

EDITH STEIN BEYOND DESCARTES: EMPATHY AS GROUND FOR KNOWLEDGE

Rocco Buttiglione*

In order to understand the significance of Edith Stein in the history of modern philosophy we must first situate her within the development of phenomenology. Phenomenology wants “to go back to things in themselves”. E. Husserl does not want, however, to set aside the whole development of modern philosophy or to go back directly to classical philosophy. In classical philosophy being stands at the beginning: “*ens est illud quod primo cadit in cognitione humana*”.¹ In modern philosophy at the beginning stands the universal doubt on being. Knowledge must be built upon absolute certainties that resist the trial of universal doubt. We will neither ask nor answer, on this occasion, the question whether this attitude is justified or what are the limits within which it is justified. It will suffice here to state the fact that the movement of Husserl towards things in themselves does not set aside the Cartesian stance. Husserl is no Thomist or Neo-Thomist.

We also, then, will begin with the “Cogito ergo sum” of Descartes. This is, in one sense, the absolute beginning of modern philosophy. How shall we translate this easy Latin sentence? The easiest translation is “I think and then I am”. If I were not, if I did not exist, I would not think. The certainty of my being then

*Dr. ROCCO BUTTIGLIONE, Italian philosopher, politician, the minister for EU policies (from 2001 to 2005) and then Minister for Cultural Assets and Activities (from 2005 to 2006) in Silvio Berlusconi's governments. Currently Italian senator nominated to become Italy's European Union Commissioner for Justice, Freedom and Security (but he withdrew himself from the nomination) in 2004. Author of *Dialettica e nostalgia* (1978), *La crisi dell'economia marxista: Gli inizi della scuola di Francoforte* (1979), *Il pensiero di Karol Wojtyla* (1982), *Ethik der Leistung* (1988; co-edited with Hans Thomas), *La crisi della morale* (1991), *Die Verantwortung des Menschen in einem globalen Weltzeitalter* (1996; co-edited with Rocco Buttiglione, Radim Palouš, Josef Seifert), *Wie erkennt man Naturrecht?* (1998; co-edited with Josef Seifert), *Karol Wojtyla: The Thought of the Man Who Became Pope John Paul II* (1997), *The moral mandate for freedom: Reflections on Centesimus Annus* (1997); taught philosophies and political science at Saint Pius V University, International Academy of Philosophy at Liechtenstein-Switzerland.

¹St. Thomas Aquinas: *Expositio super Librum Boethii de Trinitate*, q. I a. III ad III.

seems to be a consequence of the certainty of the fact that I think. On second thought, it seems that this translation does not correspond to the true philosophical meaning of the famous sentence of Descartes. A second translation seems to be “I think; I am”. Grammatically it is less correct because the “ergo” or “then” that expresses a logical connection goes lost. On the other hand, this translation seems to do justice to the peculiar and unique experience of the cogito. It is not a deduction from thought to being. In the same act of consciousness and with the same absolute evidence, we become aware of the fact that we think and of the fact that we are. Thought and being are given together and with the same immediacy. If it were not so, then the certitude of being would be dependent upon the certitude of my act of thought through the mediation of logic. Logic tells us ‘in order to think one has to exist’, and non-existing objects do not think. This would however contradict the universal character of doubt. In this initial and fundamental moment of the cogito, I doubt all, and therefore I doubt the logical laws. If the “*cogito ergo sum*” were a deduction of being from thought then Descartes should give us a justification of the logical laws before using them in a deductive process. In principle, this would be neither impossible nor meaningless, but it contradicts the structure of the Cartesian argument. In Descartes, logical laws are not immediately given but are dependent upon the veracity of God. God creates them, and their validity cannot be affirmed if we have not yet demonstrated the existence of God. The only way to save the cogito is to understand it as a double self-presentation, in the same act, of being and of thought.

