Review of “Key Concepts in Eastern Philosophy”

Mark Owen Webb
Texas Tech University

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Writing a dictionary or encyclopedia is a difficult task under the best of conditions. It requires breadth and depth of knowledge, as well as a knack for brevity. In choosing which entries to include, it requires striking a balance between the demands of inclusiveness and the demands of manageable length. Most of all, it requires a well thought-out rationale. Professor Leaman’s book succeeds admirably on all counts.

Key Concepts in Eastern Philosophy begins with an introduction explaining Professor Leaman’s reasons for inclusions and exclusions. He chose, for example, to include Islamic thought under the rubric of Eastern Philosophy, even though, as a religion, Islam seems to have more in common with the west. Even as a philosophy, Islamic thought’s ties to Aristotle and the Greeks on the one hand, and the Medieval European philosophers, on the other hand, seem to set it firmly in the west. However, Leaman is right that it should also be considered Eastern. Islam’s long history of interaction with the philosophies of India is enough to make that the right choice. He must make a similar decision about where to draw the line between religion and philosophy. I’m not sure he has drawn it in exactly the right place, but the border is sufficiently vague that it would be silly to quibble. Leaman’s Introduction is full of just this sort of thoughtful choice.

There follows a note on transliteration (always a problem for those dealing with Sanskrit, Chinese, and Arabic terms) and cross-referencing; a list of the thinkers who are referred to in the entries; and a complete list of the entries themselves. After the body of the text, there is a list of references for further reading, an index of terms, and an index of thinkers.

On the whole, Leaman’s treatment of the various topics is skillful and accurate. The entries on technical terms provide excellent brief definitions of the terms and their use in different philosophical schools. Of particular interest, however, are the entries on general concepts like knowledge, God, causality, language, and the like. Each of these is a careful review essay in its own right.

There is very little to complain about in this work. Leaman has omitted some things that I think should have been included. First of all, there is no entry on the topic of mantras, and the term does not even appear in the index, despite its central importance to the Hindu and Buddhist practices of meditation. While Nichiren Buddhism figures prominently in several entries, there is no mention at all of Soka Gakkai. These two omissions are probably to be explained by Leaman’s drawing the line between philosophy and religion in a different place from where I would have drawn it. There are other omissions that I think cannot be explained so readily. In the entry on Bardo, Leaman has...
nothing to say about the bardo’s role in the Tibetan idea of reincarnation. In the entry on Hinayana, he says that “in fact, the Theravada school is just one of the variety of non-Mahayana schools” (133) but leaves it at that. This is an important point, since many people use the terms ‘Hinayana’ and ‘Theravada’ interchangeably, so it would have been nice to have some mention of the other Hinayana schools. The entry on cosmology says nothing about Islamic cosmology, although Islamic philosophy is well represented in other entries. The entry on logic says nothing about Jain logic, which was a distinct and developed system. The entry on tian concentrates on the term’s use in Confucianism, but says nothing about Daoist use of the idea. In addition to these problems with individual entries, it would have been nice to see a listing of primary sources along with the mostly contemporary works in the references.

This would have been a better book if these things had not been omitted, but this criticism should be seen for the small matter it is. It is always possible, dealing with this kind of work, to complain about omissions. Although the book is therefore slightly different from the one I would have produced, it is also certainly much better. All in all, it is an excellent treatment of difficult material. I recommend it highly as a resource for the use of specialists and non-specialists alike.

Mark Owen Webb
Texas Tech University

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