Owen Ware: *Fichte's Moral Philosophy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020, 244 pp.

According to Kant, the architectonic structure of analysis should start with total abstraction of a concept from all its material bounds, the removal of all empirical clutter, in order to diagnose what is essential to the concept in question (KpV 5:10). But, critically, the second step in this analysis is that the concept must then be put back in the context of 'the whole', and revaluated accordingly. This is impressed upon the reader very early on in Owen Ware's *Fichte's Moral Philosophy*, and Ware is eager to stress that, though both elements are equally important to the analysis of Fichte's ethics, it is at this second hurdle that scholars of Fichte's *Sittenlehre* have generally stumbled (8–9).[1]

Ware's aim in this book is to rectify this. From the start, his goal in this masterful addition to Anglophone literature on Fichtean ethics is to reaffirm the importance of Fichte's appeal to the original fundamental unity from which we are alienated, and the ethical vocation of the individual as a project of striving towards this unity. I take it that his work is essentially divided into three: much like Fichte's own *System of Ethics* (1798), the book roughly tracks the deduction of the moral law itself; of its applicability; and an outline of what it is to *be* moral. Chapters 2 and 3 aim to both put a finer point on how Fichte understands freedom, and to put forward Fichte's own deduction of the moral law. Ware does so by situating Fichte's moral theory, not merely in relation to the Kantian deductions of freedom and the moral law, outlined in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), but also in response to the further interpretations of Kant provided in the late 1780s and early 1790s by K. L. Reinhold and Salomon Maimon.

On Ware's view, Fichte defines freedom as, far from being an overabundance of disparate definitions, as he believes scholars have previously understood it to be, a set of dialectically interacting stages in a "single, coherent […] Genetic Model" (39). Freedom is, in this sense, a progression on the part of an originally 'indifferent' will from 'formal' to 'material freedom', a transition that is enabled by my intuiting my self-activity in projecting an end to attain, and thereby reframing this very self-activity as the end to be attained (40–1). Further, against Maimon's claim that we ought to be sceptical of Kant's assertion that the moral law is a fact of common consciousness, Fichte's notion of the moral law originates genetically with an "original 'act' of the I as such" (54).

1 Unless otherwise stated, all references are to Ware's book.

FICHTE-STUDIEN
Published with license by Koninklijke Brill BV | DOI:10.1163/18795811-05301019
 | ISSN: 0925-0166 (print) 1879-5811 (online)

In this way, Fichte sidesteps the challenge that the moral law's givenness seems to pose for Reinholdian freedom, since he identifies morality with freedom in 'one and the same thought' (SE 55 [SW IV:53]). On the side of the objective, we are formally free, whereas on the side of the subjective, we seem to be rule-governed. But, Ware emphasizes, we are able to attain material freedom by reflecting on this formal freedom and its connection to the moral law. To be practically free, then, is to be acquainted with the moral law. That is, to be free is to be conscious of the fact that the perceived otherness of the 'not-I' is merely a representation that originates with the fundamental unity of the 'concept of I-hood'. "Without a link to the I," says Ware, "we lose all grounds to speak intelligibly about what *ought-to-be*" (58–9, italics original).

To my mind, the keystone of the book is Chapter 4, which advances a lucid discussion of Fichte's theory of 'drives'. I say this chapter is critical, because it clarifies the movement from the applicability of the moral law to its necessity (78), and thereby helps to unlock, in a more practically useful way, Fichte's adumbration of his moral theory that Ware advances to cover in the remainder of the book. 'Drives' are what motivates the transition, says Ware, between the merely felt moral compulsion and the deduction of the moral law. Though the former is sufficient to live a moral life, the latter is what genetically explains our moral conscience, and is thereby necessary in understanding our moral vocation (111). This functions as a transition from a drive (i.e., the real ground of activity, which is merely *felt* by consciousness) to an indeterminate sensation of 'need' (or *longing*) with no particular object. And finally, if we reflect upon longing, we become able to posit a particular end, which leads to *desire*. The satisfaction of this desire produces enjoyment (87–8). According to Fichte, what we fundamentally desire, and thereby what our natural drive is practically geared towards, is a reciprocal 'unity' with every other part of nature (92).

