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DISCUSSIONS

THE PRACTICAL BEYOND ETHICS. NOTES ON GEORGE DI GIOVANNI'S INTERPRETATION OF CLASSICAL GERMAN PHILOSOPHY

by Paolo Livieri*

Abstract. *This essay analyzes George di Giovanni's books Freedom and Religion in Kant and His Immediate Successors: The Vocation of Humankind, 1774-1800 (Cambridge University Press, 2005) and Hegel and the Challenge of Spinoza: A Study in German Idealism, 1801-1831 (Cambridge University Press, 2021). We address the central topic of these publications and identify its sources. The essay then clarifies how di Giovanni's analysis pivots on the anti-metaphysical interpretation of Fichte's and Hegel's philosophies, which then leads to a distinct definition of the philosophy of religion.*

Keywords. *George di Giovanni; Ethics; Spinoza; Philosophy of Religion; Classical German Philosophy; Hegel*

1. Introduction: Spinoza and Kant

It is widely recognized that the study of classical German philosophy must first address Spinoza's *Ethics*. At first, one may wonder why Kant's transcendental philosophy should not mark the foundation of the tasks and issues that classical German philosophy has considered, as it were after jotting them down in its notebook. Indubitably, every question raised after 1781 follows from Kant's transcendental philosophy articulating the autonomy of the subject's rational thought. Nevertheless, Spinoza's *Ethics* seems to provide an essential correction to the numerous systematic frictions that this autonomy generates.

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This backdrop may be held as a useful frame for the extensive analysis that George di Giovanni presents in his two books *Freedom and Religion in Kant and His Immediate Successors: The Vocation of Humankind, 1774-1800* (Cambridge University Press, 2005) and *Hegel and the Challenge of Spinoza: A Study in German Idealism, 1801-1831* (Cambridge University Press, 2021). Although the former was published more than 15 years ago and does not encourage a ‘Discussione’ today, the latter is both a historical completion and philosophical conclusion to the multiple investigations introduced by the former. The result is a compact fabric of philosophical challenges that are elegantly interwoven.

However, we must forewarn the reader: these two books, primarily the latter, are not meant for beginners. Certainly, it is fair to suggest that these long essays are for advanced Ph.D. students or scholars who can delve into the intricate synergy of the many debates that were held between 1774 and Hegel’s death. The first *oeuvre* (henceforth *The Vocation of Humankind*) offers a detailed description of a rich panorama of figures that are typically overshadowed by the most eminent protagonists of the post-Kantian era. The second book (henceforth *Hegel and the Challenge of Spinoza*) projects a clear theoretical line through the works of Fichte’s, Schelling’s, and Hegel’s, taking Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* and *Science of Logic* to place a seal on the era. George di Giovanni directly delves into the complexity of the primary sources, without (almost) any explicit mention of the secondary literature. This gives his books the flavor of a project published immediately following Hegel’s death, when the flame of those debates had just gone out, but the embers were still blazing. Considering all these, it could be contended that this approach could confuse the inexperienced reader; to appreciate di Giovanni’s text, one must develop a keen eye to recognize where a cluster of theoretical challenges are being summarized with terse brevity.

2. *The Challenge of Spinoza*

As might be expected, this essay is not a friend to every author and topic that di Giovanni’s two volumes address. Rather, it singles

out a center of gravity that may influence di Giovanni's interest. We must be deemed accountable for this selection, which inevitably trims down numerous branches of di Giovanni's thoughts in favor of approaching the distinct motive of his research.

The philosophical engine at the basis of both works relates to whether reason presupposes a source of meaning. If reasoning is what produces intelligibility, then what gives rise to the space wherein that intelligibility operates is yet to be identified (*Hegel and the Challenge of Spinoza*, p. 131). All issues, such as the autonomy of reason, the presupposition of a 'thing-in-itself', the justification of a posteriori knowledge, the identity of the subject, and the conflict between the reality of nature and the reality of the subject's agency, are led by that simple question. One could further summarize these questions by recalling the famous gloss of Kant's project: «how are synthetic *a priori* judgments possible?» (B19)¹. The possibility of metaphysics (comparable with mathematics and physics) seems to be connected to the possibility that thinking can include a source of knowledge in itself, without recurrence to any external source. Following this approach, our thinking could define its own meaning, thereby creating an absolute through its own virtue (*The Vocation of Humankind*, pp. 2-5).

