George di Giovanni
Hegel and the Challenge of Spinoza. A Study in German Idealism, 1801-1831
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In *Hegel and the Challenge of Spinoza. A Study in German Idealism*, George di Giovanni explores the influence of Spinoza's philosophy in the post-Kantian debate between 1800 and 1831. Through a detailed examination of Fichte's and Schelling's positions, the author focuses on Hegel's response to the crucial challenge – as highlighted by Jacobi – posed by Spinozism: how to preserve the relevance of human freedom and subjectivity against the monism of substance. The purpose of the volume is to show how Hegel's metaphysics accomplishes this goal "not by disproving monism", but "by simply rendering it moot" (p. ix).

This book constitutes a significant study that successfully combines a rich historical reconstruction of the development of German classical philosophy with a specific systematic approach borrowed from the philosophy of religion. It explores various key topics at the core of the philosophical path that unfolds from the reception and influence of Spinoza. Fichte and Schelling, despite trying to distance themselves from Spinozism, were still strongly affected by it. Indeed, due to the limits of a monistic perspective, both attempted – unsuccessfully, according to Jacobi's critique – to provide an account of individuality. In continuity with this theoretical effort, Hegel's metaphysics approaches the problem from a different angle, undermining instead the very conceptual foundations of monism.

The first chapter traces the debate raised by Kant's philosophy and Jacobi's critique of Spinozism. The author focuses on the concept of feeling (*Gefühl*) and the nature of the human vocation, starting from Jacobi's primary concern: the role of the subject within an abstract conception of reason. German classical philosophy aims to identify the principle that encompasses all possibilities of experience while preserving human freedom and

transcending the formalism of the "critical ignorance" of the *thing-in-itself* (p. 11). First, this debate distinguishes between a first immediate – pre-conscious – nature and a second nature recovered in conscious existence. Second, it highlights the relevance of feeling as an immediate and self-conscious experience, which displays "in its *feel* the whole breadth of further experience" (p. 15).

According to the post-Kantians, this structure already contains the unity – and the problematic relation – between consciousness and self-consciousness: namely, the transition from a 'past' of consciousness recognized as such to its integration into the 'present' of conscious existence. This identity between past of consciousness and present consciousness expresses the necessary condition of experience that Kant had failed to realize within the framework of representation. Through this normative-conceptual redefinition, feeling – distinct from *Empfindung* – thus posits a particular relation between reflective subject and immediate nature and, thereby, the fundamental structure of rationality. In this sense, it – unconsciously – already constitutes reason and points to the foundational "matrix of all experience" (p. 22).

The second chapter explores the controversy between Fichte and Schelling, highlighting how, after 1800, they redetermined their philosophical method. In this context, the concept of nature plays a crucial role. Fichte develops a new *Darstellung* of his conception, with which he seeks to show through what evidence reason grasps itself as such. According to his "ontological quietism" (p. 42), nature is already challenged by the reflective act, and the attitude of direct experience is always already tied to the absolute. For Fichte, Schelling's philosophy assumes nature as a given object, proving to be a pure abstraction of the ideal dimension of the *Ich*. In Schelling's view, Fichte's position still turns out to be an abstract system detached from reality. For Fichte, nature represents the process of self-manifestation through which the absolute – in the *Ich* – achieves the highest level of self-consciousness. But from Schelling's perspective, Fichte did not recognize the further process of returning to the original intuition that "would transcend nature both *as in-itself* and *as conscious of itself*" (p. 40). In this conception, Fichte recognizes the rehabilitation of Spinoza's notion of substance. Therefore, if for Fichte it is a matter of displaying how the subject in its ordinary experience already possesses truth, for Schelling it is a matter of grasping that *tertium* – *Being* as the form of the absolute – which is "more than just rational" (p. 55).

In the following two chapters, the author examines Fichte's and Schelling's positions respectively, showing how they represent two attempts to grasp the principle – the "binding character of evidence" (p. 102) – underlying experience through different reworks of Spinoza's monism.

The third chapter examines Fichte's transcendental idealism, focusing on the lectures on the *Wissenschaftslehre* of 1804. Fichte asserts the primacy and autonomy of rationality. He presents a foundational proposal starting from a "theory of absolute truth understood as the absolute unity of being as purely in itself" (p. 85). In doing so, he takes up Spinozism without falling into its dogmatic metaphysics. This approach involves a form of realism grounded in practical experience. In Fichte's view, feeling expresses a radical religious-existential attitude according to which truth is experienced as such and not displayed by science. As di Giovanni emphasizes, this aspect echoes Spinoza's concept of *Seligkeit*. Against Schelling, Fichte does not conceive nature as the starting point of his system. Instead, he develops a theory that genetically derives the evidence of being, claiming that everyone in his own experience "already *de facto* lives in the truth" (p. 65). For Fichte, the apparently irrational gap between the source of immediacy and the immediate being is an illusion produced by reflection. The original evidence of 'light' – reason – is the precondition of experience itself. Thus, there is no need to bracket the natural attitude toward experience. Fichte aims to demonstrate how this rationality, "shining from the transcendent *a se* and *per se* and itself invisible" (p. 84), is a source of evidence that our experience lies already immersed in the absolute.

