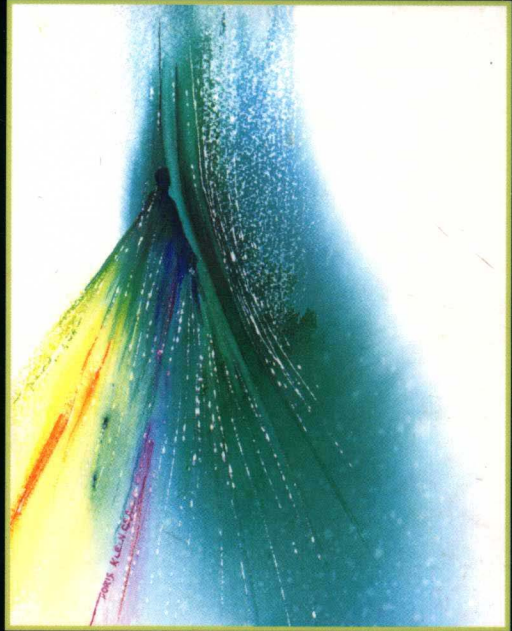




# UNDERSTANDING OUR BEING



INTRODUCTION TO  
SPECULATIVE PHILOSOPHY  
IN THE  
PERENNIAL TRADITION



JOHN W. CARLSON

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The Catholic University of America Press  
Washington, D.C.

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Carlson, John W.

Understanding our being : introduction to speculative  
philosophy in the perennial tradition / John W. Carlson.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8132-1518-1 (pbk. : alk. paper) 1. Philosophy—

Introductions. 2. Ontology. I. Title.

BD21.C364 2008

I49'.91—dc22

2007030355

## UNDERSTANDING OUR BEING

To my students across the years—  
companions in the search for understanding

"It should never be forgotten that the neglect of being inevitably leads to losing touch with objective truth and therefore with the very ground of human dignity. This in turn makes it possible to erase from the countenance of man and woman the marks of their likeness to God, and thus to lead them little by little either to a destructive will to power or to a solitude without hope."



"In the present circumstances, therefore, it is most significant that some philosophers are promoting a recovery of the determining role of this [perennial] tradition for a right approach to knowledge."



"I appeal to all *philosophers*, and to all *teachers of philosophy*, asking them to have the courage to recover, in the flow of an enduringly valid philosophical tradition, the range of authentic wisdom and truth—metaphysical truth included—which is proper to philosophical enquiry."

—John Paul II, *Fides et ratio* (1998)

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author wishes to thank those at the Catholic University of America Press (David McGonagle, James Kruggel, Greg LaNave, Theresa Walker, and Beth Benevides) who encouraged and assisted this project through its various stages. Acknowledgment also is due to four readers for the Press (Raymond Dennehy, Steven C. Snyder, Michael W. Tkacz, and one anonymous reader), who made a number of helpful suggestions. The contributions of Steven Snyder deserve special mention. I of course am responsible for errors and infelicities that remain.

I wish to thank as well Andy Jaspers, S.J., who assisted in the preparation of figures and tables, and Ellen Coughlin, who expertly copy-edited the manuscript.

My students across the years—to whom this book is dedicated—have been a source of steady encouragement; and they have helped in many ways to make a challenging text more reader-friendly.

Finally, I thank my family, and especially my dear wife, Chris, whose unflagging support now at last is rewarded.

*Omaha, Nebraska*  
*June 2007*

## PREFACE

This book introduces the reader to speculative philosophy, especially as pursued in what Pope John Paul II called the "great tradition"—a historical and continuing intellectual movement inspired, in part, by resources and requirements of Christian faith. Covering a range of topics about being—what can be known of being as such; the special character of our human, personal being; and God as Source and End of being—this book is intended primarily for use in college and university courses. The author anticipates that such courses are most likely to be taught in institutions that, like his own, maintain a Catholic identity. Some historical background regarding this matter is in order.

In earlier generations, through the middle decades of the twentieth century, Catholic colleges and universities typically taught—and required students to take—separate courses on each of the above (and other) philosophical topics. Most of these courses were "Scholastic" in content and style. That is, they followed the teachings of "schools" of philosophy—in particular that of St. Thomas Aquinas—traceable to the Medieval period. Textbooks for these courses (many published in the 1950s and 1960s) tended to be highly didactic; often they contained lengthy quotations from Aquinas and his principal philosophical mentor, Aristotle, as well as from more recent Scholastics.

During the period that began shortly before the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) and now extends into a new century, there has been in Catholic circles much intellectual ferment, as well as interest in newer forms of thought—phenomenology, existentialism, personalism, etc. In the United States and other English-speaking countries, the influence of analytic philosophy also has been significant. The re-



sult has been a salutary enlivening of philosophical discourse, but also, for many, a sense of intellectual disarray when the current situation is compared to pre-Vatican II times.