Considering this, *The Vocation of Humankind* analyzes the profound rupture that is seen in the history of metaphysics that it was first broken by Kant and then completely disabled by Jacobi. Although they approach the question differently, both target the incompatibility of the individuality of the human being (their freedom and the reality of their world) with the abstract and self-sustaining rationality of metaphysics, whose most recent and weakest installment was the German Enlightenment.

As we read the first chapters of this volume, we realize that all issues eventually boil down to the single subject of religion. It is in religion that the notion of individuality and that of the absolute articulate their reasons with reference to and contradicting one another (*The Vocation of Humankind*, p. 14 ff.).

¹ I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. by P. Guyer and A.W. Wood, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, B 19.

Approximately 100 pages of *The Vocation of Humankind* are dedicated to treating minor figures in the philosophical panorama of the final decades of the 18th century in Germany. This provides a layered summary of debates on epistemology and its religious impact that is rarely available in this concise form.

The issues at stake develop into an analysis of the justification of knowledge and, subsequently, into an account of how justification itself can turn what is justified into something that has no substance. Eventually, the deterministic whole that metaphysics and its abstract rationality elaborate deprives singular entities of their form and possibility.

According to di Giovanni's analysis, which enters into details of the history of modern philosophy, it is perceived that Jacobi detected a real conundrum, that is, modern philosophy rejects the possibility of brute facts as much as it does the possibility of a pure sight that is not already conceptual. Consequently, *scientific knowledge* entails that the fabric of reality itself includes the subject's rational activity. This approach leads on the one side to the appalling impossibility of apprehending an objective and independent reality and on the other side to the conclusion that knowledge itself takes the form of a monism that eradicates individuality. Apparently, justified knowledge encourages a picture of a reality that comprises a net of relations that leave no room for individual entities; rather, it leads to a form of determinism that dismisses the rationality of both free action and individual objects.

It is interesting to see how di Giovanni interprets Kant's *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* as the climax of this cluster of controversies and identifies the real source of this text (and of many post-Kantian disputes) as the third antinomy of pure reason:

Thesis: Causality in accordance with laws of nature is not the only one from which all the appearances of the world can be derived. It is also necessary to assume another causality through freedom in order to explain them.

Antithesis: There is no freedom, but everything in the world happens solely in accordance with laws of nature².

As di Giovanni presents it, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* introduces a description of the individual that, though historically determined and, therefore, connected to the deterministic laws of nature, attains freedom (*The Vocation of Humankind*, p. 186). The possibility of achieving an absolute and free cause (of the subject's actions) within the deterministic whole is the main challenge that *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* addresses while implicitly coordinating a long list of disputes.

George di Giovanni concludes that, notwithstanding Kant's advanced efforts, the connection between nature and ethics leaves personality a mystery of reality: the existence of finite subjects remains a problem for a model of rationality that seeks *grounding*.

3. *The Problem of the Principle of Sufficient Reason*

For classical German philosophy beyond the Leibnizian-Wolffian school of metaphysics, Spinoza's systematic ethics appeared to be the most advanced proposal in terms of the coherence of its *grounding*. Its monism is the inevitable destination for any systematic justification of knowledge.

However, welcoming Spinoza's monism would ostensibly obliterate the absolute autonomy and existence of human beings. Major post-Kantian philosophers sought to elaborate, reject, or supersede this connection, and this spawned the history that di Giovanni recounts.

The problem of grounding knowledge can be summarized by briefly examining the principle of sufficient reason, which formally states that «For every fact *F*, there must be a sufficient reason why *F* is the case or if one wants to avoid the ontological

² Id., A 444/B 472 ff.

commitment to facts, the more formal: ‘ $\forall x\exists yRyx$ ’ [where ‘ Rxy ’ denotes the binary relation of providing a sufficient reason]»³.

