

Reply to Levine

NICHOLAS WOLTERSTORFF

The Divinity School, Yale University, New Haven, CT 06510

Abstract. The aim of this paper is to show that, though Levine frequently states that *Divine Discourse* is full of fundamental errors, he does little by way of proving his point. In particular, I defend the claim in *Divine Discourse* that divine speech is not a species of revelation. I rebut Levine's account of the significance of Biblical scholarship, defend my interpretation of Ricoeur and my remarks on entitlement.

Near the end of his essay on my book, *Divine Discourse*, Michael Levine says that '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'. That this is what Professor Levine thinks will come as a complete surprise to those who have read his essay and not my book. Let me quote some of the adjectives that Levine uses to describe me, or my discussion, in the part of his essay that precedes the sentence just quoted: 'mistaken', 'unconvincing', 'inconsequential', 'contravenes usage', 'ignoring aspects', 'procrustean view', 'misrepresents', 'pristine but especially narrow', 'seriously mistaken', 'naive or disingenuous', 'largely heuristic', 'argues unconvincingly', 'mistaken', 'cannot be broken down as Wolterstorff supposes', 'does not show', 'has not shown', 'problematic and baroque', 'not right', 'least significant', 'counter-intuitive', 'does not notice', 'unacceptable', 'naive', 'parochial', 'philosophically problematic', 'covertly obfuscate', 'analysis ... mistaken', 'rather thin', 'backsliding on problems'. For the final thrust of his sword, Levine says that Wolterstorff 'often chews more than he bites off', and when not doing that, 'does not consider nearly enough'. If these adjectives apply, and these accusations are on target, why would Levine remark, in concluding his discussion, that 'those working on various problems relating to revelation ... would do well' to read my book? Seems to me they would do well to spend their time doing something else. Why, indeed, did he spend time writing about it?

Of course it's just possible that all those nasty adjectives do apply to me and/or my discussion. But I submit that Levine has not succeeded in showing that they do. For the most part, he doesn't even *attempt* to show that they apply. He doesn't engage my arguments, and then show where I have gone astray. For the most part, he just *announces* that I am mistaken, naive, disingenuous, parochial, and so forth. And that's too bad. Because if I am mistaken, I would like to be *shown* where I am, and in what way. If I am

naive, I would like my naiveté set before me in such a way that I can recognize it for what it is. And so forth.

I open my book by trying to locate the topic I wish to discuss. An important part of this attempt of mine at location is my argument, in the second chapter, that divine speech (if it occurs) is not a species of divine revelation. If we want to understand what divine speaking is, we must not treat it as a special case of divine revelation. My argument is that, in general, speaking, understood as the performance of illocutionary actions, and revealing, are distinct phenomena; and that, in particular, divine speech is distinct from divine revelation. This is not to deny – a point I emphasize in the book – that in and by speaking we often reveal things; nor is it to deny that God, in and by speaking, may reveal things.

Levine begins his essay with a critique of these claims of mine concerning the relation between speaking and revealing. He announces that I ‘am 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’. Well, why not? My argument, he says, is ‘unconvincing since there is nothing mistaken in regarding speech, in certain circumstances, as a type of revelation and usage is not contravened’. But to say this is not to give a *reason* for my being mistaken in arguing that we cannot treat divine speech as a species of divine revelation. It’s not to point out where and why my argument against such identification is unconvincing. It’s just to *announce* that it is unconvincing.

