

MISUNDERSTANDING AND INSIGHT ABOUT EDITH STEIN'S PHILOSOPHY

JOHN H. NOTA

Department of Philosophy, Brock University, St. Catharines, Ont., Canada L2S 3A1

The purpose of this article is to free the reader from a possible misunderstanding of the philosophy of Edith Stein, the first assistant of the 'father' of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, and to give some insight in the importance of her own personal philosophy. Let me start by trying to make up for a misunderstanding I unwillingly may have caused myself many years ago. August 1947, five years after Edith Stein's death in the gaschambers of Auschwitz, I wrote a commemorative article, I think it was the first one ever, on the person of Edith Stein. I wrote: 'More important than Edith Stein's work is her person.' In a sense this was somehow a superfluous statement. A person is always more valuable than a book. A philosopher is more important than his/her philosophy. To my great surprise and disappointment I found out that people started to quote these words in Holland and elsewhere to 'prove' that the philosophy of this phenomenologist is not very interesting. And that has never been my intention. On the contrary. Of course, the very great philosophers in a century, when it is a good one, you can count with the fingers of one hand. But Edith Stein is without a doubt one of the most important students of Edmund Husserl and Husserl was very happy that she agreed to his proposal to become his first assistant: 'Do you want to come with me? Yes, I would be glad to work with you.' This is a quotation from Husserl, and Edith Stein (1985: 371) continues in her autobiography: 'I do not know, who of us was the happier one. We just looked like a young couple at the moment of the engagement.' This moment did not last very long, because Husserl did not give a chance to his assistant to be herself and to philosophize in her own autonomous way. But I think one can say without exaggerating that only very few phenomenologists, and

certainly not the 'master' himself, were able to explain the new method as well as Edith Stein did, and her publications show that she practised the method in a very personal independent way. And because she was 'a born phenomenologist', as she said implicitly about herself and as her friend Hedwig Conrad Martius (1983: 84) wrote it very explicitly, she could not stop philosophizing once she discovered the truth in her confrontation with Jesus Christ in his Church. This confrontation is a confrontation with the mystery, and a mystery is not the end of our thinking, but a challenge to the human intellect.

Roman Ingarden, who appreciated her person and her philosophy so much, was not able to follow his friend in her later works. He thought that she lived the togetherness of reason and faith as a kind of tragedy. I had the good 'fortune' to become her friend at the end of her life, and one of the things we had in common was our mutual interest in phenomenology, and we did not feel ourselves in any way handicapped by our Catholic faith, but on the contrary, just very much inspired by it. This faith is for an open phenomenologist not a prejudice, but a widening of our experience and its horizon. This holds even for the unbeliever who may say with Gabriel Marcel: 'I believe in the belief of others.' Indeed the given is beyond the given by man, it includes God, giving himself to us. This is very clear in Edith Stein's publications after 1929/1930: her essays on Edmund Husserl and Thomas Aquino, *Finite and Eternal Being*, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, *St. John of the Cross*, to mention only the explicitly philosophical and theological works. Especially in her most important work '*Finite and Eternal Being*' she deals with her attitude in an explicit theoretical way and all over the book she remains faithful to the Anselmian: 'Intelligo ut credam, credo ut intelligam – I understand that I may believe, I believe that I may understand,' as a principle of her philosophy.

To me it is an unforgivable shortcoming in H. Spiegelberg's (1982: 218) third edition of the *Phenomenological Movement* that he only spent half a page on Edith Stein, followed by a short outdated bibliography, with only one article of 1942 on her phenomenology. His reason to do this is her 'outspokenly Thomistic philosophy'. According to Spiegelberg 'phenomenology has (in *Finite and Eternal Being*) merely a supplementary role as a handmaid of Thomism. Basic are the specifically Thomist categories of act and potency, of form, matter and substance, rather than concepts shared with phenomenology such as essence and existence.' You can hardly believe your eyes. For anybody who read more than two pages of the book it is clear that

