

David James and Günter Zöller, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Fichte*. Cambridge University Press 2016. 438 pp. \$110.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780521472265); \$34.99 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780521478052).

The *Cambridge Companions* have long been an invaluable resource for serious students seeking either a comprehensive overview of a major Western philosopher's achievements or an in-depth understanding of the philosopher's views on a particular topic. Two volumes on Kant and two on Hegel have appeared on this pretext. Yet there has been none on Fichte all this while. But Fichte's time has finally arrived! Nothing attests to this better than the publication of this long-awaited volume. The book consists of 14 independently written essays by an interesting mix of scholars from different parts of the world, all long-standing and abundantly fruitful laborers in the field. Though the range of topics does not exhaust Fichte's contributions and interests (philosophy of art and mathematics are omitted, for example), it is sufficiently wide to give one a sense of the full scale of his accomplishments and versatility as a thinker.

The essays are organized into four groups: (I) the first two essays (Chapters 1-2) set the historical stage for Fichte's philosophical project, the so-called *Wissenschaftslehre* (meaning a Doctrine of Knowledge); (II) the next three essays (Chapters 3-5) delve into details of the foundational portion of the most celebrated and influential versions of *Wissenschaftslehre*; (III) the next five essays (Chapters 6-10) examine the particular areas of politics, law, ethics, economics, history, religion to which the principles of *Wissenschaftslehre* have been applied; and (IV) the last four essays (Chapters 11-14) explore the immediate reception of Fichte, dealing with topics such as his alleged influence on the early German romantics and his tenuous relationship with Schelling and Hegel. As it is impossible here to give each essay the consideration it deserves, I will confine my discussion to those which I find especially interesting.

The essays in Group I are refreshing to say the least. Martin commences with an account of events leading up to the conception of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. While the first part traces the path—well-trodden by conventional scholarship—from Reinhold's efforts at systematizing Kant's critical philosophy, through Aenesidemus' (Schulze's) skeptical attacks on Reinhold, to Fichte's reply in the review of Schulze's book, the second part pursues a less explored route from Reinhold's attempt to improve on Kant's theory of freedom, through Creuzer's skeptical attack on Reinhold, to Fichte's response in the review of Creuzer's book. Martin rightly draws attention to the issue of 'the proper place (and interpretation) of the notion of freedom in transcendental philosophy' (24) as a key motivating factor in the project of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. The second chapter addresses the issue of Fichte's putative association with the French revolution and Jacobinism. Philosophical historian Beiser culls the letters and correspondences of the 1790s to show that Fichte is no Jacobin in the strict sense. In doing so, Beiser does not deny that Fichte is to be placed 'in the left-wing, if not the radical left-wing, of German politics in the 1790s' (44). Additionally, Beiser offers an interpretation of the parallel Fichte draws between the liberation of the French nation from 'the external chains of man' and that of the *Wissenschaftslehre* from 'the chains of the thing-in-itself' (38). He argues for a literal '*complete interdependence* of Fichte's early philosophy and politics' (40), claiming that Fichte seeks to undermine conservatives' legitimization of the sociopolitical *status quo* by exposing the regulative status of the Kantian idea of the highest good.

In Group II, one full chapter (by Klotz) is aptly devoted to the *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre*—the only text on the foundational portion of the *Wissenschaftslehre* which was published during Fichte's lifetime, and consequently the work with which he is inevitably identified. This is followed by a chapter by Breazeale on the second Jena presentation of the

Wissenschaftslehre, particularly as it is presented in four sets of student transcriptions of lectures Fichte gave between 1796 and 1799 under the title *Wissenschaftslehre (nova methodo)*. The final chapter by Zöller discusses the many subsequent versions of the *Wissenschaftslehre* which were orally delivered in Berlin and elsewhere. Breazeale's summary of the advantages and improvements of the second *Wissenschaftslehre* over the first is especially helpful. According to him, metaphilosophical reflections are, first of all, more clearly separated from the philosophical deductions proper. Second, the second presentation 'begins far more "naturally" with a simple request to "think the I and observe how you do so"' (119). Third, the artificial divide between a theoretical and a practical portion is abandoned for an intimately interactive account of the I's ideal and real activities. Fourth, the deductions of the second presentation proceed from the inside out, whereas those of the first presentation proceed from the outside in. Fifth, the second presentation contains a much clearer account of reflection (*Reflexion*) and the method based on the law of its productive syntheses. Lastly, a host of topics such as the body, intersubjectivity, and the supersensible substrate, 'are often assigned a weight and a function in the overall argument that they did not possess in the earlier presentation' (124).

