Divyadaan **37**/1 (2026) 1-18

EDITH STEIN'S INTEGRATION OF PHENOMENOLOGY INTO CHRISTIAN REALISM

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Born into a bourgeois Jewish family in Breslau, Prussia, 12 October 1891, Edith Stein (St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross) studied psychology and phenomenology under Edmund Husserl, becoming his first paid assistant from October 1916 until February 1918, during which she transcribed and edited, with major interventions, Husserl's research manuscripts. Another major influence in her early life was Max Scheler, whose lectures deeply impressed her. In this article, I would like to discuss a few aspects of Edith Stein's wonderful integration of phenomenology (and philosophical psychology) into the Christian realism of Thomas Aquinas.[1]

1. Life and Philosophical Development

After her conversion to Catholicism in 1921, inspired by the writings of St Teresa of Avila, the great Spanish reformer and mystic, Edith Stein discovered the Christian realism of St Thomas Aquinas, the Angelic Doctor. This pivotal moment marked a profound shift in her intellectual and spiritual life, leading her to develop an original philosophy of being and essence that integrated Husserlian phenomenology with Thomistic metaphysics.

The conversion led her to intensely study Thomas Aquinas, whose *De Veritate* she translated. She found "a home in Aquinas's thought world,"[2] yet remained loyal to Husserlian phenomenology. After initially giving up philosophical exploration to serve God, she realised philosophy could be a service to truth, inspiring her return to it. Her later works, notably *Potency and Act* (1931) and *Finite and Eternal Being* (completed in 1936,

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[1] For this purpose, I have relied mainly on secondary sources, while also consulting, from time to time, primary sources translated into English, the critical edition, *The Collected Works of Edith Stein*.

[2] Edith Stein, *Potency and Act: Studies toward a Philosophy of Bein*g, trans. Walter Redmond, *The Collected Works of Edith Stein: Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, Discalced Carmelite* ***11***, ed. Lucy Gelber and Romaeus Leuven (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 2009) 3. *The Collected Works of Edith Stein* will be abbreviated as CWES in the subsequent references.

published posthumously in 1950), are central to her integrated ontology. She also wrote significant theological treatises such as *Ways to Know God* (completed in 1941) and *The Science of the Cross* (completed in 1942).

Stein's earlier intellectual life was marked by academic frustrations (being a woman and also a Jew). Having graduated first in her class in the secondary school in 1911, Stein entered the University of Breslau to study psychology. Her professors included William Stern and Richard Hönigswald. Another professor, Georg Moskiewicz, introduced her to Husserl's *Logical Investigations*. He remarked that in Göttingen the students philosophised day and night and talked only of the phenomenon. Inspired, she shifted to Göttingen University in 1913. There she became an active member of the Göttingen Philosophical Society, that included Reinach, Ingarden, and Conrad-Martius. In Göttingen she also attended Scheler's lectures, which left a deep impression on her. Stein approached Husserl to write a doctorate on phenomenology, and his initial reaction was to recommend that she write the teacher training examination. However, encouraged by Reinach, she completed her thesis in summer 1916, entitled: *The Empathy Problem as it Developed Historically and Considered Phenomenologically.* She graduated *summa cum laude* for her dissertation; and a part of the dissertation was published as *On the Problem of Empathy* (1917).[3]

Stein attempted to register for a post-doctoral programme (required for teaching), hitherto denied to women. She applied to Göttingen in 1919 but was rejected. Husserl's letter of recommendation of 6 February 1919 was not particularly supportive. She wrote a major study intended as her post-doctoral thesis, *Beiträge zur philosophischen Begründung der Psychologie und der Geisteswissenschaften* (1922),[4] published in Husserl's *Jahrbuch für Philosophie und phänomenologische Forschung*. Failing to find a director for her thesis, Stein returned to Breslau to offer private philosophical tutorials. The phenomenologists Theodor Conrad and his wife Hedwig Martius, also known as Hedwig Conrad-Martius, were close

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[3] Thomas Szanto and Dermot Moran, "Edith Stein," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2025 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2025/entries/stein/>, accessed 21 December 2025.

[4] Edith Stein, *Philosophy of Psychology and the Humanities*, trans. Mary Catherine Baseheart and Marianne Sawicki, *The Collected Works of Edith Stein: Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, Discalced Carmelite* ***8***, ed. Lucy Gelber and Romaeus Leuven (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 2000).

friends of Edith Stein. At their home, Stein read Teresa of Avila's autobiography and immediately felt she had found the truth. She soon converted to Catholicism.[5]

In her memoirs, Stein describes an incident in which she saw a woman who appeared to be on a regular shopping trip, kneel on a pew in the Cathedral and pray devoutly for a long time. What she saw was completely new to her, and she was quite impressed. She had never seen anything like this before and was rather astonished when someone stopped in the middle of a busy day, just to have a private talk with God.[6]

