Hegel and the Challenge of Spinoza: A Study in German Idealism, 1801-1831.

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Abstracts:

In an earlier study (Cambridge 2005) I documented the discussion regarding the nature of humankind that preoccupied the German intelligentsia in the second half of the eighteenth century. Jacobi intervened in the discussion bringing Spinoza to the scene, with results that affected the reception of Kant's Critique of Reason. In the present study I pursue the same theme, but in the completely different conceptual and social context of early Romanticism. Humankind's vocation assumes rather the form of God's vocation. I explore this change with reference to the three canonical post-Kantians, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel, with Jacobi occasionally interloping, all in their post-1800 phase, taking the date of Hegel's death (1831) as my occasionally moving end-post. How to save subjectivity in the face of Spinoza's monism was still the challenge. I argue that Hegel met this challenge, not by disproving monism, which was also the assumption behind classical metaphysics, but by simply rendering it moot. In this, Hegel was much closer in spirit to Kant and Fichte than to Schelling. I consider this work a philosophical argument in historical medium.

Chapter 1. This chapter reviews how the early post-Kantians perceived the need of reforming Kant's Critique in order to complete the philosophical revolution it had initiated. In 1785, Jacobi had brought Spinoza to the discussion, claiming that his monism undermined human freedom and personality. He further claimed that this monism was the logical conclusion of all philosophy. The post-Kantians' task was thus threefold.: (1) to demonstrate that personalism is consistent which monism, which they in principle accepted as the necessary standpoint of reason; (2) to show that Kant's idealism could be the basis for the desired personalism; (3) to overcome what they took to be the formalism of Kant's system that stood in the way of it. All this came down to ridding the system of its presumed unknown "thing-in-itself" while finding a principle that would unify it internally, not just by means of external reflection. Fichte had attempted this with his "I." Even more important, however, was his analysis of feeling, which he considered the concrete counterpart of the "I" and which, as in the feeling of guilt, brought reason and nature together. This was the synthesis that the post-Kantian idealists explored in their different ways.

Chapter 2. Prior to 1800, Schelling had tried to overcome Kant's alleged formalism with a theory of nature which presented the latter as a process of progressively more complex forms of inanimate and organic existence. The process culminated in the reflectively intelligent life which made idealism possible. As Schelling contended regarding Fichte, in his Science the latter had abstracted only this last moment of the process, and this was a claim that Fichte could not accept. By 1800, Fichte was thus defending his Science of the "I" on two fronts—against Kant who in 1799 had singled it out as being empty logic, and against Schelling who was in effect making the same claim. Chapter Two is dedicated to an account of these events and the exposition of the texts associated with them. What transpires from Fichte's response to Kant, and his controversy with Schelling, is that there was a disconnect between all involved because of an ambiguity inherent to the monism, and the intuitionism the latter required, which all concerned accepted (Kant only hypothetically, by default). The ambiguity was an encumbrance from classical metaphysics that still affected the new Idealism. It was Spinoza's challenge.

Chapter 3. After his controversy with Schelling, Fichte orally presented several new versions of his Science in which he adopted, if not a new standpoint, certainly a new methodology that had repercussions for the earlier standpoint. Where the "I is I" was the principle of the earlier Science, the trope of "light," used alternatively with *Evidenz* and Reason, was the new principle. Where Fichte had earlier urged his

auditors to engage in productive thinking, he now encouraged them to practice "attention," an attitude of being actively engaged in the passive reception of the objects that presented themselves to their grasp. They had to detect in them, but only indirectly, the source of the intelligibility that made their presence compelling yet itself remained unseen. The aim was to let this source pervade one's life. Fichte was adopting a new kind of realism which was in fact more consistent with the monism to which he had been committed from the beginning. Chapter Two explores in detail a key text of 1804 in which these changes are introduced. The ontological quietism to which Fichte's Science now led was one possible existential attitude that the assumed monism fostered.

Chapter 4. Also Schelling—by 1802 a declared Spinozist—altered his methodology, adding to it a phenomenological dimension. In 1807 he portrayed the philosopher as an artist singularly gifted with an intuitive sense for nature as issuing from the Oneness of the Absolute, equally substance and subject. Jacobi attacked him for this. Chapter Four details Schelling's ensuing controversy with him but is otherwise dedicated to Schelling's seminal Freedom Essay (1809). In the essay Schelling again portrayed the philosopher as a divinely inspired artist. He now conceived his work, however, as one of remembering the event at which God manifests himself in the form of a world that reflects in its manifold the internal economy of the divine being. This event is shrouded in the human unconscious but can be brought to light through the philosopher's imaginative representations. The warrant for these is that they resonate with humankind's belief, embodied in mythology, that its history is also the history of God's realization in space/time. Schelling was thus adopting a rich metaphysical position, the direct contrary of Fichte's ontological quietism, which the monism the two shared nonetheless also made possible. Evil comes up as an important issue for Schelling.

Chapter 5. Remembering is also the theme of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit (1807), but of a different kind than Schelling's. It is not of a cosmic event; nor does it yield a theogony. The issue for Hegel is rather the actualization of the historical human individual and of humanity accordingly, and the remembering is of how being rational affects an individual's relation to nature. At origin this relation is worked out unconsciously. It is visibly reflected, however, in the sense of self-identity into which an individual is historically born, just as one is born into a family. To retrieve the source of the identity, thus to make it deliberately one's own—by the same token to make of nature a work of intelligence—is the factor that motivates experience. Chapter 5 contrasts Schelling's and Hegel's respective ideas of history. It then proceeds with a detailed examination of the Phenomenology up to the section on Religion. It argues that, while in some ways a work of conceptual fiction, the Phenomenology must nonetheless have historical anchoring and logical significance. It also underscores the debt Hegel owes to Fichte that makes him quite different from Schelling.

Chapter 6. Religion is for Hegel the language of a community about itself. Its practices and beliefs reflect the sense of self-identity that animates the community's members, and, since that identity is a product of reason, they also reflect the level of explicit rationality the community has achieved. Religion, however, is not the same as rational knowledge. Evil, for Hegel, is not a cosmic event as it is for Schelling, but a historical and eminently individual act—in effect, the product of reason doing violence to nature. Religion's specific function is thus one of reconciliation, a function that assumes different forms depending on historical circumstances and the advent of self-aware rationality. Nonetheless, reconciling cannot be same as understanding reconciliation. Chapter Six contrasts religion in Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel. It returns to the theme of feeling of Chapter One, for feeling is an experience of identity. It also examines Hegel's interpretation of the Christian story of incarnation and redemption as an imaginative portrayal of incarnate rationality. It then again returns to Chapter One by interpreting Hegel's Logic, the science of this rationality, as an extension of Kant's doctrine of the categories but without the classical metaphysical presuppositions still encumbering that latter.

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