

Review Articles

Syntopicon to Great Books*

Great Books of the Western World; Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc. in collaboration with the University of Chicago, Robert M. Hutchins, editor-in-chief, vols. 2-3. *The Great Ideas: Syntopicon*.

Tracing of Important Ideas

It may be said that no Great Books enthusiast can make an unbiased appraisal of the 54 volumes set of *Great Books of the Western World*. Perhaps this is true. Should we here apply the method used in Great Books discussions, we would differ, we would argue, be obliged to defend our opinions, and emerge bowing to no authority and finding no ready-made solutions. In the usual manner we might ask:

What is this set? Is it a reference work? Does it give information? Why a set of books? What is its purpose? Does it accomplish its purpose? How can a few people decide what is to be included? Does this canonize certain books? Is it true that it "argues no case, presents no point of view?" Is the theory of the Great Conversation itself a point of view? How can a list with only one twentieth-century writer be meaningful? What good are ideas? Are the 102 *Great Ideas* important? What do you think of an index such as the *Syntopicon* which begins with the topic, *Angel*? Why should there be an introductory essay on each of the *Great Ideas*? Is this a violation of the principle that the great books should speak for themselves? Is using the set a joy or a chore? Since a discussion of these and many other questions by means of the Socratic method would consume more time than is at our disposal, a quick examination of the more important questions must suffice.

The Great Books participant would immediately ask why certain writers included on the Great Books lists should be omitted. Among these are Cicero, Lucian, Sextus Empiricus, Boethius, St. Anselm, Thomas à

Kempis, Erasmus, Luther, Calvin, Ben Johnson, Molière, Vico, Leibnitz, Voltaire, Malthus, Stendhal, Balzac, Thoreau, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Mark Twain, Dewey, Shaw, Tawney, Toynbee, and Einstein, especially the last. If it be answered that Einstein is difficult, the same objection would apply to Newton who is included. In fact, the inclusion of eighteen mathematicians and scientists is hardly desirable, as most of them are scarcely readable and fail to represent many of the sciences. Two volumes each to Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas are disproportionate. In the main the works of imagination in poetry and prose will be enjoyed as they were meant to be. Broad representation is given to the philosophers—idealists, realists, rationalists, materialists, empiricists, and pragmatists—from Plato to James. The latter may be classified along with Freud as a psychologist. There will be slight objection to these or to the biographies, histories, and the writings on politics and economics.

How does this collection stand as a reference work? Of late there has been renewed interest in broader topics. One question recently asked of a librarian was "Did Plato write about the educated man?" By looking under the topic *Education* in the *Syntopicon* the searcher will find *Reference I, The ends of education*, with twelve references to Plato, and *Ia, The ideal of the educated man*, with ten references to Plato. In addition are twenty-three references from Aristotle to William James under the first, and thirty-three from Homer to Freud under the second. The reader realizes that this is not the usual type of reference work from which information or facts are sought and quickly obtained. Overwhelmed at first, he finds progress slow. But he does locate exact information from following the references under the "Republic" and the "Laws" of Plato. If he is interested in ideas or in information concerning ideas, he will find this an invaluable tool. The *Syntopicon* sends him on to writers in the set and to others outside the list. The system of detailed indexing in the *Syntopicon* supplements the broad topics of the texts. The format is attractive, although the double columns

* This composite review was assembled through the efforts of Frances Stalker, head, Reference Department, Indianapolis Public Library.

may not appeal to the reader of literary works.

Have the 400,000 hours of work which have gone into making this set of the works of seventy-six authors been worth the effort? Why such hard readings? It may be replied that no easy way of thinking has yet been devised. Anyone who has studied worth while authors has found that certain themes run through them. These themes recur because they deal with the hopes, wishes, joys, anxieties, and pains of man. Man changes, but he is essentially man, as he was thirty centuries ago. He is inescapably concerned with questions about himself, his surroundings, God, freedom. These universal questions are again and again appearing and will continue to appear. The twentieth century has the old problems of wars, persecution, and enslavement. The great writings are considered great because of their beauty, insight, or profound discussion of man's problems. The editors of the *Syntopicon* did not make an arbitrary list. They included many of the ideas which man has had. There may and should be differences of opinion concerning the inclusion of certain of them. By placing these books in a set and providing them with an index, the editors have made possible the tracing of important ideas.

It is true that the great writers often failed in their day. They did not always stop wars or save civilizations. They warned their countrymen, but their voices were not heard. In retrospect we should be able to interpret what they said. Some were, from our point of view, reactionary or false. For this very reason they may be worth our attention. Since the great writers often disagree, this set cannot be said to be a canonization of them. Many of them are ancient, but more than one-half of them lived between 1500 and 1900 A.D. If anyone would understand the American government, let him read Locke as well as "The Declaration of Independence," "The Federalist," and "The Constitution of the United States." He will derive benefit from contemporary books, but he will be less easily indoctrinated if he reads and thinks about these basic works.

The *Great Books of the Western World* are only some of the books that are worth reading. They should have their chance along with others. They will be used as teachers and librarians let people know that they exist.

It is to be hoped that some way of circulating them may be found. There is nothing final about them, for as the editors have told us, each generation should evaluate its tradition in the light of its own needs. The test applied to other works of man should be applied to this. Whether it is a great and useful work, only time will tell.—Margaret Pierson, *Indiana State Library*.

*Variations on an
Index Theme*

When is an index a syntopicon?

According to the editor a syntopicon is "a collection of the topics which are the main theme of the conversation to be found in the books . . . its primary purpose—to serve as a guide to the reading of *Great Books of the Western World*. . . .

"The specific type of inquiry which the Syntopicon is able to satisfy . . . can be formulated by the question, *What do the great books have to say on this subject?*"

There is much more explanation in the 80-page essay about the principles and methods of syntopical construction, which is appendix II of the *Syntopicon's* second volume. But it all adds up to the fact that a syntopicon is another variation in the numerous attempts to improve the index as a locator of information buried in sets of books and periodicals or in individual volumes of collections.

Basically, the Syntopicon consists of 163,000 entries. This number, alone, makes it a major index. It compares in size with the larger indexes to encyclopedias and other basic reference books. The same publisher's *Encyclopedia Britannica* with some 500,000 index entries, as well as the *Americana* and *Collier's Encyclopedias*, include larger indexes. So do such separate indexing ventures as the *Essay and General Literature Index* and any one of several other Wilson indexes. But the *Syntopicon* is in this class of indexing and as such deserves close scrutiny by librarianship as a possible innovation in the art and technique of indexing.

The first difference to note is the unique application of three basic indexing arrangements — alphabetic, classified, chronologic. There are 102 "ideas" (major heads in index parlance) arranged alphabetically from "Angel" through "World." Selection of these heads in preference to others is based on no