

## Speaking and revealing

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**Abstract:** I argue on three distinct grounds that the contrast between speaking and revealing is nothing like so sharp as Wolterstorff maintains in *Divine Discourse*. Speaking may be revealing: in speaking a person may reveal much about himself. Putative divine speaking can only be made intelligible given a background of what I refer to as INIS revelation, and in revealing, or more exactly, in having revealed, God may still speak.

In *Divine Discourse*,<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff makes a strong case for the idea of God speaking, and then, later in the book, offers reasons for deciding whether or not God has in fact spoken. He raises many fascinating issues in philosophical theology, hermeneutics and epistemology. It is a rich and many-sided work. However, in this paper I shall not be concerned with the issues in epistemology, philosophical theology, or hermeneutics which Wolterstorff discusses, but solely with the central idea of the book, the idea of God speaking, and with the value or significance that Wolterstorff places upon this idea. I shall argue that, while he has identified and discussed with great interest what has, astonishingly perhaps, been overlooked or greatly neglected by philosophers of religion,<sup>2</sup> there is reason to think that the sharp contrast which Wolterstorff draws between divine revelation and God speaking is much less sharp than he implies, and indeed that the idea of God speaking – divine discourse – is logically parasitic on the idea of God revealing, upon what Wolterstorff calls agent self-revelation of the non-manifestational variety. In this paper, I shall be chiefly concerned with the contrast between revealing and speaking, and with Wolterstorff's case for making it. So I shall be concerned mostly with his book's Chapter 2, 'Speaking is not revealing'. I shall present a number of arguments in favour of narrowing the gap that Wolterstorff sets up between the idea of divine revelation and the idea of God speaking.

### Speaking but not revealing

Wolterstorff's basic claim is that in, say, commanding Augustine to take up the book and read it (as Augustine recalls this incident in Book 8 of the *Confessions*), God is not revealing anything. Commanding is not revealing. Here are two different speech-act types, requiring two different treatments. Thus, God's commanding Augustine (which if he obeyed the command would make it true that Augustine opened the book and read it) is not to be identified with God revealing to Augustine that he is taking up his book and reading it (20). God could have revealed to Augustine that He was issuing such a command to him, and He could have revealed the propositional content of His command to Augustine to, say, Alypius. But such revealings are not to be identified with His commanding Augustine. And even if Augustine came to believe that God was commanding him (Augustine) to abandon his life of worldliness, what he believed would be part of the propositional content of the command. The command itself would be something distinct, something which, unlike the propositional content of the command, or the belief that God was issuing such a command, could be obeyed or disobeyed (21).

So to command something is not to reveal something. What are Wolterstorff's arguments? He has, as far as I can see, only one argument.

Wolterstorff first makes a distinction between transitive and non-transitive revelation. If revelation is of the transitive sub-variety, then it is a case of communication, and, according to Wolterstorff, commanding, promising, and asserting are not species of communication. The reason for this is that all such activities pass the 'hereby' test whereas communication fails it. That is, I can assert that I will make the pizza by uttering, in a suitable way, the sentence 'I will make the pizza'. Or I can also do so by uttering, in a suitable way, the sentence 'I hereby assert that I will make the pizza'. Asserting hereby passes the 'hereby' test.

It is certainly true that what Wolterstorff calls transitive revelation, where revelation actually transmits knowledge to the one revealed to, fails to pass the 'hereby' test. For the conditions for the success of the revelation are out of the hands of the revealer in a way in which conditions for the success of the asserting are not out of the hands of the asserter. Transitive revelation is, in J. L. Austin-speak, a perlocutionary act (33). This seems correct, though later on I shall make some qualificatory remarks about Wolterstorff's idea of transitive revelation.

But what of intransitive propositional revelation, revelation where there is, or may be, a failure of uptake? Initially, this looks more promising as a candidate for the 'hereby' test? But even this, according to Wolterstorff, fails. Wolterstorff's argument against intransitive propositional revelation being a speech act is unconvincing. He reiterates the claim that commanding is not revealing (34). But this is not the point, surely. The point is not that commanding is not revealing, and promising is not revealing, it is whether (non-transitive) revealing is a species of

speech act, allowing us to conclude that while not all speaking is revealing, some speaking is. And it looks as if non-transitive revealing might well pass the 'hereby' test. For it seems that if I use the sentence 'I shall order a pizza' to reveal that I will order a pizza, I can also non-transitively reveal that I will order a pizza by uttering the sentence (a sentence that, to be sure, it is hard to imagine anyone other than Charles Pooter uttering), 'I hereby (non-transitively) reveal that I shall order a pizza'.

