

# Edith Stein and the experience of God

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Edith Stein (1891–1942), later Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, was an original phenomenologist and an early student of Edmund Husserl. She later developed an original theocentric ontology (inspired by St. Thomas and Neo-Thomism) that deliberately opposed Martin Heidegger’s account of finitude. During her short life, Stein was extraordinarily productive; her complete works now run to some twenty-eight volumes, including philosophical works, essays on education (especially women’s education), writings on mysticism and spirituality, and translations (including translations of St. Thomas Aquinas and John Henry Newman).

A truly creative thinker, she made enduring contributions in phenomenology (on topics such as empathy, the person, the constitution of communal life, and the nature of the state), and in ontology that are worth revisiting. Her original account of empathy as a direct perception of the other’s experiences although not felt in the same way as the other person remains influential. Informed by Neo-Thomism, her account of being in her two major studies, *Finite and Eternal Being* and *Potency and Act*, provides an original and still potent alternative to Heidegger’s ontology of temporal finitude in *Being and Time* (1927) as well as an alternative to standard Neo-Thomism. In opposition to Heidegger who maintained that human essence is existence (*Dasein*), her notion of the unchangeable “core” of the person “unfolds” over one’s life and is never exhausted or diminished (and hence immortal).

## **A life of conviction**

Born into a Jewish family, she converted to Catholicism in 1922. However, categorized as a Jew by the Nazis, her life was brutally ended in the concentration camp of Auschwitz, Poland, on August 9, 1942, at the age of 51. In recognition of her martyrdom, Pope John Paul II beatified Teresa Benedicta of the Cross in 1987 and canonized her in 1998. Stein was an early feminist and wrote essays on the status of women, including a report commissioned

by the Ministry of Education, on women's education and educational reform. She gave public lectures and radio talks on women's issues, including on Bavarian Radio "Woman's Hour" program on the subject of rearing children.

Edith Stein underwent several intellectual and spiritual transformations and conversions. Brilliant and rebellious, at the age of thirteen she declared herself an atheist. In 1911 she entered the University of Breslau to study psychology and philosophy, and then transferred to Göttingen to study with Husserl. While there, she attended Max Scheler's lectures in 1913 and became an active member of the Göttingen Philosophical Society. Stein was one of the first women to complete a doctorate in philosophy with a dissertation, supervised by Husserl, entitled *On the Problem of Empathy*, published in 1917. She was also Husserl's first paid assistant (1916-1918), editing his manuscripts, especially *Ideas II* and his *Lectures on the Internal Consciousness of Time*. Stein added her very distinctive stamp to those editions, especially emphasizing the centrality of the person. Indeed, she resigned in 1918 because she felt Husserl did not respect her philosophical independence. As she wrote to the Polish philosopher Roman Ingarden (*Self-Portrait in Letters, 1916–1942*), she was not someone who could simply "obey" Husserl. If he would not treat her as a collaborator "then we shall have to part company." To gain academic employment, Stein wrote a Habilitation thesis, but could not find a sponsor (Husserl refused).

In late 1921 Stein underwent a religious conversion while reading the *Life of St. Theresa of Avila* at her friend Hedwig Conrad Martius's house and was baptized into the Catholic Church on January 1, 1922. Thereafter Stein was a committed Catholic. She eventually reconciled with her family as her youngest sister Erna later recalled. Unable to advance academically, Stein taught at the Dominican Convent of St. Magdalene, in Speyer (1923-1931). She became active in the Catholic Woman Teachers Association, supported the ordination of women to priesthood, and campaigned for women to be allowed to do the university Habilitation. In 1932, she left the Dominican convent in Speyer to become a senior lecturer at the Scientific Institute of Pedagogy in Münster, but was dismissed in April 1933 because of the Nazi prohibition against Jews working in state positions. Stein even wrote to Pope Pius XI warning that persecution of Jews was forerunner to persecution of Christians. In 1933, partly in response to the Nazi prosecution she wrote *Life in a Jewish Family 1891-1916* (incomplete).

Stein never abandoned the dream of completing her Habilitation. In 1931, she wrote to Heidegger in Freiburg offering a new work, *Potency and Act*, as her Habilitation. In a letter to Sr. Adelgundis Jaegerschmid OSB dated January 26, 1931 (included in *Self-Portrait in Letters*), Stein summarized:

Heidegger was not at all astonished by my question, he said he had no objections at all, either personally or professionally. But he would only be able to give an endorsement when he had learned from the governing board whether he could get a stipendium for me.

In July 1933, Stein entered the Carmelite convent in Cologne, taking the name Teresa Benedicta a Cruce. Her entry to the Carmelite order did not impede her scholarly activities. She wrote penetrating philosophical and theological studies there between 1933 and 1938. Shortly after the events of Kristallnacht, on November 9-10, 1938, in December Stein was smuggled across the border to another Carmelite convent, in Echt, Holland, where she continued writing on spiritual themes, especially on St. John of the Cross and Theresa of Avila. On August 2, 1942, Gestapo arrested Stein and her sister Rosa in the convent chapel in Echt, and took them first to a transit camp in Amersfoort and then to Westerbork. On August 9, 1942, she was sent to Auschwitz and likely died that day.

Edith Stein was beatified by Pope John Paul II on May 1, 1987. Her last manuscript, *Science of the Cross*, composed in 1941-2, was found on her desk in the Carmelite convent when she was taken. Most of her works, including *Potency and Act (1931)* and *Finite and Eternal Being (1935)* were published posthumously. An essay, "Ways to Know God," on the Christian mystic Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite was posthumously published in *The Thomist (1946)*.

