

Book Review: Edith Stein: Philosopher Saint?

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EDITH STEIN: PHILOSOPHER SAINT?

Sarah Borden

Edith Stein

London and New York: Continuum, 2003, x + 155 pp., ISBN 0-8264-5261-2

This book is a delight to read. It is lucid, succinct, and filled with well-honed examples and analogies, all of which help rescue Stein's philosophy from the hagiography and turgid accounts in English that have often been its fate. It is also timely given women's studies' interest in Stein's account of femininity (see, for example, Baseheart et al., 1995), and recent cognitive science enthusiasm for her account of empathy (see, for example, Thompson, 2001).

But what is empathy, how is it related to femininity, and what are some of its problems which Borden's book about Edith Stein illuminates? Born in Breslau on 12 October 1891, the youngest child of a large Jewish family, brought up by a widowed mother who ran the family lumber business after Edith's father died in July 1893, Edith went to the local university in 1911. Here, through studying history and psychology, she became interested in the problem of empathy posed by the philosophy of phenomenology developed by Edmund Husserl. His philosophy challenged, as Borden helpfully explains, both neo-Kantian idealist emphasis on innate ideas and empiricist emphasis on external reality by seeking to found the arts and sciences on a methodology grounded in the unity of the inner subject with the outer objects of experience. But this, as Stein noted in her autobiography (begun in April 1933 but not published till 1985), raised the following problem as regards empathy:

Husserl had said that an objective outer world could only be experienced intersubjectively, i.e., through a plurality of perceiving individuals who relate in a mutual exchange of information. Accordingly, an experience of other individuals is a prerequisite. To the experience, an application of the work of Theodor Lipps, Husserl gave the name *Einfühlung* [Empathy]. What it consists of, however, he nowhere detailed. Here was a lacuna to be filled; therefore, I wished to examine what empathy might be. (see Stein, 1986: 269)

Defining empathy, in her 1917 work on the subject, as the experience of others as living, sensing, thinking, willing beings, Stein arguably resolved this problem by insisting on the immediacy of empathy, as in the sadness 'read in another's face' (see Stein, 1964: 10). She also highlighted empathy's immediacy by distinguishing it from knowing another's experience through inference or projecting one's experience into them. For this assumes prior consciousness of oneself which, she argued, only comes fully into being through empathetically experiencing another experiencing oneself as a centre of consciousness. Since empathy is thus the source of consciousness of oneself, according to Stein, it cannot also be its effect.

But empathy also raises another problem mentioned by Stein in 1917, namely the problem that if, as she argued, empathy is essentially embodied then how is empathetic experience of the grace of God possible? Answering this question, she argued, entails studying 'religious consciousness' (Stein, 1964: 107). Later, Borden maintains, Stein resolved this problem by combining rather than displacing as some have argued phenomenology with theology. She combined the evidence of experience with that of revelation.

First, however, she resolved – more implicitly than explicitly it seems from Borden's account – another problem posed by empathy, namely the risk that empathizing with others leaves no room for a life of one's own. Stein arguably

resolved this problem by distinguishing between four levels of consciousness – physical, sensory, mental and personal – insisting that empathy is mediated by the mind and senses, leaving a personal core which, Borden emphasizes, is ‘uniquely private and inaccessible to others’ and the source of each individual’s freedom to choose which values motivate them (p. 43).

Stein developed her four levels account of consciousness, as well as related accounts of community and the sovereignty of the state, also usefully explained by Borden, in treatises aimed at securing her a university appointment. But this proved in vain, partly because of the then prevalent sex discrimination, which Husserl seemingly endorsed. Stein’s protest to the responsible government minister perhaps contributed to this discrimination being overruled in the early 1920s. Stein, however, had meanwhile become a Catholic after reading St Teresa of Avila’s autobiography in 1921. She was baptised on 1 January 1922, and the next year got a job teaching in a girls’ high school and teacher training college run by Dominican nuns in Speyer. From here, starting in 1927, she gave women’s studies lectures in various cities across Europe.

Continuing to adopt Husserl’s method of stripping phenomena of what is fortuitous so as to discover their essence, Borden argues, Stein now spoke and wrote about the essence of femininity which she acknowledged it had been impolitic to speculate about prior to women gaining the vote. Women’s suffrage secured, Stein now dwelt on differences between the sexes, not least regarding empathy. Whereas masculinity requires ‘abstract thought, and independent creativity,’ she claimed, ‘feminine qualities are required wherever feeling, intuition, empathy, and adaptability come into play . . . [this involving] the *total person* in caring for, cultivating, helping, understanding, and in encouraging the gifts of the other’ (see Stein, 1987b: 81–2). In this, however, Stein extended the meaning of empathy well beyond her 1917 account of it as simply the experience of another as an experiencing human being, which is arguably fundamental to being human, male as well as female.¹ Borden does not point this out. She does, however, note problems observed by Stein in relating empathy to femininity, specifically the risk of over-intrusiveness, ‘excessive interest in others’ and the urge to surrender and lose oneself in others thereby doing justice to neither one’s own nor their humanity (see Stein, 1987a: 250). On the other hand, Borden notes, Stein also emphasized the blessings of femininity, which, for her, included ‘exceptional receptivity for God’s work in the soul’ (Stein, 1987a: 253).

Stein wrote more about God in a 1929 essay and 1936 book, both of which Borden helpfully recounts, noting in the process that, whereas another of Husserl’s pupils, Heidegger, dwelt on the angst of non-being, Stein dwelt on its ground in faith in God, which she likened to the trust of a child in its mother. Her last book, says Borden, was about St John of the Cross, whose name together with that of St Teresa, Stein took on becoming a nun following her dismissal, as a Jew, from her teaching post in Münster (where she had moved from Speyer in 1932) soon after Hitler’s rise to power in early 1933. In this book Stein arguably resolved another problem posed by empathy, namely the contradiction between what one could call passive surrender to empathetically experiencing God and active autonomy and freedom enhanced from thus welcoming Him into one’s personal core, or ‘interior castle’, to use a term adopted by Stein’s namesake, St Teresa. Stein, says Borden, resolved this contradiction by emphasizing ‘consent’ to receiving and following ‘the Spirit of God’ (p. 132; cf. Simone Weil’s similar emphasis on ‘consent’, in Sayers [2003: 102]).

This does not, however, entirely obviate another problem of empathy, specifically that of passive surrender to another involving ‘masochistic desire for pain’,

which, says Borden (p. 130), Stein deplored as perverse. It is therefore ironic that the Catholic Church has chosen to depict Stein as a martyr to secure her fast-track elevation to sainthood, thereby seeking to justify the foundation of a Carmelite convent by the gates of Auschwitz near Birkenau, where Stein was gassed to death as a Jew on 9 August 1942. This appropriation by the Catholic Church of Stein's suffering is, however, entirely unwarranted given that, in 1933, the Pope ignored her plea to him to intercede against Nazi persecution of the Jews. In pointing all this out, Borden puts in question the 'Philosopher Saint' title of a January 2003 BBC radio programme about Stein. It is a pity the programme's scriptwriters did not have the benefit of Borden's book. Most of all, however, it has the immense benefit of shedding light – via the clarity, elegance, thoroughness and brevity of Borden's account of Stein's philosophy – on femininity and related problems of empathy studied, as indicated at the outset of this review, by many in cognitive science and women's studies today.

NOTE

1. My thanks to Marianne Sawicki for pointing this out in email correspondence about her work on Stein (see, for example, Sawicki, 1997).

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