

Interpretation

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Discussion

Déjà Jew All Over Again: Dannhauser on Leo Strauss and Atheism

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In a contribution to a conference on Leo Strauss and Judaism, Werner Dannhauser declares his belief that Leo Strauss was an atheist and at the same time a good Jew because he concealed his atheism out of reverence for Judaism.¹ Dannhauser does not attribute atheism to Strauss because it is the view he would have wished Strauss to embrace. On the contrary, Dannhauser proclaims himself to be a believing Jew who has never been an atheist. He believes Strauss to be an atheist despite revering him as a teacher and despite continuing to be willing to describe himself as a “Straussian.” Dannhauser’s conclusion regarding Strauss’s atheism is one he has arrived at only with great reluctance. He is driven to it by his belief that the following reasoning is sound: Leo Strauss is a philosopher. But all philosophers are atheists. Therefore Leo Strauss is an atheist (pp. 166, 158).

Dannhauser’s essay is engagingly modest. He does not pretend to be an authority on the thought of Strauss. He draws attention to the tentative character of his characterization of Strauss as an atheist. When it comes time to pass judgement on whether or not Strauss was right to be an atheist, Dannhauser goes out of his way to avoid creating the impression that he is in a state of Socratic ignorance regarding this point and declares that his condition would be better described as one of “incompetence.” He goes on to say: “Only rarely does incompetence stop anyone from anything, and it will not stop me, but let the reader beware” (p. 156). Not until he has taken these steps does Dannhauser proceed to explain why he thinks Strauss is an atheist and why he believes—believes not knows—that he is not right to be one. Given these disclaimers and qualifications it may seem that, in the remarks that follow, I am guilty of taking Dannhauser more seriously than he takes himself. I do think Dannhauser’s essay has to be taken seriously. He spent many years studying with Strauss. The atheistic views he attributes to him are views he genuinely believes Strauss to have held, and I cannot even imagine him attributing them to Strauss for any

I am indebted for this title to a witty remark by Marion Magid and to a famous observation by Yogi Berra.

other reason. If Dannhauser is in error, as I think he can be shown to be, that error is one which an able student can be misled into making. Explaining why it is an error may help some future student of Strauss to avoid making it.

Strauss indicated how he would have responded to an accusation that he was an atheist in an answer he sketched to David Spitz's assertion, in a publication, that "Strauss rejects God." Strauss's answer circulated among many of his students and has recently been published in Kenneth Hart Green's study of Leo Strauss's relation to philosophy and to Judaism.² Before quoting it, the enormous difference between Spitz's accusation and Dannhauser's own description of Strauss's views deserves to be emphasized. Dannhauser speaks of Strauss with gratitude and reverence even when ascribing to him a view Dannhauser finds it impossible to accept himself. This is very different from the spirit in which Spitz's accusation is voiced. Still, the culminating point of Strauss's reply to Spitz indicates how Dannhauser should be answered as well.

A friend showed me a passage in an article by Professor David Spitz which reads "Strauss rejects God." I could not help laughing when I read it but I did not know why I laughed. Another friend explained to me that the three words read like a manifestly absurd headline, say, "Nixon [or Stevenson] Declines Presidency."^[1] On reflection I sketched the following letter to the Editor which I did not for a moment intend to send to the periodical in which Spitz's utterance appeared.

"Spitz has said that Strauss is a great fool. If he had limited himself to saying that I would not have reason to protest. Apart from the fact that I have some awareness of my limitations, no one is under a moral obligation to be intelligent; the fact that there are and always have been so many fools in the world, would seem to show that there is a natural necessity for that, and with such necessity even gods fight in vain. But Spitz has said 'Strauss rejects God.' If one says of a man that he rejects the sun, the moon and the stars, one says in effect that he is a fool. Hence, considering the proportion of everything finite to the Infinite, if one says of a man that he rejects God, one says in effect that he is not only very foolish but infinitely foolish. In addition, however, if the accuser is not himself foolish, he accuses the accused by such a statement of something like turpitude. Such accusations at any rate require proof. My accuser has not even tried to prove his accusation. If he should be induced by this remark to try to prove his accusation, I warn him in advance to keep in mind the difference between revealed theology and natural theology or to make himself familiar with it."

