ST. EDITH STEIN ON PHENOMENOLOGY AND SCHOLASTICISM:
TOWARD RAPPROCHEMENT
OF CLASSICAL AND MODERN PHILOSOPHY

A Study of “Husserl and Aquinas: A Comparison” (1929)

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Prologue

St. Edith Stein’s credentials for undertaking a comparative study of phenomenology and Thomism with a view toward discovering their continuities and discontinuities can be located within the following relevant factors:

—Her lifelong search for Truth. According to her testimony, an earnest quest for meaning began in 1907, toward the beginning of an “agnostic period” that lasted until 1918. Her early decision to study psychology at the University of Breslau and her subsequent attraction to phenomenological philosophy and then Thomism are key elements in what her commentator, Marianne Sawicki, has identified as an underlying desire to heal hearts broken by a broken world (in a 1998 lecture, “Personal Connections: The Phenomenology of Edith Stein”). A specific interest in finding continuity between classical and modern philosophy is already evident in a 1926 letter: “Currently I am principally occupied with the works of St. Thomas...since it is important to me to attain clarity regarding the connection between Thomistic and modern philosophy”—The Collected Works of Edith Stein, VIII (2000), 49 f.

—Her close association with Edmund Husserl. In 1913, at age 21, she transferred to the University of Göttingen where the founder of phenomenology
was attracting students, including Martin Heidegger and Max Scheler, because of his pioneering work, *Logical Investigations* (1902). This direct association, as student until the doctoral dissertation—*On the Problem of Empathy, Collected Works*, vol. III (1989)—was completed in 1916, and then as teaching and research assistant (at Freiburg), continued until 1922. Thereafter the association was limited to intermittent letters and visits until Husserl’s death in 1938. Her phenomenological writings demonstrate lucid explication and critique of the movement. “The Master” often expressed esteem for her aptitude and achievements in philosophy and scholarship; this is all the more remarkable since women were not admitted to German universities until 1901—a circumstance that prevented him from recommending her for a university chair.

—*Her personal study of St. Thomas Aquinas.* In 1922 (age 30), the year of her conversion from Judaism to Christianity, a Jesuit priest-scholar, Erich Przywara, introduced her to Aquinas. In the course of the ‘20s, she came to notice a reason “why folks today are going back to his writings…. They want a truth to cling to, a meaning for their lives…. A person who has lived for some time with the mind of St. Thomas—lucid, keen, calm, cautious—and dwelt in his world, will come to feel more and more that he is making right choices with ease and confidence….”—“Husserl and Aquinas: A Comparison,” (1929). After her admission to Carmel in 1933, she had greater incentive and opportunity to continue developing her study of Thomism and to incorporate it into her thought and writing.

—*Her understanding of philosophy as practice.* Both Husserl and Aquinas taught her to appreciate the importance of methodology in philosophy and the need for a sympathetic mentor to guide independent inquiry. This led her to practice philosophy in a collegial manner and to develop fruitful student-teacher relationships. Karol Wojtyła has acknowledged her mentorship in his own discovery of phenomenology’s compatibility with Thomistic philosophy, and has called her “a paradigmatic figure” in this respect. (See also the
references to her in the papal encyclical, “Fides et Ratio,” 59 [1998], and John Paul’s addresses on the occasion of her beatification in 1987 and canonization in 1998). Her mastery of philosophy is most evident in Finite and Eternal Being (1936)—Collected Works, vol. IX, 2001—which seeks to rehabilitate philosophy through a re-examination of Thomism in the context of phenomenology.

—Her special insight as a woman. Another of her mentors was St. Teresa of Avila, whom she discovered in a random manner in 1921 at a crucial juncture in her pilgrimage from agnosticism to faith. This was probably the most significant moment in her life; it led her to cry out to friends, “I have found the truth.” The inter-personal dimension of phenomenology and its emphasis on the subject achieved deep and almost connatural insight in her feminine and contemplative soul. In the early 1930s she was invited to share her insights into the special aptitudes of women in the college where she was teaching and elsewhere around Germany. (See the eight “Essays on Woman” in Collected Works, vol. II [1987]).

Bibliographical Note

These works, in rough chronological order, are available in English translation:


Philosophy of Psychology and the Humanities, 2 treatises (1918-1921), CW, X (2002)

Essays on Woman, 8 essays (1928-33), CW, II (1987)

Knowledge and Faith, 5 essays (1929-1941), CW, VIII (2000)

Life in a Jewish Family, autobiography (1933-1939 unfinished), CW, I (1986)

Finite and Eternal Being (1935-36), CW, IX (2001)

The Hidden Life, 12 essays, 2 poems (1935-41), CW, IV (1992)

Her two translations (of John Henry Newman’s letters and diaries prior to his entrance into the Catholic Church [1928] and of St. Thomas Aquinas’ De Veritate [1931-32]) are available in the German edition of her collected works (Edith Steins Werke, 18 volumes).