Stein's conversion deeply disappointed her mother and many of her Jewish friends. She began studying Thomas Aquinas intensely and translated his *De Veritate*. In 1930, she tried again to register for the post-doctorate, contacting Heidegger at Freiburg, who was supportive. By 1931, she had completed a new post-doctoral thesis *Potency and Act*. However, she was appointed to a teaching post at the German Institute for Scientific Pedagogy in Münster, which disrupted her post-doctorate. She also thought the work was inadequate and embarked on a new study, *Finite and Eternal Being*.[7]

Following the rise to power of the National Socialists in Germany, on 19 April 1933, Stein because of her Jewish descent, was dismissed from her position in Münster. In October 1933, she entered the Carmelite convent at Cologne. In April 1934, she entered the novitiate, taking the religious name Teresa Benedicta of the Cross. In 1938, Stein was transferred for safety to the Carmelite convent at Echt, Holland. There she wrote her two most important theological treatises, *Ways to Know God* and *The Science of the Cross*.[8]

The condemnation of Nazi anti-Semitism by the Dutch bishops, on 26 July 1942, provoked the German authorities to arrest Catholics with a Semitic background. With her sister Rosa, also a Catholic convert, Teresa Benedicta was arrested in Echt by the Gestapo on 2 August 1942 and shipped to Auschwitz. She died with her sister Rosa on 9 August 1942.

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[5] Szanto and Moran, "Edith Stein."

[6] Edith Stein, *Life in a Jewish Family 1891-1916: Her Unfinished Autobiographical Account,* trans. Josephine Koeppel, *The Collected Works of Edith Stein: Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, Discalced Carmelite* ***1***, ed. Lucy Gelber and Romaeus Leuven (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1986) 401.

[7] Szanto and Moran, "Edith Stein."

[8] Szanto and Moran, "Edith Stein."

Survivors of the death camp testified that she assisted other sufferers with great compassion. At a ceremony in Cologne on 1 May 1987, Pope John Paul II beatified Edith Stein, and canonized her in 1998.[9] Robert McNamara says, "Truth was the guiding beacon that enlightened the path of her personal life and stood as the firm reference point coordinating the course of her philosophical investigations."[10]

2. Bridging Phenomenology and Thomism

As we have seen, Stein's conversion was also a turning point in her philosophic journey. All the major philosophical works written after her conversion are conditioned by the encounter of phenomenology with scholasticism, particularly with Thomistic realism, and they represent a living expression of this same encounter.[11] Stein was keenly aware of the inherent challenges in integrating Husserl's transcendental phenomenology with Aquinas's realism, but was confident in the "compatibility of Husserlian and Thomistic philosophy."[12] Husserl's approach started from the meditating ego, aiming to establish objectivity from within subjectivity. Stein, however, sought to begin from realism about being, criticising or diverging from Husserlian transcendental philosophy on this point.[13] Thomas Gricoski notes, "When Stein translates Husserl's phenomenology of essential insight into scholastic terms, she lifts the *epoché*, and grants ontological status to objects, that for Husserl, were 'merely ideal.'"[14]

Her approach involved taking the Thomistic "conceptual apparatus," a set of concepts and their interconnections developed by a philosophical tradition, and applying the phenomenological method to see if these

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[9] Szanto and Moran, "Edith Stein."
[10] Robert McNamara, *The Personalism of Edith Stein: A Synthesis of Thomism and Phenomenology* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2023) xii.
[11] McNamara, *The Personalism of Edith Stein*, xlii.
[12] Thomas Gricoski, *Being Unfolded: Edith Stein on the Meaning of Being* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2020) 8: "Stein expressed confidence in the compatibility of Husserlian and Thomistic philosophy." See also the note for this same statement, Gricoski, *Being Unfolded*, 8 n. 2.
[13] Szanto and Moran, "Edith Stein."
[14] Gricoski, *Being Unfolded*, 111 n. 5.

concepts fit reality. This process can be understood as a "testing of the concept." She argued that a "good doctrine" or concept, like putting on glasses, clarifies reality and brings it into "higher resolution," making the world more vibrant and precisely defined for the mind.[15]

Stein's phenomenological ontology presented a Christian alternative to Heidegger's account of being that stresses more on finitude.[16] For her, being itself opens up and unfolds into infinity. The finite being is open to infinity because its very act of being is received and points beyond itself to the fullness of being. In self-awareness, the finite person experiences contingency and dependence, which awakens an orientation towards the absolute being, according to Stein. This openness to eternity is fulfilled through intellect and will, which transcend finite limits and are ultimately grounded in God as infinite being. She writes, "Everything finite is placed into and sustained in existence and therefore by itself incapable of positing and sustaining being or existence."[17]

She agreed with both Aquinas and Husserl that ontological concepts could be discovered through logical reasoning, asserting that being is intrinsically intelligible.[18] This shared ground for both phenomenology (intuition of essence) and Thomism (abstraction of essence) is the encounter with the essential structure of reality. Stein, however, acknowledged the need to go beyond merely unpacking the intelligibility of experience, integrating the processes of the real.[19]

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[15] McNamara, *The Personalism of Edith Stein* xxxv, 124; see also his lecture "'Phenomenological Thomism' through the Eyes of Edith Stein," on https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HVGmI9lDLmA&t=3006s, accessed 24 December 2025.

