doubt that his extrapolation of the problem is anything like Job's understanding of the problem. Again, Wolterstorff's and Plantinga's interpretation of Calvin and Luther on 'basic belief' is not, as I see it, warranted by authorial-discourse interpretation of the relevant texts.¹² Scripture *is* a wax-nose in the hands of contemporary analytic philosophers of religion. Wolterstorff's treatment of Locke's wax nose problem does not in any way lessen the problem but exemplifies it.

MIRACLES

There are some further epistemological problems relating to God allegedly speaking that are central to Wolterstorff's defence of authorial-discourse interpretation and should be examined.

Wolterstorff quotes the story of Augustine hearing a child's voice saying 'take it and read' and Augustine interpreting this as a divine command to open 'my book of scripture read the first passage on which my eyes should fall' (p. 4). The passage Augustine turns to says 'spend no more thought on nature and nature's appetites' but turn to Lord Jesus Christ'. Wolterstorff says that Augustine 'had no doubt that by way of the child chanting these words, *God* was then and there saying something, performing a speech action ... commanding' (p. 5). Wolterstorff is interested in this as an example of a divine speech action. But both the child's strange chanting and Augustine's 'fortuitous' opening of Paul's Epistles to that 'providential' section are philosophically problematic not primarily because of God's alleged speech, but because of the episode's miraculous nature. The chanting, followed by Augustine opening to that particular paragraph, was either a (i) coincidence, (ii) determined by a divine plan, or (iii) a miracle. If the miracle occurred then the incident was not a coincidence and God was speaking to Augustine

¹¹ See, Bertrand Russell, 'Why I am Not a Christian', in *Why I am Not a Christian and Other Essays* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1975); Richard Swinburne, 'A Theodicy of Heaven and Hell', in Press, 1983), pp. 37–54; and Michael Levine, 'Swinburne's Heaven: One Hell of a Place', *Religious Studies* 29 (1993), 519–31.

¹² Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, eds., *Faith and Rationality* (Notre Dame: University Notre Dame, 1983). For a critique of 'reformed epistemology' and the claim that reformed epistemology can be traced to Calvin or Luther – for example that they adhered to the Plantinga-Wolterstorff 'reformed epistemological' notion of 'basic belief' see my critical study of *Faith and Rationality* in *Philosophia* 16 (1986), 447–60.

(via scripture) – unless God could have arranged the event (no longer a simple coincidence) without miraculous (‘particular’) intervention – in which case a host of problems arise in connection with divine foreknowledge and human freedom (cf. p. 122). This would be a case of a type of divine speech (‘by way of what Paul said’, p. 5). The immediate difficulty, however, is not with the speech but the alleged miracle.

Wolterstorff claims that no miracle is involved. He explains Augustine’s belief in terms of his background belief that God speaks ... and ‘the relevance to his own life, of God saying *take it and read*’. And he says that there was ‘No hurdling the wall to ask the child why he or she was chanting these words. *And – let it be noted – no miracles!*’ (p. 6, my emphasis). But the incident that immediately precipitated Augustine’s change was either a miracle (divine intervention) or a coincidence, and would likely have been regarded by Augustine as a particular divine intervention. When one believes God is talking to oneself by way of scripture, one believes that what they are reading applies or was indirectly addressed to them along with others. Wolterstorff claims that Augustine and Anthony believed something different. They believed that God was ‘here and now’ (Augustine) or ‘then and there’ (Anthony) speaking to them ‘by way of what the addressees regarded as a sacred text’ (p. 7). Leaving aside the possibility of pure coincidence or of God preordaining their readings and interpretation, then either the distinction between (i) reading the text and interpreting it as applying and addressed to them and (ii) interpreting the text as an instance of God ‘then and there’ speaking to them collapses; or else the miraculous character of God ‘then and there’ speaking to them must be acknowledged. However, even in case i there would have been a miracle at the point in the past when God spoke (if God spoke). There would have been a divine intervention in the natural order (though not strictly speaking a violation of the laws of nature since such laws apply to the natural but not the supernatural) – when God spoke to, or inspired, whoever was mediating the divine discourse.

Wolterstorff considers and rejects the idea that ‘all the events generative of divine discourse were contained in God’s pre-creation plan’ (p. 121). He says ‘the events generative of divine discourse cannot all be the consequence of God’s implementation of a plan formed at creation – [it is] highly likely that many if not most of the purported episodes of divine discourse are the result of direct intervention on God’s part’ (p. 123). But what is a miracle if not a particular ‘direct intervention’ by God? Wolterstorff’s account of the Augustine episode is inconsistent – regarding it both involving and not involving a miracle. Of course he considers no naturalistic explanation for Augustine’s or Anthony’s episode.