To understand the point of this reply to Spitz, one must follow Strauss's advice and acquaint oneself with the difference to which he refers. A passage quoted by Augustine in *The City of God* supplies us with valuable information concerning this point. After noting Varro's distinction between three different kind of theology, which Augustine renders into Latin as fabulous, natural and civil theology, Augustine goes on to quote Varro's description of natural theology:

The second kind which I have explained [i.e., natural theology] is that concerning which philosophers have left many books, in which they treat such questions as these: what gods there are, where they are, of what kind and character they are, since what time they have existed, or if they have existed from eternity; whether they are of fire, as Heraklitus believes; or of number, as Pythagoras; or of atoms, as Epicurus says; and other such things which men's ears can more easily hear inside the walls of a school than outside in the Forum.⁴

Natural theology, in a word, is the teaching of philosophers concerning divine beings or concerning God. Strauss's point is clear enough: even if one were to show that he rejects revealed theology (something Spitz by no means does) one would still have to show that he rejects natural theology as well (something Spitz may not realize that he must also do) before one could reasonably conclude that he is an atheist.

Strauss's sketch of a reply to Spitz circulated among his students. I saw it and I am sure that Dannhauser has seen it as well. What could have led him to ignore Strauss's admonition not to ignore natural theology? Dannhauser may have reasoned as follows. Strauss lived what he taught. He made no secret of the fact that he was not an orthodox Jew. Nor was he a practicing adherent of any other revealed religion. Therefore he rejected all revealed theology. His writings abound in scholarly attempts to demonstrate that many theological teachings found in the writings of the great philosophers of the past resulted from their efforts to protect themselves against the accusation of atheism as well as from their humane concern for the well-being of their nonphilosophical fellows. These natural theologies were exoteric teachings which did not convey their true philosophic thought. Generalizing from these examples, one can easily be misled into believing that for Strauss, every natural theology was exoteric. This would be tantamount to holding that every philosopher was an atheist, avowed or unavowed. From this the conclusion readily follows that Strauss must have been an atheist because he was a philosopher.

In criticizing the reasoning I have outlined, I will not take up the question concerning what conclusions Strauss may or may not have reached regarding revealed theology.⁵ I will limit myself to examining the contention that Strauss thought all natural theology to be exoteric. That claim, I will try to show, is untrue and leads to a serious misinterpretation of Strauss's thought. My conclusion will be that Dannhauser should have taken Strauss's advice to Spitz more seriously than he seems to have.

Strauss offered several courses on Kant. Transcripts of these courses can be found in the Strauss archives at the University of Chicago. There is no doubt that Strauss esteemed Kant as a great philosopher and accepted as true the view that Kant believed faith in—as distinguished from knowledge of—the existence of God, the immortality of the soul and the freedom of the will to be

rationally defensible and to recommend itself to rational moral knowledge. When there were reasons to think that a natural theology advanced by a philosopher was exoteric, Strauss did not hesitate to point them out. The universal faith set forth by Spinoza in chapter 14 of the *Theologico-Political Treatise* is a case in point. Strauss drew attention to the passages in that work which make it extremely difficult to regard that faith as Spinoza's own view. A similar procedure was followed by Strauss in his writings and courses on Hobbes and even on Locke. It was not followed in the course on Kant. It should be noted that Strauss always thought the burden of proof to be on himself when he concluded that a philosopher's thought differed from that philosopher's teaching, and the evidence for that conclusion had to be found in the philosopher's writings. Strauss regarded Kant as a great philosopher and thought that Kant believed in God. It is simply untrue that, according to Strauss, "none of these great men believed in God," as I once overheard a student of a student of a student of Strauss put it.