This definition may be an attempt to rephrase Spinoza’s own formulation, which represents what classical German philosophy usually accepts as standard. In E1p28, we can find an instance of it: «Every singular thing, or any thing which is finite and has a determinate existence, can neither exist nor be determined to produce an effect unless it is determined to exist and produce an effect by another cause, which is also finite and has a determinate existence; and again, this cause also can neither exist nor be determined to produce an effect unless it is determined to exist and produce an effect by another, which is also finite and has a determinate existence, and so on, to infinity»⁴.

As it is well known, the entire infinite chain of finite things manifests the *causa sui* or God, which itself is legitimate because it exists by the virtue of its own essence only.

As di Giovanni’s analysis proceeds, the reader assimilates the idea that classical German philosophy returns to Spinoza only to assess the real value of its own proposals against the nihilistic destination that stems from the most systematic thinking.

Therefore, it is certain to find that Cambridge University Press published an edited volume in 2012 that concentrates on similar topics to di Giovanni’s two texts, under the title *Spinoza and German Idealism*. Although this volume explicitly covers the territory from Spinoza to classical German philosophy, its kinship with di Giovanni’s research is clear.

This Cambridge publication may help in identifying some necessary information regarding the importance that systematic thinking holds. Certainly, among the numerous topics discussed, we can identify that the principle of sufficient reason (as presented by Spinoza) can take center stage.

³ Y.Y. Melamed and M. Lin, *Principle of Sufficient Reason*, in E. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2021, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2021/entries/sufficient-reason/>.

⁴ For the attribution to Spinoza – instead of Leibniz – see M. Della Rocca, *Interpreting Spinoza: The Real is the Rational*, «Journal of the History of Philosophy», LIII (3), 2015, pp. 523-535.

As the collected chapters clearly explain, the grounding that the principle of sufficient reason implies is the necessity, for anything that exists, that its existence be intelligible. Moreover, the intelligibility that the principle of sufficient reason exhibits includes an explanation of the attributes of a token, which leaves no trace of an x that does not then connects to a y ⁵. This, as aforementioned, inevitably leads to a form of monism where only the whole exists whereas singular individuals (finite tokens) do not⁶. Although this interpretation of Spinoza's ethics may encounter criticism, it certainly shows the grounding power of monism⁷.

Simultaneously, however, monism is also the thesis according to which, because nothing *finite* exists, what exists cannot be determined through any solid boundaries around it. Monism may subsequently give rise to the idea that the principle of sufficient reason entails that nothing *determined* exists⁸.

At this point, one may begin to suspect that Jacobi's message would be the one to listen to and live by, as he was the one who highlighted to the explicit the nihilistic nature of systematic knowledge. Nevertheless, notwithstanding their familiarity with Jacobi's criticism and warnings, classical German philosophers accepted Spinoza's philosophy, as it fulfills the many *desiderata* that

⁵ Cf. M. Della Rocca, *Rationalism, Idealism, Monism, and Beyond*, in E. Förster and Y.Y. Melamed (eds.), *Spinoza and German Idealism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012, pp. 7-26, pp. 9-10.

⁶ Cf. *ivi*, p. 17.

⁷ For instance, Yitzhak Y. Melamed, 'Omnis Determinatio Est Negatio': *Determination, Negation, and Self-Negation in Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel*, in *Spinoza and German Idealism*, pp. 175-196.

⁸ Cf. P. van Inwagen, *Metaphysics*, London, Routledge, 2014, chap. 7. On the contemporary discussion on the principle of sufficient reason in connection to the grounding problem, see F. Amijee, *Principle of Sufficient Reason*, in *The Routledge Handbook of Metaphysical Grounding*, Abingdon-New York, Routledge, 2020, pp. 63-75. The discussion about grounding has evolved throughout the 20th century, from representational grounding to hyperintensionality. For the history of the contemporary metaphysics of grounding independent of its modern pre-history, see D. Chalmers, D. Manley, and R. Wasserman (eds.), *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*, Oxford-New York, Oxford University Press, 2009.