I – What Is Philosophy?

According to Stein, Husserl and Aquinas were in substantial agreement about the nature of philosophical inquiry as a spirit and a potency that lives in the philosopher and needs to be actualized with the help of a mentor, a magister, in an ongoing process of give and take. For both, the philosophia perennis refers not to a set of propositions but to a common world of communication outside spatial and temporal boundaries. Philosophy is a doing, a way of organizing inquiry into universal realities as firmly grounded as possible in observed facts, for the purpose of increasing understanding of the world. The philosopher is attempting to satisfy an inner need to search out the force behind all that is, the λόγος or ratio of this world of our experience.

In the second place, philosophical inquiry must be carried out like any rigorous science, seriously, soberly, in accord with the most stringent intellectual honor. Only patiently, step by step, can human understanding uncover aspects of ratio. Husserl and Aquinas are both epistemological realists in that they set out from the premise that objective existence belongs to the notion of truth independently of the knower. The approach to truth which is common to them lays emphasis on essential truths. Husserl and Aquinas both make use of the distinction between empirical (practical) knowledge, which includes accidents as well as substances, and eidetic (theoretical) knowledge. The first belongs to ontology, the concern with objective reality (existence) in this world. The second belongs to metaphysics, the concern with things in themselves (essences). It is in matters of emphasis that differences appear between phenomenology and Thomism. For Husserl, philosophy is primarily
the science of essence; it treats empirical facts about the existing world as given. Aquinas, ever the student of Aristotle, makes existence the primary objective of philosophical inquiry.

Since Stein’s project emphasizes continuity and congruity, it begins, as we have seen, with agreements between the classical and modern perspectives. These can serve as the means for carrying on a conversation about the important differences between phenomenology and Thomism. (The first form of Stein’s essay was a *dialogue* between Husserl and Aquinas.)

Perhaps the most decisive difference with respect to the nature of philosophy is the meaning and competence of *ratio*. Husserl restricts this term to *natural* reason, which on principle has no limits since the acquisition of knowledge is an endless task, an unending *process*. Truth is never fully actualized in the human mind. This means that if there is, in addition, a *supernatural* reason based on divine revelation, it has no place in philosophy; Husserl would relegate it to the sphere of religion because it depends upon faith, both theoretically and practically. Whether or not that faith is genuine cannot be determined or guaranteed by human reason. This is a significant difference from Thomas, for it amounts to denying that there could be such a thing as Christian philosophy.

One of the first things a student of Aquinas learns is that *ratio* has two sets of tasks, natural and supernatural. As Stein explains, the material task of natural reason (as Husserl would agree) is analysis of truths accessible to the human mind; but it also has a formal (or methodological) task—analysis of truths discovered by supernatural reason with a view to putting them into practice. The material task of supernatural reason is supplementing the truths known by natural reason with those of faith (fundamentally illegitimate for Husserl); its methodological task is to keep natural reason from error (a service Husserl is deprived of). *Ratio*, then, includes natural reason (endlessly approaching truth without ever fully attaining it) and supernatural reason (accepting as definitive the truths proposed by faith which only a few humans
could discover, and never with complete certainty, without the aid of revelation). For Aquinas, then, faith has everything to do with reason, as it provides our surest access to truth—ultimately God Himself, who is Truth, or the first truth. Truth simply is; God’s knowledge embraces it wholly and at once, is unending, infinite, ever full and at rest. As a gift of grace, faith is the starting point of rational inquiry and its own guarantee.

II – What Is First Philosophy?

Stein calls this the sharpest contrast between transcendental phenomenology and scholasticism, the one that has caused modern philosophical developments to diverge more and more from the pre-modern tradition.

For St. Thomas, as for Aristotle and his chief medieval commentators (Arabic and Latin), “first philosophy” is ontology, the inquiry into what substantially is, or being itself. In that the fullness of being—God Himself—is its final object, first philosophy is theocentric, and it confers the same orientation upon all the other philosophical questions, which it integrates. This makes philosophy unitary rather than diverse. A Thomist cannot concede fundamental significance to the investigations Husserl considered to be first philosophy.

In contrast to scholasticism (with its emphasis on the what), phenomenology begins with the how—the gathering, testing, and organizing of knowledge in the individual mind (egocentric). As in existentialism, philosophy is before all critical, methodological: The question confronting the “transcendentally purified consciousness” is how the mind “constructs” “the world” that it can explore in the immanence of the I. What is mainly necessary for this question to be fruitfully pursued, is the perfecting of a method which would enable the subject to work on the pure material of sense experience in constructing its world. Not God but the human Subject in the immanence of its consciousness is the starting point and the center of all philosophical
inquiry. Existence is defined as the self-identification of each consciousness—hence the priority of essence to existence in phenomenology.