[16] Gricoski, *Being Unfolded*, 36: "Heidegger's promise of a retrieval of metaphysics as the science of being *qua* being came to disappointment for Stein and Conrad-Martius. In the years immediately after the publication of *Sein und Zeit*, it seemed to them that Heidegger had lifted the transcendental restriction on being only in order to replace it with a new restriction of his own, the horizon of finite temporality."

[17] Edith Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being: An Attempt at an Ascent to the Meaning of Being*, trans. Kurt F. Reinhardt, *The Collected Works of Edith Stein: Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, Discalced Carmelite* ***9***, ed. Lucy Gelber and Romaeus Leuven (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 2002) 55.

[18] Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being*, *CWES* ***9***: 13, 38-41; see also Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 85, a. 1 on the intelligibility of being through the intellect.

[19] Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being*, *CWES* ***9***: 52-55, 60-66, 173-178.

3. Phenomenological Ontology

For Stein, ontology is the science of the "basic forms of being and of beings,"[20] identifying three fundamental ontological forms: object (*Gegenstand*), what (*Was*), and being (*Sein*).[21] She insists that ontological truths are accessible by logical reasoning rather than by empirical induction alone. This allows her to maintain a realist stance about being while preserving the descriptive force of phenomenological insight. According to Szanto and Moran, "she sought to integrate phenomenology with Thomism which she did in an original way, connecting Husserl's concept of *Geist* (spirit) with the Christian personal God." Stein's innovative phenomenological ontology is found primarily in *Potency and Act* and *Finite and Eternal Being*, where she offers original analyses of essence (*Wesen*) and being (*Sein*) that merit closer study in comparison with the accounts of Heidegger and Conrad-Martius. She turned towards the question of being (*Sein*) and essence (*Wesen*) not merely as abstract categories but as fundamental structures of reality.[22]

Stein pursues a formal ontology that starts from Husserl's distinction between formal and material ontologies. Formal ontology studies being simply as "being" (that which is) and identifies a priori principles such as act, potency, object, and individual.[23] Drawing on both Husserl and medieval thinkers like Duns Scotus, she introduces notions such as *haeccitas* (thisness) and individual essence, emphasising that individual entities have a determinate "thisness" that makes them distinct.[24]

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[20] Edith Stein, *Essays on Woman*, trans. Freda Mary Oben, *The Collected Works of Edith Stein: Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, Discalced Carmelite* ***2***, ed. Lucy Gelber and Romaeus Leuven (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1996) 171.

[21] Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being*, *CWES* ***9***: 6, 71, 121ff.

[22] Szanto and Moran, "Edith Stein."

[23] In Husserl, formal ontology studies the most universal structures of being that apply to anything whatsoever, such as object, unity, part and whole, relation, identity and plurality, independently of any specific domain. Material ontology, by contrast, investigates the essential structures of particular regions of being, such as nature, consciousness, culture or values, and therefore depends on the specific content or matter of what is investigated. Formal ontology provides empty universal forms, while material ontologies fill these forms with concrete eidetic content disclosed through phenomenological intuition.

[24] Szanto and Moran, "Edith Stein."

Stein's ontology also leads her to a distinctive metaphysics of essence and divine being. She defends the reality of essences but distinguishes them from their actual existence. While concepts are human inventions; essences are not. In fact, the formation of concepts is based on grasping the essences. An essence, like joy, is timeless and potential, becoming actual and efficacious in individual instances (e.g., my joy), while essentialities are ideal and independent of objects (e.g., joy as such). The reality of essences is ideal and inefficacious, grounding the potentials that underlie actual individuals; essences are not merely conceptual constructions but have a kind of being, even if they are only realised through individual actualisation. This view opens the way to her Christian metaphysical vision in which God is understood as 'pure spirit' and the archetype of all spiritual being, possessing an essence that is tri-personal and dynamically self-giving. In this way, her ontology, as we mentioned earlier, offers a Christian alternative to Heidegger's narrow focus on finitude and situates spirit as both grounded in divine being and constitutive of all spiritual entities.[25]

