

Kellmann-Stiftung
Humanismus und Aufklärung
Hummelblumenstr. 20
D-80995 München

Press release, 11 March, 2006, Munich

2006 David Hume Prize awarded to Gerhard Streminger

The Kellmann Endowment for Humanism and Enlightenment has awarded the 2006 David Hume Prize (valued at €4,000) to Gerhard Streminger (University of Graz).

The work of this Austrian Philosopher covers an unusually broad spectrum of topics: the theory of knowledge, ethics, history -- in particular the history of the Scottish enlightenment -- as well as philosophy of religion and the relation between ethics and economics. Throughout, his work has adopted the perspective of the enlightened individual, averse to any form of metaphysics, who understands himself as a part of the natural world and has turned his back on supernatural speculations. Streminger's work and activities, which have received significant notice in both international media and specialist publications, well exemplify the guiding principles of the Kellmann Endowment, the promotion of humanism and enlightenment.

Biography

Gerhard Streminger was born 26 March 1952 in Graz, Austria. After completing his primary and secondary schooling in Oeversee, he spent the years from 1970 to 1978, studying Philosophy and Mathematics at the universities in Graz and Göttingen. He received his doctorate *sub auspiciis praesidentis rei publicae* from Graz in 1978, and went on to do post-doctoral studies in Edinburgh and at Oxford under the direction of John L. Mackie. In 1981 he taught as visiting professor in the Philosophy Department of the University of Minnesota. He completed his habilitation in the field of Philosophy in 1984 with a work on David Hume and subsequently spent the 1991/92 academic year as a Humboldt Scholar at the University of Bochum.

Professor Streminger's career has been largely spent at the University of Graz. He began his employment there as student assistant to Ernst Topitsch, a position in which he served from 1975-1977. In 1988 he was made assistant professor at the University of Graz and in 1995 he was named extraordinary University Professor.

Work

One principal focus of Professor Streminger's work has been the Scottish enlightenment, in particular David Hume and Adam Smith. His main contribution in this field, his biography of

David Hume published by Schöningh-Verlag, combines an account of the life of the great Scottish enlightenment philosopher with searching critical assessments of his philosophical and historical writings. It presents the philosophical fundamentals of Hume's position, to which eminent thinkers from Kant to Einstein are indebted, with unusual clarity, making it accessible to a wide audience. This first, comprehensive, German biography of Hume has been extraordinarily well received. Roger Koeppel, currently chief editor of *Die Welt*, wrote on 17 February 1995 in the Zurich *Tagesanzeiger*: "Gerhard Streminger, the Austrian Hume scholar, has exhaustively examined one of the most important strands in the thought of the major Anglosaxon thinkers — the birth of philosophical scepticism in reaction to widespread fanaticism. His authoritative biography, a classic work, presents Hume's life and writings as prominent features of an enlightenment project that, while condemned in his own country, spread over all of Europe."

A second focus of Professor Streminger's work is the theory of knowledge. This interest is particularly prominent in his commentary on Hume's *Enquiry into human understanding*. The *Enquiry* is widely preferred as an introductory Philosophy text in English-speaking countries, and this is increasingly the case in German-speaking countries as well. As one reviewer of Streminger's commentary put it, "Streminger's book goes beyond an introduction to Hume's *Enquiry* to touch on empirical epistemology as well. In brief, this is an informative, helpful, well-structured, expert work. It is highly recommended." Streminger himself offers the following general assessment of Hume's *Enquiry*: "Above all, reading this book is an intellectual and aesthetic pleasure. With an unflinching sense for the heart of the matter, Hume fleetly and directly resolves fundamental problems with apparent ease." The same can be said of the author of this commentary, which has become a standard reference work in universities.

