

Justice: Rights and Wrongs . Nicholas Wolterstorff. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008.

Nicholas Wolterstorff's *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* is an original and engaging study of justice. What is justice? According to Wolterstorff, there are two basic theories of primary justice: justice as right order and justice as inherent rights (xii). His book is an argument for the latter. "Rights are normative bonds between oneself and the other" (4) and "boundary-markers for our pursuit of life-goods" (5). More specifically, an inherent right, or human right, is a right possessed "on account of the worth of beings of their sort" (10-11). Wolterstorff argues that this definition of justice as inherent rights only works when grounded in theism; "The account of primary justice that I develop is a theistic account, specifically, a *Christian* theistic account; for I am a Christian believer who holds that God and justice are intimately intertwined" (x). It is this conception of justice that he sets out to define and defend in the book.

Wolterstorff argues systematically for his theory of justice through three major sections. Part One, "The Archaeology of Rights," begins with dismantling the story presented by the critics that human rights theory is a product of the individualism of Enlightenment political theory, rooted in fourteenth-century nominalism at best (44). Yet Wolterstorff in his "counter-narrative" argues that the Church Fathers and twelfth-century canon lawyers displayed a use of natural rights language. To explain this early usage, Wolterstorff makes the bold claim that rights are rooted much earlier in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. Beginning with the Old Testament, he undertakes a canonical-narrative interpretation of the theme of justice to show its clarity, coherence and consistency in the Bible. From his analysis of the Hebrew Bible, he writes, "In saying that Yahweh holds humankind accountable for doing justice, Israel's writers were assuming that there already is a normative structure of rights and obligations. Yahweh holds Israel and the surrounding nations accountable for instantiating that antecedent normative structure in their societies" (90).

He goes on to debunk the notion (which he labels the "de-justizing of the New Testament") that justice is replaced with love in the New Testament. The theme of justice in the Old

Testament, he claims, proves to run concordantly with the message of the New Testament. Further, he argues that Jesus came to establish justice, and, in accord with the Old Testament, “Jesus appeals to our worth as human beings to explain God’s care for each and every one of us, and to the sick person’s worth as a human being to explain why he himself heals on the Sabbath” (131). Thus, contrary to the critics, human rights find their grounding in the Old and New Testament.

In Part Two, “Fusion of Narrative with Theory: The Goods to which We Have Rights,” Wolterstorff works toward delineating the goods to which humans have rights. He argues that in order to understand rights one must have a conception of the good life. After briefly contending that the utilitarian conception of the good life will not suffice, he moves to the *eudaimonian* conception of the good life (“the life well lived”). Following his assessment of eudaimonism, he concludes, “There is no room in this scheme for the worth of persons and human beings, and hence none for one’s right against others to their treating one a certain way on account of one’s worth” (179). He shows that Augustine broke away from eudaimonism because of his reading of Christian scripture (180) and further examines how the teachings of the Bible were in many ways irreconcilable with eudaimonism. Leaving that behind, he adopts the view of the good life as the flourishing life, “the life that is both lived well and goes well” (145). When he goes on to discern how life goods should be characterized, he argues for a “*divine-desire* characterization” in which the desires of God for humanity characterize the nature of their life goods (236).

Finally, in Part Three, “Theory: Having a Right to a Good,” he moves to developing the theory of justice as grounded in inherent rights. Wolterstorff defends and qualifies what he terms the “weak Hohfeld thesis”; that is, “to every claim-right there is a correlative duty” (249). He moves further to show that rights cannot be grounded in duties, but, subsequently, must be grounded in worth. After an analysis of the task of grounding human rights, he argues that a secular grounding of rights is not possible and that rights are necessarily grounded in theism. This section is indeed the crux and climax of his argument. He writes that there must be a bestowed worth that is universal and equal for all humanity in order to establish inherent rights; and that bestowed worth is found in the love of God. Thus, with the universal love of God at its core, the theory of inherent human rights stands firm. As he moves to close his study, Wolterstorff’s words are ominous. If the argument of secularism succeeds, then human rights will likely lose grounding in human history. He writes, “A

melancholy conclusion to our long, winding discussion—melancholy, that is, if one believes the secularization thesis. ... I do not believe the thesis” (393).

The book is accessible and captivating, carrying the reader systematically through Wolterstorff’s theory: justice as inherent rights grounded in the worth that God bestows. It reads like an energetic and engaging conversation with bold and provocative arguments. And it will prove especially helpful to the rights theorist who desires a foundation for a coherent framework of justice and human rights in society. It will also prove to be a vital work for theologians, moral philosophers, and all who, along with Wolterstorff, “attempt to speak up for the wronged of the world” (ix).

Book Reviewed by:

Geth Allison, Vance-Granville Community College