Turning to Hegel, again one does not find an example of atheism, whether one considers Hegel as understood by Strauss or as understood by Kojève (contrast Dannhauser, p. 161). The modified version of Hegelianism advanced by Kojève is indeed atheistic. It results from Kojève's attempt to free what he thought best in Hegel's thought from what he regarded as an untenable and erroneous philosophy of nature. But Kojève was fully aware that the unamended original philosophy of Hegel was not atheistic. As for Strauss, when asked, in one of his courses on Hegel, whose reason it was that the title of the work being studied (*Reason in History*) referred to, replied that it surely does not refer to merely human reason and that in Hegel there is a divine reason effective in everything, in nature as well as in history. The question that remains, and that continues to be very difficult to answer, according to Strauss, is whether or not for Hegel that divine reason attains self-consciousness only in man. I infer, however, the presence of a divine principle, even if it is not a thinking being, is sufficient to prevent a philosophy from being atheistic. In Kojève's revised Hegelianism the question regarding self-consciousness does not arise. For Kojève, there is no reason other than human reason. But Strauss challenges even Kojève's right to his atheistic philosophy. The challenge is based on Kojève's conceding the need for a philosophy of nature. According to Strauss, Kojève needs a philosophy of nature in which nature is structured or ordered with a view to history. Strauss claims that nature so understood is incompatible with atheism. To sum up: according to both Strauss and Kojève Hegel was not an atheist. According to Strauss, Kojève was an atheist but had no right to be one. The presence of a cosmic principle supporting what is highest in man stands in the way of atheism.⁶

Observations similar to those made about Kant and Hegel could also be made about Berkeley and Aristotle. Let us turn, however, to the example most pertinent to Dannhauser's claim. According to Dannhauser, Socrates, as inter-

preted by Strauss, is an atheist. But Socrates is the philosopher to whose thought Strauss sought to return and whose views he embraced. Therefore Strauss is an atheist as well.

In his debate with Kojève, Strauss explained why Socrates sought to educate the young by ascribing the following understanding of the soul to Socrates:

The philosopher's attempt to grasp the eternal order is necessarily an ascent from the perishable things which as such reflect the eternal order. Of all the perishable things known to us, those which reflect that order most, or which are most akin to that order, are the souls of men. But the souls of men reflect the eternal order in different degrees. A soul that is in good order or healthy reflects it to a higher degree than a soul that is chaotic or diseased. The philosopher who as such has had a glimpse of the eternal order is therefore particularly sensitive to the difference among human souls. In the first place, he alone knows what a healthy or well-ordered soul is. And secondly, precisely because he has had a glimpse of the eternal order, he cannot help being intensely pleased by the aspect of a healthy or well-ordered soul, and he cannot help being intensely pained by the aspect of a diseased or chaotic soul, without any regard to his own needs or benefits. . . . He is highly sensitive to the promise of good or ill order, or of happiness or misery, which is held out by the souls of the young.⁷

The basis of the explanation offered by Strauss for Socrates' activity as an educator is clearly labelled an assumption, albeit one which explains the phenomenon better than alternative assumptions do. Some philosophers, such as Democritus, assume eternal causes of the whole which are not akin to the human soul, and which the well-ordered soul cannot reflect any more than the chaotic soul does. These philosophies, according to this analysis, are undoubtedly atheistic. But one is no more justified in describing as atheistic the Socratic view, and the assumption on which it is based, than one is in calling atheistic the philosophy of Hegel in its original, pre-Kojèvean version. At the end of his essay on Kurt Riezler, Strauss contrasts Socrates' view of human life with that of Thucydides. Speaking of the opposites whose conflict pervades human life, Strauss says that Thucydides "regards the higher of the opposites not, as Socrates did, as stronger but as more vulnerable, more delicate than the lower" (*What is Political Philosophy?*, p. 160). According to the Socratic hypothesis, then, there is cosmic support for what is highest in man.

The Socratic hypothesis claims to offer an account of human life superior to that provided by the philosophical alternatives to itself. This is not tantamount to a demonstration of its truth. It remains open to the challenge of these alternatives. The Socratic hypothesis, as developed by Plato and Aristotle, however, does refute some versions of the alternatives to itself, according to Strauss. To avoid these refutations, the alternative would have to find some way to allow for essential differences. It would have to provide a better account of knowledge and understanding than that supplied by "the corporeal mind, composed of

very smooth and round particles with which Epicurus was satisfied” and which Hobbes was right to reject on the basis of what “he had learned from Plato and Aristotle.”⁸ One could add that it would have to supply a better explanation of its own insights than Hobbes’s constructivism is capable of doing, according to Strauss.

