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David Friedrich Strauß: A Reading of His Gospel Criticism and Metaphysics

Forthcoming Publication Synopsis

On the 150th anniversary of Strauß' death (February 8, 1874), and the 300th anniversary of Kant's birth (April, 22, 1724), this two-volume study (880 pages) in English is to be published in early 2024 by Georg Olms Verlag (Hildesheim/New York, imprint of Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, Baden-Baden). Available both in hard cover, and on-line in Open Access PDF format in its series *Studien und Materialien zur Geschichte der Philosophie*, it is an extensive examination of the overlooked content and frequently distorted reception of both Strauß and Kant.

In Strauß' case, monstrous portrayals of and bitter *ad hominem* attacks because of his 1835 *Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, in which he documents the presence of 'mythic constructions' in the gospels (by no means a novel insight), led to a violent Christian nationalist revolution in September of 1839 in Zurich, Switzerland, because of his appointment to the university in January of that year. Yet, even 'progressives' know Strauß as little more than an icon of 'liberal martyrdom', with gospel critics viewing him as irrelevant given the 'advances' since then in source, form, redaction, sociological, and literary criticism (Strauß was a defender of the Griesbach hypothesis in source criticism).

Strauß's 'mythic' reading of the text had two moments. The primary moment for him was an attempt to preserve the historical truth of Christianity, not destroy it. The greatest threat to Christianity of the day was post-Copernican science, which rejected the claim that God was able to violate the laws of nature. Whereas the 'Rationalists' tried to account for miracles in the Gospels by means of 'Accommodation,' which proposed that, not possessing a sense of natural laws, the observers of Jesus misunderstood the natural causes of his actions, Strauß employed the 'Mythic School's' distinction between a narrative's 'husk' and its 'true content' to claim that at the core of a miracle story can be something 'historical,' an 'idea,' or a symbol. In short, the 'truth' of the miracle story was not its external, literal violation of physical laws but a 'meaning' that was to be found at its internal core. In 1835, Strauß took the internal core of Christianity to be the teaching of Incarnation, and he offered a notion of Incarnation (the union of Divine and Human Spirit) in the form of an *universally inclusive* Christology that applied to all humanity.

The second moment of Strauß' 'mythic' reading of the gospels not only attempted to demonstrate how the Early Church and Evangelists had used miraculous 'husks' to communicate non-miraculous 'kernels,' but he also invoked Wilhelm Krug's

notion of the *genetic mythical principle* in order to explain, following what was taken to be the example of Jesus himself (Luke 22:37; 24:27; 24:44), from where the Early Church and Evangelists drew their inspiration for the miracles stories in the gospels. Strauß identified some 50+ narrative ‘prototypes’ in the ‘First’ Testament that suggest, clearly, that the Early Church and Evangelists employed a hermeneutical strategy of mining the ‘First’ Testament to express their convictions about ‘who’ Jesus of Nazareth was in the ‘Second’ Testament.

In short, a close reading of Strauß’ entire corpus, as well as a deep reading of his mentors and interlocutors, shows that as a gospel critic he was neither ‘revolutionary’ nor seeking the destruction of Christianity, as many claimed or suspected. He does, however, in several respects anticipate or exceed subsequent gospel criticism (for example with criteria for identification of the ‘historical’ elements in the gospels), but he knew by 1872 that the gospel evidence was insufficient to establish either a biography of or any certainty about the teaching of Jesus.

Rather than pursue the implication of the *genetic mythical principle* that Christianity in particular and religion, generally, was ‘theology all-the-way-down’ as the Early Church and Evangelists confirm, Strauß’ career was devoted to seeking a grounding of religion in factual, ‘historical’ experience, not in ‘spiritual escapism.’ His work reflects a trajectory that commences with the ‘religion of the Christ,’ then turns to a ‘religion of reason’ reminiscent of Scholastic ‘Intellectualism that rejects Scholastic ‘Occasionalism’/‘Voluntarism’ that he takes to be the ‘religion of Jesus,’ followed by a ‘religion of humanity,’ and ending in a ‘religion of nature.’