Later in his essay Levine returns to the topic. Might it be that there his objections become substantive? Levine first engages in a bit of preliminary skirmishing. In my opening chapter I cited a few theologians, Maimonides among others, who argue that God cannot speak because God does not have a body; and I then went on to observe that the distinction, fundamental to speech–action theory, between locutionary and illocutionary actions, undercuts this traditional objection and opens up a fresh way of approaching the issues. Levine asserts that I am ‘mistaken’ in thinking that the distinction opens up a fresh way of approaching the issues, ‘for the simple reason that the distinction has always been implicitly recognized’ – as evidence for which he points to the opening page of the Koran. He likewise contests my interpretation of Maimonides, saying that ‘It must have occurred to Maimonides that God might make sounds occur without a vocal apparatus’. Maybe it did occur to him; and maybe I did misinterpret Maimonides on the matter at hand; but Levine’s comment obviously does nothing at all to show that I did. Levine then announces that my distinction, within an illocutionary act of commanding, between the propositional content of the act, and the illocutionary stance taken up toward that content, ‘is as suspect as it is awkward’. Why that is the case, he does not say. Instead, he immediately goes on to announce that in the case of *God’s* commands, this distinction *cannot* be made ‘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'. I don't know what to make of the second of these disjuncts. But the first is clear enough, and fails to establish its conclusion. Take a divine command; let us agree that its propositional content is an 'inseparable part' thereof – in other words, that an illocutionary act with a different propositional content would be a different illocutionary act. How does it follow that one cannot, within that act, distinguish the propositional content from the illocutionary stance taken up toward the content, with the pair of these constituting the entire illocutionary act?

But these, as I say, are opening skirmishes. What is Levine's case against my insistence that divine speech is not a special type of divine revelation? His case consists of observing that speaking often functions, both intentionally and unintentionally, to reveal. The 'function of promising and commanding can be', he says, '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'. But this is not something I denied; to the contrary, it's a point I myself made and insisted on. The question is not whether promising and commanding often *function* to reveal. Of course they do. The question is whether they just are a *species* of revealing. It's that which I deny. 'God reveals various things through speech', says Levine, presenting this as a point which I deny. It's not a point I deny. My question is whether the performance of illocutionary actions is itself to be analyzed as a species of revelation. If so, God would not reveal things *through* speaking; the speaking would be the revealing. If so, it would not be a *function* of promising and commanding to reveal things; the promising and commanding *would be* the revealing.

From contesting my claim that divine speech is not a species of divine revelation, Levine moves on to make some critical comments about my normative analysis of speaking. But once again, the annunciatory character of his objections leaves me with no point of engagement. The 'more basic problem' with my normative theory is, he says, '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'. Possibly so; and if someone pointed out just where and why they are counter-intuitive, I would have to deal with that. He likewise insists that I did not succeed in showing an ambiguity in the English phrase 'counts as', whereby sometimes we use it to assert that something satisfies a certain concept – as in 'that counts as a jig' – and sometimes we use it to claim a relation between two distinct actions – as in 'her signing her name counts as indicating consent'. But once again, *why* the distinction which I claim to see here is only illusory, Levine does not say. Or possibly he thinks that it's not illusory, but that I have not succeeded

in showing that it's not. If so, why isn't it illusory? What, to Levine's mind, does successfully show that the distinction is real?

Let me move on to Levine's comments on my attitude toward 'excavative' biblical scholarship. I say that the settled results of such scholarship should be 'honoured', and not dismissed out of hand as they are by certain fundamentalist interpreters of scripture; the account of interpreting for divine discourse which I propose does, to my mind, honour those results. Levine's main claim, so far as I can tell, in this part of his essay, is that in fact I do not honour those results. His thought is, apparently, that what I propose is so different from what the excavative scholar does, that what I propose cannot be described as 'honouring' the results of such scholarship. The practice I propose, he says, 'does not "honour" the result of excavative biblical criticism but at times ignores it and at other times subverts it'. My claim 'to honour the results of biblical scholarship since the 19th century is either naive or disingenuous'.

Why so? Well, here is one of his points:

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.

On this point, I simply beg to differ. Notice what I say. I say that the work of such scholars opens up to us a better grasp of what the human authors were saying. I do not say that this is how excavative scholars themselves understand what they are doing; I'm not trying to 'represent' excavative scholarship. Such scholarship is, for one thing, a highly diverse enterprise; and secondly, probably most excavative scholars work tacitly or explicitly with what I call a 'textual-sense' account of interpretation. So I just mean that, *as a matter of fact*, reading the work of such scholars rather often 'opens up to us a better grasp of what the human authors of Scripture were saying'. And I continue to think that that is true.

