

Between Religious Intuition and Worldly Experience: Simone Weil and Edith Stein in Search of the Truth about Man

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Abstract

Throughout their lives humans have always been torn between different concepts and ideas which underlie their existence. This can be referred to as an existential dilemma which accompanies people from the day of birth until death. Humans have always been searching for their own unique place in this world. Simone Weil attempts to find a definition of human cognition of the world between spiritual activity and critical reflection; between involvement in religious intuition and a versatile approach to outstanding philosophical concepts. Inspiration of philosophy by faith and opening of new horizons of cognition provoked Edith Stein to combine different cognitive theories in order to find a way for cognition of supernatural issues. However, an attempt to combine philosophical thinking with religious experience can be considered a certain methodological weakness in the way problems connected with human cognition are presented.

Religious intuition stirs human conscience, making man face a dilemma connected with the choice between good and evil – a contradictory pair which has been present in people's lives since the beginning of their existence. Sometimes one can get the impression that drawing on the acquired knowledge and experience men feel free to decide whether to choose good or evil, and that they believe in the power of the mind and its infinite capabilities. This attitude has brought about not only ambivalent but also dramatic consequences. Can bold thinking inspired

by religious intuition indicate solutions to existential problems and dilemmas that contemporary men have to face throughout their lives?

Keywords: *Simone Weil, Edith Stein, religious intuition, existence, cognition, man/human, faith, thinking*

Introduction

My intention is not to present the lives and extensive outputs of the two women, the French philosopher Simone Weil, as well as the mystic and nun Edith Stein. It is rather to point to some thought space, in which an unceasing quest for the truth about man continues. This space is an encounter between religious intuition and existential (empirical) experience of the world. This encounter (this space) might also be viewed as a relation between science and faith, mathematics and mysticism, or in the end between philosophy and theology. I am fully aware that to define the thought framework thus might inevitably lead to religious thinking, which today does not have to constitute the ultimate and unequivocal criterion for the understanding of the world and of man living in this world. Still, such a premise may be legitimate if it follows from an open mind and leads to the search for the truth.

Hans Urs von Balthasar, a man of superior mental capabilities of holistic reasoning, encompassing not only philosophy and theology, but also literature and arts, asked about the relation between philosophy and theology, expounded it, pointing to the three stages of human thought conception¹, which he perceived above all as attempts at understanding the meaning of being. Firstly, before the coming of Christ every philosophy was always a theology, where the central moment was man's search for the Absolute. Secondly, a crucial role in Christianity is played by the capability of the reasoning subject, as well as the fact that theology directly and necessarily carries philosophy within. Thirdly, the difficulty in determining the relation between philosophy and theology arises after Christ's Redemption of the world, as well as of man present in it. In Christ the comprehension of the meaning of being came to be fully elucidated, for Christ Himself is the meaning. Thus, religion and natural theology were presented with complete explanations, and the searching man was found by God.

¹ Cf. *Geist und Feuer. Ein Gespräch mit Hans Urs von Balthasar*, in: „Herder Korrespondenz“ Jg. 30 (1976), Freiburg i. Brsg., pp. 72–82.

I am well aware that such a line of thought is chiefly characteristic of a man of faith, for whom the postulate of the existence of God is fundamental and acts as a source of religious experience. Can one reject such a mindset? Of course, one can dismiss such a theistic line of reasoning and embrace a line of atheistic thinking, present in the post-Christian space, but Balthasar is convinced that there is no returning to the times before the self-revelation of Christ. Is Balthasar right? Is there really no way back?

