

Book Review

George di Giovanni, *Hegel and the Challenge of Spinoza: A Study in German Idealism, 1801-1831*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. ISBN: 978-11088-4224-2 (hbk), 978-11088-2040-0 (pbk), 978-1-108-90699-9 (pdf). Pp. 259. £75.00.

This is a significant work on German Idealist philosophy, which I would recommend to anyone with an interest in the subject. I recommend it for two principal reasons, corresponding to the two principal contributions I think the book makes. Firstly, di Giovanni provides a rich, historically informed treatment of the development of Johann Gottlieb Fichte's and Friedrich Schelling's respective idealisms in the nineteenth century. Especially in the case of Fichte, this involves extended discussion of material that has received comparatively little attention, particularly in anglophone scholarship. In this context di Giovanni's book makes a number of contributions to the burgeoning interest in Fichte's and Schelling's thought. Secondly, at a time when the scholarly trend is very much to attribute ambitious metaphysical claims to Hegel (and to take them seriously), di Giovanni provides a renewed reading of Hegel's idealism which seeks to deflate his apparent metaphysical commitments. The book can thus provide an interesting challenge for readers who see in Hegel an important metaphysician whose project exhibits a significant degree of continuity not only with the great pre-Kantian metaphysical systems, but also with contemporary research in metaphysics.

The basic thrust of the book can be captured fairly straightforwardly: di Giovanni provides an account of the development of German Idealism that emphasizes Fichte's, Schelling's, and Hegel's respective attempts to grapple with Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi's account of the fatalistic consequences of an explanatorily complete rationalist philosophical system, i.e., of Spinozism. He argues that the monistic positions which Fichte and Schelling develop during the first decade of the nineteenth century ultimately fail to account for human spontaneity and agency, while Hegel, by breaking with monism, succeeds. In this review I will briefly outline the contents of di Giovanni's book, attempting to emphasize some of what seem to me to be its central claims, as well as making the occasional critical remark.

The book consists of six chapters, the first of which is introductory. The introductory chapter lays the ground for the work, briefly characterizing the reception of Kant's critical philosophy and the emergence of German Idealism in the

1790s. A more detailed account of this narrative is developed by di Giovanni in *Freedom and Religion in Kant and his Immediate Successors: The Vocation of Humankind, 1774–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), to which the introductory chapter occasionally directs the reader. Di Giovanni's emphasis is on the way in which 'Jacobi hijacked the reception' of Kant's thought (6), and is gathered around three central issues: (i) Jacobi's presentation of Spinozism as the perfect expression of the kind of rigorous philosophical system to which the 'uncompromising rationalism' (3) of the enlightenment strove, (ii) his concomitant concern that any such rationalist system yields unconscionable fatalistic, nihilistic and atheistic results, and (iii) Jacobi's influential rejection of the role played by the thing-in-itself in Kant's philosophy. It is in this light that di Giovanni presents Fichte and Schelling as attempting, in the 1790s, to develop rigorous philosophical systems that can both preserve human freedom and avoid committing themselves to the 'critical ignorance' represented by Kant's thing-in-itself (12). Some readers might find that the roles played by key figures other than Jacobi (perhaps Carl Leonhard Reinhold, especially) in the narrative are given too little attention here. Others might wish that this chapter did rather more to acknowledge the possibility that the developments of the 1790s might have sprung from serious misreadings of Kant's own work. But di Giovanni is forced to cover a lot of ground in a short space here. Reinhold and others receive greater attention in his *Freedom and Religion*, while arriving at the *correct* reading of Kant does not really belong to the project of this book.

Chapter 2 is also to some extent an exercise in laying the ground for the subsequent investigation of Fichte and Schelling's later works, focusing as it does on the growing dispute between the two in the earliest years of the nineteenth century. Di Giovanni offers a narrative in which Fichte's efforts to respond to the criticisms made in Kant's 'Declaration Concerning Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*', in particular the charge that Fichte's project was an empty exercise in pure logic, raised questions about Fichte's own metaphysical commitments, especially concerning the place of nature in his system. This then plays into the dispute with Schelling. Di Giovanni rehearses the familiar terms of that dispute: Fichte perceiving in Schelling's philosophy of nature a return to dogmatic metaphysics; Schelling finding in Fichte's restriction of the reach of philosophy to a *Wissenschaftslehre* a merely formal account of the 'I' and of experience, the basic principles of which were in need of proper metaphysical explanation. After fleshing out Fichte's and Schelling's conceptions of their own systems at this point, di Giovanni concludes by suggesting that both Fichte and Schelling commit themselves to versions of Spinozist monism (55), a claim which is then explored in more detail in the next two chapters. At this point the text, however, it is difficult to understand. Schelling, certainly, seems to endorse a metaphysical monism more radical in fact than Spinoza's is often taken to be, with di Giovanni attributing to the former

not only the view that ‘reality is essentially One’ (47), but also that ‘singular things, *as particulars*, are nothing’ (48). But Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre* seems not primarily to be the endorsement of a metaphysics at all, as di Giovanni acknowledges (41). It remains first and foremost an exercise in transcendental philosophy, providing a supposedly scientific account of the theoretical and practical determinations of experience. The ‘monism’ it features, in deriving its determinations from a single, practical origin, seems to have little to do with Schelling’s metaphysical monism. If the labelling of both Schelling and Fichte as ‘monists’ here is not just equivocating on the term, I think it needs further explanation. It is, after all, perfectly possible, I take it, to advocate for a monistic metaphysics without being committed to anything like Fichte’s scientific model of knowing, and equally possible to demand of a science of knowing that it proceed deductively from a single principle, while supposing that reality is essentially plural in nature.

