

The Other Wolterstorff— A Review Essay

By Todd Buras

Nicholas Wolterstorff. *Inquiring about God: Selected Essays, vol. 1*, Terence Cuneo, ed. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 322 pp. ISBN 0521514657.

77

Nicholas Wolterstorff. *Practices of Belief: Selected Essays, vol. 2*, Terence Cuneo, ed. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 446 pp. ISBN 0521514622.

1.

Nicholas Wolterstorff needs no introduction to readers of *Christian Scholar's Review*. He has done as much as anyone alive to promote the kind of integrative scholarship that is *CSR's raison d'être*. The project of Christian higher education, in general, does not have a more able spokesperson. Wolterstorff's writings on Christian scholarship and Christian higher education are well known, and, thanks to two recent collections of essays, that work is now readily available.¹ The pair of volumes reviewed here brings a different Wolterstorff clearly into focus. The familiar Wolterstorff—at least in the present context—is an astute advocate of faith-informed scholarship. The other Wolterstorff is an accomplished practitioner of this sort of scholarship. The publication of these volumes of selected essays offers the broader community of Christian scholars a fine occasion to get acquainted (or reacquainted) with the other Wolterstorff.² The purpose of this review is, as it were, to handle the introductions. I begin with the big picture and then touch on a few of the details.

2.

The other Wolterstorff is unmistakably Wolterstorff. Those who know him mainly through his reflections on Christian scholarship will recognize the many virtues on display in these essays: the spritely leaps across centuries of learning; the courageous indifference to disciplinary boundaries; the tenacity, creativity, and

candor of a true lover of Wisdom. These volumes present Christian scholarship in the sense of scholarship distinguished by the virtues to which Christians aspire.

The other Wolterstorff is, though, a philosopher's philosopher. His conversation partners are icons, his topics epic. Is the world outside the mind accessible to human reason? What is it for beliefs to be formed and held responsibly? What are the limits of our entitlement to believe? His answers to these questions are not exclusively, or even explicitly, Christian. But they are consistent with Christian commitments. These volumes display Christian scholarship in the sense of hard-hitting work at the center of a discipline that is consistent with Christian commitment, and distinguished by the virtues to which Christians aspire.

The other Wolterstorff is also a philosopher's philosopher of religion. He is interested in questions that may not occur to just any philosopher—questions about the implications of philosophical theories for religious belief, and about the philosophical issues raised by religious proclamation and practice. Given what he says about epistemology, for example, he asks, "Can belief in God be rational if it has no foundations?" Similarly, he asks about the assurance of faith that believers admire and enjoy: "Is it consistent with the tentativeness implicit in responsibly held belief?" We have here Christian scholarship in an even fuller sense: hard-hitting work at the center of a discipline that is consistent with Christian commitment, characterized by the virtues to which Christians aspire, and especially attentive to questions of importance to believers.

The other Wolterstorff is also, at crucial junctures, an explicitly Christian philosopher's philosopher. At certain points, he sees no alternative to theorizing within a framework of convictions not every rational and well-informed adult will share. At these points Wolterstorff is a methodological pluralist, who turns his attention to cultivating one of the thousand flowers he is happy to see bloom. This Wolterstorff's work is not simply consistent with Christian convictions and attentive to the questions raised by faith; it is plainly Christian theorizing. His contributions to philosophical theology (which need not be Christian) aim at both philosophical cogency and harmony with the broad themes of Christian Scriptures.

In the final analysis, then, these volumes present hard-hitting work at the center of a discipline that is consistent with Christian commitment, especially attentive to questions of importance to believers, characterized by the virtues to

¹See Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Educating for Life: Reflections on Christian Teaching and Learning*, Gloria Goris Stronks and Clarence W. Joldersma, eds., (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002); and *Educating for Shalom: Essays on Christian Higher Education*, Clarence W. Joldersma and Gloria Goris Stronks, eds., (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004).

²But even these volumes do not suffice to complete the picture. There are yet other Wolterstorffs! There is, for example, Wolterstorff the aesthete in *Works and Worlds of Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); Wolterstorff the analytic metaphysician in *On Universals: an Essay in Ontology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); Wolterstorff the political theorist in, most recently, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010); and Wolterstorff the historian of philosophy in, for example, *John Locke and the Ethics of Belief* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

which Christians aspire, and, in places, explicitly shaped by Christian faith. The volumes are worth reading simply for the example they set of Christian scholarship. If the familiar Wolterstorff had never written a word about the nature of Christian scholarship, we could still learn the essential lessons from the other Wolterstorff's deeds.

