

Kurt Smith. *The Descartes Dictionary*. Bloomsbury 2015. 144 pp. \$104.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781472514691); \$32.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781472510105).

To date, publishers have offered those interested in Descartes' philosophy a wealth of companion texts, guidebooks, introductions and commentaries as well as dictionaries. The latter aim to provide clarification of important terms and concepts Descartes employs while also indicating exactly where in Descartes' writings the concepts in question occur. The *Descartes Dictionary* joins other similar volumes starting with the *Descartes Dictionary* by John Morris (Philosophical Library 1971), followed by John G. Cottingham's *A Descartes Dictionary* (Wiley-Blackwell 1993), *Historical Dictionary of Descartes and Cartesian Philosophy* by Roger Ariew, Dennis Des Chene, Douglas M. Jesseph, Tad M. Schmaltz, Theo Verbeek (Scarecrow Press 2003; second edition Rowman & Littlefield Publishers 2015; Kindle edition 2015). The *Cambridge Descartes Lexicon*, described by the publisher as the definitive reference source on René Descartes, is scheduled to appear in November 2015.

Smith's *Descartes Dictionary* is geared specifically for undergraduate students and guided by two principles: fidelity to the text as well as charity (requiring us to prefer those readings which preserve or enhance the coherence Descartes' overall thought). This book contains an Introduction, a Terms and Names section and a Bibliography. The Introduction, divided into three parts, includes a sketch of Descartes' life, a sketch of his philosophical system and a section on Descartes in the classroom. In the remainder of this review I will focus on some of the virtues of the present *Descartes Dictionary* while also pointing out aspects that could be improved.

First, by closely following the Preface of Descartes' *Principles of Philosophy* which contains the famous tree of philosophy comparison, Smith's Introduction provides the reader with a comprehensive picture of Descartes' thought. All the main disciplines that Descartes considered important and dealt with (metaphysics, physics, mechanics, medicine, and morals) are touched on in this overall presentation of his views. The body of this dictionary, however, falls short of this complete coverage.

In the Terms and Names section, metaphysical, epistemological as well as scientific concepts that Descartes uses are discussed. To facilitate the reader's understanding, the author treats of important Cartesian distinctions (such as formal/objective reality, a priori/a posteriori, analytic/synthetic method) without breaking them down. Smith makes a point of carefully marking those notions whose meaning Descartes modifies by departing from the Scholastic use. Further changes made by subsequent philosophers are also noted.

Not unlike Descartes when preparing the *Meditations* for press, Smith acknowledges having consulted with fellow philosophers and benefitted from anonymous reviews regarding the selection of entries. It is striking that 'judgment' is not among the entries. Neither is 'belief', although some of the elements related to these two notions appear when the author addresses 'will' and 'freedom'. 'Doubt' is not entered in the alphabetical list of terms but placed together with 'skepticism'; no attempt is made to link Descartes' method of doubt to his 'method'. Missing are also concepts like 'praise/blame (for endorsing a certain idea)' and 'truth', other than in the context of 'eternal truths'.

With regard to the trunk and some of the branches of Descartes' tree, the author usefully brings to the reader's attention the fact that Descartes was a practicing scientist. In addition to the Introduction where Descartes' research in mechanics, physiology and anatomy is briefly character

ized, his work in physics is exemplified through terms such ‘vacuum’, ‘motion’, ‘space’, etc., while ‘animal spirits’, ‘pineal gland’, ‘heart’, etc., illustrate his physiological studies.

On the other hand, Descartes’ practical philosophy, an integral part of the Introduction, is almost absent from the body of the dictionary. This is an unfortunate shortcoming of the volume, which fails to keep up with and take advantage of recent work in Cartesian studies which tries hard to recover neglected areas of Descartes’ thought, especially his position on emotions and action. While the present dictionary does contain entries on ‘emotion’, ‘passion’, ‘will’, it also lacks terms such as ‘ethics’, ‘morality’, ‘the good’, ‘virtue’, ‘generosity’, ‘desire’, ‘control of the passions’, ‘praise/blame’, ‘responsibility’, to name just a few. The cursory discussion, in the Introduction, of what counts as good for Descartes as well as what the latter took virtue to be, puts the onus on the reader to piece together the complete and unified picture of Descartes’ overall system. This, in turn, increases the chances of perpetuating the all-too-familiar one-sided view of Descartes, as a hard-core rationalist committed to the rejection of emotions and embodiment, and to viewing human beings as pure intellects. Striking a balance between clarity of expression and explanation and capturing and keeping the reader’s attention, on the one hand, and comprehensiveness, on the other, is no doubt a difficult endeavor. Still, a concerted effort to include more aspects of Descartes’ practical philosophy would be more in keeping with the importance Descartes gave to the unity and interconnectedness of knowledge.

Second, in the Introduction, Smith rightly flags the inclusion of secondary sources into some of the entries of this dictionary as a positive feature of this volume. We learn that this manner of approach was reserved for entries dealing with particularly controversial topics of Descartes views, topics with regard to which no consensus has been reached among Cartesian scholars. However, it remains unclear how the decision to include or forgo secondary sources was made. For instance, when ‘freedom’ is examined no secondary sources are cited, despite the fact that this has been and still is one of the most hotly-debated topics of Descartes’ philosophy.

This dictionary might also be of even more assistance to its intended undergraduate audience if the Bibliography (containing sources that the author himself consulted) were separated from ‘Suggestions for further reading’ (which would include those secondary sources suitable for undergraduates who wish to get more information about and/or look more in depth at certain problems, e.g. encyclopedia entries as well as less specialized scholarly articles).

Finally, although the author does not explicitly say so, he seems to be concerned with bringing to light both the innovations that Descartes made (e.g., his analytical geometry, his prefiguring conservation laws in physics, etc.) and the fact that Descartes’ views are still relevant for us today. In his treatment of the Cartesian method Smith emphasizes repeatedly that Descartes prefigures logical notions in use today such as logical partition, relations of logical equivalence, etc. While the attempt to showcase Descartes’ importance and relevance for present-day concerns is undoubtedly worthwhile, we should be careful about the way in which this relevance is presented to undergraduates. Logic is not always a favorite subject among these students and too close an alliance between it and Descartes’ views may turn them away from Descartes rather than entice them to learn more about him. Furthermore, using logical notions to illuminate Descartes’ views in the way Smith does here, can, at times, be difficult to follow.

In conclusion, Kurt Smith’s *Descartes Dictionary* is a good resource for students coming to Descartes’ writings for the first time. The volume has the potential of being an even better

pedagogical and study aid once its wrinkles (some of which were mentioned in this review) are smoothed out, maybe in a second edition.

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