The focus of Chapter 3 is Fichte’s 1804 lectures on the *Wissenschaftslehre*. As I mentioned earlier, this is material which has gone to some extent under-discussed, particularly in anglophone Fichte scholarship. It is also difficult material (as di Giovanni acknowledges more than once), both in terms of its presentation and in terms of its content, which can appear at first glance to represent a bewildering departure from the project of Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre* as it had been developed from its first presentations up to and including his dispute with Schelling during the first years of the nineteenth century. What is so bewildering, of course, is that, after years of defending the necessity of beginning philosophy from a voluntary act of intellectual intuition and rejecting the idea that nature itself could be understood as the foundation of the self-conscious ‘I’ of transcendental philosophy, Fichte suddenly sets out a ‘foundational theory of being’ (58) and affirms that the *Wissenschaftslehre* should begin from ‘the system of Spinoza’ (59). It can look as though Fichte has performed a radical *volte-face* and is now defending a position much closer to the Schellingian one that he rejected forcefully only shortly before. Di Giovanni’s approach to the 1804 lectures attempts to defuse this puzzle, firstly by briefly reminding the reader that Fichte’s earlier presentations of the *Wissenschaftslehre* were themselves not at all opposed to the ‘facticity’ of experience (61), and thus should not be reduced to a caricature of an idealism interested only in the subject. Secondly, di Giovanni suggests that Fichte had lost faith in the force of his practical account of intellectual intuition to convince others of the validity of his *Wissenschaftslehre*, and thus sought to ground his philosophical account of experience in ‘a theory of being *as such* that, as in classical metaphysics, stood in relation to the content of experience as its *a priori*, informing it essentially’ (63), but, crucially, *without* thereby slipping back into dogmatic metaphysics, as he took Schelling to have done. This is a tall order, of course, but di Giovanni plausibly presents it as an attempt on Fichte’s part to deepen or to better justify the foundations of his *Wissenschaftslehre*, rather than as a radical break.

Di Giovanni presents the basic thrust of Fichte's new approach as one that accepts at the outset a certain validity or intelligibility essential to experience itself (63), and then supposes that philosophy must attend carefully to experience and to the conceptual, subjective structures that emerge within it, in order to 'recognize in them the already present truth of which they were only the appearances' (66). The details of Fichte's development of this view as di Giovanni recounts them in the remainder of the chapter I cannot rehearse here. Crucial to mention, however, is its primary conclusion: di Giovanni finds the Fichte of the 1804 *Wissenschaftslehre* to be a kind of Spinozist, albeit one not committed to a dogmatic metaphysics. Indeed, di Giovanni attributes an 'ontological quietism' to Fichte (86–87). Fichte here, according to di Giovanni, draws from the *Wissenschaftslehre* a certain, 'special religious attitude' (85), according to which all the content of experience can be viewed *sub specie aeternitatis*, as the expression of a truth that is fundamentally 'One' (68–69).

Chapter 4 turns to Schelling, centring on his 1809 *Freiheitsschrift*, as well as its legacy in some of Schelling's later works. Di Giovanni introduces Schelling's essay in terms of a response to Jacobi, suggesting that the former endorses the latter's critical attitude towards the abstract conceptual systems of the rationalists, as well as acknowledging the need for an account of individuality and freedom supposedly lacking in such system. Di Giovanni shows, however, that Schelling rejected Jacobi's attempt to provide such an account by appeal to 'immediate feeling' (91). The stage is thereby set for the development of a 'positive philosophy' that could treat topics of theology, freedom and the possibility of evil which is neither a rationalist metaphysics (which, suggests di Giovanni, always ends up 'denying the reality of evil', 95), nor based on mysterious appeals to immediate intuition. I will pass over the details of the reconstruction of the argumentative content of the *Freiheitsschrift* and move to his conclusion: di Giovanni returns to the topic of Schelling's monism, here in the shape of the unusual pantheism of the *Freiheitsschrift*. He finds a tension in Schelling's position, between his 'pantheistic vision of reality as absolute One' (116) and his desire to provide an account of the becoming of nature, and history, from out of God (along with his 'dark ground') that adequately treats evil and the possibility of genuine freedom. The latter, di Giovanni suggests, is 'negated by the traditional doctrine of predetermination and divine presence with which Schelling concluded' (116). This is no doubt a provocative conclusion to reach concerning Schelling's strenuous efforts to provide an adequate treatment of freedom. Certainly, di Giovanni's conclusion runs against what I take to be the prevailing understanding of Schelling's later works: that his difficulties spring not so much from limiting his thought to a narrow set of traditional doctrines, but rather from the sheer variety of conceptual resources which he attempts to deploy, which prove almost impossible to bring into systematic form. The remainder of the chapter seeks to confirm di

Giovanni's critical conclusion by shorter engagements with later material on history and spirit from *The Ages of the World* and the *Historical-Critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology*.