Kant's transcendental philosophy left behind; a way to conceive the unity of reality is unquestionably a need and a goal of rationality, even though rationality threatens to annihilate what is rooted in reason itself, namely, individual existence and freedom.

This surprising move is Fichte's. Fichte himself, even before 1790, saw the real champion of philosophy in Spinoza but only if his monism underwent a transformation that would carry it beyond itself while it continued to welcome subjectivity. The only way to escape a nihilistic monism, for Fichte, comprises defining thinking as an activity that cannot be considered a cause that determines the net of reality⁹.

This first outstanding maneuver captivated a whole cohort of readers, not least Schelling. As di Giovanni's *The Vocation of Humankind* also recognizes, D. Nassar clearly shows how openly Schelling confessed to himself and his friends that Fichte's philosophy was as important to him as Spinoza's was. In his own words, Schelling could legitimately declare himself both a Fichtean and a Spinozist almost in the same respect, for he saw the long-awaited promoter of a Spinozism of the I in Fichte¹⁰.

At the end of the 18th century, the chance to take a step ahead of the conflict between Spinoza and Kant seemed feasible.

4. *The Difference Made by Hegel*

The Vocation of Humankind recognizes the great leap that Fichte compelled others to perform. With him, an entirely new leg of the journey seemed to commence. Drawing on and going beyond both Kant and Spinoza, Fichte claimed that volition lies at the origin of any sense perception, which defines our own faculty of self-determination. This volition exceeds the distinction between active production and passive reception, thereby leading to a new panorama of possibilities for thinking to ground knowledge and save the self (*The Vocation of Humankind*, pp. 216-217).

⁹ Cf. A.W. Wood, *Fichte on Freedom: The Spinozistic Background*, in *Spinoza and German Idealism*, pp. 121-135.

¹⁰ Cf. D. Nassar, *Spinoza in Schelling's Early Conception of Intellectual Intuition*, in *Spinoza and German Idealism*, pp. 136-155.

In this new panorama, the spontaneity of volition defines itself through a cluster of notions (e.g., *Trieb*) that determines *experience* as always conceptual yet, as regards to volition, never detached from finitude, individuality, and contingency.

Thus, Fichte ends metaphysics to establish a logic of the manifestation of consciousness. Fichte clearly exceeds the metaphysical oppression of monism and concurrently announces the birth of a phenomenological understanding of thinking (*The Vocation of Humankind*, p. 260).

Di Giovanni states that it is only under these premises that we can understand Hegel's *Glauben und Wissen* and its criticism of Fichte. That famous text should not be taken simply as an attack on the subjectivity of thinking. Rather, it is a criticism of the distinction (still partially active in Fichte) between freedom and monism. In Hegel's eyes, this distinction itself should disappear. And the reason for rejecting this distinction is simple: both monism and freedom, at least as they were conceived through Fichte (included), are not real (*The Vocation of Humankind*, p. 293). The challenge of saving subjectivity from Spinoza's monism, the challenge issued by Spinoza (*Hegel and the Challenge of Spinoza*, p. IX), is met by further elaborating the line of thought that Fichte inaugurates and Hegel develops.

This last thesis marks the real incipit of *Hegel and the Challenge of Spinoza*; it is a study that emphasizes how the subject defines itself within a system of reality. It seems that phenomenology (along with the modal categories that phenomenology rescues) is the pre-eminent tool that resolves both the metaphysics of the system and freedom.

5. *Phenomenology instead of Metaphysics*

All of this pivots on a subject that should be defined through a new interpretation of the faculty of thinking itself¹¹. In the

¹¹ We cannot give this topic the space it deserves, but it is important to call attention, as di Giovanni does, to the paramount significance for the

absence of such an interpretation, thinking will remain mere formalism, nature will recede into the obscure, and the finite subject will disappear.