I find Ware's perfectionism, in this sense, a little problematic. Ware seems here to make the tacit concession that individual agents are, by virtue of their constant striving, fundamentally flawed. If, by means of reflection, the original unity of subject and object is 'broken up' (86), then it seems that achieving the unity that the *Urtrieb* (fundamental drive) strives for is simultaneously the annihilation of the practical subject itself, thereby undermining the doctrine of the 'primacy of practical reason' that Ware is keen to emphasise on Fichte's behalf.

Ware does anticipate this objection, and in so doing appeals to Fichte's notion of 'relating', as opposed to 'absorbing' the objects of our desire. On this view, I aim to "bring [such objects] into a certain relationship with me" (SE 118 [SW IV:123]), and coordinate my own desires in order facilitate these

relationships. For the ethical drive, this is a "striving for wholeness in a self divided by reflection", and concerns "mutual formation between one's actual willing and one's original being as an *Urtrieb*" (95). It is, however, unclear to me that this necessarily makes things any clearer. What, on a perfectionist reading, would constitute such a relationship? As Ware acknowledges, one need only a moral compulsion to be a good moral agent. With such a compulsion, is it really possible to relate ethically to others (be they objects or other agents) in the same way as it would be for a philosopher who has reflected properly on the conditions of the applicability of the moral law?

It is, to me, conceivable that an agent may act according to their moral compulsion, yet derive no enjoyment (*Genuss*) therefrom. For example, consider individuals in existential 'bad faith' (*mauvaise fois*), who act in ways that may contribute to maximising the perfection of others around them, but for whom it is difficult to say that acting thusly contributes to their own inner perfection.[2] In cases such as these, it does not appear that they *do* properly relate to the objects around them, since the enjoyment attendant upon fulfilling their desire is not present as it is for one who is conscious of the moral law. As such, a problem of alienation arises for the perfectionist reading. This is because the moral compulsion that motivates us to act has a more indistinct end for those who have not reflected in this second manner upon their ends as desiring individuals, and who are resultantly not consciously contributing to the reciprocal striving to maximise perfection. It seems that, on a perfectionist reading, a 'philosopher' who is conscious of the moral law and their capacity for reflection is better able to properly relate to the objects of their ethical striving than one who has not, thus alienating the latter to some extent.

But this is merely a slight grievance I have with what is an otherwise robust account of moral perfection, and is by no means unresolvable. Indeed, it is somewhat prefigured in Ware's discussion of Fichte's view of 'Conscience' as the fundamental guiding principle of morality in Chapter 5, according to which our feelings of self-harmony afforded by conscience give assent to our convictions in ethical deliberation (99). For this reason, though we can enter into ethical deliberation with others over what we do, the buck stops with us, and us alone, when it comes to actually making our minds up. This leads Fichte to object to moral deference, on the grounds that we *may* be prone to defaulting

2 Ware does discuss Fichte's anticipation of existentialist 'bad faith' later, but is more concerned with the application of this term in relation to the problem of evil (118). This particular objection pertains to individuals in 'bad faith' who nonetheless act in ways that would accord with conscience – think of Sartre's example of a waiter 'playing at' being a waiter. Adjacently, what I am describing is an individual who 'plays at' being a moral agent.

to the position that others may be 'fully mature moral agents', but that to do so over and above our own agency is to shirk the responsibilities of morality (116). I like this argument because it manages to hold in tandem the social nature of moral reasoning, whilst simultaneously rejecting its authority in moral acting, and thus reaffirms the dual nature of ethics as solitary, yet relocated in the wider context of the whole.