In all of this, Kant was present across Strauß’ career as the unexamined ‘elephant in the room.’ His understanding of Kant was deeply shaped by the anti-Kantian and anti-Enlightenment movement at the beginning of the 19th C, particularly by key influences from Hegel, Schleiermacher, F.C. Baur, and C. Daub. Consequently, although he refers to Kant across his corpus, he completely overlooked in Kant a valuable epistemological and ‘metaphysical’ alternative to Idealism and (reductionist) Materialism. The alternative that is Critical Idealism is a life-enhancing ‘faith’ that empowers *creative, intentional, responsible agency as a rupture in nature’s blind causality*. This faith benefits from communal recognition of the universal, imperceptible, coherent, ‘lawful’ order (which would include statistical significance and algorithmic order) to theoretical and practical reason, that is, a recognition of the universal Commonwealth of God as an architectonic of ‘ends’ and not mere ‘means.’ Although present in every religion, the Commonwealth of God is most effective the more that it is independent of any particular religious institution. Its aim is to encourage and sustain all intentional experience, understanding, and responsible agency *in the world especially when adherence to the Commonwealth of God is contrary to one’s and one’s community’s self-interest*. Above all, it calls for creative, responsible agency *in the world, not an escape from the world*.

Furthermore, Strauß completely ignores Kant’s discussion of aesthetics in the third *Critique*, the *Critique of the Capacity of Judgment*. For Kant, ‘critique’ means

identifying those elements not directly given in perception that are required in order for there to be perception. For example, without concepts, there can be no perception. Concepts themselves, like the substances of perception, are not directly given in perception. Kant's third *Critique* addresses the mental processes of how consciousness arrives at and applies a concept to phenomena. Concepts themselves are relationalities, not 'things,' and, as relationalities of experience, they are not innate to consciousness. They are derived by 'reflecting judgment' that grasps the imperceptible relationalities of a set of phenomena in order to classify the set. *Reflecting judgment (reflektierende Urteile)* presumes that phenomena are 'ordered.' Without this assumption, there would be no ground to seek out the order, and perception would be merely random chaotic appearances. Once a reflecting judgment has done its task, reason assumes the validity of the concept as the basis for further reflection. Post-reflecting judgment concepts are called '*ascribing judgments*' (*bestimmende Urteile*). The core issue of the third *Critique* is how reflecting judgment does what it does? This issue is what Kant investigates as *aesthetic judgment*. As with all 'critique,' the critique of aesthetic judgment is not concerned with the 'objective' phenomena themselves but with the conditions and capacities of consciousness not given directly with the phenomena that make it possible for consciousness to perceive the respective phenomena.

In short, *aesthetic judgment* for Kant is not the 'frosting on the cake' of life that is the 'reward' for those who have developed their capacities of skills or for those who expect to be rewarded for their work as the means to demonstrate their valuing 'culture' by aesthetic 'pleasure:' cuisine, museums, concerts, recreational drugs, sex, etc. *Aesthetic judgment* is concerned with consciousness' ability to experience an extraordinary form of judgment.

Whereas all other forms of judgment involve establishing the relationalities that are a concept to a set of phenomena, in the case of the experience of beauty, there is no single concept that applies to all the varieties of experience that lead one to formulate a judgment of beauty. Rather than beauty fulfilling the criteria of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (B 75) for a 'blind' judgment (perception without a concept), the experience of beauty is not a matter of the particular phenomena but a matter of the capacity of judgment itself. A concepts is not a 'thing,' but, because consciousness is able to experience without one, beauty teaches consciousness about its extra-ordinary capacities.

No one denies the experience of beauty. As far as we know, no other species on this planet, at least, is capable of experiencing, or would go out of its way to experience, beauty. In order to experience beauty, one must be 'free' from nature to the degree that one can formulate a judgment even without a concept. This *freedom-from nature* Kant calls autonomy. The highest expression of autonomy (freedom-from) is not independence from tradition or institutions but freedom-from physical nature. It is epitomized in the experience of beauty! Of course, there can be no experience of beauty or autonomy without the phenomena of nature. Nonetheless, the *aesthetic judgment* of beauty occurs in consciousness only to the degree that consciousness is 'above' nature.