Certainly, Hegel was not alone in this: numerous post-Kantian philosophers seek to escape from formalism, so that the dream to surpass experience and attain the real – a task that Kant's philosophy seems to incorporate in accordance with a metaphysical fashion – would sound meaningless (*Hegel and the Challenge of Spinoza*, p. 14). In other terms, an eminently philosophical project should disappear: the idea that there is a need to surpass experience to reach reality is only a dream that grows from a formalistic and superficial understanding of thinking. There is no *prius* that precedes experience.

Interestingly, the Fichte that di Giovanni turns to is the one who has already left Jena. Di Giovanni focuses on the second version *Wissenschaftslehre* 1804. He develops his analysis based on some previous texts (including the second edition of *An Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation*) that address the notion of *Gefühl* conceived as the starting point to judge the identity of the self. Notwithstanding the clear convergence of Fichte and Jacobi on this theme, di Giovanni reveals his interest in the Fichte-Schelling debate over what role and value to assign to the 'nature' (the *prius*) that *Gefühl* reveals.

Di Giovanni is quite adamant in admitting that, while in Fichte, any «nature» is already «contended with» in the very act of determining the subject (hence the possibility of a phenomenology that supersedes metaphysics), Schelling (e.g., in the *Darstellung*) sees in Fichte's I as an instance of nature, where nature is becoming conscious of itself (*Hegel and the Challenge of Spinoza*, p. 39 ff.).

The remaining text details the convergences and divergences of Fichte's and Schelling's philosophical paths. They both exclusively sought the «binding character of evidence that governed all experience». But, they did it differently. Fichte saw in it the autonomy of a rationality (hence, no *prius*) that presents the conditions of possibility of any reflective judgment on rationality

development of all classical German philosophy of the issues raised in § 76 of Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*.

itself; Schelling described the «biding character» of all experience as the irreducible moment where irrationality and rationality are taken together (*Hegel and the Challenge of Spinoza*, p. 104).

It is interesting to note that di Giovanni does not clear Fichte and Schelling of the charges that he presses against Kant. Eventually, they all prioritize a source of meaning that transcends discursive reason, making of reason a space of intelligibility whose occurrence cannot be explained by reason itself (*Hegel and the Challenge of Spinoza*, p. 131).

Contrary to this general tendency, di Giovanni stresses, Hegel gives absolute priority to reason: in Hegel's philosophy, there is no *a priori* in any conceivable form. The actual and concrete rationality of historical facts is all that there is¹².

For Hegel, therefore, questions such as 'why is there something rather than nothing' lose their meaning because there is no possibility of something that precedes its reality (*Hegel and the Challenge of Spinoza*, p. 136 ff.); further, any philosophy that values that question, shows nothing but its weakness¹³. In Hegel, in other words, we witness the eradication of the very notion of a *prius* that would precede thinking.

The role of the herald of metaphysics has notoriously been assigned to the question 'why is there something rather than nothing'. It can then be certain that Hegel's philosophy is to be read in light of a rejection of what the question presupposes: the priority of a source of meaning. Alternatively, Hegel suggests, the meaning of experience needs to be found in experience, that is, in the very rationality that it unfolds (*Hegel and the Challenge of Spinoza*, pp. 175-177).

¹² Numerous works deal with Hegel's metaphysics or anti-metaphysics, but we may refer to one in particular. In his recent discussion of the history of philosophy, Habermas deems Hegel a metaphysical thinker precisely for his interpretation of the historicity of reality. See J. Habermas, *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie*, vol. II, Berlin, Suhrkamp, 2019, p. 567.

¹³ G.W. Leibniz, *Principles of Nature and Grace, Based on Reason*, in Id., *Philosophical Texts*, ed. by R.S. Woolhouse and R. Francks, Oxford-New York, Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 258-266.

