

ARTICLE X.

STRAUSS'S SUPERFICIALITY.¹

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IN this interesting but weak book, which has importance chiefly as a summary of its predecessors by the same author, Strauss, who is now sixty-four years of age, subjects the results of his life to the crucial, but undeniably fatal, test of an attempt to exhibit as one harmonious system his views not only of theology, but of science, art, literature, and politics as well.

Admitting (pp. 5, 7, 179) that his Mythical Theory, put forth when he was a young man, and now for twenty years marked as juvenile by the best scholarship of Germany, has not had force enough to drive from the world the belief in the supernatural, he adopts here, as hopeful instruments to the same end, the new weapons of physiology, the nebular hypothesis, and Darwinism. Upon all these he lays an emphasis that is eager to the degree of being incautious. Although he adopts Darwinism with a few reservations, he expresses an unqualified confidence that if this system ultimately proves to be correct, belief in the supernatural will become impossible: an opinion precisely the opposite of Mr. Darwin's. Even Mr. Tyndall maintains that if a right-hand spiral movement of the particles of the brain could be proved to produce love, and a left-hand spiral movement hate, we should still be as far as ever from knowing the causes of the movements themselves; while profounder minds, like Sir John Herschell, W. B. Carpenter, and Professor Agassiz, accustomed to clear definitions, understand by the vague phrase "natural law," nothing other than the omnipresent fixed method of action of the divine will, so that no matter by what process of natural development man and the universe may have been produced, there remain, according to these naturalists themselves, and as theology has for centuries taught, two undeniable instances of mind acting upon matter in the universe, namely, the beginning and the continuance of that process. Strauss' discussions, however, greatly lack clearness in definitions; indeed, his definition of a myth has been subjected to most important modifications between the edition of his principal work published in 1835, and the form in which his theory appeared in 1864, and now reappears in 1872.

¹ Der Alte und der neue Glaube. Ein Bekenntniss von David Friedrich Strauss. Zweite Auflage. Leipzig. 1872.

That there are higher and lower natural laws; that, on all sides, as in the power of the vital principle over chemical affinities, or of the human will over gravitation, we find examples of the subordination of the lower to the higher; that a miracle may be only the exhibition of the power of a higher over a lower law, and that the supernatural, therefore, is not necessarily the unnatural, were positions familiar in the theology of Schleiermacher, and even in the philosophy of Hegel, before Strauss began his historical criticism; but of which, to judge by the constant misrepresentation of the doctrine of miracles which abounds in this last book by Strauss as well as in his first, the author has not yet heard, although Schleiermacher and Hegel were once his teachers. Demanding, as always heretofore, a criticism of Christianity which shall be free from presuppositions, Strauss here, as always heretofore, himself writes with the determined presupposition that the supernatural is the unnatural, the impossible, and therefore the unhistorical. On account of this presupposition, and for no other reason which the most careful reader can discover, must the first three Gospels as well as the fourth, be regarded as by no means productions of the date to which scholarship assigns them, nor, indeed, of eye-witnesses at all. Accounts of miracles have been interpolated in them by the mythical process, and by the partisan needs of the Pauline and the Petrine factions. German criticism and the discovery of manuscripts, have within the last fifty years carried back the earliest undeniable date of the New Testament literature, thirty years, and narrowed by so much the previously too narrow room for the time which Strauss requires for his myths to grow up in; but of this new aspect of the case he takes no notice.

As specimens of the curiously unsound or unfair statements to which Strauss commits himself, and which prove that this, his latest and perhaps ripest book, is by no means true to the scientific method, one may instance the propositions:

1. That the Bible is untrustworthy because it teaches that the sun was created on the fourth day of creation, while night and day had previously existed (pp. 17, 18).

2. That Christianity is undeniably an institution in defence of poverty and beggary, and that the begging monks of the Middle Ages, as well as the begging system now adopted at Rome, are "genuine Christian institutions" (p. 63).

3. That the Gospels "do not contain a word for the peaceful political virtues, for love of country, and worthiness as a citizen" (p. 65).

4. That the household and family virtues have no sufficient teaching in the example or doctrine of Christ (p. 65).

5. That the New Testament, which represents Dives as "sure of hell, only on account of the fact that he fared sumptuously every day, without our learning anything else wrong of him," denies that there can be a right personal use of wealth and is opposed to the industrial virtues (pp. 62-64).

6. That, by these peculiarities, Christianity becomes "a principle at enmity with culture" (p. 64).

7. That the ideas of brotherly love and philanthropy owe more to the philosophy of infidelity than to Christianity (p. 85).

