Fichte’s stock as a philosopher and political philosopher is rising. He is now a popular figure on which to write, attracting the interest of distinguished philosophers and able historians of ideas, including David James. In contrast with Kant, Fichte has a far wider output in political philosophy which includes a major treatise on the theory of right and diverse political essays such as *The Closed Commercial State* and *Addresses to the German Nation*. Fichte is no doubt a captivating philosopher to read, but judgements upon his work are often mixed. Although the accusations of his igniting the flame of German nationalism, and so providing a start down the insane path to National Socialism, are now largely forgotten, he is still seen by many liberal commentators as being too unsettling and radical to provide a firm foundation for political philosophy.

Some of this fate is attributable to Fichte’s fortunate (and maybe also unfortunate) historical situation of being a figure in intellectual history who comes between Kant and Hegel. Partly this is Fichte’s own responsibility since he deliberately portrayed himself in the formative (and perhaps most notable) stage of his career as both a student and follower of Kant. In his early writings on politics he sees himself as spelling out more clearly the implications of Kant’s own system, and perhaps saying more openly things that Kant feared to say. Certainly Fichte’s support for the French Revolution is more unequivocal than Kant’s (cf. pp. 65–73), and James makes a point in this book of drawing attention to Fichte’s affinities with the French Revolutionaries (pp. 2–3). A great deal of the logic of James’ book is driven by his aim of showing how many of Fichte’s political opinions have their origin in his reading of Kant’s philosophy (cf. p. 39). I think this strategy leads to interesting conclusions, but whether Fichte gets Kant right in these internal dialogues – or whether the silent dialogue bears as much fruit as James believes – can legitimately be placed in doubt.

But another key factor in placing Fichte as this linking figure in a philosophical chain that goes beyond him, can be attributed to Hegel’s treatment of his predecessor in the Chair of Philosophy in Berlin. As is usual in Hegel’s approach to the history of philosophy, Fichte is first given great credit for
having seen the strengths of Kant’s system and going decisively beyond him. However, the catch of course, as with all earlier figures in the history of philosophy, is that Fichte was himself to be superseded, first by Schelling and then by Hegel himself. The general burden of Hegel’s critique of Fichte is that, although Fichte justifiably brought out the subjective side of philosophical reasoning by concentrating on the I as the centre of experience, the approach fails adequately to bring out the natural side of our existence. For Hegel the I is not the ontological stepping stone for everything else, as this has the defect of neglecting the objective side of things. This was compensated for by Schelling’s Absolute Idealism which embraced Nature as ultimately equivalent with mind. The final stage of the story for Fichte – in Hegel’s version – was that his philosophy was embraced as a moment in Absolute Idealism. Fichte’s philosophical system provided the one half of the true system which was to depict substance as subject.

That Fichte’s philosophical reputation has survived this sandwiching between two of the most central figures in modern philosophy is in itself something of an achievement. Whether we can join those who salute Fichte as himself a central figure in modern philosophy is another matter. I don’t think James’ book – powerfully argued as it is – wholly makes the case for Fichte’s political philosophy. For in many ways this is a perplexing book. James is both an advocate of Fichte’s political theory and also a critic (pp. 84, 169, 179). He sets out to demonstrate that Fichte’s very many later political writings should be seen as forming a single philosophical system. But several chapters begin with the theme that Fichte boldly sets out in his writings to deal with an issue in a novel manner, but somehow appears to lose his way. James conveys the impression that he is not fully happy with any of the positions Fichte sets out (p. 75), and appears to believe that in some parts the arguments may be convincing but on the whole the separate political writings do not hold together (p. 205). I can sympathize with this view. Fichte is indeed a baffling thinker and it is very difficult to discern one theme or thesis that fully holds his political theory together. A striking example of this is the contrast between Fichte’s enthusiastic reception of the French Revolution and his later embrace of an anti-French stand. A similar contrast occurs earlier on too, where in the Grundlage Fichte advocates a cosmopolitanism which draws inspiration from Kant, only for him a few years later to turn into an advocate of state-centrism in The Closed Commercial State. In this book Fichte draws from the international nature of the economy that was developing at the beginning of the nineteenth century the conclusion that it is time for individual states to stamp their authority on this alienating system by creating autarkic economic spaces within their own territory: each state should cease trading between citizens of their country and those of others. Taken separately both these publications are of considerable interest today (the latter in particular in the era of ‘putting America first’ and Brexit!) but
taken together the reader is obliged to wonder whether the earlier ideas are being repudiated or simply ignored. I am not sure that James resolves these puzzles in Fichte’s oeuvre for us. James is not always convinced by the detail of Fichte’s argument, and tells us this frequently, but he does not give much indication as to the overall plausibility of Fichte’s journey. Rather than having one system of philosophy, I think we can suggest that Fichte has the beginnings of several, and this might account for the heterogeneity of those followers of Fichte who have their imaginations sparked by one or other of his writings.

Finally, for historians of ideas this book has the virtue of carefully analysing several of Fichte’s more popular works. The main focus is of course the Addresses to the German Nation, but there are also valuable accounts of Fichte’s essays on Machiavelli (p. 211); the French Revolution (pp. 65–73); Characteristics of the Present Age (pp. 85–92); and his writings on the role of the university (pp. 146–52). This makes it an essential purchase for serious philosophy libraries.

Howard Williams
Cardiff University
e-mail: WilliamsH58@cardiff.ac.uk

Kenneth Westphal, How Hume and Kant Reconstruct Natural Law: Justifying Strict Objectivity without Debating Moral Realism
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The subtitle of this book is suggestive, for one can avoid debating moral realism in several ways. Hume and Kant might first be understood as having avoided debating moral realism because the term was not invented for close to two centuries after they wrote. But of course what we call the ‘moral realism’ debate does apply to their theories despite the novel terminology. Or secondly one might invoke a claim that moral realism is a meta-ethical issue on a distinct plane from normative ethical considerations, and hence the subject of an entirely different kind of analysis that abstracts from, or is even unrelated to, particular normative theories. But this claim, although promoted by the initial twentieth-century advocates of what came to be called meta-ethics, is certainly implausible because some issues, such as the status of reason as a source of