



Empathy and the Constitution of the Self in the Philosophy of Edith Stein

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The purpose of this paper is a modest one. I mean to offer an analysis of the concept of empathy as it is presented in the work of the philosopher-saint Edith Stein. The text with which I shall be concerned is her remarkable doctoral dissertation *Zum Problem der Einfühlung*, an essay conceived and composed while Stein was studying under Edmund Husserl at the university of Freiburg some years before her conversion to the Catholic faith. Given the limits proper to a paper of this sort, I shall not pretend to offer a comprehensive account of Stein's philosophical investigations into the question of empathy. All I shall do here is to adumbrate, as briefly as possible, the shape of her argument. In particular, the focus of my enquiry will be around a set of propositions that Stein makes as to the relation between empathic awareness and the constitution of the human person.

I should declare, before we proceed any further, that I consider the text in question to be one of the most significant contributions to the discourse on empathy ever to have been published. This may seem an extravagant claim to make about what is, after all, a work that was written to satisfy examiners and secure the reward of a degree. And yet I cannot think of another philosopher who has done more to render intelligible this most strange transaction of the human spirit. I do not believe that the conclusions that Stein arrives at in the course of her study are by any means definitive or unassailable. Perhaps Alasdair Macintyre was right when he suggested that Stein will be remembered less for what answers she gave than for the sorts of question she asked. In any case it seems to me that what she does achieve is to bring us into a full state of wonder about the problem of empathy. Reading Stein, we are

delivered into the heart of the mystery of empathy – and it for this reason, I submit, that we must continue to engage with her dense and difficult essay.

Before we can begin to understand what Stein thought empathic apprehension to involve we must first address the question of her method. For Stein, as for so many of her contemporaries, to philosophise correctly was to follow the method of phenomenological description established by Edmund Husserl in his *Logical Investigations*. According to Husserl, all philosophical problems arise after the world has been subject to a phenomenological reduction. By this Husserl means the act of thought by which everything that is susceptible to doubt is methodologically excluded and so removed from the ambit of our attention. After the harrowing of the intellect by this radical doubt all that remains is the world of pure phenomena. Having so adjusted herself to the world, it is the task of the philosopher to apprehend the discrete intelligible phenomena that survive the reduction and to describe the way in which they are constituted for thought. Thus for Stein the object of her inquiry is to designate the basic nature or essence of empathy – that act by which the inner life of a living body, given to us as a concrete phenomenon in our experiential world, is apprehended.

How then are we to think of the structure of empathic acts? For Stein empathy is best understood by analogy with remembering, a pure act of consciousness which itself can only be explained with reference to a more basic mode of apprehension – what Stein calls 'outer perception'. In my outer perception 'concrete being and occurring' are given to me primordially.¹ Suppose I were struck by a missile hurled from a disgruntled member of the audience; the experience of being struck and the pain that would issue from the experience are primordially given to me. This, I assume is clear enough. Let us now suppose that days hence I try to recall to my memory the experience of having been struck. Before the pain had impinged on my consciousness with an irreducible immediacy or primordially; now, though the memory of the pain is primordial as a representational act, the content of the memory – the actual pain itself – is non-primordially given. As I remember being struck the

¹ *On the Problem of Empathy*, trans. W Stein, 1989, p. 6, hereafter 'OPE'.

pain is not recapitulated but has the 'character of a deceased former "now"'.²

Let us now make an adjustment to our example. Suppose I were in the audience as some poor soul, in my stead, were struck with the same missile. How is the pain of the victim given to me in my perception? I apprehend the pain of the person in question without myself being subject to that pain. I am somehow brought into the life of that stricken foreign consciousness but do not feel, primordially, the searing of the flesh that characterises pain. Thus in empathy, as in memory, we are 'dealing with an act which is primordial as present experience though non-primordial in content'.³ However, what makes empathy an act of perceiving *sui generis* is the fact that the two subjects – myself and the person in pain – are separate and not joined together by the continuity of a unified consciousness. The pain into which I live is not experienced by me but is still there in the excruciated countenance of the suffering lecturer. We can say, as Stein puts it, that empathy is a non-primordial experience which announces a primordial one in a person other than ourselves. I stand, momentarily, at the point of an 'I' beyond my own 'I'

It is important here to note two mistakes that often obscure the phenomenon of empathy. The first is that of supposing an identification or confusion of my consciousness with that of the person toward which my empathic attention is directed. As Stein correctly notes, if the two subjects were to become one the condition for empathic apprehension would be annulled. Empathy, like love, is necessarily a transaction or communication between distinct but related persons; the 'I' of the empathising subject must retain its 'monadic character' while it is submerged in the foreign experience.⁴ To suppose the boundary separating one consciousness from another collapsed is precisely one way of failing to be empathetic. It is – and this has something of paradox about it – just another mode of solipsism. The second mistake is to make empathy a matter of inference rather than a direct intentional act as John Stuart Mill does in his historically significant account of empathic awareness. For Stein, Mill manages to miss the whole phenomenon of empathy entirely, as any inferential account requires the presupposition of basic empathic experiences in order to be probative. Were we

² OPE, p.8

³ OPE, p. 10

⁴ OPE, p. 17

not given, through the act of empathic comprehension, a way into the life of another, whatever inferences we make about a foreign consciousness would be unwarranted. In any case, to suppose that we get at the life of another through a series of inferences is, plainly, an inadequate phenomenological description of empathic acts.