In *Potency and Act*, Stein deepens this ontological framework by reinterpreting the Aristotelian-Thomistic distinction between act and potency within a phenomenological horizon. Being is understood dynamically, not as a static property but as an actuality that unfolds from essential possibilities. Potency refers to the real capacity of a being to become, while act signifies the fulfilment of these possibilities in existence. Stein insists that this structure is not imposed conceptually but discovered through eidetic insight into the nature of beings themselves. Ontology thus becomes the study of how essence, potency, and act are internally ordered within finite beings, while also pointing beyond them to pure act as the ultimate ground of all being.[26]

In *Finite and Eternal Being*, Stein approaches the idea of being through a phenomenological clarification of essence and existence, drawing on both Husserl's formal ontology and Thomistic metaphysics. She argues that being is not grasped first as an abstract concept but is given through the intelligibility of essences, which disclose what a thing is prior to the question of whether it exists. Being, in this sense, is always structured, intelligible, and ordered, and ontology becomes the investigation of these basic structures of reality. Stein distinguishes finite

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[25] Szanto and Moran, "Edith Stein"; see also Gricoski, *Being Unfolded*, 36.
[26] Stein, *Potency and Act*, *CWES* ***11***: 45-75.

being, marked by contingency and participation, from eternal being, which is pure actuality and fullness of meaning. Finite beings receive their being, whereas eternal being is self-grounded and necessary. This distinction allows her to frame ontology as both descriptive and metaphysical, remaining faithful to phenomenological insight while opening it towards the question of God as absolute being.[27]

Thus, Stein offers an ontology that integrates phenomenological description with a realist metaphysics of participation and creation.

4. Personalism

In Stein's understanding of the concept of person, we can see the integration of scholasticism and phenomenology.[28] McNamara situates her personalism at the centre of this integration. According to him, Stein's personalism builds on the Boethian definition of the person as "an individual substance of a rational nature."[29] Thus she would accept Thomas Aquinas's concept of person: "individuals of a rational nature have a special name; and this name is person."[30]

Such an understanding shows that the person is the primary foundation of reality and possesses dignity, a value that cannot be measured or compared with anything else. This dignity comes from rationality, not merely as the power to calculate or use the mind intelligently, but as the capacity to enter into reality and grasp truth. From truth arises freedom, through which the person becomes the master of their own actions and the true source of personal acts, capable of creativity.[31] In this light, martyrdom, as seen in the personal life of Stein, can be considered as the highest expression of freedom, where a person freely gives their life in witness to truth.

Stein characteristically adjusted this concept of person by adding the conscious 'I' as a structural component, which she received from Husserl. The 'I' is the 'luminous apex of personal life' where awareness and self-

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[27] Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being*, *CWES* ***9***: 3-6, 11-14, 23-24, 45-55.
[28] See Jadwiga Guerrero van der Meijden, *Person and Dignity in Edith Stein's Writings* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019).
[29] McNamara, *The Personalism of Edith Stein*, xxxv.
[30] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 29, a. 1, co.; quoted in McNamara, *The Personalism of Edith Stein*, 1.
[31] McNamara, *The Personalism of Edith Stein*, xvi, 38. See also Guerrero van der Meijden, *Person and Dignity in Edith Stein's Writings*.

awareness reside, allowing engagement with the world while remaining present to oneself. For Stein, thinking is always 'someone thinking,' and the 'I' wields the power of thought.[32]

McNamara also notes that Stein departed from Aquinas' view that individuation is primarily due to the body (matter individuates). For Stein, individuality is also something of our 'personal spirits,' stemming from the conscious 'I's' ability to distinguish itself from all else, actual and possible.[33]

According to her, the soul is the form of the body (in keeping with Aristotelian-Thomistic thought), but it also possesses a rich inner life. Drawing on St Teresa of Avila, Stein describes the spiritual soul as an 'interior castle,' the dwelling place of the conscious 'I.' The conscious 'I' can journey inward into the depth of the castle.[34] In her earlier writings, Stein observed that shallow subjectivity means shallow objectivity, meaning a superficial life leads to a superficial understanding of reality.[35] Conversely, living in the depth of the self reveals the meaningful depth of the world.

The nourishment of the soul is meaning or *logos*. Just as the body transforms material food, the soul incorporates meaning, growing, developing, and maturing through time. Eventually, every person is forever oriented towards the eternal *Logos* that grounds all finite being.[36] Stein writes, "Behind all that the human being does stands a guiding *Logos*."[37]

Each person possesses a unique qualitative distinctness, a singular hue or colour likened to the refraction of divine white light into a rainbow.[38] This uniqueness is given by God, making each person one off, unrepeatable, and irreplaceable. This proper name captures a unique aspect of the divine image that is only fully revealed by living in the depth of the