Dannhauser restates the argument for revelation that one finds in Strauss, but is commendably aware of some of the reservations Strauss expressed regarding it.⁹ As far as I can tell, Dannhauser has not worked out the difficulty implied in his both relying and not relying on this argument, but his essay, as I indicated above, is not the least bit pretentious and I don’t think he would claim to have worked it out. The argument, briefly stated, runs as follows. Philosophy cannot disprove the possibility of the miracles that revelation presupposes. Any rejection of revelation by philosophy is based on an act of faith no less than adherence to revelation is. But philosophy claims to be more than faith. It claims to be knowledge of great importance. By rejecting revelation without refuting it, philosophy refutes itself.

Dannhauser recognizes that according to Strauss Jewish revelation claims to be rationally superior to other religions, even if this superiority is not what moves the pious Jew to embrace it. In the foregoing argument for revelation, however, the central contention is that reason itself is based on faith. If this is the case, it is difficult to see of what importance it can be to be rationally superior, or how there could even be such a thing. This difficulty is one of the grounds for the reservations expressed by Strauss. Another way of stating this difficulty, of which Dannhauser is well aware, is that the victory of the argument for revelation opens the door to “Babylon or [Constantinople] or Mecca” as well as to Jerusalem.¹⁰ One might add that willed acts of belief need not lead to the worship of any God or gods whatever. A willed act of belief can lead, for example, to “the atheism from intellectual probity” described at some length by Strauss (*Liberalism*, pp. 255–56). Finally, a willed act of belief can lead to acceptance of the revelation communicated by Hesiod’s *Theogony*.

Dannhauser declares: “Given the greatest of all miracles, the existence of God, the belief in all other miracles is easy enough for believers” (Dannhauser, p. 165). Is what we are told by Hesiod’s *Theogony* any less miraculous? Instead of a world brought into being out of nothing by an omnipotent cause, we have a world coming into being out of nothing through nothing, without any cause. What could be more miraculous than that? If we are told that what the *Theogony* asserts is simply impossible, we would be entitled to ask what rational principle shows this to be the case, what other constraints reason places on what we should believe, and on what grounds it does so. In brief, we would be facing, in another form, the difficulty we mentioned in the preceding paragraphs. One could add that the gods of Hesiod were for centuries the delight of poets. I can recall that one professor, other than Strauss, whom Dannhauser and I both admired as students, made plain that, if he had to choose, he would prefer the gods of Hesiod to the God of Biblical religion.¹¹

Dannhauser's awareness of Strauss's reservations concerning his argument for the victory of Jerusalem over Athens is important for Dannhauser's presentation of Strauss. If Dannhauser thought that Strauss accepted the outcome of that argument, he would not have concluded that Strauss is an atheist. While I have already made plain that I don't think Dannhauser's conclusion is justified, the difficulties that prevent him from simply equating Strauss's views with the argument for Jerusalem are genuine enough. These difficulties also find expression in Strauss's remark that "Orthodoxy could be returned to only if Spinoza was wrong *in every respect*" (*Liberalism*, p. 239. The italics are not in the original). It is true that both in the text of his youthful *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* and in his mature account of that youthful work Strauss draws attention to the role played by ridicule and laughter, as distinguished from rational argument, in Spinoza's polemic against orthodoxy. But anyone who has read Strauss's *Socrates and Aristophanes* with some understanding knows that the mature Strauss thought more highly of a good joke as an argument than he did when he was younger.¹²

Difficulties in the argument for Jerusalem do not by themselves justify the choice of Athens or philosophy. Dannhauser is convinced that Strauss did choose Athens. I have tried to indicate above why I think that even if Dannhauser were right regarding this point, it would still not follow that Strauss was an atheist. Dannhauser tries, tentatively and provisionally, to provide an outline of the argument by which Socrates, and Strauss in agreement with him, justify their atheism. The atheism Dannhauser ascribes to them is not the "dogmatic atheism" of other philosophers. It is what Dannhauser calls "Socratic atheism" (Dannhauser, pp. 166–67). In the course of describing Socratic atheism, Dannhauser provides characterizations of Socratic thought which I think are in need of correction.