'ARE WE ENTITLED?'

Wolterstorff addresses the epistemological question of how beliefs that God speaks 'are to be appraised' (p. 261). He considers the case of a woman who believes that God spoke to her (pp. 274–5) and he claims that she is 'entitled' to the belief – 'entitled' partly on the basis of her other 'background beliefs' and because a psychologist told her that nothing was wrong with her. '[A] person 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 better than S did ... the obligations in question are *situated* obligations ... a function of various aspects of the particular situation of the person in question' (p. 272). On Wolterstorff's account anyone may be entitled to believe anything given a certain context, and a set of 'background beliefs'. Even if this is true, all it does is covertly obfuscate the real issue.

In the case of the woman who believes God is speaking to her, the relevant philosophical question has to do with objective justification rather than entitlement. Consider William Alston's account of justified belief. '[B]eing justified in believing that *p* is for that belief to be based on an objectively adequate ground, one that is (fairly) strongly indicative of the truth of the belief' (p. 267).¹³ How one might distinguish a veridical experience of being spoken to by God, and be justified in believing the experience to be veridical, from cases of nonveridical experiences and unjustified belief? It *sounds* illuminating to say that she is entitled to believe God spoke to her, but once clear about the nature of 'entitlement' it is evident that it is not. For all that Wolterstorff has said, the 'Yorkshire Ripper' is also 'entitled' to believe that God spoke to him – and may be correct in his belief. So too may Margaret Thatcher if she believes, as some others undoubtedly believe and are 'entitled' to believe, that God speaks to her. They could have gone to the same Harvard Health Plan psychologist as the woman in Wolterstorff's example, believed they were being commanded by a loving God, and judged that 'accepting that the experiences are veridical, have the consequences that one would expect if the experiences were indeed of God speaking' (p. 277).¹⁴

CONCLUSION

Partly by employing elementary distinctions of J. L. Austin's speech-action theory, but largely by noting ways in which people can be said to 'speak' (e.g. through an intermediary), Wolterstorff shows that neither a vocal apparatus nor appropriate substitute thereof is necessary for God to speak. Assuming God can act in the world and does not need speech organs to speak, God can speak directly to someone, by 'inspiring' someone, by appropriating

¹³ William Alston, *Perceiving God* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 99.

¹⁴ Cf. Michael Levine, 'Can There Be Self-Authenticating Experiences of God?', *Religious Studies* 19 (1983), 229–34.

someone else's discourse, or whatever. But then is the idea of 'God speaking' philosophically problematic? If so, it is problematic in connection with divine intervention, and because of various epistemological problems associated with justifiably believing God is speaking and interpreting what is said. It is here that I have shown Wolterstorff's analysis to be mistaken.

The subtitle of Wolterstorff's book is 'philosophical reflections on the claim that God speaks'. But the philosophical dimension of Wolterstorff's problem with God speaking is rather thin. Can and should texts in general and the Bible in particular be read to discern what the author (God) said? These are not issues about God speaking. They are about textual interpretation in general or the Bible in particular. If authorial-discourse interpretation is possible and can be applied to the Bible, and if one believes that God speaks through others (i.e. appropriates the discourse of others) in the Bible, then one will read the Bible to find out what God said. The problem is then not about God speaking but about disparate interpretations of what is allegedly said.

I have endeavoured to be specific in stating and refuting Wolterstorff's central theses and some of his arguments for those theses. In conclusion, however, some general comments are in order. There is much that is interesting in this book, and those that are working on various problems relating to revelation from philosophical, theological or biblical studies perspectives would do well to read it. Nevertheless, the discussion of the hard-core issues (e.g. the 'wax-nose problem') is not advanced on any front. In fact, there is backsliding on problems like criteria for justifiably believing that God is speaking to one. Wolterstorff often 'chews more than he bites off', to quote William James's remark about brother Henry's novels, while in others he does not consider nearly enough (e.g. ch. 15 'Are We Entitled?').

From the start both Wolterstorff and the reader are sure of where he is going. 'God speaks to us on our way, and ... our calling as human beings is to listen to that speech from beyond' (p. ix). And I am reminded not of Anselm's 'faith seeking understanding', but of W. Somerset Maugham whose characterization of philosophy pertains to most types, but particularly to the apologetics of contemporary Christian analytic philosophy of religion. 'Philosophy is an affair of character rather than of logic: the philosopher believes not according to evidence, but according to his own temperament; and his thinking merely serves to make reasonable what his instinct regards as true'.¹⁵ There are intimations of (what is right in) Wittgenstein's notion of 'forms of life' in Maugham's perceptive remark.

¹⁵ W. Somerset Maugham, 'The Philosopher', in *On A Chinese Screen* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1922), p. 164.