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[32] McNamara, *The Personalism of Edith Stein*, 32, 36.
[33] McNamara, *The Personalism of Edith Stein*, 88.
[34] McNamara, *The Personalism of Edith Stein*, 141-143.
[35] McNamara, "'Phenomenological Thomism' through the Eyes of Edith Stein."
[36] McNamara, *The Personalism of Edith Stein*, xi-xii; McNamara, "'Phenomenological Thomism' through the Eyes of Edith Stein."
[37] Edith Stein, *Der Aufbau der menschlichen Person*, *Edith Stein Gesamtausgabe **14***, ed. Michael Linssen, Beate Beckmann-Zöller, and Hanna-Barbara Gerl-Falkovitz, 2nd ed. (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2010) 2. There is no complete English translation for this German volume; the above translation is of McNamara himself, quoted in McNamara, *The Personalism of Edith Stein*, xxiii.
[38] McNamara, *The Personalism of Edith Stein*, 140.

soul.[39] This contrasts with the 'banality of evil,' which makes individuals appear the same, whereas saints embody 'incredibly unique' characters.[40]

For Stein, human persons are a composition of body, soul, and spirit, straddling creation as both material and spiritual beings. The spiritual composition of the soul provides its immortality, distinguishing humans from merely material beings.[41]

Stein characterises spirit as openness (*geöffnet*). This means being able to engage with what is other than oneself, turning towards it intentionally. Spirit also has self-shaping power and its essence is self-giving. The soul, too, has its own inner openness to other subjects and to value. This openness for oneself and for what is other is the highest and hence also the most proper form of spirit.[42]

While focusing on the spiritual soul of the human person, Stein does not negate the body's significance. Our cognition, in her view, is deeply embodied, that is, our physical being and perspective condition our experience of reality.[43]

In the human person, Stein identifies various powers influencing the psyche, including sensate and spiritual life-powers, motivational forces from drives, strivings, and volitional stances, as well as the will-power of autonomous individuals and the laws of reason. Motivation, distinct from causality, is an egoic activity where acts are performed due to or for the sake of another, subjecting the psyche to the rule of reason. Stein extensively elaborated on the intermeshing of causality and motivation. All these cluster around her original concept called psychic causality, which is an alternative to the extremes of determinism and indeterminism.[44]

5. Consciousness and Being

Edith Stein discusses consciousness as the way and means by which we gain access to the world of existents, understood within the broader context of an analogy of being. Here too we can see her synthesis of phenomenology and Thomistic thought. In this perspective, consciousness

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[39] McNamara, *The Personalism of Edith Stein*, 149 n. 55.
[40] McNamara, "'Phenomenological Thomism' through the Eyes of Edith Stein."
[41] Szanto and Moran, "Edith Stein."
[42] Szanto and Moran, "Edith Stein." See also Stein, *Philosophy of Psychology and the Humanities*, *CWES* ***8***: 295-296.
[43] McNamara, "'Phenomenological Thomism' through the Eyes of Edith Stein."
[44] Szanto and Moran, "Edith Stein."

is not merely an inner psychological state but a mode of access that allows one to encounter and disclose reality. Through consciousness, beings are given to us as meaningful and intelligible, making it possible to relate the knowing subject to the world of existents within the ordered horizon of being itself.[45]

What is consciousness, then, for Stein? It can be understood as the immanent and intimate locus of one's experience, representing an inner sphere or an interiority, in distinction to the outer sphere of transcendent objects.[46]

Stein begins her objective investigation in *Finite and Eternal Being* with the self-evidence of one's own being as it is given in conscious experience, taking consciousness as her point of departure. She starts from the always present 'I am,' the first person inner awareness that accompanies every act of knowing and experiencing. In this sense, consciousness is not something added to experience but is found in all experiences, providing the immediate and undeniable givenness of one's own being.[47]

For Stein, therefore, consciousness is neither a self-enclosed stream of mental states nor a mere psychological fact. It is the living centre of the person where experience is given, meaning is disclosed, and the person becomes present to self, to others, and to the world. Consciousness opens both the inner world and outer world to oneself.[48]

According to Stein, the primordial form of consciousness simply goes along with our living and acting as an 'I.' It does not step away from our experience to look at itself, nor does it turn back on itself in a special act of self-observation.[49] Consciousness is both directed to the subject as well as the object simultaneously. Without the subject, there is no object; and similarly, without the awareness of the object, there is no self-awareness. Following Husserl, Stein understands consciousness as intentional. It is

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[45] Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being*, *CWES* ***9***: xxix.

[46] Edith Stein, *Potency and Act: Studies toward a Philosophy of Being*, trans. Walter Redmond, *The Collected Works of Edith Stein: Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, Discalced Carmelite* ***11***, ed. Lucy Gelber and Romaeus Leuven (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 2009) 9-18; quoted in Gricoski, *Being Unfolded*, 83.

[47] McNamara, *The Personalism of Edith Stein*, 5.

[48] Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being*, *CWES* ***9***: 430: "To its being, that is, its life, there pertains a being there for itself that is being conscious, a reflection that is immanent in all spiritual life."