Edith Stein is not Thomistic in her philosophy, that she deviates again and again from Thomas, that she is influenced by other thinkers, e.g. Scotus in important issues, that she deals all the time with essence and existence. Moreover Aristotle would be very much surprised to hear that 'act and potency' are Thomist categories and I do not see why Edith Stein's friend Hedwig Conrad Martius, while she is also using 'the categoric scheme of act and potency' (Spiegelberg, 1982: 220), deserves ten pages and an extensive updated bibliography. One can only conclude that the history of philosophy does have its presuppositions. Of course Hedwig Conrad Martius is an important philosopher, but Edith is important as well. The real student of her book on 'Finite and Eternal Being' will see that Edith Stein remains a phenomenologist and philosophizes in her own personal way, with an open eye to great thinkers. The only thing I regret is that she spends so much time on Gredt, because somebody recommended this textbook to her. He thought she was a beginner, whereas as a matter of fact she should have dealt with neo-thomists like e.g. Maréchal instead. On the other hand she is constantly in touch with E. Przywara S.J., a great original thinker. Anyway, phenomenologists like Husserl and Scheler, to mention only the greatest, appreciated her philosophy very much.

Husserl (Jaegerschmid, 1981: 51) said once about Edith Stein: 'She views then, as from a mountain, the clarity and the expanse of the horizon in its wonderful transparency and openness, but at the same time she has also the other turn, the turning inwards, and the perspective of her Ego.' And Max Scheler talked in one of his last lectures in Cologne with great admiration about Edith Stein and her philosophy. He even interrupted his lecture and asked his students, if they could tell him her address, and else to give her his warmest regards when someone might meet her. As a matter of fact Edith received this message after Scheler's sudden death, and she took it, as she told me, as a sign from heaven to pray even more for him.

What is the reason that Husserl and Scheler respected her philosophy so much, and what is the important contribution of Edith Stein to philosophy of all times, and especially of our contemporary times?

It is interesting that both Husserl and Hedwig Conrad Martius, who knew her person and her philosophy so well and so intimately, like to stress her *radicalism*. Husserl said to Sister Adelgundis Jaegerschmid (1981: 517: 'With her (Edith) everything is absolutely authentic . . . after all, in a Jew you find love for radicalism and love for martyrdom' (thinking about her life in the Carmel, not knowing about the real fulfillment in the gas-

chambers of Auschwitz). And Hedwig Conrad Martius (1983: 86) tries to explain why so many Jewish phenomenologists became phenomenologists in an article about Edith: 'The Jewish spirit is characterized by a certain unconditional radicalism, which showed itself in good and bad things, even in the worst, but also again and again in the best and the highest. Phenomenology however means by itself a radicalism of purely spiritual openness and availability to things that cannot be more surpassed. Part of the essence of phenomenology is a complete suspension of all prejudgements Phenomenology has the unconditional capacity of a pure and undisturbed intending of the thing' Hedwig Conrad Martius (1983: 83), in opposition to Spiegelberg and Ingarden, mentions her friend's 'courage without any prejudice' in the book 'Finite and Eternal Being'. The wonderful quality of her phenomenology is her ability to be faithful to and consistent in this phenomenological attitude all the way. I think that she is better in this respect than many other great phenomenologists. She owes this partly, as Husserl and Hedwig Conrad Martius say, to her Judaism, that wants to go to the roots. She remained faithful to her origin till the end of her life, when she, at the moment of her arrest in Echt by the nazis who forced her to leave the Carmel convent in Echt, said to her crying sister Rosa: 'Come, let us go for our people.'

Another reason for her faithfulness to phenomenology is her femininity. A good phenomenologist has to combine a radical openness to the phenomena, which he allows to reveal themselves to his careful listening, with an excellent capacity to respond and express the experience. This presupposes a combination of activity and passivity which is more part of the nature of woman than of man. A man wants to fight, conquer and dominate instead of patiently listening first, before he is starting to speak. So the male philosopher is more inclined to rationalism of calculating reason of all kinds than to the faithful expression of intuitive experience. Edith Stein owed her method to Husserl, but she remained more of a phenomenologist than 'the master' himself when he took his idealistic turn. She remained a realist and was able to give the right reasons for her attitude. And she had more patience than Scheler who took often his first intuitions for the right ones, and did not check them again and again, before putting them into writing.

