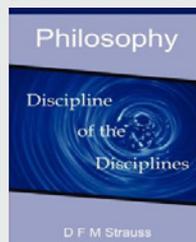


Danie Strauss: Philosophy as discipline of disciplines

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Danie F.M. Strauss

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Danie Strauss: Philosophy as discipline of disciplines

Reviewer:

Sander Griffioen¹

Affiliation:

Department of Philosophy,
Vrije Universiteit,
Amsterdam, Netherlands

Email:

griffioen.sander@gmail.com

Postal address:

Rijksstraatweg 77, 3632AA,
Loenen aan de Vecht,
Netherlands

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Philosophy: Discipline of the Disciplines earned D.F.M. Strauss the Herman Dooyeweerd prize awarded at the Christian Philosophy Conference 2011, Amsterdam. Everyone who has worked his way through its 650 pages cannot but be overwhelmed by the richness of materials brought together and systematised. It is a landmark both in his personal bibliography that started almost 40 years ago with his doctoral study *Begrip en Idee* (1973) and in the history of Reformational philosophy.¹

The preface concludes with a gracious acknowledgment of teachers and fellow students who have helped him to 'digest and further develop the legacy of reformational philosophy'. One sees that the book does not present itself as an entirely new interpretation making short shrift with all earlier interpretations but as a stage in a communal trajectory. This is sympathetic, although, of course, we still have to find out whether the community of thought invoked functions only in determining what has been bequeathed or also in 'digesting' and 'developing' this legacy.

The title offers a further clue as to the genre of the book. The reference to *disciplines* indicates that philosophy is situated in the vicinity of the special sciences. Apparently, this study aims to show philosophy's relevance for the sciences, and not, for instance, for the pursuit of meaning or the development of a worldview or lifeview. But the formulation 'discipline of the disciplines' makes clear that its role should be understood as foundational, rather than as a clearing up of what those sciences have left unresolved. Finally, by speaking of a *discipline* amongst disciplines it stresses that philosophy does not hold this foundational position as readymade and waiting to be applied, but rather that its systematics can only be developed in close conjunction with the special sciences.² It is an idea of philosophy very much present in Herman Dooyeweerd (more so than in Vollenhoven's work) and that since then has been worked out in various ways by many of the philosophers mentioned in the preface of this book, but only reaching encyclopedic breadth in the work of Dick Stafleu and, indeed, Danie Strauss.

Turning now to the table of contents we immediately discern two salient features. Firstly, just by consulting the titles one notices that all chapters relate in one way or another to the theory of 'modal structures'. Secondly, the quantitative, spatial and kinematic aspects appear to play a pivotal role within the order of modalities.

Unmistakably, the theory of modal structures holds pride of place in this conception. Strauss follows Dooyeweerd in interpreting creational diversity and coherence first and foremost as diversity and coherence of modal structures. Moreover, with Strauss, the modal structures also form the horizon against which issues of unity, universality, uniqueness, infinity, et cetera, are being placed. On this score he differs from Dooyeweerd. I will restrict myself for the moment to unity. In this respect Dooyeweerd follows a scheme that is essentially Kantian. Put simply, it means that unity comes about by the synthesis of a given diversity – a synthesis transcending the level at which the diversity occurred. On this account unity always lies beyond diversity – there is no unity-in-diversity! In Dooyeweerd's case this gives rise to the (in-)famous quest for an Archimedean point. The leading question is: where to find a place from which the whole can be overseen? The answer is: in the human heart; only here is life still one (as Kuyper was fond of saying). In Strauss's view, however, unity is already given a level of diversity. Thus, there is no use for an Archimedean point nor for a concentration point in the human heart. All synthesis is inter-modal (pp. 363–307; *pace* Kant).

Characteristic for Strauss's conception is the assumption that notions such as unity, uniqueness, universality, continuity, discreteness, permanence, change, part and whole have their home in the basic domains of the modal order and can at those levels be shown to be mutually compatible. The

1. See Alan Cameron's glowing review in *Philosophia Reformata* 77, 85–90.

2. The title of the final chapter does refer to what lies beyond the disciplines: 'Philosophy is more than the "Discipline of the Disciplines"'. But this overture serves to account for the influence of ultimate commitments on what lies *on this side* of the borderline, *not* to cross the border. See the title of its final section: 'The presence of ultimate commitments within the special sciences'. On ultimate commitments see also p. 462 and section 5.14: 'Trust (faith) in rationality' (187–188).

author takes pains to show that many (all?) of the antinomies and paradoxes that have marred Western philosophy originate in disregard for the creation order, and especially of those basic domains. Don't think this only regards worn-out, Zeno-type paradoxes about how to conceive motion. It is the author's conviction that such a vital '-ism' as historicism is equally flawed by misconceiving the basic relationship between constancy and change (p. 292).