[49] Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being*, *CWES* ***9***: 375.

always consciousness of something. Every act of consciousness is directed beyond itself towards an object, whether this be a thing, a value, a person, or God. Consciousness (the stream of consciousness) is therefore relational by its very nature and cannot be reduced to isolated inner states.[50]

At the same time, Stein goes beyond a purely phenomenological account. Consciousness is the place where the soul expresses itself and where the spiritual dimension of the person becomes manifest. It is not identical with the soul, but it is the soul's field of manifestation. Through consciousness, the person knows, feels, chooses, and responds to values.[51]

Stein also emphasises self-awareness. In consciousness, the 'I' is not only aware of objects but also aware of itself as the one who experiences. This self-presence grounds personal identity and responsibility. Consciousness thus has an ethical dimension since it enables the person to recognise values and to take a stance towards them.[52]

Finally, consciousness is essentially open to others. In her analysis of empathy, Stein shows that through conscious acts we encounter other persons as conscious subjects like ourselves. This openness culminates in her later thought in an openness to God, where consciousness becomes the place of encounter with the divine life.[53] For Edith Stein, then, consciousness is the intentional, self-aware, and relational field (of interiority) in which the personal and spiritual life of the human being unfolds.

6. Subjectivity and Objectivity

In her Thomistic-phenomenological integration, Stein provides a coherent view where subjectivity and objectivity are deeply connected. Objectivity cannot be understood without subjects, and subjects are inherently turned towards an object. "Stein does not reduce being and knowing, objectivity and subjectivity, or the external and internal realms of consciousness to each other."[54] She argued that living a more intense subjective life (rightly

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[50] Szanto and Moran, "Edith Stein."
[51] McNamara, *The Personalism of Edith Stein*, xxiv; Szanto and Moran, "Edith Stein."
[52] Szanto and Moran, "Edith Stein"; McNamara, "'Phenomenological Thomism' through the Eyes of Edith Stein."
[53] Szanto and Moran, "Edith Stein"; McNamara, "'Phenomenological Thomism' through the Eyes of Edith Stein."
[54] Gricoski, *Being Unfolded*, 8.

understood) leads to a more objective place in the world, and vice-versa. Decoupling these concepts can lead to problematic subjectivism or a brutish objectivity.[55]

Because persons are conscious and rational subjects, their dignity forbids reducing them to mere objects. Disregarding their subjectivity, for example, by treating a person like an inanimate object, would be psychopathological and an insult to their dignity. The core of personal dignity lies in the capacity to be present to the other while remaining present to the self, a unique characteristic of consciousness and rationality that matter does not possess.[56] So we could say that this makes persons distinct from artificial intelligence, robots, or animals, providing a clear basis for distinguishing beings that should have rights.

Stein writes, "*Mind* is a going out from yourself, an openness, in a twofold sense: an openness for an objective world, which is *experienced*; and openness for someone else's subjectivity, someone else's mind, *along with* the objective world is *experienced* and *lived* in common."[57] For her, the mind does not mean being closed in on ourselves but reaching beyond ourselves. It is open to the objective world that we see, know, and experience. At the same time, it is open to other persons and to their inner lives, their thoughts and feelings. Because of this, we do not experience the world alone but share it with others. Our life in the world is therefore both personal and communal.

Christ's teaching to lose oneself to find oneself (Mt 16:25; Mk 8:35; Lk 9:23; Jn 12:25), is understood by Stein as a metaphysical truth about the nature of spirit: to be with the other without ceasing to be oneself, and thereby becoming more fully oneself. Spirit pours itself forth while remaining wholly with itself.[58]

Stein therefore understands subjectivity as an intentional consciousness that is intrinsically open to objectivity rather than enclosed within itself. Subjectivity is the correlate of the objective world, the living centre from which objects are experienced as meaningful and real. In *Finite and Eternal Being*, Stein argues that objectivity is not constituted by an abstract subject but disclosed through the subject's participation in being itself, so that knowledge involves a genuine encounter with what is.

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[55] McNamara, "'Phenomenological Thomism' through the Eyes of Edith Stein."
[56] McNamara, "'Phenomenological Thomism' through the Eyes of Edith Stein."
[57] Stein, *Philosophy of Psychology and the Humanities*, *CWES* ***8***: 295-296.
[58] McNamara, "'Phenomenological Thomism' through the Eyes of Edith Stein."