A good example of Edith Stein's approach can be found in her intelligent understanding criticism of Heidegger's *Being and Time*. Let me give two examples:

In *Finite and Eternal Being* Edith Stein is confronted with the experience of being *independent* and *dependent*. This double aspect she discovers within her own being confronts her with the phenomenon of anxiety, an anxiety finally for 'nothingness'. Here she disagrees with Martin Heidegger that the phenomenon of anxiety would be the dominating vital feeling. 'Because of the undeniable fact that my being is a passing being that goes from moment to moment and is exposed to the possibility of non-being, – because this is accompanied by another fact, just as undeniable as the former, that *I am* notwithstanding this passing by, that I am *kept in being*, from moment to moment, and that I contain a permanency within my passing being, I know that Somebody supports me and this gives me rest and certainty. It is not the self-conscious certainty of a man who stands on his two feet by his own power, but the sweet and blessed certainty of a child that is being carried by a strong arm. This certainly is after all not less a radical certainty. Or would one call a child "sensible", when it would live continuously in anxiety, because mother might drop it?' In other words: trust is just as basic to 'Dasein' as anxiety.

The other instance she is dealing with in her addition (*Anhang*) to *Eternal and Finite Being* wherein she talks explicitly about Heidegger's philosophy, is her criticism of his qualification of Dasein as *Being-unto-death*. She does not disagree with Heidegger about the importance of death in our human life, but she tries, as the born phenomenologist, to analyse better the phenomenon of death. She is asking the question: Is there an experience of our own death? To this question Heidegger answers affirmatively, but she likes to elucidate the answer. Moreover, he denies that there is an experience of the death of others. Here she disagrees with him completely. Of course, each human being dies his/her own death. But we do have an experience of the death of others, especially of the death of our loved ones. She is talking here from her personal experience as a nurse in the hospital during the war, and later in the Carmel when her fellow-sisters died. Moreover her own mother was dying in the days she was writing on this issue. She mentions how different people have a different way of dying. Sometimes it is a real agony, other times it is a dropping asleep. Often the dead person lies after the agony as a victor: in majestic rest and deep peace. She describes how sometimes, even before the moment of death, all vestiges of struggle and suffering disappear, how the dying person becomes transfigured by a new life, so that all who are present can see it. His or her eyes look into the light that is inaccessible to us, and its shine remains present

on the lifeless body. These and similar experiences make it clear to her that *Dasein* as being-unto-death is not being unto an end, but to a new kind of Being. The meaning of death is the transition from this life to another life, even when it has to be through the bitterness of the violent break of natural *Dasein* (Stein, 1962).

These examples may suggest that Edith Stein is very close in her philosophising to the life of ordinary people. She talks about a child in his mother's arms, about dying and death. Indeed, she is, and I think this is a compliment to her, for philosophy does not improve by being more understandable and more abstract and remote from human life. But at the same time Edith Stein deals extensively with the most difficult issues in the 'perennial philosophy', the relation between beings and Being, essence and existence, potency and act, individual and person, male and female, finite and eternal Being. She does not hesitate to give her very personal answers, and she is clearly inspired not only by her scholarship, but first of all by her experience, an experience deepened by her prayer, her intimate union with God. When she talks about Eternal Being, as a philosopher, she joins the awe for the mystery of the greatness of God of Maimonides with the trust she experienced with her Jewish mother at home and her own religious experience in the Catholic Church. 'My secret is mine,' she said once in this respect, but one may feel the depth of that experience in her actions and writings, especially in her last book on St. John of the Cross. And here again she remains the phenomenologist who uses her great talent to describe the painful and blissful experience of the soul who is being called by God to a mystical union with him. How wonderful is she in explaining the difference and unity between sign and symbol, between Cross and cosmic night.

However, to understand the depth and greatness of the philosophy of Edith Stein one should fulfill the first condition of the phenomenologist: approach *all* her writings in a real 'epoche' – suspension of judgement and especially pre-judgement. This will prevent misunderstanding and open new horizons to a better insight in the mystery of Being. Her own mystical experience made her very careful in speaking about the hidden God of her love, but inspired her to speak even better about the world of God's creation.