So speaking (as such) is not revealing – there is no identity between them. Nevertheless, some speaking is revealing: some revealing is speaking. And so while commanding, asserting, and requesting are not acts of revealing, some speech acts are cases of revealing, at least if the 'hereby' locution is the test. It is therefore odd to find Wolterstorff concluding that:

Speaking consists not in communicating or expressing knowledge (or true belief) but in taking up a certain sort of *normative stance*. The attempt to treat discourse as a species of revelation – which is, incidentally, an attempt definitive of the Romantic family of theories of discourse – founders on the inherently normative character of discourse. The conclusion toward which we are forced is that the phenomenon of discourse, be it divine or human, is fundamentally distinct from that of revelation. (35)

I am not sure who – Romantics apart – has ever treated discourse as such as a species of revelation of inner states (see 76 also). For, surely, in much discourse one obviously talks about what is on the surface of things, on one's own or on others' surfaces. And such talk can often be non-transitively revealing. But, in any event, the conclusion that the phenomenon of discourse is fundamentally distinct from that of revelation is not the one to which we are driven, but we are in fact driven to a much weaker conclusion. Wolterstorff has argued:

- (1) Commanding, asserting, and requesting are not cases of revealing.
- (2) Commanding, asserting, and requesting, in passing the 'hereby' test, show that they are a species of illocutionary act.
- (3) Therefore, no case of discourse is a case of revelation.

But the conclusion does not follow. For we have identified an instance of discourse which is a case of revealing. Therefore,

- (4) Some instances of discourse are cases of revealing for they pass the 'hereby' test.

Therefore (3) is false.

Wolterstorff does note, at the very end of Chapter 2, that the relation of assertion to propositional revelation is closer than that of commanding and promising. But giving this point full recognition, recognizing that propositional revelation can actually take the form of an assertion, would undermine the sharpness of the

distinction between revelation and speaking which he has gone to such pains to establish. For we have seen reason to conclude that the relation between revealing and speaking is not only close, it may in fact be the closest possible. A case of asserting may *be* a case of revealing. And if, as Wolterstorff says, divine assertion is one of the media of divine revelation (35), then revelation, insofar as it takes place through assertion, involves the taking up of a normative stance which, Wolterstorff says, is characteristic of all speaking. So propositional revelation, insofar as it takes place through the making of assertions, may after all involve a normative activity of the sort which Wolterstorff discusses at length later on in the book, and which he takes to be characteristic of discourse and not of revelation.

Wolterstorff also maintains that propositional revelation can occur without assertion being its medium (35), and so, though revelation may take place through assertion, it need not. So let's go back a few pages in *Divine Discourse* and look at that claim.

### **Revealing and asserting**

In discussing revelation in those pages Wolterstorff concentrates on agent self-revelation. You may discover that I would like a pizza, but then this is not revelation. But if I (sincerely, of course), say that I would like a pizza, then this is a case of agent self-revelation, when what was previously hidden is revealed, an item of knowledge about myself (24–25), a case of intended revelation. But Wolterstorff claims that cases of intended, non-manifestational (i.e. propositional) revelation (26–27) may not be assertoric. He cites John Locke's picture of original divine revelation, 'that first impression which is made immediately by GOD on the mind of any man' (*Essay* 4.18.3). And Wolterstorff adds,

... non-assertoric divine revelation can occur in various ways: God directly bringing about a true conviction in a person, God bringing about a text which, when properly interpreted, transmits knowledge from God to us, God planting in a person – or in all persons – some disposition which, when activated, yields true conviction. (27–28)

Later on, Wolterstorff interprets Locke's 'impression' as a belief (264). This may be too stringent a requirement, as may Wolterstorff's more general claim that for propositional revelation to occur knowledge or true belief must be transmitted to the recipient. Too stringent a requirement because it seems possible that God should reveal something to someone which, though true, was literally incredible to that person, perhaps because it was couched in an oblique or enigmatic form, or because it seemed to the recipient to be outside the bounds of probability. Perhaps we may instead say something like this, that for transitive revelation to occur the recipient's cognitive state must undergo the change intended by the revealer. This requirement is weaker than Wolterstorff's transitive revelation, but stronger than his intransitive kind of revelation.