Subjective life therefore has an objective structure that can itself become an object of reflection, without losing its personal character. As Guerrero van der Meijden notes, Stein's use of subjectivity remains realist and non-Cartesian, closely tied to consciousness as directed towards the world rather than as a self-enclosed interiority.[59]

This unity of subjectivity and objectivity finds its fullest expression in Stein's account of intersubjectivity, especially through empathy. In *On the Problem of Empathy*, she shows that the other person is given neither as a mere object nor as a projection of the self, but as another subject whose experiences are grasped in a non-original yet genuine way.[60] Intersubjectivity thus becomes the space in which objectivity is confirmed and lived-in-common, as multiple subjects are oriented towards the same world. As McNamara emphasises, for Stein the objective world is intersubjectively constituted, not in a relativistic sense, but through the shared orientation of persons towards truth and being, a view developed particularly in her later phenomenological-metaphysical synthesis.[61]

7. Entfaltung

In *Being Unfolded*, Thomas Gricoski examines Stein's metaphysics of unfolding, arguing that it is a concept of central significance in Stein's mature thought and provides an interpretive development of it as the point of departure for a fundamentally relational ontology.[62] Gricoski attempts to

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[59] Guerrero van der Meijden, *Person and Dignity in Edith Stein's Writings*, 150-151. See Edith Stein, *Einführung in die Philosophie*, *Edith Stein Gesamtausgabe* ***8***, ed. Beate Beckmann Zöller (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2004) 101. There is no complete English translation for this German volume.

[60] See Edith Stein, *Zum Problem der Einfühlung*, *Edith Stein Gesamtausgabe* ***5***, ed. Beate Beckmann-Zöller and Michael Linck, 3rd edition (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2016) 54-56, 93. The corresponding English translation of this work is: Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, trans. Waltraut Stein, *The Collected Works of Edith Stein: Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, Discalced Carmelite* ***3***, ed. Lucy Gelber and Romaeus Leuven (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1989).

[61] McNamara, *The Personalism of Edith Stein*, xv-xvi, li-lii, 41-42; see Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being*, *CWES* ***9***: 320-322.

[62] Gricoski, *Being Unfolded*. See also Sarah Borden Sharkey, "Edith Stein and Thomas Aquinas on Being and Essence," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* **82**/1 (2008): 87-103; Sarah Borden Sharkey, *Thine Own Self: Individuality in Edith Stein's Later Writings* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010).

answer the issue that if there is a mode of being that is not actual, then Stein's ontology cannot square with Aquinas' ontology of the act of existence. How does Edith Stein understand being? "(Finite) being is the unfolding [*Entfaltung*] of meaning."[63] Keeping this in mind, Gricoski states that Stein's concept of *Entfaltung* would seem to represent a novel and beautiful ontology, that is a synthesis of Thomistic thought and phenomenological understanding of being.[64]

Gricoski affirms that Stein begins from phenomenology, from how things appear to consciousness, but she does not stop there. What phenomenology discovers about essences pushes her to dialogue with traditional metaphysics, especially Thomism. In this way, what is given in experience is not opposed to scholastic thought but invites a deeper explanation of being and essence. Gricoski states, "The realm of essential being, which has been made accessible to us from the phenomenological side, demands a clarifying confrontation with the theory of being and essence contained in traditional metaphysics."[65]

Moreover, Gricoski writes, "If being and meaning are correlative and non-reductive to each other then unfolding into actual being appears as an essential necessity. The fullest meaning of being is act, *actus purus*, and the full being of meaning is actualization."[66] Here he explains unfolding as the key idea that connects meaning and existence. Essences contain meaning in a quiet and non-temporal way, but this meaning tends towards expression in actual being. Being and meaning belong together, and unfolding names this movement from inner meaning to lived reality, without reducing one to the other.[67]

Gricoski also shows how Stein takes Husserl's insight into essences seriously but goes further by affirming their ontological status, as Thomism does. The idea of being as the unfolding of meaning emerges as a conclusion where phenomenology and scholastic metaphysics meet and

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[63] See Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being*, *CWES* ***9***: 325ff, chapter VI, "The Meaning of Being." The quote is Gricoski's translation of Edith Stein, *Endliches und ewiges Sein: Versuch eines Aufstiegs zum Sinn des Seins;*
Anhang: Martin Heideggers Existenzphilosophie, Die Seelenburg, *Edith Stein Gesamtausgabe* ***11-12***, ed. Andreas Uwe Muller (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2006) 284; quoted in Gricoski, *Being Unfolded*, xviii.
[64] Gricoski, *Being Unfolded*, 249.
[65] Gricoski, *Being Unfolded*, 150.
[66] Gricoski, *Being Unfolded*, 128.
[67] Gricoski, *Being Unfolded*, 128, 249.

support each other. He says, "The characterization of being as the unfolding of meaning comes…as a conclusion drawn from the phenomenological investigations and their confrontation with Aristotelian and Thomistic metaphysics."[68]

8. Social Ontology

By integrating eidetic phenomenology and Thomistic metaphysics, Stein constructed a novel systematic account of social life. This account posits that social life constitutes actions by free, individual persons whose experiences and volitions are rooted in cognitions and emotions. Stein believed that humans could achieve a level of rational and communal life open to transcendence, ultimately lifting them beyond their finitude.[69]