## **Empathy and personhood**

Stein's most original contribution is her account of the *person*, initially inspired by Husserl and Scheler, later by her study of St. Thomas and Duns Scotus. She agrees with Scheler that persons are responsive to values and live in a "value-world" (*Wertwelt*). In 1922 she wrote "we see what a person is when we see which world of value she lives in." In *On the Problem of Empathy* (1917) she argues for the "constitution" of the person in emotional experiences; and emotions are intuitive apprehensions of values (goodness, beauty). Through emotions, furthermore, persons grasp other persons as value-beings. Love, for example, is an apprehension of the *value* of the loved person. Following Husserl, Stein maintains that the person actualizes him or herself in uniquely personal acts, either *self-directed* acts (a deliberate decision), or *other-directed* acts (promising, forgiving). Persons also actualize themselves by interpersonal acts of recognition, addressing others as *persons* (cf. Husserl's *Ideas II*). Her most original claim is that each human being has an individual personal "core" (*Kern der Person*) that remains unchanged and is never exhausted by one's acts. A person has a depth beyond their acts and lives at different depth dimensions. The more a person lives at depth, the more the core unfolds. The person "unfolds" or "ripens" but the personal core is never completely "disclosed or disclosable." For Stein, the person's core persists after death. The person enters eternity as what she has become. This core is directly knowable only by God. We only actualize some of it in our finite lives, but, in contrast to Heidegger, our human being has an essential wholeness (core) that finite life does not exhaust.

Stein agrees with Heidegger that human beings are "beings in the world," but she rejects his account of human finitude. Humans are both material and spiritual. We are necessarily "bound-to-the-body" (*Leibgebundenheit*), influenced from below, but also spirits, influenced

“from above” (i.e., spiritually motivated). “The self sinks its tap roots into nature,” she wrote. The soul is a living “root” (*Wurzel*) whose innate capacities have to be activated. For Stein, moreover, the soul is always evolving and developing, “unfolding” (*Entfaltung*), fulfilling its innate capacities. Stein insists that “every I is unique” (*Jedes Ich ist Einmaliges*) with its own “peculiarity” (*Eigentümlichkeit*), that is incommunicable, even though it also has a nature that it shares with other selves. Every human being has “unrepeatable singularity.” Persons are infinitely valuable because of their uniqueness and their capacity for free acts.

### **Individual being and divine being**

Stein’s original phenomenology of the person was enriched by her encounter with Neo-Thomism. Following her conversion in 1922, Stein immersed herself in Catholic philosophy, translating St. Thomas Aquinas’s *On Truth*. She “found a home in Aquinas’s thought world,” but remained loyal to Husserl’s phenomenology, in an original way connecting Husserl’s concept of “spirit” (*Geist*) with the Christian personal God. In major works, *Potency and Act* (1931) and *Finite and Eternal Being* (1935), Stein offered a Christian alternative (“infinite Being”) to Heidegger’s account of human finite being-toward-death. Stein defends the unique and individual essence (*Einzelwesen*) of each person, adapting Dun Scotus’s “thisness,” or *haecceitas*, in an explicit departure from St. Thomas. This essence controls one’s capacity to actualize one’s nature.

Stein developed her own conception of God as “fullness” (*die Fülle; Seinsfülle*) following Husserl, for whom experience has degrees of emptiness and fullness. The experience of God is perfect fullness. God is pure spirit and spirit is “superabundant, diffusive life,” fulfilled by “self-giving.” Spirit is active and dynamic and divine being is “a movement from the inside out (...) a generating being (...) eternal self-drawing and self-creating” (*Sich-selbst-schöpfen*). All other beings that are spiritual are founded in this divine spirit and have their “archetypes” (*Urbilder*) there. The human subject is the bearer of spiritual life. Spiritual being must be “illuminated” (*durchleuchtet*) and “open” (*geöffnet*). A spirit must be open to the world and to other persons. In *Potency and Act*, she maintains that “being open for oneself and for what is other is the highest and hence also the most proper form of spirit whereto all other spiritual being harks back.”

### **In the realm of sense**

When Pope John Paul II beatified Stein at a ceremony in Cologne on May 1, 1987, he declared her worthy of public veneration as a genuinely holy, or blessed, person. In Rome, on October 11, 1998, the Pope canonized her. Her beatification treated her as a martyr for the faith, which was controversial as she was persecuted as a Jew. In 1999 Stein was proclaimed one of the patron saints of Europe. On October 1, 1999, Pope John Paul II wrote in his Apostolic Letter that the proclamation of Edith Stein as a Co-Patroness of Europe (along with St. Catherine of Siena and St. Bridget of Sweden) “is intended to raise on this

Continent a banner of respect, tolerance and acceptance which invites all men and women to understand and appreciate each other, transcending their ethnic, cultural and religious differences in order to form a truly fraternal society.”

Stein made unique contributions to phenomenology (of the person, empathy, community) and to philosophical theology (her conception of God as “fullness” who unfolds by revealing itself as *sense* or meaningfulness). Uniting her theology and phenomenology is her insight that spirit is “sense” or meaning (*Sinn*). She translates the first sentence in the Prologue to St. John’s Gospel not as “In the Beginning was the Word,” but as “In the Beginning was the Sense.” Phenomenology is sense-exploration and Christianity made *sense* for Stein and made her life intelligible even to the point of martyrdom.

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