3.

Wolterstorff has scattered philosophical essays in occasional volumes and professional journals for well over 40 years. Some vital work has remained largely hidden from view in the form of unpublished lectures. These volumes are welcome additions to the Wolterstorff *corpus* in part because they make this work more readily and broadly available. Terence Cuneo set about editing these essays with this goal in mind. But he accomplished something more. Thanks to Cuneo's judicious selections, these volumes largely supplement rather than overlap material already available in Wolterstorff's books. More importantly, they unify Wolterstorff's work by demonstrating how his main contributions in philosophy of religion and philosophical theology follow from his central convictions in metaphysics and epistemology. Some of the essays here are new. Some are substantially revised. Some are well-worn touchstones of professional debate. Together they are a revelation, even for long-time students of Wolterstorff's work. What emerges is not a system, but systematic themes, the outlines of which will occupy the remainder of this review.

The introductions Wolterstorff composed for each volume, together with the postscript appended to the second, offer the best points of access to the unifying themes. These pieces add a personal touch and an element of narrative unity to the collections. They allow the volumes to tell the story of the convergence of Wolterstorff's thought around a handful of animating philosophical convictions. The story begins with the death of logical positivism. For untenable reasons that need not be rehearsed here, positivism suppressed the grand concerns of metaphysics and epistemology. In the wake of positivism's demise, the more traditional philosophical challenges resurfaced. Wolterstorff's personal journey into professional philosophy coincided with this momentous shift. Two of the traditional issues—one Lockean and one Kantian—drew the lion's share of his attention over the years, especially as they are applied to theistic belief. His deepest philosophical commitments emerged in the process of responding to these challenges. His central contributions to philosophy of religion and philosophical theology apply these commitments to theistic beliefs.

4.

The Lockean challenge rests on what Wolterstorff calls a doxastic ideal, a certain picture of an ideally managed belief life. Very roughly, the picture is this:

an ideal believer is a responsible epistemic agent. A responsible epistemic agent holds only those beliefs to which one is entitled by the proper conduct of the understanding. The beliefs to which one is entitled by the proper conduct of the understanding are those supported by one's evidence, narrowly construed. The beliefs supported by one's evidence, narrowly construed, are those that follow by good inductive or deductive arguments ultimately from one's basic beliefs. One's basic beliefs are self-evident necessary truths and incorrigible truths about the content of one's own conscious experience. This ideal is an expression of what Wolterstorff calls classical foundationalism, and its offspring he dubs the evidentialist challenge. The challenge is to demonstrate that one's beliefs satisfy this ideal, especially one's beliefs about matters of ultimate concern.

Responding to this challenge is a general issue in epistemology and a watershed issue in philosophy of religion. Some thinkers (following Locke himself) accept the terms of the challenge and attempt to demonstrate that the central tenants of theism satisfy the ideal. Wolterstorff sides with those who instead question the terms of the challenge. Indeed, along with Alvin Plantinga and William Alston, Wolterstorff is credited with originating the response to the challenge that now goes by the name Reformed Epistemology.³ Where Plantinga's and Alston's initial responses to the challenge eventually received book-length treatments,⁴ the most substantive developments of Wolterstorff's ideas have been available only in the form of scattered essays and unpublished lectures. The second of these two volumes, *Practices of Belief*, fills that gap. The essays collected in this volume are the most complete statement of Wolterstorff's general epistemological framework and of its application to belief in God.

Practices of Belief includes Wolterstorff's original contribution to Reformed Epistemology ("Can belief in God be rational if it has no foundations?"), a retrospective reflection on the movement ("Reformed Epistemology"), and a series of pieces in which he engages historically influential challenges and alternatives (see, for example, essays 6, 7, 9, 10, and 13). But Wolterstorff's most developed reply to the evidentialist challenge can be found in four essays, two published here for the first time, and two revised for this occasion. "Ought to believe—two concepts" identifies what the Lockean ideal got right, that is, the importance of responsibly held belief in epistemology. "Historicizing the belief-forming self" identifies what the ideal got wrong about the concept. "Entitlement to believe and practices of inquiry" fleshes out Wolterstorff's alternative account of entitlement. "On being entitled to beliefs about God" applies this general epistemological

³The three crucial papers were first published in Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, eds., *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983). Wolterstorff discusses the publication of these essays, and identifies some of the earliest hints of the central ideas in *Practices of Belief*, "Reformed Epistemology"—volume 2, essay 12.