The difference between the first and the second formulation is that in the second formulation we have a direct presence of being in consciousness. In one case, what is present in the ego is just being as thought, in the second it is real being. We will see soon the reason why this difference is so important. It becomes apparent if we now turn our attention to the meaning of the word I. The ego is the necessary presupposition of thought. I am the subject of thought and the idea of the ego accompanies all other ideas that are present in me. I am the subject that accompanies all my thoughts. This is the logical function of the ego. It is purely formal. If we however accept the idea that the ego is really given in self-consciousness than this ego is not only a formal presupposition of thought but also a real content of thought. The ego is given to us in consciousness—not only as a subject—but also as an object. The ego as object is a real content of consciousness and as such can be analyzed. In the ego and through the ego a

whole world is given. All what we know and all what we make experience of is present in the ego as a content of the ego. These phenomena inspired the first phenomenological discovery of Edmund Husserl. He wanted to go back to things in themselves, and it seems that the things in themselves of Husserlian phenomenology are the phenomena as they are immediately given in consciousness—that is as contents of the ego. We have made an important step forward in relation to a purely neo-Kantian philosophy in which the transcendental ego is just the support of the cognitive faculty of man. Can we however say that we have reached the things as they are in themselves? On this, Husserl in his *Logical Investigations*² is not entirely clear. Some (or perhaps most) of his students in *Göttingen* were convinced that *things in themselves* contained in the phenomenological motto “Back to things themselves” were the things of the real world. It seems however that for the later Husserl, through the phenomenological turn, we have reached things as they are in our consciousness, as they are for us or, rather, for me. In that perspective, it is difficult to speak of a *we* or of an *us*.³ The other is given to me only as an intentional content of my consciousness. What stands beyond this intentional content remains unknown as much as the noumenon of Kant. I am isolated in my cognitive prison, and I cannot know if the image of the other, which I perceive in myself, has a real existence beyond the limits of my own consciousness. Here transcendental phenomenology encounters the same limit and the same objection as all forms of idealistic philosophy. It is the objection of solipsism: the subject cannot reach beyond the borders of his own self. We can describe all the richness of the contents of consciousness but we will never be able to trespass the limits of consciousness⁴

It is as if we could not see clearly whether we are leading a real life or are just immersed in an interactive game—a game in which all contents are projected

²London Routledge 1970. first German edition 1900, second edition revised by the author 1913.

³Edmund. Husserl. *Ideas Pertaining to a pure Phenomenology and a Phenomenological Philosophy*. First book: *General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, The Hague, Martin Nijhoff, 1983; first German edition 1913.

⁴For a criticism to Husserl from the point of view of realistic phenomenology see Josef Seifert *Back to Things Themselves*, New York, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987.

in front of us by a kind of interior television. Husserl wanted to trespass the limits of mere psychologism that is of the perception of psychological data. Sense experience is reflected in the human psyche, but in the realm of our inner experience some data present themselves as real, and others do not. Although some data may present themselves as real, we ultimately remain one-step removed from the real object. Are the data that present themselves as real constituted by our consciousness as real or do they possess a kind of autonomous existence? Let us make one example: the proposition "two plus two makes four" is clearly different from a dream in which we see a winged donkey. "Two plus two makes four" clearly presents itself as real and is real. The basis of this reality is however interior to the subject. Mathematical propositions are true (real) but would be true even if we were the only thinking subject and the only existing being. They do not carry us beyond the border of our subject. We are here beyond the limits of psychologism but wholly within the borders of the subject. We can make a further step forward towards reality and say that the world of phenomena presents itself to us in a way that seems to presuppose the existence of a plurality of subjects. The world of phenomena is an intersubjective world. Is it enough to say that we have reached beyond the limits of the subject and have reached the real thing, the thing in itself? It does not seem so. The subjects that we find and describe, and who sometimes may look like really existing men, are nevertheless constituted by us or rather by the only subject whose existence is really given to us, that is oneself. Hamlet may seem to be more real (in one sense) than most people we meet in our everyday life, he is however a fictional character constituted by a human subject, the author. He is not a real human being and in knowing Hamlet we do not transcend the limits of our own subject⁵.