Having established what Stein understood the essence of empathic acts to be, we can move now to the question of how such acts are involved in the 'constitution of the human person'. We must ask if it is possible to remain a person without this radical capacity to involve oneself in empathic relations with other living bodies? In order to answer this question, we need to consider empathy in what Stein calls its reiterative mode. When I apprehend a living body other than myself I acknowledge another 'zero point of orientation' – as Stein would say – a focus or axis beyond my own horizon of experience around which the world is arrayed.⁵ Through my empathic awareness I am brought into a sort of eccentric intentionality whereby I see the world from this outside point. And among the objects given to me through this displacement is my own self. To quote Stein, we are made able to 'see ourselves as we see another and as he sees us'.⁶ It is through the ek-static movement of my consciousness in empathy that I discover my point of orientation to be just one among many others. To borrow from the poet Wallace Stevens, having seen the world under the aspect of another I find myself more truly and more strange. I discover that I am a person, a finite monad with no special eminence, set among other finite centres of consciousness on which I must rely to become truly adequate to myself.

Thus, it is through empathy that we are properly constituted as persons. Stein does not, however stop here; the significance of empathy extends deeper still. Without reiterative empathic awareness, Stein proposes, our understanding of the outer world as that which transcends our consciousness would become unintelligible. As I move from each discrete point of orientation to the next it becomes evident that the world, though it may appear differently from every perspective, is nonetheless independent of consciousness. In Stein's words, were I imprisoned within the boundaries of my individuality, I could not go beyond

⁵ OPE, p. 57

⁶ OPE, p. 88

'the world as it appears to me'.⁷ I would be condemned to a dejected and inescapable solipsism. Unless, to borrow from Rowan Williams, who has written at length about Stein in his recent Tanner lectures, I have access to the 'displaced awareness of self and world seen from an imagined elsewhere' I have no reason to suppose 'self' and 'world' to be distinguishable. To understand myself to be what I truly am – a person inhabiting a world with which I am not identical – I must have another with whom I can empathise. The notions of person and world are thus inter-subjectively or empathically grounded.

In this connection we may want to consider a passage from an essay by another of the great Christian philosophers of the 20th century, Simone Weil. Stein and Weil may seem a strange pairing at first; though both were Jews who had acknowledged the divinity of Christ, they had radically different attitudes toward their common heritage. Moreover, a great gulf divides the two philosophically, the one inclining toward a sort of Husserlian Thomism, the other a late child of the platonic tradition. However, I am not the first to have brought the two into conjunction; no less a thinker than father Erich Przywara, who knew Stein briefly, has suggested that her work, and the work of Weil, though 'antithetical' should be considered, over and against all differences, as profoundly complementary. The passage I have in mind is taken from Weil's astonishing essay on *The Forms of the Implicit Love of God*; I shall quote at length, as the excerpt in question is not only pertinent to what Stein has to say about empathy but is also, in and of itself, profoundly beautiful:

'We live in a world of unreality and dreams. To give up our imaginary position as the centre, to renounce it, not only intellectually but in the imaginative part of our soul, that means to awaken to what is real and eternal... A transformation then takes place in the very roots of our sensibility...' 'To empty ourselves of our false divinity, to deny ourselves, to give up being the centre of the world in imagination, to discern that all the points of the world are equally centres and that the true centre is outside the world... such consent is love.'⁸

⁷ OPE, p. 64

⁸ Simone Weil, *Waiting on God*, 1959, p. 115.

Although one should not speculate about such things, I suspect that, had Stein the chance to read Weil's essay, she would have been especially attracted by this extraordinary passage. For both Stein and Weil neither world nor self can be understood so long as we are impaled on the point of our own consciousness.

I would like to end this paper with some theological reflections occasioned by Stein's account of empathic awareness. This may seem an extravagance but, given that this colloquium has been convened here at Blackfriars, it only seems proper that we should conclude by directing ourselves toward the divine. As I have said, Stein wrote *Zum Problem der Einfühlung* some time before she committed herself to the Catholic faith. Her essay is, unsurprisingly, altogether unconcerned with God. Moreover, she seems not to have thought a great deal about the problem of her doctoral dissertation when she resumed her philosophical work as a Carmelite nun after her conversion. In any case, as I have read her work on empathy I have become more and more convinced that Stein's analysis has important theological implications. I shall attempt to demonstrate just what these implications are indirectly, by bringing Stein's essay into relation with a further philosopher, one with whom she was somewhat familiar - Søren Kierkegaard.

In an entry in one of his notebooks, Kierkegaard proposes that the task of every man is to have an 'objective attitude to his own subjectivity'. This augmented subjectivity – what Kierkegaard calls 'subjectivity raised to the second power' – is much like what Stein describes as reiterative empathy. Through the same doubled or eccentric intentionality I am given my self as both subject and object, one centre among others. Kierkegaard then makes a most extraordinary remark. 'The maximum anyone achieves in this respect' he writes, 'may serve as an infinitely weak analogy of how God is infinite subjectivity'. I believe Kierkegaard here may have glimpsed something of great importance, something that, had Stein then been attuned to the religious dimension, she would doubtless have seen. An empathic act, you recall, is that act by which I am brought into the life of a foreign consciousness as a zero point of orientation. Now try to imagine what it would be to comprehend all of the luminous points of consciousness that are currently gathered in this room. It is, of course impossible; but in so trying the world we inhabit is suddenly transfigured, and this room

becomes a conflagration of intending consciousnesses. This is perhaps a mystical thought, but should not, I submit, be discounted for that reason. When we attempt to think what it would be to hold in our apperceptive grasp the life of every person here simultaneously and stand with each at their point of consciousness we are given some sense – albeit an infinitely weak and finally fugitive sense – of what it might mean to know the mind of God, that centre beyond all centres.⁹

⁹ A version of this paper was delivered at the 2015 ‘Persons and Community’ conference, organised by the Dalai Lama Centre for Compassion in collaboration with the Humane Philosophy Project at Blackfriars Hall, University of Oxford.