Simone Weil: Thought radicalism and religious intuition

Simone Weil was born in Paris on 3th of February 1909.² That was the year in which Pope Pius X beatified another prominent and highly controversial woman, Joan of Arc. Thus, Simone Weil began her life at the time when Joan of Arc was embarking on her eternal life in glory, which was officially recognized by the Church. The history map shows five centuries intervening between the lives of these two women, but there is one link between them – a rebellion against the then shape of reality, contempt for worldly life, empathy with others, mystic visions as well as – interestingly enough – defiance of one's own femininity. Czesław Miłosz, a famous Polish man of letters, said about Simone Weil the following: "She was no good with life. She was myopic, hardly fit, pure, righteous, fearless and a little awe-inspiring to her academic colleagues, who would refer to her as the 'Red Virgin'; she alienated others with her dowdiness and a complete lack of femininity, and certainly with her superabundant book learning."³

Some consider her a saint, others – a damned thinker who had the use of contradictions down to a fine art. She aroused controversy, but also intellectual admiration. „She was a philosopher of the borderland, of the intersection of various cultures and values; she would always make extreme choices, almost at the borderline of comprehension. In all that she experienced and pondered, she searched for clarity and logical lucidity, being convinced that mathematical necessity is the principle of all reality.”⁴

² Simone Weil's oeuvre may well be referred to as fragmentary, aphoristic or epistolary (the bulk of her output is letters) as well as agitational (she would react to contemporary events by publishing all kinds of articles and manifestos). She consigned some of her writings to the care of her family and friends, who collected them and posthumously published in book form. Simone Weil's life can be divided into two periods in: the first one is concerned with social commitment, whereas the other one is of religious fascination.

³ C. Miłosz, *Wyznania tłumacza*, in: S. Weil, *Wybór pism*, transl. by C. Miłosz, Wydawnictwo Znak, Kraków 1991, p. 7.

⁴ J. Sochoń, *Simone Weil, młoda skrajna intelektualistka*, in: „Przegląd Powszechny”, 11(1991), p. 320.

She could not settle in this mathematical world for good though, and so was not able to attain some moderate peace of existence. A little bit of suffering caused by her disease, but also awareness of the suffering of others led her to believe that “to suffer is to reach the core of the human condition, to agree to it, and only after one has fully agreed, to reach the other shore – the side of the spirit.”⁵ Spirituality is accompanied by suffering. This is what Christians call following Christ. She was convinced that moving from one extreme to the other is conditioned by so little, which nevertheless can completely change the adopted system. Hence, Simone Weil wrote the way she lived. She displayed a capability to convey thoughts characterized by ultimate discretion, scrupulosity typical of a representative of the world of sciences, and radicalism of viewpoints, to name but a few qualities typifying her life and output. All that she had – the broad mind, openness to social injustice, sensitive heart and religious intuition – she wanted to give up to others, claiming that “if one has a right to want to be understood, then it is not for the sake of oneself, but of the other so that one can live for the other.”⁶

She subscribed to determinism, confessing that “I have always regarded as the most beautiful life possible the one in which everything is determined either by the compulsion of circumstance or by (...) impulse, that is the kind of life in which there is never room for any choice.”⁷ Even miracles can result from causes that can be discovered. But is there room for good and evil in this deterministic world? What if good is only attributable to the supernatural sphere – God? The nature of God stops Him from being present in the world of things. And so He should be absent from the world; after all, His mode of existence is different. What to think of the world so as not to lapse into contradiction?

The world that Simone Weil addresses is governed by blind necessity, but at the same time there is Providence, which in line with Platonic philosophy appears as an intervention on the part of power acting as if from above. In this way, chance, necessity and an intervention of Providence do not exist as contradictions, but vertically and simultaneously. They do not cancel each other out. Weil writes that “contradiction is the lever of transcendence”⁸, for it is in it that one can discern the light of hope. In her view necessity is a kind of contact between man’s material and spiritual spheres; it establishes a certain order that reigns in the world. “That which makes admiring and loving necessity possible is the beauty of the world. Without the beauty it would not be possible. Even

⁵ E. Bienkowska, *Śmierć Simone Weil*, in: „Znak”, (11)1994, p. 12.

⁶ S. Weil, *Dzieła*, transl. by M. Frankiewicz, Wydawnictwo Brama, Poznań 2004, p. 157.