Professor Streminger's second principal work, *Gottes Güte und die Übel der Welt. Das Theodizeeproblem (A good god and an evil world. On theodicy)*, is devoted to a further interest. This book has also received a great deal of attention, and not all reviewers have found it to be congenial to their interests. A short review appearing on the web site, "German Catholicism," can be cited as a balanced, representative assessment: "In this book Streminger addresses one of the most serious problems of monotheistic belief: the problem of evil. He presents the problem in context and then thoroughly examines a collection of positions pro and con. The principal conclusion of the book is that the problem of evil is not only unresolved, but unresolvable. This position is well supported, above all through appeal to the work of Schopenhauer and Hume. Above all, Streminger's work exhibits a breadth and depth of reasoning. Each argument is precisely analyzed and refuted point for point — and from all perspectives. ... The book is also both illuminating and a pleasure to read. Even those who cannot follow all the arguments will be rewarded with a range of suggestions, ideas and challenges. All in all, this is an excellent engagement with the topic from a sceptical perspective. Theologians should read it, in order to know which unsolved problems await them. And atheists should read it in order to learn how one can deal with theistic arguments that seem rationally irrefutable. The book also contains an important chapter on the conflict between reason and belief. The consequences of this work must be taken seriously: that there is no good God, even if God is assumed to be less than omnipotent. The reasoning applies equally to Christianity and Islam."

A fourth center of Streminger's interest is the relation between ethical and economical questions. This theme is the focus of his *Adam Smith* and *The way of things*. Reinhard Karger, in a "Book of the week" article in the *Salzburger Nachrichten* writes that "Adam Smith's economics was the first systematic analysis of the changes in the conditions of production brought about by the bourgeois "industrial revolution" in the West. There are many reasons why Great Britain became a center of smelting, ship building, shipping, and international commerce in the 19th century. A decisive one is Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*. The Austrian Philosopher Gerhard Streminger is well aware of this fact, but his recently appearing monograph on this leader of the Scottish enlightenment is far from reducing Smith's work just to economic theory. This unusually detailed and carefully researched study makes it impressively obvious that moral principles play a guiding role in the background of Smith's economic theory, even though they are not explicitly mentioned." Streminger has pursued this connection in various essays in *The way of things*. Peter Roser, writes in *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (Business and Society) that "This volume by the Austrian philosopher Gerhard Streminger deals with central aspects of the social theory of David Hume and Adam Smith, the most well-known authors of the Scottish enlightenment. ... The three most important papers are "David Humes Entwurf einer natürlichen Ethik (David Hume's outline of a natural ethics)," "Adam Smiths Sprachphilosophie (Adam Smith's philosophy of language)," and "Die unsichtbare Hand des Marktes und die sichtbare Hand des Staates. Zur Sozialphilosophie Adam Smiths. (The invisible hand of the market and the visible hand of the state: on Adam Smith's social philosophy.)" ... These works give us rich insight into their themes. They are well researched and serve as excellent introductions to their respective problems. This is particularly important as the social theory of both figures is divided among diverse works and so cannot simply be drawn from a close reading of their main writings."

These various randomly sampled reviewer's assessments are a clear indication that Professor Streminger well worthy of being the recipient of the first David Hume prize to be offered in the German-speaking world.

Bibliography:

- David Hume: Eine Untersuchung über die Prinzipien der Moral*. A translation of Hume's *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*. Stuttgart: Reclam 1984 (3rd edition: 2002), 304 pages.
- David Hume – Mit Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten*. Reinbek: Rowohlt 1986 (3rd edition: 2003), 160 pages.
- Adam Smith – Mit Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten*. Reinbek: Rowohlt 1989 (2nd edition: 1999), 158 pages.
- Gottes Güte und die Übel der Welt. Das Theodizeeproblem*. Tübingen: Mohr 1992, 442+v pages in both paperback and hardcover editions.
- David Hume – Sein Leben und sein Werk*. Paderborn: Schöningh 1994, 715 Seiten (2nd edition: 1994; pocket book edition: 1995).
- David Hume – Eine Untersuchung über den menschlichen Verstand. Ein einführender Kommentar*. Stuttgart: UTB 1995, 253 pages.
- Der natürliche Lauf der Dinge. Essays zu Adam Smith und David Hume*. Marburg: Metropolis 1995, 256 pages.