

The Blackwell Dictionary of Western Philosophy

Nicholas Bunnin and Jiyuan Yu
Malden, Blackwell, 2004, pp. viii + 766
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review by Trevor Curnow

Compilers of dictionaries are on a hiding to nothing. If they get it right, it all seems effortless and obvious, if they get it wrong, their shortcomings are there for all to see. Dictionaries of philosophy are particularly problematic, perhaps, given that philosophy is a discipline in which disagreement is endemic. It is also a discipline that has a very long history. One of the ways in which these problems can be addressed is by explicitly limiting a dictionary's scope. So in their preface, Nicholas Bunnin and Jiyuan Yu say: 'Although the Dictionary covers a wide historical range and explores many subject areas, it focuses on terms and individuals at the center of current philosophical discussion' (p. vii). However, in order to justify such a work at all, it also has to do more than just duplicate others of the same genre, and this may be as much a matter of form as of content.

One of the distinctive features of Bunnin and Yu's dictionary of philosophy is the fact that many entries conclude with a quotation. Some of the quotations are more instructive and useful than others, but I suspect that for many people suggestions for further reading might be more useful. Sometimes the source of the quotation provides a suitable desired suggestion, sometimes it does not. On the whole, I am not convinced that this particular experiment is successful.

There are inevitably quibbles: Sextus Empiricus should not be referred to simply as 'Empiricus' (p. 673) because it just means 'the empiricist', describing R. G. Collingwood's place of birth as 'Coniston, Lancaster' (p. 119) would probably not go down too well with most people who live in Coniston, and I'm not sure that Nietzsche's choice of book title is enough to justify a place for Zoroastrianism (pp. 742-3) in a dictionary of western philosophy. But these things probably lead to more enjoyment in spotting them than frustration at their existence. And few who have ever written a book are in a strong position to cast the first stone in that particular direction.

The book makes for interesting browsing, and there is a lot of information to be found in it. There is probably not enough in it to tempt anyone who already has a dictionary of philosophy to buy this one as well, but for those looking for a first one, it certainly stands comparison with its competitors.

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