Similarly, when it comes to the *aesthetic judgment* of the sublime. It is not a judgment about physical phenomena (the expanse of the universe or the power of nature). Rather, it is awe and fright (attraction and repulsion) over the capacities of finite consciousness. Given that finite, transcendental consciousness exercises a form of causality found nowhere else in nature (a finite form of *eminent* causality¹), Kant recognized already in 1775 that in principle not only is finite consciousness infinite because its concepts are without limit, but also consciousness, at least in principle (unfortunately, we now know that it can in fact), possesses the capacity to destroy nature.

Both the *aesthetic judgment* of beauty and of sublime, then have as their highest function that they teach transcendental consciousness of the significance of being able to make a judgment (the lesson of beauty) and limitlessness and destructive power of finite consciousness (the lesson of sublime). Beauty and the sublime, then, are cornerstone elements of practical reason's moral capacity (the ability of the individual to take responsibility for its agency). Clearly, theoretical reason (understanding of 'what is'), practical reason (understanding of 'what ought to be'), as well as aesthetic judgment indicate that there is far more to reason than merely *instrumental* reason. In fact, *instrumental* reason with its establishment of teleological goals and identification of the technical skills and steps that are needed to achieve those goals is a mere subset of theoretical reason erroneously taken to be independent of practical reason, the capacity to determine what 'ought to be.'

Additionally and crucially, *aesthetic judgment* establishes the role of feeling at the very core of reason. Yet, the feeling of attraction and repulsion/pleasure and displeasure is nothing merely random any more than autonomous freedom is mere spontaneity. Deeper than attraction and repulsion/pleasure and displeasure is the conviction of *reflecting judgment* that experience not only is 'ordered' but also that experience can be 'understood' by making the effort to seek out the relationalities (concepts) that structure phenomena. The core feeling of attraction and repulsion is attraction to, and joy over, discernment of the imperceptible 'order' of experience, and the core feeling of disappointment and displeasure occurs when the imperceptible 'order' eludes understanding. In short, finite, transcendental consciousness is driven by the attraction and repulsion/pleasure and displeasure of discerning order in phenomena and the self-application of moral order to (not external, heteronomous imposition on) the individual's agency.

One can say, even, that *a priori aesthetic judgment* is at the core of what it means to be human, universally, not simply the *a posteriori* reward one is 'owed' for developing one's technical skills and for one's particular, external achievements. The world is not merely a set of 'perceptible means' for fulfilling self-interest. For finite, transcendental consciousness, the world includes an architectonic of *universal, 'imperceptible ends'* that establishes the dignity of each individual and is the basis for the

¹ An eminent cause is one that is 'greater than its effect.' Eminent causality depends upon the *assumption* of the Principle of Sufficient Reason: Every effect must have a cause that has at least as much reality as its effect, or else something can come from nothing, which would mean there's only chaos.

grounding of any and all ‘respect,’ which itself is anchored in the individual’s acknowledgement of *universal* order. Ignoring of universal order by placing one’s self- and one’s community’s particular interests above universal criteria evokes disrespect to the point, even, of absolute derision.

An account of Strauß’ epistemological and metaphysical odyssey, as well as its glaring oversights, offers insight into the dominant intellectual currents of his day and documents his arrival at reductionist materialism. His work profiles the strengths and weaknesses of what today is called ‘scientism.’ Although a champion of ‘science,’ Strauß’ Hegelian epistemology that shaped his early career has little to do with the emerging hypothetico-deductive science that arose at the turn of the 20th C. The latter owes far more to Kant than it does to Hegel because it is Kant who calls for an open-ended investigation of the imperceptible ‘lawfulness’ (not the eternal Ideas of a creating, Absolute Spirit) that makes possible understanding (theoretical reason; NOT merely instrumental reason) and responsible agency (practical reason) in the world. Understanding is not the pursuit of absolute, causal explanations but identification of the *a priori* synthetic elements that must be *added to* phenomena, *responsibly*, in order for a finite being to understand and act responsibly in the world.

Given that most of the source material of the project is unavailable in English, I have provided not only citations to texts in order to substantiate my conclusions, but I, also, have presented translated passages to confirm them. As much a reference work as an intellectual biography, the two volumes on Strauß include a ‘Historical Reader.’ Along with accounts of the events that led to and of the revolution itself and aftermath, this ‘Reader’ contains translations of materials from the Zurich revolution of September 5/6, 1839. In addition, there are four appendices.