Thus, on Wolterstorff's account of transitive revelation, all the cases of non-assertoric divine revelation which he cites would appear to be cases of transitive revelation in the amended sense. But, besides these, other kinds of case could be added, cases of God revealing puzzling or enigmatic or improbable things by forming an impression of them in the mind of the recipient. So far, Wolterstorff's claim that propositional revelation can occur without assertion being its medium seems plausible. But are there any cases of non-assertoric divine revelation which are cases of intransitive revelation, I wonder?

Using all the distinctions which Wolterstorff offers us to aid us in our reflections on revelation, we might identify a case of agent self-revelation that was: (a) intended, (b) non-manifestational (i.e. propositional), and (c) intransitive.<sup>3</sup> Let's call this INIS revelation, for short.

Wolterstorff distinguishes between manifestational and non-manifestational revelation. When the marks on my tie reveal that I have just been eating pizza, this is a case of (non-intended) manifestational revelation. Such revelation is not intended by me, but it manifests by a natural sign something about me, and so reveals it. By contrast, non-manifestational revelation, and some cases of manifestational revelation (31), is revelation that is intended by me. (As Wolterstorff points out, however, the manifestational/non-manifestational distinction does not always coincide with intended/non-intended distinction, for a person may intentionally manifest something (26). I may intend you to see the mess on my tie, so revealing to you my untidy eating habits.)

Can INIS revelation, the central case as far as traditional conceptions of revelation in the Abrahamic religions are concerned, occur without assertion being its medium? It would be over-bold to say that all such cases of revelation are conveyed by the medium of assertion. I cannot think of an argument which would compel this conclusion. So let us be less bold and assert that nothing that Wolterstorff says in *Divine Discourse* provides an argument to show that they may not be. If this is correct, then, though there may be cases of saying that are not revealing, all cases of INIS revelation are cases of saying. Not all speaking is revealing, but some speaking will be revealing if anything is.

So while Wolterstorff is correct in maintaining that propositional revelation can occur without assertion being its medium, nevertheless he has not shown that the most significant kind of propositional revelation, significant in terms of the character and identity of the Abrahamic religions is concerned, can occur without assertion as its medium.

### **Commanding and revealing**

I think that there is another way in which it is possible to narrow the distance between the idea of divine discourse, God speaking, and the idea of revelation.

Suppose we employ this distinction between manifestational and non-manifestational revelation in the case of Augustine in the garden. Suppose also (for a moment) that Augustine took it that it was Alypius commanding him to take up the book. On this version of events, the question that it was God commanding him never entered Augustine's mind. Alypius' command to Augustine to take up the book, whether he chose to obey the command or not, could have revealed to Augustine many things about Alypius. Just as the marks on my tie may reveal that I have recently been eating pizza, so Alypius' commanding of Augustine could reveal things about Alypius. These would be instances of non-intentional manifestational revelation, perhaps things about Alypius that were revealed to Augustine without Alypius intending it. But they need not be. In commanding Augustine (as was supposed by Augustine), Alypius may intend to reveal many things about himself, to intend to manifest himself to Augustine in many different ways.

Let us now return to the canonical account of Augustine in the garden. On this account Augustine takes it that it is God who is commanding him to take up the book. May it not be that as Alypius, in issuing his command (as we were supposing that Augustine believed), manifestationally revealed things about himself, so God may do the same? For if we suppose, as Wolterstorff does, that God for Augustine has foreknowledge (20) (as well as omniscience), then unlike Alypius, God could foreknow and also could have intended that in issuing a command to Augustine He would be revealing certain things about Himself. True, if God foreknows that  $p$ , this does not entail that He intends that  $p$ , but if He foreknows that  $p$ , and knows that He could prevent  $p$ , but doesn't, then this comes very close to intending  $p$ , and will often be equivalent to the intention that  $p$ . God has greater epistemic resources than has Alypius, and so it is that the contrast between manifestational and non-manifestational revelation narrows further, if it does not altogether collapse, in His case.

Wolterstorff claims, as we have seen, that manifestational revelation is revelation by natural sign (28), while non-manifestational revelation is propositional revelation (28). But to the extent that, in God's case, the contrast between manifestational and non-manifestational revelation narrows, so revelation by proposition will tend to supplant revelation by natural sign. Suppose that in commanding Augustine to take up the book God reveals that (say) He is a gracious God, or a God who is intent on bringing about, in Augustine, a change in his life, then God will know this, and (as I have argued), in all likelihood intend it. And what He knows, and may intend, is one or a series of propositions about Himself – that He is gracious, that He is intent on Augustine's conversion, and so on.

And so, on hearing the youngster's words, Augustine could also have reasonably drawn the inference that in commanding him God was also manifestationally revealing to him that He was gracious, that He was also revealing to him that He was intent on effecting his conversion; and so on.