Can we go any further? Can we reach the real object existing beyond the limits of the subject? Does such a real object exist? Transcendental phenomenology and realist phenomenology differentiate themselves according to the answers that each one gives to these questions. Up to this point, we have considered the possibility for the subject to transcend its limit and reach reality beyond this limit. We have considered if it is possible that the things in themselves phenomenology reaches are not just the phenomena as they give themselves in consciousness but actual existing things. Can an intentional act

⁵See Roman Ingarden *The Cognition of the literary Work of Art*, Evanston Illinois: Northwestern University Press 1973. First Polish edition 1937.

trespass the limits of consciousness? It seems that it cannot or at least the question must remain undecided.

Now we enter into a different path. This is the path of empathy. What is empathy? The first one who spoke of empathy was Husserl himself. In *Ideas for a pure Phenomenology and phenomenological Philosophy*, Husserl says that the intersubjective world is the correlate of the intersubjective experience, i.e. of experience mediated by “empathy”. What exactly is this intersubjective experience? Moreover, consequently, what is the proper meaning of empathy? Here begins the research of Edith Stein, who was then a student of Husserl and a young woman of 22 years. Only a few months after her arrival in *Göttingen* from Breslau, and after having attended his summer seminar in Göttingen in 1913, Edith Stein decided to write her doctoral thesis under the direction of Edmund Husserl. The topic was exactly empathy. Edith Stein moved from Göttingen to Freiburg im Breisgau, in order to follow Husserl who had been appointed to a chair of philosophy at Albert Ludwig University. She gave it the title “On the Problem of Empathy”.⁶ The original title was *Das Einfühlungsproblem in seiner geschichtlichen Entwicklung und in phaenomenologischer Betrachtung*.⁷ *Einfuehlung* has been translated into English with the rather unusual word “empathy”. It comes from Greek and is a rather literal translation of *Einfuehlung*. *Em* corresponds to *Ein* in German or to the English “in.” It indicates the act of entering or being in a given space. *Fuehlen* corresponds to the English “to feel” and to the Greek *pathein*. The Greek word *pathein* has however a shadow of meaning which differentiates it from the German *fuehlen*. It implies what I feel is a consequence of an action. This action is not my action, I am not the active subject of the action, and I am rather the passive subject or the object of the action. The *pathein* is something that is done to me or happens in me. Although the original word is *Einfuehlung*, the English translation reveals to us something more than the original German. In the *Einfuehlung*, we change the perspective of our research. We do not move from the subject following the intentional act until it reaches (or, more likely, does not reach) the real object beyond the limits of consciousness. Consciousness cannot be transcended by intentional acts. What happens in the case of empathy is something different. Empathy is the presence of the other as other in us. We do not reach the other through our reaching out

⁶in *The Collected Works of Edith Stein* v. 3 ICS Publications 1989.

⁷Phil. Diss., Freiburg 1917.

towards a reality that exists outside of our consciousness but on the contrary, we perceive in us the presence of another who has penetrated in our consciousness. This implies a certain passivity of the subject. Passive, by the way, etymologically comes from the Greek verb *pathein*, the same verb from which the word empathy is derived. How is it possible that 'another one' may be present in me? In empathy, the intentional act discovers a knowledge material in the subject that is clearly not originated in the subject.

Edith Stein distinguishes sharply between empathy and other states of affairs that may be similar or analogous to empathy but are not empathy.

To feel the living experience of the other is different from knowing about the interior feelings of the other. In this case, we know but we do not feel. In the case of unipathy (*mitfühlen*, to feel together), the same sentiment is experienced by a plurality of persons at the same time. Each one of them remains clearly the only subject of these feelings. Let us make one example. Imagine that the Houston Astros win the World Series. We can imagine that all the supporters of the Astros will feel the same sentiments of profound satisfaction and great enthusiasm. However, the cause of these sentiments in me will not be the similar sentiment present in another Astros' fan. The cause will be the victory of the Astros, which causes analogous feelings in the soul of a plurality of subjects. I would be equally happy for the victory of my team, even if I were completely alone.