The final two chapters introduce Hegel to the discussion. Chapter 5 develops a reading of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* up until the beginning of the chapter on religion, intended to show that Hegel's project is not committed to the fatalistic implications of the Spinozist monism still present in Schelling, who 'painted the course of experience as if its events acted out in time a play of forces already accomplished in God's inner life before all time' (176). Instead, according to di Giovanni, the *Phenomenology* is a creative reconstruction of the history of human experience. The rational form in which this philosophical science presents that history does not chart a necessarily determined progression, but is simply the result of that distinctively human ability to make sense of ourselves and the world around us. Hegel, as di Giovanni reads him here, is simply not interested in the classical questions of rational theology and the relation between God and creation, but is instead committed to the idea that 'the truth of experience was to be found nowhere but in the course of its events' (176). This is not exactly to overthrow any kind of Schellingian monism, but rather to leave the ambitious questions concerning such metaphysical topics unanswered in favour of a more modest project of attending only to 'the process by which reason becomes aware of its own rationality in the course of playing its determining role in human affairs' (177). I take it that di Giovanni's point, however, is that in charting that process in the *Phenomenology* in the unique way that he does, Hegel thereby does away with the *need*, still present in Schelling, to appeal to God for a satisfactory explanation of that process, along with its fatalistic implications.

Chapter 6 then differentiates Hegel from Fichte on the subject of logic and religion. The discussion of Fichte is focused on his popular writings from 1806, *Characteristics of the Present Age* and *The Way towards the Blessed Life*, which di Giovanni takes to pick up where the 1804 *Wissenschaftslehre* left off. In these texts, di Giovanni argues, Fichte's phenomenological project of recasting our attitude towards the content of experience takes on a more explicitly religious character, while maintaining the monism of Fichte's system: human feeling belongs ultimately to God's self-manifestation, and 'God manifests himself so that he may love *himself*' (192). Returning to Hegel's *Phenomenology*, di Giovanni finds a very different account of religion: one that acknowledges that 'Substance is nothing divine. It has meaning only to the extent that a subject, beholden to reason, writes on it [...] its own story' and that '[t]he subject [...] is a concrete self engaged in history, and religion is the concrete expression of this engagement' (199). This is again a metaphysically deflated account, this time of the import of religion: one that attempts to make sense of it and its meaningfulness within the confines of an account of human historical practice, without needing to reach for metaphysical

explanation, and in particular, without implying any monism. The meaning Hegel ascribes here to religion, according to Giovanni, consists principally in the attempt to reconcile spirit, especially the demands of morality, with the facts of nature, but through drama, imagery, faith, artistic representation, organized ritual and the like. To philosophy then falls the task of ‘comprehending’ that reconciliation in explicitly rational, conceptual terms (220).

In the closing sections of the book di Giovanni turns to Hegel’s *Logic* to discuss its philosophical task. The discussion is fairly brief. Di Giovanni begins with Hegel’s account of the modal categories, maintaining that this account itself ‘makes no metaphysical commitment’ (222), but is rather merely the setting out in abstract terms of what is required in order for rational experiencers to explain the actuality of objects. This account, di Giovanni holds, makes no appeal to a fundamental ground, whether ‘Substance, Absolute, God, or else’ (226), thus breaking with Spinozist necessitarianism. This is then followed by a discussion of the determinations of the Concept, in order to spell out Hegel’s account of freedom. The key move here, according to di Giovanni, is from a reflective account of the conceptual determinations required in order to explain some object to an account which treats the object as a subject, that is, as responsible itself for the categorial forms used in its explanation. The discussion is therefore from this point on really about ourselves. The domain of the application of the categories of the *Logic* is, according to di Giovanni, ‘the universe of meaning which is the specific achievement of human existence’ (229), and not reality in general. This reading of the determinations of the Subjective Logic understands them to constitute a non-metaphysical doctrine of the categories that we have spontaneously developed, and which we put to use in human discourse in general, in our scientific attempts to understand nature, in knowing and acting, and in organizing our own collective, spiritual life.

Di Giovanni’s metaphysically deflated account of Hegel’s *Logic* as developing in abstract, conceptual terms the history of humanity’s coming-to-be-rational that is presented in the *Phenomenology* is not unconvincing. I must point out in closing, however, that its force as a challenge to those of us who detect in Hegel a commitment to a much more ambitious metaphysical research programme, whether one committed to monism or not, is weakened by a serious lack of engagement with any important work on Hegel’s metaphysics from recent years.¹

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Note

¹ This review was written during a fellowship from the Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung. While writing it I benefitted greatly from attending Philipp Schwab's lectures on Schelling and Hegel, as well as from several conversations with Matthew Nini.