Other changes have affected philosophy programs at Catholic institutions in this country. For one thing, there has been an increase in student diversity on the campuses—not only in terms of students from other than Catholic religious backgrounds, or students who represent the American racial composition, but also in terms of students from other cultures and nations: from Asia, Africa, India, and traditionally Islamic nations (or the sons and daughters of immigrants from these various nations).

Moreover, in American education generally there has been a movement toward less didactic approaches, and toward more involvement of students in their own learning. And, among Catholic institutions, a pre-professional turn in many college curricula, together with requirements of accrediting agencies in various fields and legitimate claims of other disciplines to a share of the “core,” have reduced the number of class hours typically devoted to philosophy.

As suggested above, genuine good has come from these changes. However, they have made it increasingly difficult to transmit elements of the “great tradition,” or, more specifically, what the late pope also called the “enduringly valid philosophical tradition.” This tradition often has been referred to by Scholastic thinkers as the “perennial philosophy,” and so shall we refer to it in this book. Proponents of the perennial philosophy (including the present author) believe that, properly expressed, its themes can appeal to open and reflective minds in every age and culture.

The difficulty of handing on this tradition in our day is exacerbated by the fact that the older textbooks described above, long out of print, have not been replaced in kind. Books now available for undergraduate courses tend to be anthologies and surveys, with the topics dictated by forces generally prevailing in American academic philosophy. It is extremely rare to find works suitable for the general undergraduate student that present a single, continuous thread of specu-

lative thought, let alone one that seeks to redevelop and present the type of philosophy most associated with Catholic tradition.

This book attempts to fill the gap in question, but at the same time to accommodate irreversibly changed circumstances. While introducing students to elements of traditional "Thomist" philosophy (that is, philosophy in the tradition of St. Thomas), it at the same time incorporates genuine insights of modern and contemporary thought. It also tries to represent fairly, and outline responses to, opposed points of view.

Our book also recognizes (as good instruction always has) that in the end students must think for themselves. It endeavors to help them do this by presenting, at the end of each part, questions for reflection that might be used for classroom discussion and debate, as well as for essay assignments; and also by offering, at the end of the volume, a comprehensive bibliography. Finally, in light of the diversity of today's students—as well as questions arising from the book itself—we conclude with an Epilogue relating the philosophical tradition that has been introduced to ways of "understanding our being" that have arisen in other cultural and religious contexts.

The loss, by comparison with earlier works of Scholastic philosophy, obviously comes in the depth and level of detail to which topics can be pursued. It is hoped that this loss (which can partially be made up through instructor and student initiative, making use of sources in the Bibliography) will be compensated for in terms of usefulness in the present-day class setting.

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# INTRODUCTION





## Philosophy

This is a book of speculative *philosophy*,<sup>1</sup> but what, the reader may ask, is that? From its Greek etymology (*philia*, for "love," plus *sophia*, for "wisdom"), the word "philosophy" means "love of wisdom." "Wisdom," in turn, suggests an understanding of ultimate matters—in particular, concerning the nature of our being, as well as concerning the choices proper for us, as individuals and as communities. But just how we are to achieve such ultimate understandings has been the subject of a variety of proposals.

Throughout history, and across cultures, there have been expressions of the search for wisdom. We might note, for example, the Vedas of ancient India, the sacred Scriptures of the Jewish people, the teachings of Confucius and Lao-Tzu in China, as well as of the Buddha and his followers in India and East Asia. More recently, of course, there have appeared the Gospels of Christianity and the Koran of Muslim peoples. We also should note, within the heritage of the West, the discourses of the Greek philosophers (especially Plato and Aristotle), as well as those of later thinkers. Each of the above, we might say, has offered a path to understanding—a more or less formal and rigorous means by which persons concerned with ultimate matters might pursue their objective.

Catholic tradition distinguishes three types of wisdom: infused (or mystical) wisdom, theological wisdom, and philosophical wisdom.<sup>2</sup> The first must be received as a direct gift from God; the second can be acquired through a study of God's revelation in light of human experience and reflection; and the third, philosophical wisdom (with which we shall be concerned), is a work of human reason itself. As Ar-

1. As an aid to the student, terms introduced in *italics*, along with brief accounts of their meanings, are gathered together in the book's Glossary.

2. On this matter, see Jacques Maritain, *Science and Wisdom*, trans. Bernard Wall (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1940), 22–25.

istotle pointed out (*Metaphysics*, book I, chap. 2), a search for the last-mentioned type of wisdom has its origin in *wonder*—a deep concern about how things are, and about the types of persons and communities we should strive to become. Moreover, philosophical wisdom is achieved, to the extent possible in this life, through rational analysis, reflection, and theory related to the above-noted questions. For present purposes, therefore, *wisdom* (i.e., philosophical wisdom) can be defined as a comprehensive understanding—arrived at via rational analysis, reflection, and theory—concerning the way things ultimately are and the way we humans ultimately should act. And philosophy itself can be said to be a love of or a search for wisdom, understood in precisely this way.