Copathy comes nearer to empathy. Here the cause of my joy is the joy of the other. There is a causal relationship between the state of mind of the other and my own state of mind. I am happy because you are happy but my happiness is not your happiness. If I were not your friend but your enemy, I could as well be happy because you are unhappy. Your suffering could be the cause of my joy. In any case, however, I do not feel your sentiment. Drawing nearer to empathy, we find the imitation of the other. We see another human being rejoicing and we imitate his joy. The imitation causes in me a similar experience but this is not yet empathy. Similar to imitation is the association. I see the other performing a certain action, for instance laughing, and I remember that I myself have performed the same action and I feel again the same sentiment I felt on that occasion. I suppose that the other now experiences the same feelings I experienced in a similar occasion. I know about the feeling of the other but I do not feel what the other feels.

In the inference through analogy, I know that, as a rule, certain bodily expressions or also some verbal expressions correspond to certain states of mind.

When I see those bodily or hear those verbal expressions, I suppose the presence of the corresponding feelings. From the inference through analogy derives an important field of phenomenological research that E. Stein has made possible but has not developed. This is the study of the language of the body. Modern linguistics developed on the basis of the strong distinction, stated by De Saussure, between the *signifiant* (significant) and the *signifié* (signified)⁸. The relation between significant and signified, according to De Saussure, is arbitrary. In inference through analogy, that is in the case of the language of the body, the relation between significant and signified is not arbitrary but necessary, perhaps because the sentiment is expressed through a mimetic act that imitates the action corresponding to the sentiment. Edith Stein, however, opens the path leading to the language of the body but does not thread herself that path.⁹ She is concentrated on the issue of empathy, and we also shall go back to empathy.

We have seen what empathy is not, but we have not come to a definition of empathy, although we have by way of approximation drawn nearer to empathy. The reason of this difficulty in finding a proper definition lies perhaps in the fact empathy is a primary quality which cannot be defined but must be the object of an act of direct intuition. It is like when a diapason causes another one to resound. Empathy is a kind of interior resonance through which the experience of the other makes itself present in me or, rather, the other becomes present in me¹⁰.

One of my favorite poems is a lyric that stands at the beginning of German poetry. It says:

You are mine, I am yours,
 ("dû bist mîn, ich bin dîn:

⁸De Saussure Course in general Linguistics, Glasgow, Fontana/Collins, 1977. Original edition in French 1918.

⁹Pope John Paul II provides many insights regarding the language of the body in his theology of the body. See Pope John Paul II. *Man and Woman He created them: a Theology of the Body*, Pauline Books and Media, 2006.

¹⁰This idea of a kind of cognitive and emotional resonance in empathy seems to be confirmed by recent research of Rizzolatti in the field of Neurosciences. See G. Rizzolatti and L. Craighero *The Mirror-Neuron System* in Annual Rev. Neurosci. 27 (2004) 169/192. See also G. Rizzolatti, C. Sinigaglia *Further Reflections on how we interpret the Actions of Others*, in Nature (2008) 455/589.

This you must never doubt.

des solt du gewis sîn.

You are enclosed

dû bist beslozzzen

In my heart

in mînem herzen:

The key went lost.

verlorn ist das slüzzelin

You will stay there forever

dû muost immer drinne sîn

(the translation is mine) ¹¹

I think it brings to evidence with great force what really empathy is: the clear perception of the presence of the other in me. The word *Einfühlen* (to have a feeling of) closely resembles the word *Einsehen* (to have an intuition of). It seems then that feeling has a cognitive potential. We will not consider now the way in which a cognitive and an emotional act are connected in the *Einfuehlung*. It is enough to say that through feeling we become receptive to the presence of the other, that the other enters into us. The strongest example of empathy is love. It is not by chance the poem I have quoted is a ‘love poem.’ This experience of passivity/receptivity seems to be easier for women than for men. Perhaps this may be a consequence of the fact that women have (at least potentially) the experience of pregnancy in which a human being is bodily contained in another and this is exactly what happens spiritually in the phenomenon of empathy: we feel his/her feeling because he/she lives in us. This experience of being able to feel the other in us characterizes the person, is constitutive of personhood.

