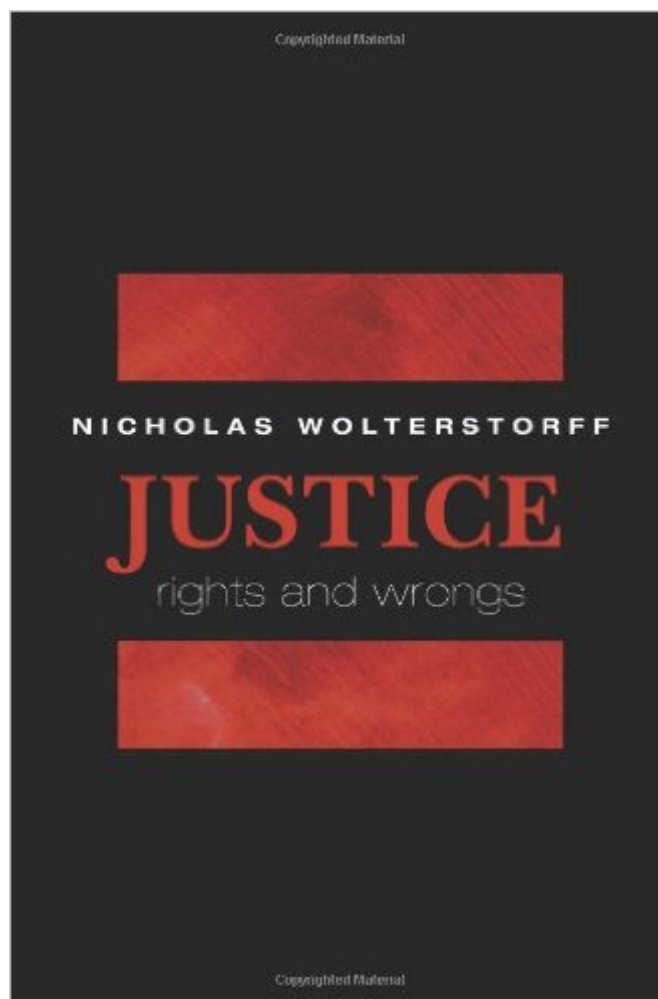


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Justice: Rights And Wrongs



Synopsis

Wide-ranging and ambitious, *Justice* combines moral philosophy and Christian ethics to develop an important theory of rights and of justice as grounded in rights. Nicholas Wolterstorff discusses what it is to have a right, and he locates rights in the respect due the worth of the rights-holder. After contending that socially-conferred rights require the existence of natural rights, he argues that no secular account of natural human rights is successful; he offers instead a theistic account.

Wolterstorff prefaces his systematic account of justice as grounded in rights with an exploration of the common claim that rights-talk is inherently individualistic and possessive. He demonstrates that the idea of natural rights originated neither in the Enlightenment nor in the individualistic philosophy of the late Middle Ages, but was already employed by the canon lawyers of the twelfth century. He traces our intuitions about rights and justice back even further, to Hebrew and Christian scriptures. After extensively discussing justice in the Old Testament and the New, he goes on to show why ancient Greek and Roman philosophy could not serve as a framework for a theory of rights. Connecting rights and wrongs to God's relationship with humankind, *Justice* not only offers a rich and compelling philosophical account of justice, but also makes an important contribution to overcoming the present-day divide between religious discourse and human rights.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"This book is an attempt to speak up for the wronged of the world . . . My speaking up for the wrong of the world takes the form, in this book, of doing what I can to undermine those frameworks of conviction that prevent us from acknowledging that the other comes before us bearing a claim on

us, and of offering an alternative framework, one that opens up to such acknowledgements" (ix). According to Nicholas Wolterstorff's highly acclaimed and landmark book *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (comparisons have been made to John Rawls's *Theory of Justice*), any political framework not based upon "inherent human rights," that is, "normative social relationships . . . in the form of the other bearing a legitimate claim on me as to how I treat her" (4) cannot do justice to the wronged of the world--any other framework must be, in a word, unjust. Secondly, this exclusively just political framework can only be grounded in theistic belief, both theoretically and practically, for human beings have the right not to be wronged only because they are all equally loved by God--and God Himself has the right to be obeyed, loved, and not wronged. If contemporary academics, politicians, and talking heads think and speak of human rights as attached to autonomous, atomistic individuals in virtue of their willful right to do what they want, this is not the fault of inherent human rights; it is due to ignorance to their true character, purpose, and genealogy, and of a corrupt, egocentric culture that has subjectivized, secularized, and privatized something that is God-given and intrinsically normative and social.

Justice: Rights and Wrongs by Nicholas Wolterstorff was the best philosophy book I read this last year. In what follows are my notes that summarize the main argument of the book. Broadly speaking, Wolterstorff gives his theoretical account of justice in light of his career of activism on behalf of the 'coloreds' in South Africa and Christians living in Palestine. The goal of his theory is to give us ears to hear the cry of pain, to help us see what justice is through the eyes of those who have suffered injustice. His is an exposition of primary justice. Primary justice covers that which a person is due. It consists of distributive justice (how goods should be distributed in some social order) and commutative justice (how goods are exchanged via legal contracts). Rectifying justice is the justice that becomes relevant when there are breakdowns in primary justice--it calls for the righting of wrongs, so to speak. There are two conceptions of primary justice (xii). The first is justice-as-right-order, which grounds justice in an objective matrix of obligations for the right ordering of society (11). The second is justice-as-inherent-rights, which considers a social order to be just insofar as its members enjoy the goods to which they have rights (35). Wolterstorff contends for the latter. Inherent rights are had on account of the worth of the being who has them (11). But the worth need not be an essential feature of the person who has it. Suppose someone attains moral worth by virtue of performing some supererogatory act of charity. That would be an example of worth that is not essential to the person, because she might not have performed the act.

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