A similar response is appropriate to Levine's next point:

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.

I know, of course, that that assumption plays no role in excavative biblical scholarship. But why is that offered as an objection to my claim that such scholarship aids us in interpreting the human discourse of the Scriptures? Why can't an engineer make use of a body of mathematics which did not originate as mathematics for engineers?

Levine reports me as holding that the principal way in which excavative biblical scholarship aids better interpretation of mediating human discourse is ‘in the flow of new and better modern language translations’. And though he doesn’t directly say what he thinks about this, pretty clearly he thinks it trivializes such scholarship. But what he reports me as holding, I do not hold. What I did observe is that the principal way in which most *lay people* bump up against the results of biblical scholarship is in the ebb and flow of new Bible translations. But that’s a very different claim, from the claim that this is the principal way in which such scholarship aids better interpretation of the human discourse of the Bible.

So far as I can tell, however, Levine’s main point here is the following:

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.

The last chapter of my book indicates that I do not regard the assumption, that scriptural discourse is humanly mediated divine discourse, as immune to the findings of biblical criticism – and other such historical inquiries. I regard it as very much susceptible to such findings. But let that pass. I regard such findings as relevant to interpreting the discourse of the human writers – while freely acknowledging that interpreting such discourse is at best part of what biblical scholars do, and, on the interpretative theories of some of them, not at all what they do. But I also hold that interpreting the human discourse is indispensable to getting at the divine discourse. Accordingly, I regard such findings as eminently relevant to discerning the divine discourse of the Scriptures. So is my overall stance that of honouring, or of dishonouring, such scholarship? I’ll let the reader decide that.

Let me make some comments, next, about Levine’s contesting of my interpretation of Ricoeur’s interpretation theory. What did, and does, intrigue me in Ricoeur’s theory, is the fact that though he firmly embraces speech-action theory, he nonetheless insists that when interpreting at a distance, we must interpret for the sense of the text, rather than for what the author or redactor said by means of issuing this text. Why, given his embrace of speech-action theory, would he, when it comes to interpretation (at a distance), embrace New Criticism? I offered an explanation. Ricoeur assumes that everything which is abidingly significant in an act of discourse – everything which is not purely ‘eventful’ and perishing – is the ‘what’s said’ of that act of discourse, and that that is incarnated in the sense of the text. Indeed, the the ‘what’s said’ (i.e. the propositional content of the discourse), so Ricoeur assumes, is identical with the sense of the text, and can accordingly be recovered therefrom by grasping the sense. Though Ricoeur

doesn't say all this flat out, I offer a good deal of textual evidence in support of my claim that this is his underlying pattern of thought.

Evidently Levine doesn't like this explanation. He says that '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'. That last sentence is certainly true; the New Critics made no such assumption. But it doesn't follow from that that my proposal does not capture how Ricoeur was thinking. Levine says that Ricoeur 'would of course reject' my 'contentious' interpretation of how he was thinking. If so, Levine cites no evidence to that effect.

