Daniel Breazeale. *Thinking Through the* Wissenschaftslehre: *Themes from Fichte's Early Philosophy*. Oxford University Press 2014. 488 pp. $150.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780199233632); $50.00 USD (Paperback ISBN9780198768678).

Thinking Through the Wissenschaftslehre is an outstanding collection of fourteen of Daniel Breazeale's previously published essays. Each essay has been substantially revised for the volume. The chapters are self-standing, but themes overlap in helpful ways. Breazeale is clearly sympathetic to Fichte's project in the Jena *Wissenschaftslehre* (though not uncritically so), and the book is intended to help scholars and students find their way into Fichte's project.

Each chapter performs at least one of three functions. First, all of the chapters involve, to a greater or lesser degree, the disambiguation and clarification of Fichte's terminology and concepts, often in order to defend Fichte's project against one or more objections. Second, several of the chapters explore Fichte's historical context and philosophical influences. Third, many of the chapters elaborate on what could broadly be called "existential" themes in Fichte's philosophy. I discuss each of these themes in turn.

Regarding the first theme, *Thinking Through the* Wissenschaftslehre is an exercise in a specific kind of interpretation focused on the resolution of textual puzzles and the clarification of Fichte's central ideas (see Breazeale's hermeneutical remarks at vii-viii of the Preface and at 95-97). This aspect of the book will be extremely useful to those coming to Fichte's philosophy for the first time, as well as for scholars working on specific technical aspects of Fichte's philosophy. Fichte's texts are frequently unclear regarding the meaning of key concepts, such as the 'absolute I' (discussed in Chapter 6), 'intellectual intuition' (Chapter 8), the *Anstoss* (the 'check,' Chapter 7), or the idea of a 'pragmatic history of the human mind' (Chapter 4). Breazeale aims to set the record straight regarding such difficult aspects of Fichte's philosophy by carefully combing through the texts, making distinctions and clarifications where Fichte's terminology is ambiguous or imprecise, and working to arrive at a coherent overall picture of the role of these concepts in Fichte's complex project. Breazeale's encyclopedic grasp of both Fichte's writings and the extensive scholarly literature on Fichte, as well as his lucid writing, make him uniquely well-suited to carry out this task. Breazeale's book will be a tremendous resource to anyone who finds herself perplexed by Fichte's Jena writings.

Now I turn to the second, contextualizing function of Breazeale's project. Chapters Two, Three, and Four of the book include extensive discussion of Fichte's engagement with other key figures of early post-Kantian thought. Taken together, these chapters provide a vivid account of Fichte's intellectual millieu and his intense engagement with his contemporaries. Chapter Two locates the origins of Fichte's central doctrine of self-positing in his engagement with Schulze's *Anesidemus* and with Reinhold's *Elementar Philosophie*. Chapter Three discusses Fichte's response to the rationalist scepticism of Salomon Maimon. Chapter Four discusses the sources and meaning of Fichte's claim that the *Wissenschaftslehre* is 'a pragmatic history of the human mind'. Breazeale catalogues the occurences of the idea of 'pragmatic history' in the work of philosophers familiar to Fichte – Kant, Platner, Maimon, Reinhold, and Tenneman—arguing that Fichte takes insights from each of these figures in developing his own conception of pragmatic history (70-79).

Lastly, I want briefly to discuss the third function, that of elaborating on humanistic or 'existential' themes in Fichte. A common objection to German Idealism is that, in their drive for systematic unity, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel ignore important lessons of Kant's critical philosophy and instead revert to a totalizing, pre-critical rationalist metaphysics, which violates Kantian strictures on our cognition of the supersensible. The Idealists, on this reading, succumb to the temptation to move beyond the theoretical and practical limits inherent in the finite human standpoint.

Breazeale argues that, whatever the merits of this objection as it applies to Schelling and Hegel, it is *not* a valid objection to Fichte's Jena *Wissenschaftslehre*. On Breazeale's reading, Fichte's philosophical ambitions turn out to be both more modest and more humanistic than commonly acknowledged. Regarding the claim about Fichte's philosophical modesty, Breazeale responds to two objections based on the *Wissenschaftslehre*'s alleged metaphysical extravagance. First, many readers have thought that the *Wissenschaftslehre*'s reliance on the self-positing activity of the 'absolute I' commits Fichte to a robust metaphysics of the absolute. Breazeale argues that such an objection misunderstands the methodological role of the absolute I in Fichte's Jena *Wissenschaftslehre*. The only 'I's' that exist, according to Breazeale, are finite, individual I's—i.e., embodied human agents (103). The absolute I plays two functions in Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*. First, it is a philosopher's fiction, the point of which is precisely to show that the I can exist *only* as finite or limited by something outside of it (103). Second, it is a *regulative ideal* of practical activity—our duty as finite practical agents is to overcome limitations to our agency (103).