Back to the foundations

The point is not, of course, that any use of notions beyond their basic sphere ipso facto turns them into contraband. However, one does get such an impression by Strauss's rather cavalier dismissal of what he sees as a lack of critical thinking. So, for instance, versus Giddens he says: 'In different contexts he simply uses the terms (social) *differentiation* and *integration* without realizing that they reflect biotic analogies within the structure of the social aspect' (p. 528). Does this not sound like a Derridean deconstruction programme? It is only by re-reading the statement carefully that one understands the point: it is not that Giddens wrongly used the term *differentiation*, for it does denote a very real element of the structure of the social aspect. What is criticised is a wanting reflection on the analogous character of this element. See also this comment on mathematical logic: 'This discipline simply introduces the terms *constants* and *variables* intuitively, without even addressing the question about *analogical concepts*' (p. 234). Another example would be on page 390 where a certain Regan is taken to task for positing criteria for moral principles such as consistency and adequacy of scope:

He does not realize that these terms stem from diverse irreducible modal domains – *consistency* resides in the logical aspect (non-contradiction); *adequacy of scope* is equivalent to (...) *universality* which reflects the spatial meaning of *everywhere*

In spite of appearances to the contrary, the point is not that the use of 'consistency', et cetera, in moral theory is to be condemned; it is perfectly legitimate lest a proper (*philosophical*) account be given of its origin. One final example is the objection against Calvin Seerveld's use of 'nuancefulness' to characterise the aesthetic. Notice the 'nothing but' in the following statement: 'the term *nuancefulness* without any doubt analogically reflects nothing but precisely the meaning of the numerical and the spatial aspects of reality ...' (p. 253). It would, of course, be absurd to hold that the use of 'nuancefulness' in aesthetics is illegitimate. The proper interpretation must be that what is rejected is its claim to denote the meaning-nucleus.

Why do I list all these examples? In the first place it is to illustrate the great weight given to the modal order. Secondly, to illustrate the main line followed in Strauss's critique of other authors crossing his path. Last but not least, it is to show a certain likeness to a deconstruction programme. Let me make this last point more clear. The author's strategy is to show the relevance of philosophy by problematising concepts forming the stock-in-trade of practitioners of the special disciplines. I am not convinced by this approach.

Should we as philosophers not start with acknowledging social (societal) differentiation, moral consistency, aesthetic nuance(-fulness), et cetera, as genuine, full-fledged notions? This is not just a matter of choosing the most expedient approach for a philosophy of the special disciplines. In the first place it is about the significance of the foundational relation. To return once more to the discussion with Giddens, also if we agree that the relation to the biotic differentiation is constitutive for what social differentiation means it is still not clear what insights are gained this way. Would it help Giddens to become a better sociologist? I for one am not convinced. It seems more fruitful to focus instead on the place of this notion within the entire constellation of the economic, social and jural aspects.

It is not that Danie Strauss neglects the disclosure of 'later' modal structures. On the contrary, he stresses that the 'ontic coherence' is enhanced. However, even so, the emphasis remains on the 'constitutive' foundational relations rather than on the 'regulative' anticipatory relations (for instance pp. 227–229, 233).

Concept and idea

Thus far I did not mention one of the most interesting themes of the book: the idea of 'concept-transcending knowledge'. For Strauss, properly speaking, the use of 'concept' is only valid if all the elements pertain to one and the same domain. A notion such as 'social differentiation' would not qualify as a concept in a strict sense because it depends for its meaning on elements pertaining to the biotic domain. Yet – and this is important – it can nevertheless serve as a vehicle for valid knowledge (pp. 179–182, and *passim*).

The theory behind the notion of concept-transcending knowledge was first developed in his doctoral dissertation, *Begrip en Idee*. This conception of 'idea' as concept-transcending is now brought to bear on issues touching on the unique, contingent and individual (p. 191). It means that we can never claim to have conceptual knowledge of what makes something unique. It also means that we may nevertheless have valid knowledge. Thus, the author develops a challenging approach that tries to steer clear from both conceptual dogmatism and agnosticism.

One application deserves special mention. This is with regard to our speaking about God (pp. 195–204). The texts offer a philosophical justification for 'modal terms the Bible uses' in this respect (p. 195). For example, the speaking of God's omnipresence, his acting, of 'God is life', 'God is love' are all instances of concept-transcending ideas (p. 195). As such they represent valid knowledge. Strauss distances himself in this regard from the 'negative theology' of Vollenhoven's *Isagoogè philosophiae*. Vollenhoven, as is well known, held that we can only speak about God confessionally and never theoretically. Strauss's point is that Vollenhoven is caught in a vicious cycle for by speaking about a boundary between God and creation he does use a concept-transcending idea of a boundary maintained by God (pp. 204–205) The same argument is leveled against B.J. van der Walt's claim that we

cannot speak about God in spatial terms (p. 205). I expect this critique is provocative enough to call forth a spirited response from his Vollenhovian friends!

The state

The last major chapter is dedicated to human society, about one third of which is dedicated to the state (pp. 548–574). Here, Jonathan Chaplin is his main sparring partner. Generally, Danie Strauss succeeds in offering a balanced account, avoiding conservatism and progressivism. Another good point is the sharp delineation of typical tasks from non-typical activities. It is very important that the administering of public justice be upheld as the state's main task. My own experience is that the insights of Reformational philosophers find much appreciation with a broader public.

My disagreement here is restricted to what I perceive as a too narrow definition of the state's proper tasks. The author takes his cue from Dooyeweerd's definition of the nature of the state

in terms of attaining a harmonious balance both in regard to legal regulations (law side) and legal interests (subject side) (p. 570). Such delineation implies that, for example, keeping up the value of the Rand or the Herculean task of saving the Euro would be non-typical. Obviously, monetary policies are as vital to the state as the tasks listed as typical. For a similar reason, I am also not comfortable with the designation of civil law as private (p. 563). It seems to me that the state's involvement with the conditions and quality of civil law is so strong and so much in line with its responsibility for the legal order that the qualification 'public' is fully warranted (as Jonathan Chaplin holds).

Finally

Philosophy: Discipline of the Disciplines is an immensely stimulating book. It does not take prophetic gifts to predict that it will become one of the classics of Reformational philosophy. *Paideia Press* deserves our thanks for publishing a book of almost 700 pages. The quality of the printing leaves nothing to be desired.