

**Allen W. Wood.** *Fichte's Ethical Thought*. Oxford University Press 2016. 288 pp. \$60.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780198766889).

The only two systematic treatises which Fichte ever completed are the *Foundation of Natural Right* (1796/97) and the *System of Ethics* (1798). Both are freestanding pieces that reward careful study and rigorous examination. However, by comparison with the *Foundation of Natural Right*, the *System of Ethics* has received little scholarly attention in the English-speaking world to date. This despite the availability of a high-quality, reader-friendly English translation of the ethical treatise for the past ten years. Allen Wood's *Fichte Ethical Thought* might change the situation for good. One of the most highly regarded specialists in Kant and Hegel's practical philosophy of his generation, Wood surpasses himself in this latest work. Actively seeking out embarrassing Fichtean theses (e.g., everything exists in the I, there is a morally right action for any given situation, we ought to treat ourselves as a tool of the moral law, all human beings have a common end), Wood explores interpretations that render them plausible and compelling.

The book consisting of eight chapters can be viewed in three parts: Part One (chapters 1-3) equip the reader with the biographical, systematic and conceptual background information that are essential to appreciating Fichte's ethics; Part Two (chapters 4-7) takes the reader through the main arguments of Fichte's system of ethics in detail; Part Three (chapter 8) concludes with a concise discussion of Fichte's political thought in order to contrast it with his ethics. In addition to giving an exposition of Fichte's moral treatise, Wood is given to convincing the reader that 'Fichte is the most influential single figure on the entire tradition of continental European philosophy in the last two centuries' (ix). Name any major philosopher of this tradition, Wood writes, and he can identify a central idea that traces back to Fichte.

Part Two undoubtedly contains the volume's most substantive and lasting contributions to the field. Nevertheless, something must be said about Wood's achievements in Parts One and Three. Chapter 1 acquaints the reader with the person of Johann Gottlieb Fichte by recounting the defining events of his life. The narrative lays the groundwork for Wood's portrayal of Fichte throughout as an over-zealous anti-elitist who is bent on tearing down the divide separating the thinking and the laboring class, and his exploration of the impact of this aspect of Fichte's character on both theoretical and practical thinking. Chapter 2 introduces the reader to the basic, overall objectives and principles that define the project of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, such as the meaning of transcendental philosophy, the first principle of the I, intellectual intuition, the synthetic method, and the rejection of things in themselves. According to Wood, the traditionally prevalent 'subjective idealist' reading gets it all wrong. On his 'modernist' or 'secular humanist' interpretation, the Fichtean version of transcendental philosophy aims not to correct common sense, but to vindicate it. This is clear when we see that its task is to provide not a theory of 'reality in itself' but a satisfactory answer to the question 'How do we combine what we think about the world with what we must think about our own activity in knowing and acting on it, in order to make our conception of the world coherent with our conception of our own activity?' (33). Chapter 3 offers an account of two concepts which Wood considers to be fundamental to Fichte's ethics: freedom and intersubjectivity. Fichte scholars have lamented the unhappy plight of his readers being left to piece together his conception of freedom on their own. Wood's exposition of Fichte's theory of freedom—especially its difference from Kant's—will prove to be an important resource for readers facing the task.

As already mentioned, the volume's most substantive and lasting contributions lie in its detailed interpretation and analyses of the arguments contained in *The System of Ethics*. First of all, Wood voices with an unprecedented clarity the problems readers of the moral treatise have to tackle

in order to come to grips with it. This highly recommends the volume as an essential reading for any student of Fichte's ethics. According to Wood, the threefold division of Fichte's ethical treatise (into 'Deduction of the Principle of Morality,' 'Deduction of the Applicability of the Principle of Morality,' and 'Systematic Application of the Principle of Morality') corresponds neatly with Kant's division of the deduction of the categories into metaphysical deduction, transcendental deduction, and schematism. Chapter 4 examines Fichte's deduction of the moral principle, a concept which Wood explains in terms of what he calls 'moral authority.' Chapter 5 offers a reading of Fichte's deduction of the law's applicability. According to Wood, Fichte does not provide (or wish to provide)—as one might be prone to think he would—a discursive criterion of right action' (149). Fichte takes himself to have demonstrated the law's *applicability* just insofar as he has shown that conscience makes a demand on us (viz., we have a conviction about duty) in any given situation. As Wood rightly points out, Fichte considers conscience (and conviction) to be sufficient for the ordinary purposes of ethical deliberation. But for the scientific purpose of developing a 'concrete system of ethics,' a separate inquiry into the law's *application* is required. This is the topic of the following chapter 6 and 7. Wood follows Fichte's plan in chapter 6, dividing his discussion of the law's application into duties pertaining to the body, to cognition and to other rational beings. The introduction of the final theme of intersubjectivity transforms the entire system so radically that chapter 7 continues with an analysis of its contents, before looking at Fichte's fourfold classification of duties.

A substantial portion of chapter 5 and 6 is devoted to debunking the interpretation of a worthy opponent. In a couple of recent articles, Michelle Kosch argues that Fichte embraces a distinctively non-utilitarian version of consequentialism which Wood calls 'calculative consequentialism'—as if to highlight the practical conception of its function as a criterion for moral deliberation. Wood argues that such an interpretation cannot be right because Fichte is not concerned with formulating a criterion for moral appraisals at all. As he does so, Wood offers an alternative interpretation of Fichte's conception of the human moral vocation and the final end. Citing Fichte's statement in the *Vocation of Humankind* (1800) that the commandment determines the end, and not *vice versa*, Wood suggests an alternative way of thinking about the relationship of each morally right action to the final end: Each new action in the series of morally right actions is determined, he submits, not through the maximization of the final end (of which we would then have to have a fairly definite conception in advance), but through a kind of 'recursive projection' of the previous action in the series. The final end is then successively determined through each new action as 'the (impossible) terminus of this recursive series' (180).

One illustration of the insight and wit Wood brings to bear on his critical engagement with the text is his proposed resolution to an interpretative difficulty concerning the concept of happiness. In the first of his *Lectures on the Vocation of a Scholar*, Fichte expressly adopts a significantly different concept from Kant's when he denies that happiness is possible without morality and insists that what is good makes us happy. However, he seems to retreat to the orthodox Kantian position in the *System of Ethics* when he says of someone who seeks the greatest pleasure that she adopts the 'maxim of happiness.' Wood masterfully resolves the difficulty by noting a difference between *pursuing happiness* and *being happy*. In fact, as is clear from his ultimate characterization of the final end as a community of rational beings, Fichte sees one who pursues happiness as having no chance to be happy. A necessary condition of being happy is that one does not pursue it, but seeks the moral improvement of others.

Chapter 8 stands apart from the rest of Part Three. But the exposition of the *Foundations of Natural Right* picks up where chapter 3 leaves off. Together they form a complete, running commen-

tary on the *Foundation of Natural Right*. Besides offering a detailed analysis of the Jena system of rights, Wood goes to some length to compare and contrast Fichte's view of the relationship of right and ethics with Kant's. Both Kant and Fichte reject the more traditional approach of deriving right from the moral law. Both regard a system of rights and a system of ethics as having separate and distinct foundations, while admitting various ways in which they are interdependent. Both are clear that no one may rightfully be coerced to commit to the moral law, and no commitment to the moral law is required for membership in a community based on right. However, while Kant allows that a system of rights borrows the concept of obligation from ethics, Fichte insists that such a concept has no place in a system of rights. Consequently, while Kant believes that rational beings existing outside a community based on right may rightfully be coerced to join one such community, Fichte insists that no one is obligated to create or to enter a community based on right.

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