

## **BOOK REVIEW**

*A to Z of Philosophy*, by Alexander Moseley. London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008. Pp. 272. £11.99 (paperback)

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It is a daunting task to deal with over two millennia of the deepest human thought in fewer than three hundred pages, but despite this, there is a wealth of guides to the subject of philosophy. A recent incarnation of this project is Alexander Moseley's *A to Z of Philosophy*, which attempts to trace both key ideas and key figures in the history of philosophy in a witty and engaging manner. Obviously, such a book can only ever be introductory and cannot explore any one idea too deeply or give much of an overview of the various positions within the secondary literature surrounding debates. Even so, introductions differ in character, and this one advertises itself as 'reader-friendly', being aimed at those with 'no prior knowledge of philosophy'. The book should therefore be judged according to whether it lives up to this description.

Moseley's method for making the book reader-friendly is to present the material with enthusiasm and occasional humour. What becomes clear as one progresses is that this is someone who is excited by ideas, and the resulting momentum helps keep the reader interested. Moseley's humour will not be to everyone's taste; although he is sometimes funny, at other times the jokes are either distracting or just bad. The guide avoids being boring not through the humour, but on account of the fact that Moseley often presents

ideas mixed with his own leanings on the topic, giving the whole project a distinct authorial presence. However, this strategy risks giving a new reader to the topic a biased view on issues. For example, Moseley is clearly an atheist and in his discussion of religion (p. 181), he is dismissive of claims that are based on faith or intuition. Those new to the topic might be led to believe that such claims to knowledge are not taken seriously in philosophy, when in fact such epistemological debates are far from settled. Moral intuitionism, as the name suggests, takes intuition very seriously, to give but one example. Although Moseley is not consistently impartial in his treatment of debates, he acknowledges in the preface that his presentation of ideas is personal and that the book is intended as a springboard into various topics, not an authority on them.

Whilst Moseley does not present himself as an authority on any of the topics, he performs better in some areas than others. He displays an appreciation for continental philosophy, an area that many introductions of this kind overlook or do little justice to. Even so, anyone who studies a particular philosopher will inevitably be frustrated by the simplification of entire bodies of work. The Hegel scholar, for example, will cringe at the use of the reduction of the dialectical method to ‘thesis-antithesis-synthesis’. Although this is not a book for scholars, there is a thin line between simplification and misrepresentation. My area of expertise is Nietzsche, and I found the entry on him (p. 154) crossed that line, containing simplifications that are based on elementary mistakes. For example, Moseley’s narrative is based on the idea that Nietzsche worshipped Wagner and drew the idea of the *Übermensch* from the content of his operas. But the notion of the *Übermensch* only appears in Nietzsche’s work after the point at which he explicitly rejects Wagner and everything he represents. In fact, it was

Nietzsche's negative reaction to the Bayreuth festival, a celebration of Wagner's work, that led Nietzsche to write the series of books that eventually resulted in the *Übermensch*. Coupled with this, we find classic stereotypes of Nietzsche reinforced: he was a misogynist, embittered and power-hungry. Such views might deter potential readers of Nietzsche and misrepresent much of the current understanding of his work. It is very possible that such mistakes are present in the entries on philosophers about whom I have less knowledge.

These are the negative aspects of the book, but they should not be seen as overriding the many positive things that can be said. Many of the entries are incredibly astute summaries of very difficult issues. Consciousness, for example, must surely have been one of the hardest entries to deal with, yet it is handled brilliantly, providing the perfect balance of definitions, answers and open questions. The entry on science begins with some beautifully clear outlining paragraphs. Most of the historical entries give a good overview of the philosopher in question and provide the kind of contextual content that means that, by the end of the book, the reader is left with a sense of the historical continuity of ideas and individuals. The trade-off is that there are times when issues are left ill-defined in one entry on the basis that they will be covered in another, which can sometimes render such entries a little dense or confusing. For example, the first use of the term 'deontologist' occurs in the sentence "Kant is a renowned deontologist, one who looks at doing the right thing rather than the consequences." (p. 11). Had I not already known the meaning of 'deontology', this might well have left me none the wiser.

The claim that no prior philosophical knowledge is required to read the book is true to some extent, but readers in such a position will find themselves skipping the denser parts on their first reading. As an introduction, *A to Z of Philosophy* is challenging because it deals with deep issues. Ultimately, though, I think the purpose of the book is not so much to provide a comprehensive study, but to stimulate thought and get people interested in philosophy. Even those who don't understand everything will end up asking themselves new questions about issues they may not have previously considered in the remit of philosophy, and that is a good thing. More seasoned philosophers will most likely learn something new or at least revisit some thoughts they may not have toyed with for a while and as such, everyone will find that this book contains something of value to them.