However, as di Giovanni warns, dismissing metaphysics does not entail dismissing religion. Hegel finds in religion a clear manifestation of the «feeling» (*Gefühl*) through which the self achieves concrete life, which dismantles the distinction between necessity and freedom. In fact, *feeling* retains the judgment that the subject poses between itself and the other within itself; the form of this judgment opens the way along which the self defines and evaluates itself:

We said that feeling in Idealism is like a primordial judgment about one's identity. It is an existential judgment, for it has to do with who one is. It is made by confronting an other, namely nature, which the one making the judgment necessarily presupposes historically. And it is reflected in the significance (the felt determination) that this 'other' assumes because of the judgment. Who one is, is how one feels about that other. Nonetheless, the judgment is about oneself, and it is achieved by virtue of a principle internal to the one performing it. Reason, or better, the force of its logicity, is for Hegel the principle at issue. This is what Hegel essentially means by the 'cunning of reason' (*die List der Vernunft*). Whether, in its attitude toward nature, the self assumes the attitude of mere observer, taking nature as if it were all already there, or whether it approaches it as something to be appropriated through work, thus transforming it into social and political realities – moreover, whatever the language in the medium of which the attitude is expressed (for language is the existence of Spirit) – in all cases the self's underlying preoccupation, the one that effectively colors all its experiences, is its identity precisely as self-validating individual (*Hegel and the Challenge of Spinoza*, p. 179)¹⁴.

¹⁴ For a different interpretation of Hegel's criticism of Spinoza's substance in relation to the notion of subject, see G. Hindrichs, *Two Models of Metaphysical Inferentialism: Spinoza and Hegel*, in *Spinoza and German Idealism*, pp. 214–231.

6. *Becoming instead of Being*

Nothing must be revealed beyond the historical practices of the self. Along the track that this revolutionary approach summarizes, religion has the function of manifesting an absolute truth: neither nature nor the self is the true bearer of the form. Owing to religion, all of the forms in which reason presents itself appear cleansed of any priority of nature (i.e., substance) or the subject.

Admittedly, in the same vein as Hegel, Fichte quit metaphysics, precisely because he made the I into the original actuality, which *de facto* entailed moving away from the interpretation of the I, conceived as a logical function (the bearer of forms) applied to something given (*Hegel and the Challenge of Spinoza*, p. 194 ff.). Notwithstanding this affinity between Fichte and Hegel, the remedy to metaphysics presents itself only with Hegel and his definition of religion; following di Giovanni's narrative, one finds oneself wondering how this last maneuver can cast the shadow of metaphysics upon Kant himself and all his successors. Indeed, Kant was not the only one to require both the 'given' and that 'subjective function'.

In Hegel, unlike all metaphysical thinkers, religion is the proper expression of the history created by the subject that it uses to recognize itself (*Hegel and the Challenge of Spinoza*, p. 199): it is the history of a self that seeks to state its own universality beyond its historical aspect. In this respect, the *Phenomenology of Spirit* marshals a great variety of forms to reveal how the paramount relationship between universality and individuality unfolds. In fact, after reading these chapters, one may even conclude that the *Phenomenology* is the ultimate anti-metaphysical expression of rationality. Of course, the *Science of Logic* has a place as well. However, the revolutionary die has already been cast: Hegel turns the *grounding* that metaphysics seeks into an analysis of modal categories, and this alone can express the real nature of the becoming that the *Phenomenology* highlights.

While Spinoza and Kant denied the objective validity of modal categories, Hegel took *intelligibility* and *grounding* to be entirely a matter of understanding the eternal and immutable law of *becoming*, that receives its grammar from the interaction between

modal categories. He rejected the idea of a *prius* that would destroy the very concepts of possibility, necessity, and actuality.

This thesis explores the undiscovered anti-metaphysical potential of these categories. Concurrently, it exposes the real value of religion for this philosophical breakthrough. Furthermore, this thesis can be presented differently, as di Giovanni does in a yet-to-be-published essay: «transcendence is immanent to the becoming itself»¹⁵. Therefore, apparently, transcendence defines reality.

In the final sections of *Hegel and the Challenge of Spinoza*, a famous Hegelian *dictum* finds its place, as we understand that conceiving of substance as a subject involves bringing universality and necessity, which are typically attributed to substance, down to the historicity of the subject. As one might expect, this approach leads to the dismissal of any attempt to find the cosmic foundation of being in logic (as it happens in Schelling): logic does not perform the unintelligible function of revealing the ground, as the ground is simply the (modal) historicity of the becoming.