⁷ Ibidem, p. 31.

⁸ Ibidem, p. 263.

though consent is the proper function of the supernatural part of the soul, it cannot occur without some involvement of its sensual part and the body itself. The fullness of this collaboration is the height of joy.”⁹

Indeed, in the world of Simone Weil one can often come across contradictions, which by complementing one another make up an inextricable unity. A conception of the idea of God is another illustration of this type of reasoning, whereby on the one hand He is personal, but on the other hand has an impersonal nature. God is – Weil writes – “impersonal in the sense that His infinitely mysterious mode of being a Person is infinitely different from the human mode of being a person. This mystery can only be fathomed when we simultaneously use the two arms of forceps of sorts – these two opposing notions which on earth are irreconcilable, but can only be reconciled in God.”¹⁰ Being on earth intuitively relays Simone Weil’s thoughts towards another world.

The fragments of mathematical life are discreetly encroached upon by religious thought, which in time and under the influence of new experiences becomes dominant, and the language that Weil uses is no longer an attempt at an empirical description of reality, but it becomes a way to express the new order. In this language, a crucial role is played by words that emerged from the experience of the world created from God’s great love. But this experience brings a drama of incomprehension of one’s own existence.

Every day some human drama is enacted; a man torn between various realities has a role in a play that is life. He is torn between subjectivity and the social subject, between his own needs and a blind necessity of work, between another man and that which is above him, between life and death. This existential rift marks the beginning of thinking about man. Man incessantly looks for his own, somewhat separate place in the world in which he finds himself living. Ultimately, Simone Weil wishes to see man somewhere between spiritual zeal and critical reflection, between commitment to religious intuition and pondering – but a versatile one to boot – of the great philosophical achievements.

Actually the important thing is that by nature man is a free and thinking being. Unlike nature he can make his own free decisions and stir himself to willingness to engage in reflection and ponderings. There is something holy about every man¹¹, or deep down, reposing at the bottom of his soul there is a hidden particle of good, a divine spark. Simone Weil’s religious thinking was becoming

⁹ S. Weil, *Szaleństwo miłości. Intuicje przedchrześcijańskie*, transl. by M. E. Plecińska, Brama, Poznań 1993, p. 171.

¹⁰ S. Weil, *Świadomość nadprzyrodzona. Wybór myśli*, transl. by A. Olędzka-Frybesowa, Instytut Wydawniczy PAX, Warszawa 1986, 1999, p. 154.

¹¹ Por. S. Weil, *Pisma Londyńskie i ostatnie listy*, transl. by M. and J. Plecińscy, Wydawnictwo Brama, Poznań 1994, p. 1.

more and more distinct. The sphere of transcendence was a vital reality in her life. At first in the early years of her childhood when she considered that it was the field that might not be meant for her. Later on, inspired by Platonic and Pythagorean thought, she claimed that mathematics is a reflection of divine laws, and as such it can provide us with some notion of transcendence. Eventually, when God descended into her heart she could experience Him directly. She realized that apart from the divine element present in the human being, Christ is the intermediary between man and God. This postulate follows from the fact that He is the only one standing midway, at the intersection point of divinity and humanity; He is the only Son of the living God. Through His passion and the Cross man was redeemed and is granted an opportunity to commune with God. For this to happen Christ had to renounce His divinity on the Cross to be able to die for the sins of the world.