While Socrates, as described by Dannhauser, is not projecting the attainment of the indubitable sciences which Descartes seeks and believes he has attained, he does seem to be troubled by Descartes' radical doubt to a greater degree than Strauss's Socrates is. Dannhauser describes Socrates' knowledge as "uncertain knowledge." Dannhauser seems to me to be measuring Socrates' knowledge against the ideal of Cartesian certainty and concluding that it does not live up to that ideal and that Socrates did not expect it to. He does not ask himself whether Socrates would have considered that ideal a reasonable standard. I see no reason why we should deny Socrates knowledge of the things Strauss's "man from Missouri" knows:

He knows that he, as well as everyone else who is of sound mind and whose sight is not defective, can see things and people as they are with his eyes and that he is capable of knowing how his neighbors feel; he takes it for granted that he lives with other human beings of all descriptions in the same world and that because they

are all human beings, they all understand one another somehow; he knows that if this were not so, political life would be altogether impossible. (*Liberalism*, p. 211)

I also do not see why we have to tinge this knowledge with any touch of uncertainty. One of the things which distinguishes Socrates from “the man from Missouri” is that Socrates is aware of the difference between knowing the things we have mentioned and understanding what makes it possible for us to know them. As any thoughtful reader of the *Theaetetus* knows, Socrates is aware of the enormous difficulty of achieving that understanding. Strauss goes so far as to call this problem “the fundamental riddle” (*Liberalism*, p. 211). One misses the fundamental riddle by doubting what should not be doubted no less than by not doubting what should be. Dannhauser confuses not adequately understanding what we know with being uncertain of it. To be sure, this is a confusion one frequently encounters.

Not surprisingly, Strauss attributes more knowledge to Socrates than he does to “the man from Missouri,” knowledge of high importance, knowledge that amounts to a good deal more than zetetically skeptical knowledge of ignorance.

But since love of wisdom is not wisdom and philosophy as prudence is the never-to-be-completed concern with one’s own good, it seems impossible to know that the philosophic life is the best life. Socrates could not know this if he did not know that the only serious alternative to the philosophic life is the political life and that the political life is subordinate to the philosophic life: political life is life in the cave which is partly closed off by a wall from life in the light of the sun; the city is the only whole within the whole or the only part of the whole whose essence can be wholly known.¹³

The knowledge attributed to Socrates here cannot be reduced to Socratic ignorance.

Dannhauser concludes his essay by explaining why he thinks that Strauss was a good Jew who made his Jewish students better Jews than they would otherwise have been. Many of the Jewish students of Strauss, when they first came to him, regarded orthodox Judaism as something foreign to themselves. From Strauss they learned how powerful an argument could be developed for Biblical religion. Strauss deepened the understanding of Biblical religion on the part of both his Jewish and of his non-Jewish students. This heightened the respect of his Jewish students for their Judaism and so made them better Jews. Regarding this point, there is no disagreement between Dannhauser and me, and I join him in citing myself as an example of this effect of Strauss.

NOTES

1. Werner Dannhauser, “Athens and Jerusalem or Jerusalem and Athens,” in *Leo Strauss and Judaism: Jerusalem and Athens Critically Revisited*, ed. David Novak (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996), pp. 155–171. See especially pp. 169–70.

2. David Spitz, "Freedom, Virtue and the 'New Scholasticism': The Supreme Court as Philosopher Kings," *Commentary* 28, no. 10 (October 1959): 315. The full phrase by Spitz reads: "Yet how established are these 'truths' when Strauss, for example, rejects God, Voegelin and Hallowell embrace him (so long as he is the Christian God), and Lippman tries to bring the two factions together under a common umbrella. . . ." Kenneth Hart Green, *Jew and Philosopher: The Return to Maimonides in the Jewish Thought of Leo Strauss* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), pp. 237–38.
3. The reading "Stephenson" in the text as published by Green should be replaced by "Stevenson." Strauss is referring to Richard Nixon and Adlai Stevenson, who were two defeated candidates for President at the time this response was written.
4. Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dodds, Modern Library Giant (New York: Random House, 1993), 6.5.190.
5. For an illuminating examination of this question, see the book by Kenneth Hart Green referred to in note 2.
6. Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction à la Lecture de Hegel* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), p. 378. Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny*, ed. Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth (New York: The Free Press, 1991), p. 237.
7. Leo Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?* (New York: The Free Press, 1959), p. 121.
8. Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), p. 172.
9. Leo Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), pp. 256–57.
10. Dannhauser, p. 164. I assume that "Constantinsate" was meant to be Constantinople.
11. David Grene. He said this with a smile.
12. Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, trans. E. M. Sinclair (New York: Schocken, 1965). See especially pp. 143–44. Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, pp. 224–59, 254–55. Leo Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).
13. Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 29.