A second common objection to the *Wissenschaftslehre* is that, because Fichte rejects the Kantian dualism of the form and matter of experience in favor of deriving all experience from the self-activity of the I, Fichte must hold that the transcendental subject somehow necessarily constructs the entirety of concrete experience, including such facts as the existence of 'a belt of asteroids between Mars and Jupiter,' to borrow Josiah Royce's example (117). Surely it is implausible to hold that it is a condition of the possibility of self-consciousness I-hood that we must posit such empirical facts. Breazeale agrees that this is implausible, but argues that Fichte's transcendental philosophy accepts that there are no *a priori* philosophical answers to such empirical questions (117). Rather, transcendental philosophy is limited to the more modest task of deriving 'fundamental features and laws governing the entire range of everyday experience' (125), and Fichte accepts that transcendental philosophy must be supplemented by empirical inquiry (117). The I must be '*open to experience*' (117). Note, however, that Breazeale does not deny that the I constructs all of experience through its positing activity. Rather, he denies that it is possible to derive the entire content of experience through the *a priori* method of transcendental deduction employed by the *Wissenschaftslehre* (117). If the objection to the *Wissenschaftslehre* is that it is implausible that all experience derives from the self-activity of the I, then Breazeale's claim does little to mollify the objection.

In any case, instead of a speculative metaphysics of the absolute or a wild exercise in transcendental deduction, Breazeale emphasizes that Fichte's philosophy is centered around the practical striving of finite human beings to overcome their necessary limitations. This is a major theme of Chapters Five, Six, Seven, Thirteen, and Fourteen. The Fichtean I is, necessarily, an embodied (117-118), "divided self" (119, and Chapter Six), characterized by dueling 'drives' that constitute the I as a form of activity (129-132, 180). The practical task of the I, in the broadest sense, is to overcome its divisions and reconstitute itself as a 'unity,' a goal that is unachievable for us as finite practical agents but nonetheless necessary as the highest end of human striving (136). Practical reason is in some sense 'primary' for Fichte, for there can be no purely *theoretical* demonstration of the superiority of the *Wissenschaftslehre* over dogmatic materialist metaphysics. Rather, as Fichte emphasized in his exchange with Schelling, the philosophy a person adopts is ultimately a matter of whether one chooses to affirm or deny her freedom (see, e.g., 372-3). The choice to adopt the standpoint of the *Wissenschaftslehre* is on Fichte's view a matter of "willful *decision*" (314). Although this conclusion sounds rather existentialist, Breazeale takes pains to distinguish Fichte's view from that of existentialist philosophers such as Sartre by emphasizing that, for Fichte, the choice to affirm one's freedom is not absurd or groundless (302-3, 313-14). Rather, we have good moral and theoretical reasons to endorse the *Wissenschaftslehre*, but such reasons are visible only to a person who already regards her own freedom as a datum for which any philosophical system must account (324-8, 419-22).

At the same time that the I must strive to overcome its original limitations and reunify itself, Breazeale holds that the *Wissenschaftslehre* also helps us to *reconcile* ourselves to these limitations (125) by coming to view them as essential conditions of any self-conscious rationality whatsoever (150-152, 168, 184). Practical striving to overcome necessary limitations turns out to be, necessarily, the human condition. Recognizing the necessity of our 'divided selves' is supposed to reconcile us to our condition (152). But Breazeale does not specify why achieving this insight should result in *reconcilation* to our condition rather than *alienation* from our life of endless striving, which can by hypothesis never achieve its goal. Breazeale writes that 'it is tempting to view the Jena *Wissenschaftslehre* as a transcendental theodicy,' but Fichte's reconciling project would have to be spelled out in greater detail to make the account plausible.

Thinking Through the Wissenschaftslehre encapsulates Breazeale's decades of careful interpretative work. The book is a major contribution to Fichte studies and to the study of post-Kantian German philosophy more broadly. It is highly recommended for both scholars and students of Fichte.

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