Does this not suggest that, not only is the distinction between manifestational and non-manifestational revelation not a hard and fast one, but also, and more significantly for Wolterstorff's thesis, that the distinction between speaking and revealing is not a hard and fast one either? In speaking, a person may intentionally reveal things about himself, propositional things, besides the propositional content of the speaking. And God may do this as well.

### **Speaking and revealing**

What of those cases of divine discourse that are not cases of revelation? Here, I shall attempt to narrow the distance between revelation and divine speaking (as Wolterstorff presents this) still further, by arguing that taking something as a possible case of divine speaking, and this speaking being intelligible as a command, say, logically requires a background of INIS revelation. It is a background in the sense that some speech is only a candidate for God speaking if the one putatively spoken to has some prior understanding of God, and such speech will only be taken to be a case of God speaking if the one spoken to has appropriate beliefs about God. And, I shall argue, these prior understandings and beliefs have occurrences of INIS revelation as a logically necessary condition of their occurrence. Such a claim seems particularly appropriate in the case of what Wolterstorff calls instances of revelation by deputation and appropriation. At one point in his book Wolterstorff argues that though much of God's discourse may be deputation and appropriation not all of it can be.

At some point God must Himself do things which generate God's acts of discourse. And, in any case, the religious traditions on which we have our eye – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – are replete with purported cases of God discoursing in God's own voice, without resort to deputation or appropriation (117).

In a similar vein I shall argue that though some of God's speaking is not revelation in the strict sense; it presupposes a background of God's speaking which is revelation, INIS revelation.

But how shall I argue this? I have no a priori argument for this claim. So what I shall do is to examine the two case studies of God speaking that occupy centre-stage in *Divine Discourse*, that of Augustine in the garden (Chapter 1), and the case of Virginia (Chapter 15). I shall argue that each of these instances of a person taking an occurrence as a case of God speaking, whether this is a case of revelation by appropriation and deputation, or revelation of a more direct kind, is only intelligible and credible on the assumption that they possess background beliefs derived from an INIS revelation. I shall then claim that the onus is on the shoulders of others to disprove this claim rather than on mine to argue for it in more apodeictic fashion.

What I have in mind here can be expressed more precisely using the contrast drawn by James Barr cited by Wolterstorff (30). There, Barr distinguishes between

God's revelation through history and propositional revelation. Barr claims that it is only knowledge of divine propositional revelation that renders intelligible God's action through history. Barr says:

Far from the incident at the burning bush being an 'interpretation' of the divine acts, it is a direct communication from God to Moses of his purposes and intentions. This conversation, instead of being represented as an interpretation of the divine act, is a precondition of it. If God had not told Moses what he did, the Israelites would not have demanded their escape from Egypt, and the deliverance at the Sea of Reeds would not have taken place.

In parallel fashion, I shall argue that the idea of God speaking now can only be made intelligible by presuming or presupposing a background of INIS revelation.

In looking at the examples of Augustine and Virginia, as described by Wolterstorff, it is important to stress that in these cases, and perhaps throughout the whole book, what Wolterstorff means by divine discourse is God speaking *now*. Only occasionally (as on 45–57) does he reflect on the idea that the record of God speaking *then* might come to be a case of God speaking *now*. And, even then, what he is concerned to distinguish are cases where the one whose discourse is appropriated by God may nevertheless also speak in his own name. I shall return to the significance of Wolterstorff's concentration upon what might be called contemporaneous speaking at the end.

#### *Augustine*

Let us consider some of the details of the story as Wolterstorff retells it. Augustine was visited by Alypius and Ponticianus while he was in Milan. Ponticianus picked up a book lying on a games table, a copy of St Paul's epistles, and Augustine said that he had been studying Paul's writings 'with the greatest attention'. Following the departure of Ponticianus, Augustine, in an agony of indecision, went out into the garden alone, and there it was that he heard the youngster's voice saying, 'Take it and read, take it and read'. Augustine took this to be a divine command to open his book of Scripture and to read the first passage on which his eyes should fall (4). Augustine went back into the room for the book of Paul's epistles, and read the words 'Not in revelling and drunkenness, not in lust and wantonness, not in quarrels and rivalries. Rather, arm yourself with the Lord Jesus Christ; spend no more thought on nature and nature's appetites'.