Ware advances to discuss the extreme case of this failure to acknowledge our moral burden: the problem of evil. Rejecting the historical interpretation, beginning with Schelling, that Fichte locates our propensity for evil in some external force, Ware believes that we are prone to passivity, but that this is the result of our refusal to acknowledge our moral autonomy. Part of the originality of this claim, Ware says, is how close Fichte stands on this point to Kant: for both, he believes, "instead of revoking obedience to the law, we effectively work to obscure what we know deep down is our duty; that is, we deceive ourselves" (128). Yet, by very virtue of the fact that Fichte provides a 'formal proof of radical evil', he simultaneously stands independently of Kant.

The book closes with an account of the marriage of the natural drive and our intersubjectivity in determining what constitutes our ethical vocation – the *content* of our moral lives. Intersubjectivity, on this view, connects embodiment, intelligence, and community as conditions of our moral content, of which sociality is supreme. And, since "the social whole of which I am a part instantiates the 'final end' of my ethical vocation" (150), maximising the 'perfection' of others should be constitutive of our ethical drive, a striving to attain a primordial unity with them, albeit inherently ideally unachievable.

To conceptualise this, the first thing that struck me on reading this section is the degree to which Ware's account of Fichte's ethics ostensibly resembles that of Spinoza. Fichte's belief that one's 'ethical vocation' is "reuniting with our nature", i.e., "a state of undivided wholeness" (11) seems to me reminiscent of Spinoza's notion of the 'intellectual love of God' (*amor Dei intellectualis*) (*Ethics Pt. v*. *Prop.* xxxvi). However, Ware is careful to emphasise in the later stages of his book that this 'perfectionist' account of Fichte's ethics is distinct from Spinoza's (and Aristotle's and Wolff's), insofar as Fichte's theory is "*wholly* social" (179, my italics). I do wonder whether this is actually something desirable. Granted, Fichte himself asserts that one "acts upon this community of rational beings, or [...] upon nature *for the sake of this community*" (se 325 [sw iv: 343], my italics), and that we *never* act upon nature merely for its own sake. But I wonder whether the human-orientation of this theory of perfectionism is indeed preferable. My worry is that this perfectionist reading of Fichte (and indeed Fichte's *own* comments) seems unable to explain various ways in which we interact morally with our wider, non-human environment. It

seems worrying to me that a practicing Fichtean would only do their bit for climate change if their conscience dictated that it was good *for others*, as opposed to for the planet's sake. Ecological concerns *qua* ecological concerns seem, on this claim from Fichte, undesirably subordinated to anthropic desires. I am glad that Ware acknowledges Fichte's similarity in this sense to Spinoza, but I wonder whether his claim that we are 'wholly social' is in fact desirable in the first place.

I started by highlighting Ware's emphasis on the importance of replacing analysis of the moral law within the context of the whole. Ware successfully achieves this in his reimagination of Fichte's moral perfectionism as situated in the context of drives that underpin the subject's striving towards the 'whole'. Moreover, Ware reframes, and makes the reader appreciative of, the relationship of Fichte's *System of Ethics* within the wider whole, not merely of Fichte's intellectual development, but the context of his contemporaries, and their respective attempts to escape the long shadow cast by Kant's three *Critiques*. Ware's work dually serves as a clear and engaging exegetical work, that both situates and clarifies the minutiae of Fichte's moral theory against a rich background of post-Kantian thought, *and* as an erudite contribution to scholarly interpretation. His view of Fichte as a 'moral perfectionist' expertly toes the line between previous scholarly interpretations of Fichte as respectively a consequentialist and a deontologist. Ware's thesis is both a unique and plausible account of Fichte, that reaffirms, in an interesting and relevant way, the importance of reading Fichte today. *Fichte's Moral Philosophy* is, to conclude, an exemplar in modern Fichte scholarship whose consequences will, I expect, continue to reverberate for years to come.

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