Stein understands social life as something much richer than simple interpersonal empathy. While empathy is necessary, it does not by itself explain how people truly live together. She therefore analyses different forms of social life, including crowds, societies, communities, and the state. Crowds are temporary and unstable, shaped mainly by emotional contagion rather than shared goals or awareness. Individuals in crowds often act without reflection and are easily influenced (even negatively). This shows that not every form of togetherness has depth or genuine unity.[70]

In contrast, societies and communities involve shared intentions and forms of collective life, but they differ in an important way. Societies are mainly instrumental, bringing individuals together for practical or self-interested goals, where others are treated more as means than as persons. Communities, however, are grounded in solidarity. Members encounter one another as subjects and live with one another in openness and mutual influence. This solidarity is not fixed but must be constantly renewed through shared life, attitudes, and values.[71]

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[68] Gricoski, *Being Unfolded*, 9.
[69] Szanto and Moran, "Edith Stein."
[70] Szanto and Moran, "Edith Stein." See also Thomas Gricoski, "Essential Being and Existential Metaphysics," in *Edith Stein: Women, Social-Political Philosophy, Theology, Metaphysics and Public History: New Approaches and Applications*, ed. Antonio Calcagno, Boston Studies in Philosophy, Religion and Public Life **4** (New York: Springer, 2016)197-212.
[71] Szanto and Moran, "Edith Stein."

For Stein, true communities are formed through communal experiences that create a shared stream of life beyond individual experiences. Communities can intend, act, feel, value, imagine, and even take responsibility together, though in a limited sense. They can develop a distinctive character or personality and possess shared intellectual and moral qualities. Communal experience is not just many individuals feeling the same thing but a genuinely collective way of experiencing, where subject, content, and mode are integrated into a living unity that cannot be reduced to individual psychology alone.[72]

According to McNamara, Stein's realist phenomenology is 'a motivated intentionality' that gives importance to meanings and values, not an abstract conceptualization that disregards social relationships. "[S]he unveils the personal spirit as a being that relates to the world according to a motivated intentionality that is especially responsive to values."[73] While discussing the concept of persons, Stein says that each person is both a value and correlated to a 'value-world' (*Wertwelt*).[74] She has a nuanced understanding of collective intentionality. According to her, as mentioned earlier, communities can share intentions, emotions, values, and even exhibit intellectual capacities and virtues. Her unique perspective challenges simplistic categorizations of social formations. According to her, a communal experience is not a mere totality of individual experiences, but a constitution that involves reciprocal feedback and a dynamic interplay between the individual and the community. Furthermore, she insists on maintaining the autonomy of individuals, who are able to preserve their distinctiveness and moral responsibility, even within the context of communal life.[75]

We also should not forget that Edith Stein campaigned publicly on issues relating to women's rights and education, besides her political and feminist thought.

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[72] Szanto and Moran, "Edith Stein."
[73] McNamara, *The Personalism of Edith Stein*, xxiv, n. 3.
[74] Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, trans. Waltraut Stein, *The Collected Works of Edith Stein: Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, Discalced Carmelite* **3**, ed. Lucy Gelber and Romaeus Leuven (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1989), 108; quoted in Szanto and Moran, "Edith Stein."
[75] Szanto and Moran, "Edith Stein."

9. Conclusion

Edith Stein's work contributes to the 'perennial philosophy,' suggesting that later thinkers like herself, standing on the shoulders of giants like Aristotle and Aquinas, can draw new insights into light, expanding and refining the understanding of reality. We can say that her life and thought bear witness to a rare unity of intellectual rigour, spiritual depth, and commitment to truth. From her early immersion in Husserlian phenomenology to her mature engagement with Thomistic realism, her philosophy emerges as a fruitful synthesis of subjectivity and objectivity, consciousness and being, essence and existence. By integrating the phenomenological attention to lived experience with the metaphysical depth of Aquinas, Stein offers a compelling personalist and relational ontology in which the human person stands as a conscious, embodied, spiritual being open to truth, to others, and ultimately to God. Her philosophical work, inseparable from her personal journey and martyrdom, affirms that truth is not merely an abstract ideal but a lived vocation, one that unfolds through reason, freedom, compassion, and self-gift, and remains forever oriented towards the eternal *Logos* that grounds all finite being.

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ABSTRACT

We find a wonderful synthesis of Husserlian phenomenology and Thomism in the later thought of Edith Stein, inspired by her conversion to the Catholic faith. The resulting relational ontology presents being as opening up and unfolding into infinity. Stein's thought is an integration, not a compromise, of phenomenological attentiveness to lived experience with the metaphysical realism of the Christian tradition, especially of Thomas Aquinas, ordered towards a fuller understanding of the human person as grounded in truth, open to transcendence, and ultimately fulfilled in God.