Simone Weil was driven by a bizarre determination in her quest for the truth, which was a kind of redemptive knowledge providing liberation (even if at times those were the thoughts derived from a gnostic doctrine). She would introduce into her thought the view that mankind is in a way related to the divine being through the element of divinity which is planted in the human soul. Ultimately, the sacred thing in every human being is that “despite all the experience of the harm done, suffered and watched, the human being permanently expects that some good, and not evil will be done to him.”¹² The greatest evil is the one that affects man, and above all the one committed in an unjust and gratuitous manner. “The good is the only source of sacredness. There is nothing sacred except the good and what pertains to it.”¹³

Edith Stein: Search for the Truth about Man

Philosophical investigations and scholarly output of Edith Stein are some of the most significant ones that emerged in the 20th century. Her life and legacy left their mark on philosophy and religion, as well as on the German and European culture. On 21 October 1891, in Wrocław, Edith Stein was born into a Jewish family. Following Edmund Husserl, the master of phenomenological description of the world, she was on the way to realize the desire to return to that which is objective, to the sanctity of being, purity, flawlessness of things, the very things themselves. In the open mind a thought was conceived – that perhaps it would be possible to overcome the modern subjectivism and go beyond and towards

¹² Ibidem, pp. 2–3.

¹³ Ibidem, p. 3.

that which constitutes the measure of things. Her sober, lucid and objective mind, her straightforward insight, her absolute terseness evidently predestined her to describe the world in an objective manner.¹⁴

Edith Stein found the mystery of man inspiring and thought-provoking. From the outset of her scholarly adventure, when she began studying psychology, she endeavoured to find a satisfactory solution of this mystery. When her studies did not bring answers concerning the essential issues related to man, Stein turned to philosophy. Phenomenological studies offered more – they expounded the nature of man and opened the human being to the quest for the truth about himself and about the whole world. The investigations into the nature of a person and direct religious experience were to result in the creation of a personal method for the cognition of God.

After all phenomenology involved some mental asceticism, getting rid of all prejudices and borrowed opinions, as well as uncompromising audacity. Edith Stein had such audacity. In time, however, the aim of this audacity was not an objective description of the finite world, but the quest for infinite being. Informing philosophy with faith as well as new cognitive vistas emerging therefrom provoke Edith Stein to combine various cognitive systems so as to open a gateway to the cognition of supernatural reality.

Nevertheless, this way first led through the understanding of the mystery of another man. Stein attempted to reach his soul through the experience that was supposed to make it easier to understand man as it were “indirectly”, that is through the phenomenological description of the act of “empathy”, which was supposed to provide an access to another man’s experiences and state of spirit, thereby bringing one closer to the discovery of the truth about him.

It was Husserl who first asked how to reach the transcendental intersubjectivity which constitutes the objective world. The only resolution of this issue appears to be the examination of the capabilities to get to know other subjects and their consciousness. He pointed out that getting to know another man is based on empathy, which is a proper experience of another person. For Husserl, that which is spiritual in man – the person – is the meaning of the body. Empathy as an understanding experience allows one to grasp human existence, reach it and understand its inherent meaning. “Empathy with persons is nothing but the approach that actually understands the meaning, that is captures the body in its meaning and in the unity of this meaning that the body is supposed to carry. To effect empathy means to capture the objective spirit, to see the

¹⁴ Cf. H. Conrad-Martius, *Moja przyjaciółka Edyta Stein*, in: *Edyta Stein albo filozofia krzyża*, „Znak”, 1(1989), pp. 3–4.

man.”¹⁵ Husserl implied that the act of empathy is valuable as a cognitive tool, and is a kind of participation in the being of another person. Empathy cannot be reduced to physical cognitive activity only, as it enables the experience of profound spiritual acts hidden in another human being.

Also for Edith Stein the posed problem was to demonstrate whether and how it is possible to get to know another man, his experiences, spiritual acts, which reveal his spiritual life that has its deepest source in that which we call the human “inner being”. In Stein’s phenomenological investigations the subjective world becomes a correlate of the experience, and on the other side of the subjective world lies the objective world in its entirety. Indeed, such a treatment of the problem recognized the possible existence of beings independent of the cognitive consciousness, but it was not the mere existence of these beings that was to be the object of interest and study. Stein wanted to open up to the seeking philosopher yet another world – the world of interpersonal relations, which in a way evaded solely empirical experience. She knew that empathy was to lead to the research outside the sphere of experiences in which the study of the correlation between the act of consciousness and the object in the already-tested manner was possible. She knew that empathy was not a simple subject-object relation, but that it creates an interpersonal relation.