⁴See Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) and William Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

framework to belief in God.

The view developed in these essays is a valuable supplement to that of his fellow Reformed Epistemologists. All parties to the movement agree that the Lockean ideal sketched above is too stingy in the distribution of epistemic merits to be a plausible epistemology. They also agree that a sufficiently broadened alternative is more congenial to theistic belief. But Plantinga and Alston challenge the implicit standards of basicity at work in the ideal. Wolterstorff nowhere disputes the legitimacy or importance of this response. But he does make a point of going further. His aim is to refine the concepts of entitlement and responsibly held belief involved in the Lockean ideal.

At one level, the explanation of this difference is simple. Wolterstorff notes at several points that there are a variety of different merits that attach to beliefs. His colleagues focus on one sort (such as warrant and reliability, respectively), while he is interested in another (such as entitlement). A deeper reason for the difference is that Wolterstorff is interested in merits that imply a certain degree of voluntary control over our beliefs, while his colleagues are not. This difference belies yet another. We are responsible only for beliefs that fall under our voluntary control; yet most of our beliefs are formed by the activation of dispositions, which is beyond our control. Many conclude from these considerations that the range of beliefs for which we are responsible is of negligible importance in epistemology—not Wolterstorff. In “Ought to believe—two concepts,” he argues that, despite the considerations just adduced, the range of beliefs under our voluntary control is not at all negligible. Our intentions to hold and strengthen beliefs impact the beliefs produced by our dispositions dramatically over the long run. For these intentions and their doxastic impact we are rightly held responsible.

For these reasons Wolterstorff carries the critique of the Lockean ideal further. Not only is the operative account of properly basic beliefs too narrow, as his fellow Reformed Epistemologists have argued, but the operative notion of responsibly held belief is similarly flawed. Wolterstorff is ultimately a sympathetic critic of this dimension of the Lockean ideal. Locke was right to identify responsibly held belief with beliefs to which we are entitled by the proper conduct of the understanding. The crucial blunder is the ham-fisted identification of the beliefs to which we are entitled with beliefs supported by an attenuated mode of inquiry—inquiry into what follows with certainty or probability from a narrow stock of basic knowledge. As Wolterstorff tells the story, Locke was tempted by this blunder because of the hope it held out for extricating humanity from socially disruptive disagreements. What Locke failed to appreciate, however, is what Wolterstorff calls the historically situated nature of the belief-forming self. In “Historicizing the belief-forming self,” he argues that there is no rising above the particularities of time and place by the proper conduct of the understanding because the proper conduct of the understanding is always a historically situated practice.

Wolterstorff’s own positive account of entitlement in “Entitlement to believe and practices of inquiry” recognizes the centrality of historically situated practices

of inquiry. Practices of inquiry are simply ways of finding things out, patterns of action aimed at bringing it about that one learns something. Among all the possible practices of inquiry, Wolterstorff explains, only some are available in one's society at a given time. For any given person at any given time, fewer practices still are personally accessible and acceptable, that is, such that one is both capable and willing to conduct them. Epistemic agents are often prompted into practices of inquiry by dissatisfaction with their beliefs, but some doxastic deficiencies are such that one has an obligation to do one's best to eliminate them by engaging in practices of inquiry. Responsibly held beliefs are, to a first approximation, those that survive the available, accessible, and acceptable practices of inquiry one has an obligation to conduct in order to remedy as far as one is able deficiencies of belief. We are entitled to our beliefs, on Wolterstorff's alternative, unless they are held irresponsibly.