In this book we develop and explore one approach to philosophical wisdom—an approach rooted, as noted in the Preface, in what the late Pope John Paul II termed the “great tradition.”<sup>3</sup> Our focus will be the dimension of that tradition represented by the school of St. Thomas Aquinas. But before undertaking this task, we should note a number of other preliminary points.

First, although there are wide differences in people’s ways of reasoning about how things are, there also are certain remarkable affinities. Writers sometimes speak, therefore, of a “common sense” understanding that lies at the base of philosophy. In this vein, John Paul himself spoke of an “implicit philosophy” that is shared in some measure by all and that thus “should serve as a kind of reference point for the different philosophical schools.” Indeed, he went so far as to refer to “a core of philosophical insight” that includes, for example, “the principles of non-contradiction, finality and causality, as well as the concept of the person as a free and intelligent subject, with the capacity to know God, truth and goodness” (*Fides et ratio*, sec. 4). Some may wonder whether all people can be said to share, even implicitly, all of the ideas just noted. However, the success of such ventures as the United Nations’ “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” (1948)

3. See John Paul II, *Fides et ratio* [On the Relationship between Faith and Reason], Vatican translation (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1998), sec. 85. (Hereafter, references to this document often will be made in the text, with the title followed by the section number.)

suggests that a common fund of human wisdom indeed is in some way possessed by all peoples. Moreover, regarding basic judgments and distinctions about reality, philosophical notions that are truly implicit in the common sense of all humankind (insofar as such notions can be discerned) are surely to be trusted, unless compelling evidence requires their rejection or revision.<sup>4</sup>

Another point to be noted is that, from the Middle Ages on, but especially in recent times, philosophy formally speaking has been held by most scholars to relate to a body of thought that in principle is available to all—irrespective, in particular, of their religious commitments or lack of such commitments. This is a key to what sometimes is referred to as philosophy's "autonomy." Thus, for a position or argument to be properly philosophical, it must be expressed in terms that represent (or allegedly represent) what is available to common human experience and rational reflection. Theories or understandings that require special insight or special data may well occupy theologians or, in their own ways, natural scientists and other specialists; but philosophical reflection is a work of human reason as such. Of course, to speak here of "common" experience is not to imply that the articulation and assessment of such experience is easy. On the contrary, as we shall see, it sometimes is quite difficult. Moreover, due to various cultural factors, as well as the difficulty of the topics pursued, the various philosophical traditions and schools display considerable diversity: in their inspiration, their language and methodologies, and their specific results. Even within a single tradition or school, philosophers are liable to disagree on a number of finer points. And, while it may seem that nearly everyone can hope to increase to some extent his or her grasp of ultimate matters, it also seems that a "complete" understanding of subjects so broad and so deep is an ideal that can only progressively be approached, never finally achieved.

4. We would emphasize that we are here speaking of common sense understandings about basic and general philosophical matters. The present statement does not hold regarding the more particular beliefs and hypotheses investigated by the natural sciences; nor does it hold of certain pictures or images associated with common sense. (As we shall see, these distinctions become important in several philosophical subject areas.)



Lastly, we should mention that philosophers since the time of Aristotle have distinguished between *speculative* (or theoretical) wisdom and *practical* (especially moral) wisdom—and accordingly between the types of philosophy that pursue them. The first pursues an understanding about, as we have put it, how “things ultimately are”; the second pursues an understanding about how “we humans ultimately should act.” As suggested by the subtitle of our book, the present text will be concerned primarily with matters of the speculative sort.

### “Christian Philosophy” and the Perennial Tradition

Philosophy has interacted with Christian faith since the original preaching of the Gospel, when St. Paul encountered the philosophers of Athens at the Areopagus (see Acts of the Apostles, chap. 17). Some early Church thinkers regarded “pagan” philosophies as simply false, and they held that Christian faith presented the “true philosophy.” Others found in the writings of the philosophers arguments which, at least if suitably adapted, might contribute to the promotion of faith—either by preparing minds and hearts to hear the Gospel, or by assisting in theological reflection upon it. Still others sought in the Christian message themes that might inspire properly human or rational lines of reflection that could be shared with all interested parties.

These various issues, trends, and emphases have been represented throughout Western history. During the twentieth century, in particular, there was considerable discussion as to whether there was, or could be, such a thing as “Christian philosophy”—especially in view of the prevailing understanding, noted above, of philosophy’s autonomy vis-à-vis religious faith. Pope John Paul II’s *Fides et ratio*, written in the wake of these discussions, offered several helpful clarifications and proposals. (It may be noted that, during the early years of his career, the late pope, under his given name Karol Wojtyła, was himself a professor of philosophy at the Catholic University of Lublin in Poland.) Let us discuss a number of John Paul’s central points about *Christian philosophy*—which may be characterized most simply as philosophy pursued in the context of Christian faith, or philosophy occurring in a Christian condition or state.