REFERENCES

- Conrad Martius, H. (1983). *Meine Freundin Edith Stein*. In Herbstrith, W. (Ed.), *Edith Stein*. Herderbücherei, Bd. 1055. Freiburg i.B.: Herder.
- Jaegerschmid, A., O.S.B. (1981). *Gespräche mit Husserl*. Stimmen der Zeit.
- Spiegelberg, H. (1982). *The phenomenological movement*. The Hague: Nijhoff.
- Stein, E. (1962). *Martin Heidegger's Existentialphilosophie*. In *Welt und Person*. *Edith Stein Werke*, Bd. VI, 100–107. Louvain: Nauwelaerts; Freiburg: Herder.
- Stein, E. (1985). *Aus dem Leben einer jüdischen Familie*. *Werke*, Bd. VII. Freiburg i. Br.: Druten.
- German text quoted from 'Finite and Eternal Being'. In Stein, E. (1950). *Endliches und ewiges Sein*. *Edith Stein Werke*, Bd. II, 56 f. Louvain: Nauwelaerts; Freiburg i.Br.: Herder.

Edith Stein, Selected bibliography

The Edith Stein Archives in Brussels (Belgium) have published so far ten volumes, edited by L. Gelber and Fr. Romaeus Leuven O.C.D., published by Nauwelaerts-Louvain and Herder-Freiburg (Vol. I–VII) and De Maas en Waler-Druten and Herder-Freiburg (VIII–X):

- I *Kreuzeswissenschaft, Studie über Joannes a Cruce*, 1950, 1954.
- II *Endliches und ewiges Sein, Versuch eines Aufstiegs zum Sinn des Seins*, 1950, 1962.
- III *Des Hl. Thomas von Aquino Untersuchungen über die Wahrheit*, Bd. I, 1952.
- IV *Des Hl. Tomas von Aquino Untersuchungen über die Wahrheit*, Bd. II, 1955.
- V *Die Frau*, 1959 (*Woman*, translation in progress).
- VI *Welt und Person*, 1962.
- VII *Aus dem Leben einer jüdischen Familie*, 1965 (*Life in a Jewish family*. This autobiography will be published by The Institute for Carmelite Studies, Washington, D.C. in 1986, in English translation).
- VIII *Selbstbildnis in Briefen 1916–1934*, Vol. I, 1976 (Selection of letters).
- IX *Selbstbildnis in Briefen 1934–1942*, Vol. II, 1977.
- X *Heil im Unheil. Das Leben Edith Steins. Reife und Vollendung*, 1983. This volume is not from Edith Stein, but about her by Fr. Romaeus Leuven O.C.D.

In English:

- On the problem of empathy*, translated by Waltraut Stein, The Hague: Nijhoff, 1964 (translation of *Zum Problem der Einfühlung*, Diss. Halle 1917, reprint München: Kaffke, 1917).
- The Science of the Cross*, translated by Hilda Graef, Chicago: Regnery, 1960 (translation of *Kreuzeswissenschaft*).
- Ways to know God*, translated by Rudolf Allers, New York: Edith Stein Guild, 1981 (translation of *Wege der Gotteserkenntnis*).
- Writings*, selected, translated and introduced by Hilda Graef, Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1956.

Life in a Jewish family, 1891–1916: An autobiography, translated by Josephine Koepfel, O.C.D. Washington, DC: Institute for Carmelite Studies Publications, 1986.

More English translations are in progress. A more extensive bibliography one may find in the German biography: Waltraud Herbstrith, *Das wahre Gesicht Edith Steins*, München: Kaffke, 1983, pp. 183–196. This excellent book has been translated into English: *Edith Stein, A biography*, San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985, but it lacks the long bibliography of the German original.

A solid book on her philosophy is in French: Reuben Guilead, *De la phénoménologie à la science de la croix*, Louvain-Paris: Nauwelaerts, 1974.

A report on a Symposium on her person and philosophy will be published by The Institute for Carmelite Studies, Washington, DC, in 1986, with articles by Freda Oben, Sr. Catherine Basehart, John H. Nota, Ralph McInerny et al.

Also in English: a letter from Edith Stein to Roman Ingarden, in Roman Ingarden, *Edith Stein on her activity as an assistant of Edmund Husserl*, PPR XXIII (1962), 155 ff.

Important for readers of *Human Studies*, available in Husserl's Jahrbuch: Edith Stein: *Beiträge zur philosophischen Begründung der Psychologie und der Geisteswissenschaften*, JPPF V (1922), 2–283. Also in reprint, Tübingen 1970.