Based on these premises, one can even claim that there is no ground but everything is manifest. This represents an unprecedented blow to the notion of substance, which inevitably affects our conception of God as well. If we take Hegel to represent the culmination of an age, we can assert that at the end of classical German philosophy, religion still stands, but its God has no substance.

7. *Philosophy of Religion*

After reading di Giovanni's two volumes, one may feel the need to define both the perimeter and reach of the philosophy of religion introduced by classical German philosophy. This, we believe, is one of the themes and tasks that we inherited from di Giovanni.

¹⁵ For a precise reference to Hegel's text where modal categories are discussed in their anti-metaphysical character, di Giovanni mentions, among other places, G.W.F. Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline*, ed. by K. Brinkmann and D.O. Dahlstrom, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, § 147.

Browsing the history of philosophy, it is transparent that human intellectual efforts always turn to God as their prime object. Simultaneously, we could claim, after reading di Giovanni, that *philosophy of religion* cannot simply be reduced to the status of an example of this innate drive. The philosophy of religion appears at a specific time, when philosophical debate has cast aside the substance of God and replaced it with an anti-metaphysical understanding of religion.

This profound change produced an entirely new discipline. Certainly, it is only in the last few decades of the 18th century that philosophy systematically turned toward religion (not God) as such¹⁶. Hence, it seems that the philosophy of religion should not be understood as the philosophy of a specific object, such as the philosophy of mathematics and biology. Rather, it should be interpreted as an instance of a new philosophy that is based on the eradication of the notion of substance that religion seems to epitomize¹⁷.

This does not imply that philosophy entirely dismisses theology¹⁸. In fact, eradicating the notion of substance involves the human being as well. Philosophy of religion suggests that a new parameter to define the real is available: human self-consciousness is translated into an instance of the *absolute* self-consciousness. This new course of philosophical thinking suggests that, after the deposition (or the death) of God that was conceived as an *ens*, we must focus on the notion of *spirit* to allow us to absolve our duties with regard to the question of our real being.

¹⁶ Cf. W. Jaeschke, *Zur Genealogie der Religionsphilosophie*, «Archivio di Filosofia», LXXV (1/2), 2007, pp. 33-54.

¹⁷ For a different approach in Italy, see A. Fabris, *Filosofia delle religioni*, Roma, Carocci, 2012; A. Aguti, *Filosofia della religione: storia, temi, problemi*, Brescia, La scuola, 2013. Or A. Fabris, *La Filosofia della religione oggi, nell'epoca dell'indifferenza e dei fondamentalismi*, «Archivio di Filosofia», LXXV (1/2), 2007, pp. 287-302. See also A. Caracciolo, *La filosofia della religione, oggi*, in Id., *La religione come struttura e come autonomo della coscienza* [1965], Genova, il Melangolo, 2000, pp. 33-55, and, of the same author, *Sul concetto di filosofia della religione*, in Id., *Religione et eticità* [1971], Genova, il Melangolo, 1999, pp. 109-127.

¹⁸ Cf. Jaeschke, *Zur Genealogie Der Religionsphilosophie*, pp. 51 and ff.

Historically speaking, the philosophy of religion seems to spring from forms of annihilation only to elaborate an understanding of the notions of spirit (and God) that transcend mere substantiality. Thus, one may feel that it is right to claim that the philosophy of religion is a new form of theology, which searches for the principle of reality within the fabric of religion and simultaneously rejects the idea of a supreme all-funding being conceived as a being.

More mildly, the history of the philosophy of religion seems connected to the need to reshape our theoretical understanding of the supreme principle of reality, which draws from a different conception of the relationship between thinking and the absolute principle. This may remind us of certain religious traditions expressing the idea of God beyond substance and being, or it may even entail an idea of God that embraces the very annihilation of substantiality in its revelation¹⁹.

It is only in this sense that the phenomenology of our thinking would not eclipse but rather reveal the absolute and its history.

¹⁹ One may find a general orientation of this topic in M.M. Olivetti (a cura di), *Filosofia della rivelazione*, «Archivio di filosofia», LXII (1-3), 1994.