**III – Philosophy as Method**

In spite of the strong divergence just summarized, Stein considered the methodological differences between Husserl and Aquinas to be superficial and even diversionary, and thus to hold out hope for a mutually beneficial dialogue. The last and longest section of her comparative study is devoted to this question. It comes down to finding ways of reconciling Husserl’s “intuition” (an immediate beholding of eternal truths) with St. Thomas’ “intus legere” (the logical processing and exploration of sense experience—reading the inside of things). As against the immediate insight of Husserl, the Thomistic version is mediated through species; inferences from premises must be actively acquired by agent intellect. Strictly speaking, immediate insight is proper to the mind of God.

Stein finds three important points of agreement under this difference: 1) All knowledge begins in the senses (sense experience). 2) All naturally acquired knowledge comes through the intellectual processing of sense data. 3) Both intuition and reading from within are receptive (passive) and protect the philosopher from subjectivist arbitrariness. These agreements about sensation, intellectual processing, and passivity of understanding are significant for Stein because they distinguish phenomenology (and protect it) from the more subjective (and dangerous) excesses of other contemporary idealistic currents, especially in the existentialist movement. Evidently, these cannot exist in the same universe of discourse with classical and especially scholastic philosophy.

Like her own follower, Karol Wojtyła, Stein can remain a bona fide Thomist even as she embraces what she finds compatible with it in the new phenomenological movement, and thus develop her primary project of finding sufficient convergence between classical and modern minds to promote a mutually beneficial dialogue. In the imaginary dialogue she constructs
between Husserl (in his study) and Aquinas (his late-night visitor), each learns something from the other. The phenomenological shift of the philosophical center between objective and subjective, between nature and person, thus serves to balance philosophy and give it a more robust capability in the coming revival of the intellectual life which Stein envisaged beyond the militant ideological totalitarianism that took her life.

The world of the future needs to learn from phenomenological personalism who we are at the same time that it is reminded by Thomistic naturalism what we are and what we are capable of knowing about the world. In this sense, Stein can admit with her phenomenological colleagues that in an important way method is the philosophia prima because the who and the what necessarily leads to the question how we subjects know the objects around us. In this context Stein places back on the agenda of philosophy the great question philosophers of all ages have had to confront in one way or another: the question of the compatibility of reason and faith. She was convinced that the better phenomenologists and scholastics get acquainted with each other, the more they will come to appreciate the significance of fides for ratio and of ratio for fides. And unless some working relationship is established there, post-modernism must mark the dead end of all philosophy. Reading between the lines, it is not too much to say that Stein also expected that dialogue to produce many conversion experiences like her own.

Epilogue

Here are some relevant passages from Pope John Paul’s recognition of Edith Stein (St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross) as a major figure in the contemporary revival of intellectual life—and possibly the next Doctor of the Church.

*Canonization Homily (11 Oct. 1998):*

“For a long time Edith Stein was a seeker. Her mind never tired of searching and her heart always yearned for hope. She traveled the arduous
path of philosophy with passionate enthusiasm. Eventually she was rewarded: she seized the truth. Or better: she was seized by it. Then she discovered that truth had a name: Jesus Christ.”

Angelus address following canonization Mass (11 Oct. 1998):

“Thanks to her studies of philosophy and to the grace of God, she discovered the truth about Christ..., adhered to this truth with all her heart, [and] studied it more deeply through contemplation until she experienced it in its fullness.... ‘The world is made up of differences,’ she wrote, ‘however in the end none of these will remain. Only great love will remain.’ Today these words find their most magnificent confirmation.”

Edith Stein, Co-Patroness of Europe (Apostolic Letter, 1 Oct. 1999):

“...Teresa Benedicta of the Cross..., by her entire life as thinker, mystic and martyr, built a kind of bridge between her Jewish roots and her commitment to Christ, taking part in the dialogue with contemporary philosophical thought with sound intuition, and to the end forcefully proclaiming by her martyrdom the ways of God and man....

“...it was precisely along the byways of philosophical investigation that grace awaited her: having chosen to undertake the study of phenomenology, she became sensitive to an objective reality which, far from ultimately dissolving in the subject, both precedes the subject and becomes the measure of subjective knowledge, and thus needs to be examined with rigorous objectivity. This reality must be heeded and grasped above all in the human being, by virtue of that capacity for ‘empathy’—a word dear to her—which enables one in some way to appropriate the lived experience of the other....”