The fourth chapter focuses on Schelling's prophetic Spinozism, examining the development of the position espoused in the *Freiheitsschrift* of 1809 and in some later works. Schelling recovers Jacobi's critique of rationalistic metaphysics but rejects the negative character of his *Unphilosophie*. Thus, he seeks to achieve the goal that Jacobi's immediate knowledge had renounced – namely, a system of freedom – through a unified and pantheistic conception of reality originally posited by Spinoza. Schelling develops a self-creating and self-contained system of nature that realizes itself in its products and, at the same time, transcends them as its finite manifestations. God's creation renders such phenomena immediately revelatory in a positive sense. For this reason, in Schelling's view, nature represents the "warrant for ontological exuberance"

(p. 99). According to this perspective, the foundational character of experience lies in an "irreducible moment" in which rationality is "inextricably connected with the irrational" (p. 102). However, according to the author, the particular dimension of the human being for Schelling is still bound to God's "doctrine of predetermination and divine prescience" (p. 116). Fichte and Schelling, therefore, conclude that the way everyone finds himself is already embedded in the self-justification process of truth. However, both of their positions still fail to move beyond Spinozism, because they "did not do justice to the individual" (p. 129).

The fifth chapter investigates the difference between Hegel and the perspectives of Fichte and Schelling through the role of religion. Against the idea of a source that transcends reason, Hegel seeks to recover its superiority and authenticity. Starting from the framework represented by Spinoza and Jacobi, he thus develops a new way of understanding logic and metaphysics, as well as the method of philosophy itself. According to Hegel, the ground of experience is not unintelligible, but corresponds to the fulfillment process of reason. Unlike a metaphysics – such as that of Fichte and Schelling – bound to "the classical assumption of the primacy of Being over Becoming" (p. 150), Hegel thus develops a conception that locates the very truth of experience in the unfolding of spirit. Through the different ways religion manifests itself, "reason becomes aware of its own rationality" (p. 177). Di Giovanni focuses on several passages of the *Phenomenology*, showing the crucial role of religion in bringing to light the reason that lies in the unfolding of human experience. Here emerges the importance of the Hegelian transition from substance to subject. Religious representations and practices thus express the vocation of humankind in general. These aspects refer to a process that visibly manifests in human history the concrete meaning of rationality: we "are religious because we are rational" (p. 175).

The sixth chapter delves further into Hegel's position. Beyond the limits of previous forms of monism, the purpose of religion is to achieve the reconciliation of spirit. Within this dynamic framework, substance acquires meaning only to the extent that the subject is "a concrete self engaged in history" (p. 199). The individual and universal self-validation inherent in reason thus occurs through the self-recognition of spirit. Religion embodies this principle of experience, showing how its intelligibility lies in the actual development of rationality. Di Giovanni argues that, due

to its capacity to reconcile with concrete self-experience, religion's task always follows speculative comprehension. Additionally, the author points out that the *Logic* builds upon the results of the *Phenomenology* and outlines the processual perspective of spirit, revealing the presence of the absolute within historical experience. By preserving the significance of singularity, the *Logic* reveals itself as a *Kategorienlehre* that describes the norms of the "activity of conceptualization that gives rise to the universe of meaning" corresponding to the "specific achievement of human existence" (p. 229). Hegel thus meets Spinoza's challenge by articulating a metaphysics of becoming that, through the transition from divine substance to subject, preserves human personality.

In conclusion, di Giovanni's book offers a significant analysis of the historical development and conceptual nuances of a central issue raised by Jacobi's critique of Spinozism. One of the book's main merits is its original and engaging perspective on the role of the philosophy of religion, which underscores the relevance of Hegel's proposal for this specific systematic approach. To further develop this observation, it would be fruitful to explore in more detail the differences between Fichte's and Schelling's forms of monism. While both philosophers engage with Spinoza, each provides a distinct interpretation of his legacy. Moreover, the volume raises a question that, although outside its purposes, is deeply connected to its overarching argument: how Hegel redefines Spinoza's substance in the *Logic*. Thus, I believe this book provides a solid and inspiring foundation for further research that moves beyond the context of *Phenomenology*. This position would involve addressing the key text where the radical challenge of Hegel's philosophical project appears most clearly, namely, the overcoming of both Spinoza's monism of substance and Jacobi's immediate knowledge. In doing so, this perspective would not only recover but further develop the core of the Hegelian position emphasized by di Giovanni: the task of saving "this possibility conceptually" (p. 236).