We will now draw some consequences from this discovery of E. Stein.

One first line of research goes directly towards theology and the idea of *Communio*. The *Communio* is exactly the presence of one in the soul of the other. It may refer to the inner life of the Trinity as well as to the presence of God in the soul of man. Alternatively, it may refer to the presence of one in the life of the other, which constitutes the human community, or also to the spousal love, which constitutes the sacrament of marriage. We will not pursue now this path because this is a philosophical paper. Another line of research leads us to a reevaluation of

¹¹From the Manessische Liederhandschrift, author unknown, probably XII Century.

the history of philosophy and of some fundamental problems of phenomenology and modern philosophy.

One regards the interpretation of Descartes and of the *cogito*. In the first part of his *Discourse on Method* Descartes gives us a short autobiography. What is appalling in this biography is the absence of women. He does not seem to have had a mother (she died when he was very young), or sisters, or wives or mistresses, daughters¹². The feminine is completely lacking. The *cogito* (at least in its rigid interpretation) seems to correspond to a man who was not born of a mother, was never in love, and was never a father. A man in love can doubt more easily his own being as the being of the beloved person. We are, since the beginning of our lives, in relation to others and without this relation, we could not exist. E. Stein gives us the evidence of the existence of the other. The certainty of the existence of the other is given together with the certainty of the existence of the ego. This grounds in general the existence of real being. The other whom I directly experience in myself is a real being and this is enough to affirm the existence of real being in general.

Husserl, on the other hand, explains that the world is given to us as inhabited by a plurality of subjects. If these subjects are real subjects, then real also is the world supported by intersubjectivity. We can distinguish between interior and exterior experience through the relation to another man. We determine the objective through the intersubjective dialogue. If the subjects participating in this dialogue are real, then the world we discover through this dialogue is also real. We have here a decisive breakthrough towards realism. This breakthrough allows us to rediscover from within the modern attitude (the *cogito*) some fundamental aspects of classical philosophy. The first of them is a certain passivity of knowledge. There is in knowledge a movement from the subject towards the object but there is also a movement from the object towards the subject, which enters into the subject and makes the encounter of subject and object possible. Stein brings to evidence through her research on empathy this passivity of knowledge in the case of the presence of the other man in us (but there are some

¹²As a matter of fact, he had a daughter and loved her dearly. Nevertheless, the feminine did not have any role in his philosophy. See Jeroen van de Ven: *Quelques données nouvelles sur Helena Jans* in Bulletin Cartésienne XXXI, Centre de Études Cartésiennes 2003.

hints at the possibility of a limited degree of empathy with animals). The road is however open for further research on the receptive side of knowledge and on the presence of the object as object in the subject. We came here very close to the philosophy of knowledge of Aristoteles and St. Thomas Aquinas. Within the constraints of this paper, we will not pursue this direction of research any further.

Husserl's 1929 Paris lectures were written and later enlarged and published in 1973 under the title *Cartesian Meditations*.¹³ Husserl maintains his choice to understand the *cogito* in a transcendental sense and therefore not as the basis of an ontology. The whole content of the *cogito* is the transcendental ego. In the *Fifth Meditation* however, Husserl considers the problem of the existence of the ego of the other and writes, "...the transcendental ego ... grasps himself in his proper original being as well as himself in the exterior experience of the other and grasps therefore the other transcendental egos".¹⁴ We have then a real plurality of transcendental egos but they seem to communicate with one another not through a common real world but rather through a "transcendental intermonadic consciousness." It is not clear what this intermonadic consciousness really is. The process of thought seems to be similar to that leading in Descartes from the self-apprehension of the ego to the ontological argument for the existence of God. This God is however only the transcendental support of the world of knowledge does not seem to be a person and comes very near to the philosophers' God criticized by Pascal or to the pantheistic God of Spinoza.