This is epistemology on a grand scale—a general theory about what it is for one's epistemic house to be in order, as Wolterstorff says. Examples bring the theory down to earth, and no example is more important to Wolterstorff than the case of theistic beliefs. Where Plantinga and Alston argue in different ways that belief in God can be properly basic, Wolterstorff argues that beliefs about God can be responsibly held, or, alternatively, that we can be entitled to beliefs about God. In "Entitlement to beliefs about God," Wolterstorff revisits the case of Virginia, introduced in *Divine Discourse*.⁵ Virginia must determine whether she is within her rights to maintain a belief about God that she mysteriously finds herself holding, namely that God has spoken to her about a certain situation in her community. Through careful consideration of the details of Virginia's particular situation—which are too rich to be treated here in summary fashion—Wolterstorff shows that Virginia satisfies the standards of entitled belief he has defended. Virginia is entitled not only to believe that there is a God, and not only that God speaks, but also that God has spoken to her. Virginia is entitled to these beliefs because they survive the practices of inquiry she has an obligation to conduct.

Granting Virginia's entitlement does not entail that her belief is true, or that other people in different situations are similarly entitled. The example emphasizes the highly situation-specific and indirectly truth-conducive nature of entitlement. Wolterstorff's is a trusting and pluralistic epistemology. We each must conduct inquiry as the historically situated persons we are, trusting that the competent execution of our best practices of inquiry will eliminate doxastic deficiencies or lead us to yet better practices that will. We can do no more than our best to keep our doxastic houses in order.

5.

The other Wolterstorff, we have seen, is an epistemic responsibilist. This

⁵Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), ch. 15.

makes him a reformed epistemologist with a twist, and a methodological pluralist in philosophy more generally. But the other Wolterstorff is also a practitioner of the methods of inquiry he defends—as indicated by the title of the other volume, *Inquiring about God*. He inquires into the nature of God as the fully historicized person he is. As a Christian, he is interested in philosophical theology that is not only internally coherent but also consistent with the broad themes of Christian Scripture. His practice of inquiry involves a complicated process of thinking through the implications of the classical concept of God and through the interpretation of Christian Scriptures in light of one another. In the next section, we will touch on some of the most significant results of Wolterstorff's theological inquiry. Before doing so, however, we should note briefly the way in which the practice itself pits him against another of the great challenges of traditional philosophy, a Kantian challenge to the possibility of this sort of theological inquiry.

Where the Lockean challenge is to show that beliefs about God may be held responsibly, the Kantian challenge is to show that it is possible to have beliefs about God in the first place.⁶ Behind this challenge lies a general theory not about the proper conduct of the understanding, but about the admissible contents of thought. The rough outlines of the challenge are these: We can have beliefs about God only if we have ideas about God. We have only those ideas that satisfy some general criteria of admissible contents (here the details vary). The challenge is to show that the idea of God satisfies the general criteria, or to accept that, strictly speaking, we have no beliefs about God.

Rather than meeting the challenge on its own terms, Wolterstorff again questions the terms of the challenge. His critique of the challenge this time around is much less sympathetic; there is no core insight he is interested in salvaging. One reason for this more uncompromising response is that theories of admissible contents are easy to come by. The best way to determine what are and are not possible objects of thought is not by theorizing about the human mind but by examining the actual content of one's own thought. For his own part, the other Wolterstorff is an unreconstructed realist about theological inquiry (and, indeed, about metaphysics generally). He says, forthrightly: "I myself, as a religious person, would stop thinking God-thoughts and cease using God-talk if I thought I was never thinking and speaking about God" (1:52). He thinks he is inquiring about God, and therefore in possession of beliefs about God. Since actuality proves possibility, he thinks it is possible to hold beliefs about God. It would therefore take a strong argument to persuade him that what he takes to be the case is impossible, and that he is not doing what he seems to be doing when he takes himself to be inquiring about God.

Are there any such arguments? In a trio of essays that span the two volumes,

⁶Wolterstorff takes care to note that the Kantian challenge is poorly named, since Kant himself was not, in the end, skeptical about the possibility of beliefs about God. Indeed, he notes that Kant himself was a practitioner of a certain kind of rational theology. See essays 2 and 3 in volume 1, and essay 2 in volume 2 for further discussion.

Wolterstorff patiently entertains the best reasons he can find to believe his mode of theological inquiry transgresses the boundaries of human thought and is therefore, despite appearances, impossible. In "Is it possible for theologians to recover from Kant?" he entertains reasons to think beliefs about God, in particular, are beyond the pale. In "The world ready-made" and "Does the role of concepts make experiential access to ready-made reality impossible?" he examines reasons for a much more general pessimism about our access to mind-independent reality. The details will grip professionals. Suffice it to say here that he finds all these arguments spectacular failures. The most these arguments show is that access to either mind-independent reality or the nature of God is impossible on certain theories of the admissible contents of thought.

