

## *Words of Wisdom: A Philosophical Dictionary for the Perennial Tradition*

John W. Carlson. *Words of Wisdom: A Philosophical Dictionary for the Perennial Tradition*. Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 2012. 350 pp. \$45.00. Paper. ISBN: 0268023700.

Initially it would appear that the author of this work has simply added another philosophy volume to an already crowded field. Early in the Introduction, John W. Carlson, professor of philosophy at Creighton University, lists sixteen philosophical dictionaries that have been published in the last eighteen years. But rather than trying to lose his work in a sea of similar texts, the listing is really Carlson's way of revealing the uniqueness of his own volume. While these other works have their place, they "make little effort to give a systematically ordered presentation—let alone one that coheres with integral Christian wisdom." This volume counters this general presentation of "topics, approaches, and thinkers" by focusing on the terms most meaningful to the perennial tradition as represented by the works of Thomas Aquinas.

The perennial tradition is defined by Carlson as that Catholic philosophical position that incorporates much of Plato and Aristotle's work, and finds its truest expression in the writings of Thomas Aquinas. And while Aquinas may represent the apex of this thinking, the name itself, as does Carlson, suggests that this school of thought is continually renewing itself in the fresh waters of intellectual change.

This subject seems to limit the audience for this dictionary to the Catholic community. In fact, Carlson himself identifies his audience as Catholic institutions' and seminaries' students and teachers, those drawn in one way or another to Thomism, and only lastly those "broadly educated readers" who might wish to gain a greater understanding of the perennial tradition in philosophy. His approach to inclusion of terms into this dictionary underscores his commitment to his niche audience. The criteria for inclusion include entries that are linked to the development and tradition of Aquinas' thinking (these represent the majority of the entries); terms from major Western philosophers and movements that have intersected with the Christian tradition; and terms that represent challenges to thinking of both Aquinas and his predecessors. His notable exclusion, and given his specific subject area and audience an understandable one, is the terms used in non-Western philosophical or theological traditions.

Carlson's presentation is pretty standard fare for a dictionary. Presented alphabetically, the average length of each of the over 1,170 entries is not long. An equal number of definitions fall either in the sixteen- to twenty-word range or the eighty- to hundred-word range. The longer definitions rarely exceed 200 words. The average length, however, does not do a disservice to Carlson's attempt to provide a linking of "interrelations" and "theological contexts" for the terms used in the perennial tradition. The construction of each definition is also standard. For a single word the part of speech it represents is indicated, along with a definition, and often a sentence illustrating its meaning within context. While not all possible definitions are always examined, each one relevant to the perennial tradition is. If there are related words or phrases, those are often highlighted along with the definition. Also of benefit is the oft-included reference to the philosopher who developed or furthered the concept under discussion. While the minority audience of the broadly educated may not be aware as they begin this volume which concept belongs to which philosopher, they will have been enlightened to a great degree by the time they finish. An added

help given to the majority audience are the frequent references to Catholic Church sources providing supporting material or further clarification, and the Latin translations of many of the words or phrases.

A good idea for a dictionary, particularly one covering philosophy, can be ruined by a poor writing style. This is not a problem with Carlson. From *noncognitivism* (“Philosophical view, or family of views, holding that certain types of putative judgments and beliefs in fact involve no genuinely cognitive content or understanding”) to *life* (“Condition of, or an instance of, a natural being that is alive”) the author writes with an economy of words that neither obscures nor inflates a definition.

The book has two more assets that are helpful for further research. While Carlson doesn’t provide a complete bibliography of Aquinas’ works, he does list, under five broad category headings (Theological Syntheses, Commentaries on Aristotle, Other Philosophical Commentaries, Disputations, and Other Philosophical Works), works that help to further stimulate thinking along the perennial tradition lines. Following that are twenty pages of bibliographic material, the majority of it published in or near the new millennium, from other scholars also discussing this tradition. Combined, these are a rich resource for the intended audience.

Each one of the structural pieces of Carlson’s effort seems to come together in a very successful way. There are lessons here for anyone wishing to develop a dictionary of any kind. To that extent this is a successful work. The question finally comes down to whether Carlson has presented the perennial tradition in a way that will further educate his target audience. The answer to this must also be yes. Assuming the dictionary’s bibliography has also informed Carlson’s own understanding of the perennial tradition of philosophy, he is obviously well acquainted with his subject. The parsing of his definitions reveals an understanding that has found a way to reduce complex terms to their most fundamental parts. In doing so, Carlson has allowed the lay community to be as enriched as the scholarly one.

The question of purchase is a difficult one. Every purchase is scrutinized in this wayward economy. For any institution following the Catholic tradition this is a must buy. However, with Carlson’s forthright designation of a target audience, it might be difficult for a non-Catholic institution to make this purchase. Yes, they would fall under the umbrella of “broadly educated readers,” but in a school where the Catholic tradition is lightly or not at all touched upon that might not be enough. Two factors, however, should lead theological librarians to the conclusion that this is a must buy. First, as mentioned before, Carlson has produced a masterful dictionary. It is both scholarly and accessible. Secondly, the distillation of the thoughts of Aquinas (one of the greatest philosophical and theological thinkers of any age or tradition) is a great resource for those who wish to have the taste of every tradition without consuming (or purchasing) the entire meal.

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