A second and more thoroughgoing reconsideration of these issues and of the whole structure of phenomenology arrives with *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*.¹⁵ This book sheds a new light on the whole of the thought of E. Husserl. All Phenomenology can be seen as an attempt to give us a rigorous methodology of philosophy as a science. Philosophy must be recast in a method similar to that of natural science. The empirical materials resulting from sense experience must be constructed according to *a priori* categories and only in this way they become object of (scientific) knowledge. This implies that the data we receive from our senses do not possess a

¹³Dordrecht Kluwer 1960. First edition in French, *Méditations Cartésiennes*, 1931.

¹⁴*Ibidem*, p.62.

¹⁵ Edmund Husserl. *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: an Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, Evanston, Illinois, Northwestern University Press, 1970. First edition in German, 1936.

form of their own. They receive their form from the intellect as far as they are shaped by it through an intentional act. The world of knowledge is therefore identified with the world of scientific knowledge.¹⁶ In *Crisis* Husserl turns his attention to a life world in which man is involved before he turns his attention to the task of constructing a scientific approach to reality. What is this life world? In one sense, it is the world of opinions and prejudice, that we have put within brackets, in order to begin the process of the phenomenological/scientific construction. This prescientific world is, for science, an infinite source of errors, and this is the reason why it was put within brackets at the beginning of the phenomenological enterprise. This reduction of the world of experience allows us to work with pure sense data that receive meaning through the scientific construction of the transcendental subjectivity. Now the life world is considered from a different perspective, a practical perspective. When we are not content with describing the world but must situate ourselves in this world and make decisions then the pure scientific description is not enough. In addition, the interaction of sense data and transcendental ego is not enough. We must introduce necessarily the element of human finality and of value. I evaluate phenomena and attribute them meanings determined through their relation to my interior experience and feeling. The (non-transcendental) subject, which had been correctly excluded in the approach of transcendental phenomenology, must now occupy the centre of the scene. In '*Crisis*' the life world enters not just as an obstacle to objective knowledge but also as a general background of cultural convictions and traditions which determine human preferences and actions. The sphere of culture and history enters into phenomenology and demands to be interpreted. The role of objective knowledge, of reason and of science in our society now does not appear any more as something in itself evident that does not stand in need to be explained and justified. We can imagine that this reflection is not wholly unrelated to the spread in Germany and in Europe of irrationalist movements and trends. Why comes that in Europe objective knowledge and science have conquered the particular role they have in these societies? How can we justify and defend this role? The life world precedes the world of scientific knowledge, and the world of scientific knowledge is born out of the life world.

¹⁶Edmund Husserl. *Philosophy as a rigorous Science* (1910) in *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy*, New York, Harper and Row, 1965.

Now the ideal of rigorous science stands in need of being justified, and it must be justified in the life world and must be helped to reemerge from the life world. We can then move to a third consideration of the life world. The first consideration was purely negative and saw it only as an obstacle we had to get rid of in order to reach true knowledge. The second consideration is more balanced. Now we recognize that the life world is irreducible to transcendental knowledge and foundational in relation to the objectifying attitude that gives birth to the world of transcendental knowledge. A third consideration (but here we go, at least in part, beyond the argument of Husserl) regards the fact that the life world has a modality of exercise of reason that is its own. There is not only the transcendental use of reason. There is a sapiential use of reason, which orders the life world according to rules, which are not transcendental. Shall we say that those rules are no more phenomenological? The question remains open. Perhaps these contents can be object of a phenomenological insight, but this insight must enter into the realm of value and of feeling. We do not know only sense data and the transcendental ego. There is also the world of the actual existing egos, with their feelings and value perceptions. The discovery of empathy by Edith Stein has introduced us in this world, and it is likely, in his last reconsiderations of the whole development of the phenomenological movement E. Husserl, may have been moved and inspired by the groundbreaking work of his former student.¹⁷

¹⁷We must mention together with that of Edith Stein the name of M. Scheler. His book on sympathy moves along the same path as the doctoral thesis of Edith Sein. See M. Scheler: *The Nature of Sympathy*, New York, Arcon Books, 1970. German original edition 1923. There is also a prior edition of 1913 with the title *Zur Phaenomenologie und Theorie der Sympathiegefuehle und von Liebe und Hass*.