Levine thinks that the issue between Ricoeur and me, on biblical interpretation, pretty much boils down to whether there are ostensive references in religious texts, with Ricoeur holding that there are not. That, he suggests, is why Ricoeur thinks that, in Levine's words, 'Interpretation at a distance must be textual sense interpretation'. Now that is indeed part of the issue. As I argued in *Divine Discourse*, and much more extensively in my *Works and Worlds of Art*, I think that poetic, fictional, and religious texts incorporate 'ostensive references', to use Ricoeur's terminology; and I argue that we cannot, in general, recover reference just by reading texts with a knowledge of the language. But my argument against Ricoeur, and textual-sense interpretation, is more general. I don't think there is any such unique thing as *the sense* of a text. My reason is that a text does not, by itself, determine what is to be taken as metaphorical, what as ironic, etc. Indeed, it doesn't even determine whether or not the entire thing is to be taken as ironic. Levine clearly thinks that I am mistaken about this; he says that I argue 'unconvincingly'. But once again, he does not engage my argument. I observe that a standard assumption of New Criticism and its cohorts was that texts have consistent senses; the thought was that the attempt to arrive at a consistent sense is what forces some words to be taken metaphorically, some passages to be taken ironically, and so forth. It was because this assumption was so widely held that Derrida's calling it into question had such devastating impact. Levine says that 'textual sense interpretation *does not* rule out the possibility of a text having inconsistent senses'. Maybe not. But then we have to be shown, contra the New Critical tradition, how it will work without that assumption. That Levine does not even attempt to do.

Let me skip over Levine's assertion that my discussion of the wax nose problem neglects 'the genuine wax nose problem', misinterprets Locke, and is 'naive' and 'parochial', and also over his discussion of my claim that in the case of God speaking to Augustine, there was no miracle, in that there was no contravention of the laws of nature, and say just a word, in conclusion, about his criticism of my discussion of whether we are ever entitled to believe that God spoke. A very important preliminary point here – I make the point in the book – is that beliefs have a variety of distinct (truth-relevant) merits and demerits; and that it is of prime importance that we distinguish those.

A belief may, or may not, be a case of knowledge; it may, or may not, be warranted; it may, or may not, be entitled; it may, or may not, be appropriate for incorporation within science; it may, or may not, have been reliably formed; it may, or may not, be true; and so forth. Though epistemology was not my concern in *Divine Discourse*, I did not want to neglect entirely the epistemological issues that my discussion so obviously raised. But given my conviction that there are these distinct merits – and my conviction that epistemology in the contemporary period has suffered from not realizing or remembering this – the question faced me, which of these several merits shall I focus on? I chose entitlement. Are we ever permitted, entitled, to believe that God spoke?

Why choose entitlement to focus on? Pervasive in everyday human life is the practice of reproving and reproaching each other for our beliefs and our ignorances, or for how we formed or hold our beliefs. ‘You should have known’, we say; ‘you shouldn’t have believed him without checking it out with his employer’. Behind the phenomenon of what I call ‘entitlement’ is this practice of reproving and reproaching each other in this way. To reprove someone for her belief is to claim that she isn’t entitled to it. But it was not principally because of this everyday practice that I chose to concentrate on entitlement. Rather, I had a historical reason. The intersection of his epistemology and his social theory led John Locke to reproach all those whose beliefs about God were not held for optimally good reasons; I judge that that ‘evidentialist reproach’ has haunted the modern West ever since. That’s why I chose to focus on entitlement, whereas I might have chosen knowledge, or justification, or whatever.

Levine contests my account of entitlement. He says that on my account, ‘anyone may be entitled to believe anything given a certain context, and a set of “background beliefs”’. But once again, he just asserts this; he doesn’t say anything at all which would tend to show it. More importantly, however, he asserts that all I do ‘is covertly obfuscate the real issue’. What is ‘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’. Who says that that is ‘the relevant’ philosophical issue, ‘the real issue’? To say it once again: beliefs have many merits and demerits. Entitlement is one such merit. Justification is another – depending on what one means by that notoriously ambiguous word. But why is justification ‘the relevant’ philosophical issue? Is the fact that, in the modern and contemporary periods, people have pervasively been reproached for their religious beliefs, of no real interest to philosophers? In my address to epistemological issues, the discussion ‘is not advanced on any front’, says Levine. ‘In fact, there is backsliding on problems like criteria for justifiably believing that God is speaking to one’. But given what Levine means by ‘justifiably believing’, there can’t be any such backsliding, since I never did, and never intended, to offer criteria for such belief.