This is a good enough reason to Wolterstorff to look for better theories—in just the same way that the failure of the Lockean ideal to accommodate obvious cases of entitled belief was a good enough reason to develop a better theory of entitlement. The essays mentioned above touch on the very broadest outlines of what a better theory will look like. But a full-dress presentation of such an alternative is, at this point, one of the other Wolterstorff's unfinished projects. This is one reason I said above that the essays in these collections present systematic themes and not a system.

6.

Wolterstorff's response to the Lockean and Kantian challenges clears the way for a practice of inquiry about God. His inquiry about God leads him to the last great challenge tackled in his essays, what we might call the Thomistic challenge. His response to this challenge also falls short of a system—in his own words, the response is "piecemeal and mostly negative." Even so, the essays comprising the heart of *Inquiring about God* (essays 5-10) are a lasting contribution. They present a sympathetic critique of the classical concept of God, which receives its most articulate expression in St. Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*. The criticisms are motivated not by any theoretical misgivings about the classical concept but by a deep commitment to the message of the Christian Scriptures. Though these essays offer no systematic alternative, they are a powerful dissenting voice in the tradition of Christian philosophical theology.

As Wolterstorff himself describes the situation in the introduction to *Inquiring about God*, he is committed in this series of essays to a particularly Christian practice of inquiry, a pattern of activity aimed at finding things out about God by consulting Christian Scriptures. He recognizes the complexity of the interpretive project involved in this practice, but thinks that there are nonetheless "pervasive patterns" in the scriptural story about who God is. One such pattern represents God as savior, acting in history, and specifically in the death and resurrection of Jesus, to redeem. This pattern of scriptural representation strongly suggests that God is involved as an agent in the events of human history and that God is equally

affected by what transpires therein.

He is similarly committed to the distinctly philosophical practice of finding things out about God by the natural light of reason. This too is a complicated business, but again patterns emerge. In particular there is an ancient line of reasoning in support of the following claim: there exists something on which all other things depend for their existence and properties but which does not itself depend on anything else either for its existence or its properties. Such a thing is *a se* (from itself), or possessed of *aseity*.

The heart of the Thomistic challenge is to reconcile these two characterizations of God. The difficulty of the challenge comes from the domino-like consequences Aquinas draws from *aseity*. In outline form, the consequences are these: *aseity* leads to simplicity, which leads to immutability, which leads to impassibility and eternity. But it seems nothing impassible is affected by the events of human history, and nothing outside of time is an agent in the events of human history. Yet the savior described in the Christian Scriptures is affected by the events of human history and an agent in that chain of events. Therefore nothing impassible and eternal is the savior described in the Christian Scriptures.

Wolterstorff is well aware of the strategies deployed from Aquinas forward to demonstrate the compatibility of eternality and saving action, impassibility and responsiveness to human sin. His critique of the classical concept of God turns on his case against these compatibilist strategies. His case against these strategies in "God Everlasting" and "Suffering Love" are justly renowned. The subtleties cannot be conveyed here, but the basic strategy is simple enough: show that there is some element of the biblical depiction of God's agency and passion that cannot reasonably be construed in the way required by the most promising compatibilist schemes. Wolterstorff allows, for example, that many of the things God is represented as doing in Scriptures may be such that doing those things implies no temporal ordering of events in the divine life. But he argues (see 1:150-153) that God's remembering and planning are not things God can do without some element of succession in the divine life. Yet, these are essential parts of what the redeeming God of Scriptures does.

Wolterstorff's critique forces hard choices. One can resuscitate one of the compatibilist strategies. One can reject the literal truth of the scriptural depictions of God's actions and passions. One can dispute a link in the chain of consequences from *aseity* to eternality and impassibility. Or, lastly, one can replace the classical concept of *aseity*. Wolterstorff sees this last alternative as the only plausible option. His disagreement with the classical concept is all the way back at the beginning. It was a mistake, he says, to hold that God is not dependent on other things for some of the properties God has (see 1:15). A detailed systematic theology that concedes this aspect of the concept of *aseity* is another unfinished project broached in these essays. But the other Wolterstorff's inquiry about God is sufficiently well developed to make him an eloquent spokesperson for what I once heard him call "the other God."

Copyright of Christian Scholar's Review is the property of Christian Scholar's Review and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.