8. That the Christian doctrine of heaven and hell is so connected with the idea of a place for each, that modern astronomy has destroyed the possibility of maintaining the one doctrine or the other (pp. 132-134).

9. That "the continued existence of the soul without its bodily organ is inconceivable" (p. 132).

10. That divorce should be made far easier than the Christian sentiment of the world at present permits (pp. 255, 256).

11. That in respect to the relations of the sexes Jesus and Paul held extravagantly ascetic notions (pp. 252, 253, 256).

12. That the Founder of Christianity teaches that whoever looks on a woman to lust after her has committed adultery in his heart, and that, if this is so, every marriage that is not one merely of convenience or reason is preceded by sensuality. (p. 253. "Jesus aber lehrte in der Bergrede, wer ein weib ansehe, ihrer zu begehren, habe schon mit ihr die Ehe gebrochen in seinem Herzen. Wenn dieses richtig ist, so geht jeder Ehe, die nicht Convenienz- oder sogenannte Vernunfttheirath ist, innerliche Unzucht voran. Was haben wir an einem Spruche, der, ohne an der Natureinrichtung, gegen die er anläuft, das mindeste ändern zu können, ein mit ihr gegebenes Gebiet menschlicher Empfindungen brandmarkt?")

Germany has suffered so much from the contagion of French coarseness; the court morals of her petty states and uneducated nobility, imitated from the pattern of Paris and Versailles, have received since the war of liberation from Napoleon the First, so many terrible political and social rebukes from the sound portion of the nation, that when materialism, as here in Strauss, exhibits leprosy, the shudder of even continental tastes, which the results at Sedan have done something to correct, is perceptible. Although Strauss would make music, art, and poetry the only substitute for the church (pp. 298-300), one doubts, as the eye falls upon such amazing passages as those just cited, whether such a person as Aurora Leigh or Evangeline, or Mrs. Browning's Sir Walter's wife would be intelligible to him. In spite, however, of Strauss' own experience of speedy separation from the actress to whom he was married in 1840, it must by no means be supposed that his general tone of soul is low enough to meet the demands of those who consider Voltaire's personal character admirable, and who, from this German, would meet only moral rebuke. In contrast with recent French theological sceptics, Strauss has a considerable degree of religious and aesthetic culture, the want of which has in the last century destroyed the value of so much sceptical German criticism, although not enough, as has just been shown, to make visible to him that moral beauty of the New Testament which Goethe in his maturity used to speak of as

unsurpassable, and as if, in the Weimar court, where French tastes had by no means been expelled from morals, it had just begun to be visible to him. It is too late now, however, even on the continent, for that style of infidelity which the learned German histories classify as *Rationalismus vulgaris*, and describe by the epithet *philisterhaft*, to recover the ground it has lost in the last fifty years. A serious man must rejoice to have Christianity tested philosophically, historically, and in every great way, but not in a certain small, light, and inwardly coarse way, of which the world has had enough, and is tired. Although the moral insight of Strauss's book is superior to the average standard of French scepticism, yet were the volume written with French vivacity instead of with German steadiness of tone, its reasoning would appear, as a whole, quite as weak as that of Renan's imaginative life of Christ, of which no German scholar of position speaks with intellectual respect. As in the astonishingly unfair reasoning just quoted, the reader has a painful sense that the discussion is thoroughly uncritical, so throughout the book, in spite of bright hints here and there, and the transcendent importance of the historical and scientific themes discussed, one may search in vain for a page where the more vital parts of the argument will bear the test of being thrown into the syllogistic form.

Strauss expressly admits in this work that the minority for which he has spoken for forty years is in Germany exceedingly small (pp. 5, 7), and that all attempts to form into organizations those who hold these views, have been failures so perfect as to be ludicrous. (p. 7. "Wir sollten mithin, so schein es, den alt- und neukirchlichen Vereinen gegenüber einen unkirchlichen, einen rein humanitären und rationellen, gründen. Aber es geschieht nicht, und wo es einige versuchen, machen sie sich lächerlich.")

Among the sound fragments of the book are the doctrines that conscience is the rightful law of the soul, even although there be no immortality or personal God (pp. 142, 146); that the feeling of unconditional dependence upon a higher order of things, is the ground of a religion, although we cannot any longer call ourselves Christians (pp. 141, 94); and that, whether we name this higher order God or the universe, we must seek harmony with it, as revealed by experience and conscience (pp. 142, 146, 374). "We demand," is the express claim of this latest statement of infidelity, "for our universe the same piety as the pious man of the old style demanded for his God." Schopenhauer's Pessimism, even Strauss finds revolting.