The first appendix lists Strauß’ identification of the ‘likely’ historical elements in the gospels. The second lists the 50+ prototypes in the ‘First’ Testament as well as ‘classical narratives’ identified by Strauß as employed by the Early Church and authors of the ‘Second’ Testament gospels to articulate their understanding of Jesus of Nazareth. The third appendix provides examples that confirm Strauß’ thesis of the *Glau-benslehre* the confirmation of Strauß’ thesis that “The criticism of Church doctrine is its own history” without needing to invoke any ‘external,’ ‘this-worldly’ philosophy. The fourth appendix is a set of reflective poems on Hegel, Schleiermacher, differences between the notion ‘criticism’ (not ‘critique’) between Strauß and F.C. Baur, and his view of *The Old and the New Faith* – all published posthumously.

The best illustration of this aphorism, however, Strauß himself overlooks because he (and Hegel as well as Schleiermacher and F.C. Baur et al.) all take religion to be *the ultimate, absolute, causal explanation of ‘what is.’* An, if not ‘the,’ exemplary instance of internal contradiction and self-implosion of Christian doctrine (and all other religious claims to know absolute causality) is Paul’s teaching about *God’s intentional use* of the ‘foolishness of human wisdom’ (1 Cor. 1:19-21²). It is both an

² Invoking the *genetic mythical principle* and *ascribing an ultimate causal explanation*, Paul writes: “As scripture says [the *genetic mythical principle*: Isaiah 29:14]: I shall destroy the wisdom of the wise and

example of the *genetic mythical principle* at work and of finite, transcendental consciousness *ascribing* an *intentional*, ultimate, causal explanation to appearances.

Paul provides what he takes to be *the* ultimate, causal explanation of the purpose of God's *intentional* destruction of human wisdom. Yet, contrary to Paul's claim, it is not just the 'philosophers' and 'scribes' who elevate humanity to occupy God's throne. All but one religious conceptions are anthropomorphic projections. With one exception (itself qualified), there is no religious perspective that does not elevate humanity to the throne of God. In other words, there is no understanding of ultimate, eminent causality that is not an ascription generated by finite, eminent causality *because transcendental consciousness has no direct access to causes, much less external, eminent causality, but only to effects, which are the appearances of causes*. The only form of eminent causality that we have ever experienced is our own finite, eminent causality.

The one exception to *literal* anthropomorphism in religious faith, Critical Idealism, acknowledges the inescapability of *symbolic* anthropomorphism. The only legitimate *symbolic* use of anthropomorphism, though, recognizes that human understanding of events inescapably requires a universe and *purposiveness* – not merely bottom-up purposiveness but also top-down purposiveness – if there is to be anything remotely like experience and understanding, not to speak of responsibility for one's agency. The *purpose* of such *symbolic* anthropomorphism is not to provide ultimate proof God or of His (*sic.*) intentions, which constitutes the very pinnacle of human hubris, but only the recognition of the inescapable *presupposition* (regulative idea) of those divine predicates that make any and all *finite*, conscious experience, understanding, and responsible agency in the world possible, in the first place.

In short, all causal explanations are 'as ifs' and always involve a degree of probability. The only truly *necessary*, *eminent* causes are those that are *required* in order for there to be anything remotely like finite, intentional (not merely instinctual) experience, understanding, and responsible agency *in the world of appearances*. The necessity of this finite, eminent causality is confirmed by the fact that finite, intentional consciousness cannot deny its experience without its experience of appearances. All other accounts of eminent causality are flights of fantasy like a dove dreaming that it would be easier to fly in a vacuum. Of course, such dreams may be 'true' because all that goes beyond human understanding is possible. However, finite transcendental consciousness undermines its own capacities and responsibilities when it takes such dreams to be absolutely true – as the case with Paul.

bring to nothing all the learning of the learned. Where are the philosophers now? Where are the scribes? [Septuagint Isaiah 33:18]Where are any of our thinkers today? Do you see now how God has shown up the foolishness of human wisdom? If it was God's wisdom that human wisdom should not know God, it was because [Paul's ascription of ultimate causal explanation] God wanted to save those who have faith through the foolishness of the message that we preach."

A detailed Table of Contents, thorough set of indices, and internal cross-referencing aid the reader's mining of Strauß' reflections and their implications.

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