The essays in Group III move into relatively unexplored terrains. Allen Wood commences with a chapter on Fichte's political thought and ethics. Though the issues are more extensively detailed in Wood's recent book on Fichte's ethical system, the chapter provides a helpfully straightforward summary of the book's findings in popular areas of interest like criminal law and economic justice. Especially surprising are the chapters by Merle on Fichte's economic theory in the little known *Closed Commercial State*, Fichte's philosophy of history (by Raddrizzani), and the controversial *Addresses to the German Nation*, by Aichele. Verweyen then concludes with a chapter on Fichte's religious philosophy as it evolves from the early *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation*, through the *Atheismusstreit*, to the more contemplative *The Way toward the Blessed Life*. Among these chapters, Aichele's compelling treatment of the long-avoided *Addresses* deserves special mention. According to Aichele, the *Addresses* should be approached in light of Fichte's philosophy of history as it is laid out in the *Characteristics of the Present Age*. Through the lens of reason's five-stage *Weltplan*, Fichte sees Napoleon's occupation of German soil as posing a genuine threat to the progress of humankind as a whole. It is under the threat of humankind's regression carried by the 'necessary lack of foreign insight' (270) that Fichte seeks to hasten the progress from the third 'state of completed sinfulness' to the fourth 'state of progressive justification' (257) through a national rebirth based on a radical educational program that aims at the 'elimination of sensuous individuality' (261). From beginning to end, Aichele argues, Fichte is not so much concerned with the 'restoration of the Prussian state, let alone the Holy Roman Empire' as with 'humankind's progress' (260). Nevertheless, Aichele admits: 'reason has in the final analysis become German, and it has come to speak only German, too. But this is obviously wrong' (270).

A cluster of closely related popular works on religion, history, education and language produced during the post-Jena period has been translated into English by William Smith in the mid-19th century. They include *Characteristics* (1804-5), *On the Essence of a Scholar* (1805), *The Way toward the Blessed Life* (1806), as well as the *Addresses*. Despite their availability in English for more than a century, these works remain relatively unstudied. These perfectly readable works not only mark significant developments in Fichte's views, but they have potential in shedding light on the nature of his project of the *Wissenschaftslehre* itself. The essays' masterful treatment of some of these make no small contribution by awakening interest in them.

Although all the essays in Group IV explore Fichte's impact on his successors, each has a distinctive approach of its own. The collection gives one a good idea of where the field is headed.

Millán shows that the early romantics—particularly Hölderlin, Schlegel and Novalis—are not (as they are often reputed to be) ‘blind followers’ of Fichte, but some of his earliest critics. Gardner reconsiders how Fichtean the Schelling of the so-called ‘Fichtean period’ really is. James suggests how Hegel’s account of the struggle for recognition might have evolved from a critical engagement with Fichte’s theory of mutual recognition. Franks concludes with a discussion of how Fichte’s talk of positing can be understood in the terms of contemporary Anglo-American metaphysics. With Millán’s essay, the curtains are drawn with a ‘sobering’ note, for Schlegel, Millán points out, likened Fichte’s effort at deducing a system of philosophy from a first principle to a drunkard’s attempt to mount a horse despite repeated failures (319). For all their admiration of the *Wissenschaftslehre* as a ‘tendency’ toward freedom, the early romantics were staunch anti-foundationalists who saw it as another ‘misguided, mystical quest for absolute foundations’ (321).

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