

Editorial: Reference

Is, as both economic liberals and Marxists believe, the market the prime indicator of culture? If so, we should attend to a strange aspect of the current market in philosophical publishing—and not just because contributing to it is consuming so much philosophical time.

We refer to the current fashion for works of reference; thick companions to this topic and that philosopher thudding monthly, it seems, on to our desks, and clamouring for a place on our bookshelves amid the welter of dictionaries (some illustrated) encyclopaedias, encyclopedias, guides and handbooks, come and about to come.

Students, of course, find reference books useful for essays. Nor is it unknown for professors in new dispensations having to prepare new modules to go to the great *Edwards* of 1967. But so much and so many? And who finds the time to write it all, let alone the motivation for another 3,000 words on the x or y or z one has already done twice in the past few years?

Many of the volumes in question claim, in the words of one series, to be 'comprehensive surveys of philosophy as a whole'. There is an attempt, at least, to be all-inclusive, all-encompassing, and not too overtly judgmental, even where the overall stress is on Western analytical philosophy. Now while, in one sense, such ecumenism is a good thing, in another it is dispiriting. It suggests an enervating emphasis on the detail of the past and a lack of confidence as to where the subject's centre of gravity is or should be. At the worst it suggests a post-modernist insouciance to what are deep and difficult questions, to be pursued with rigour rather than by attempting to include every possible perspective, whether fruitful or not. And the reference craze itself has something positively Alexandrian about it, a feverish and bureaucratic effort to gather everything in against the coming of the new millennium, maybe in the hope that then someone or some group will be able provide the subject with the commanding presence it lacks at the end of the old.

Or perhaps the publishers have simply got it wrong. Come 2000, will we see that philosophers themselves had their interests focused elsewhere, leaving the prodigious works of reference of the 1990s unsold, unread, remaindered and finally pulped?