Wolterstorff says, as Augustine himself says, that for Augustine the youngster's cries were nothing other than a divine command. Augustine believed that God spoke to him, commanded him, through the youngster's cries. God appropriated the cries in order thereby to command Augustine. But it is obvious, is it not, that what made Augustine's verdict that God was commanding him both intelligible to him as such, and a reasonable claim to make, lay in the background of Augustine's beliefs? In particular, it was the value that he placed upon Paul's epistles and their teaching, and no doubt the value he placed on his mother Monica's Christian



piety, and on much else in the background. Suppose, as is likely, that he took the writings of Paul to be inspired, or that at the very least he took them to be writings appropriated by God in the manner described by Wolterstorff in Chapter 3, 'The many modes of discourse', then these writings would be, for Augustine, a case of INIS revelation.

### *Virginia*

The second case of God speaking which Wolterstorff discusses in detail is in Chapter 15, 'Are we entitled?' This is also a putative case, as Augustine's was, of God speaking now, at the very time that the recipient forms the belief that God is speaking to him or her. Virginia is depicted as a Christian who was rather cautious over the question of whether, in principle, God could speak to her now. In a situation of conflict in her parish, Virginia believed herself to be the recipient of knowledge, imparted to her by God, and receiving this knowledge was a somewhat traumatic experience. As a result of the experience, she formulated seven distinct statements which she believed she had to tell another person. She asked God to confirm these messages in various ways, and she put herself through a series of tests to verify, as far as possible, her own mental fitness.

It is interesting to note that, in the Virginia case, God's speaking to her is a case of communicating (on Wolterstorff's understanding of this (32)), and thus is something which, according to Wolterstorff, cannot be a case of speaking.

While all this, baldly summarized here, might well be necessary for Virginia to conclude that God was speaking to her, I argue that it is hardly sufficient. What was also needed, and what was clearly present in this case, was a background of Christian belief. Virginia was, Wolterstorff tells us, a Christian. She already believed many things about God including, for example, that God was directly interested in the goings-on in her parish. These beliefs, and no doubt many other beliefs that were relevant but are not cited by her, provide the background to render what happened to her, despite her misgivings, intelligible as a case of God speaking now. And if Virginia was a mainstream Christian, then this background set of beliefs would have contained beliefs which could only be understood by her and by ourselves with the aid of the ideas and beliefs provided by INIS revelation. (Wolterstorff makes a similar point himself, 221–222, 224–225).

### **Revealing and speaking**

Here, finally, is another way in which the distinction between speaking and revealing may be narrowed. To discuss this, we shall need to visit Wolterstorff's Chapter 4, 'The many modes of discourse'. The point of this chapter is to emphasize that you may speak by appropriating another's discourse, as when you buy a card to send to a friend, and you may speak by having your authorized spokesperson to do your speaking for you, as when a head of state authorizes an

ambassador to speak for him. Each of these possible ways of speaking opens up a spectrum of intermediate cases.

There are two points that I wish to make about what Wolterstorff says. The first is that what he shows to be undoubtedly true of speaking is also true of revealing. One can reveal truths, even truths about oneself, through appropriating another's propositions to do so, just as one can reveal truths about oneself by authorizing another to speak on one's behalf.

There is also a sense in which the ideas of appropriating discourse, and authorizing another's discourse, are ideas which offer more illumination to the idea of propositional revelation than they do to Wolterstorff's idea of God speaking. For while God speaking is a present, temporally immediate activity, the idea of revelation can be temporally indexed. Indeed, in religions such as the Abrahamic religions, which owe their existence (they believe) to God's revelation and speech in the past, the thought of temporally-indexed revelation is an appealing and vital idea. The basic idea is this: in having revealed in the past, God speaks now. Putting the idea in the modes of discourse highlighted by Wolterstorff, one might express it as follows: God might deputize for Himself, or he might authorize Himself to speak.

How does this go, in more detail? Suppose that God reveals Himself, in one or other of the modes of revelation identified by Wolterstorff, at time  $t_1$ . Say that He reveals by means of an INIS revelation, then He can, at the time of the original revelation or at some subsequent time, authorize that revelation as His present speech. The word revealed to Abraham can, say, have abiding significance, constitute the speaking of God now. So God does not have to speak anew now to make His revelation to Abraham His speech to us now. The stones may cry out, and those who are dead may still speak.

### Notes

1. Nicholas Wolterstorff *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). All page references in the text are to this book.
2. Though Wolterstorff might have been helped by Donald D. Evans's *The Logic of Self-Involvement* (London: SCM Press, 1963).
3. Wolterstorff points out (31) that intended revelation comes in both sorts, manifestational and propositional. But I do not think that this fact affects anything here.