Empathy was a special kind of experience which cannot be merely reduced to sensually perceptible material things, since in it we experience unique and individual psychological sensations. Hence, the starting point was the conviction that “we are provided with other subjects and their experiences.”¹⁶ Getting to know “something” from another’s mental life is a direct and clear experience – it is a kind of experience, learning about “something” that is going on in another human being. Stein was convinced that “there is a fundamental experience, a thorough cognition of others’ mental states that come from the other person.”¹⁷

Thus, the analysis of the issue of cognition of another man by means of empathy implies the necessity of consideration of the notion of a person who captures man in his corporeal, psychological and spiritual existence. The world of empirical experience of human corporeality needs complementing. Consciousness is a moment which, constituting the objective world, goes beyond the related sphere of nature and contradicts it: consciousness as an equivalent of the world is not nature, but spirit.¹⁸

¹⁵ E. Husserl, *Idee czystej fenomenologii i fenomenologicznej filozofii*, vol. II, transl. by D. Gierulanka, Warszawa 1974, p. 342.

¹⁶ E. Stein, *O zagadnieniu wczucia*, transl. by D. Gierulanka and J. F. Gierula, Kraków 1988, p. 15.

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 6.

¹⁸ Cf. R. Kozłowski, *Filozofia osoby ludzkiej*, Słupsk 2006, p. 121.

The spiritual sphere is a person's inner depth which has to develop in a physical body. And so Edith Stein introduces an analysis of corporeality into her study. It is only the analysis of a stream of consciousness combined with the analysis of corporeality that slowly reveal a picture of an "individual" that we are touching by means of empathy. The body is a sphere enabling a man and at once limiting the experience of states peculiar to him, and which determine a person's nature. The notion of spirit describes two spheres of existence: personal beings and products of personal beings as well as the meaning of each and every one of beings. Stein writes: "The word *spirit* has a double meaning and it should be understood in this dual sense. It means both a spiritual person and a spiritual sphere. The attitude of a spiritual person to the spiritual sphere is dual too: each spiritual sphere derives from a person (or persons), where its centre lies; a person may develop in the spiritual sphere, even if the sphere has not originated in him."¹⁹

Such a concept of a person and his structure shows that empathy may be an adequate means of cognition, and that after surpassing a pure sensual observation it may lead to a real cognition of another man, since every person is anchored in universal laws. The more profoundly a man is formed and the more sensitive he is, the easier and more quickly he can learn the truth about another man. The nature of a spiritual being is an openness to other beings, which is not only limited to intentionality of a human Self, but points to a capability of receiving something from the outside, from other persons.

Getting to know oneself and another person does not exhaust the cognitive capabilities of empathy, but is also a well-founded cognitive tool in the religio-mystical field. Learning about our existence leads us to a "triple question: what kind of being is that which is aware of oneself? What kind of a Self is that which becomes cognizant of its existence? What kind of a spiritual stirring is that (...), in which I am and I am aware of myself and him?"²⁰ The existence that I am aware of as mine is immersed in temporality, between "not any more" and "not yet" – in the constant "now." This tension between being and non-being reveals pure existence – atemporal existence – eternal existence. My existence is temporal – of a nothingness kind, that is, it is forever faced with nothingness and over and over again it needs to be endowed with existence, and through this incessant movement we can commune with the fullness of existence; "becoming and passing that we find in ourselves reveals for us the ideas of true, unchangeable and eternal being."²¹

¹⁹ E. Stein, *Twierdza duchowa*, transl. by I. J. Adamska, Poznań 1998, p. 43.

²⁰ E. Stein, *Twierdza duchowa*, op. cit., p. 68.

²¹ Ibidem, p. 87.

There is another way to reach the eternal being – through the experience of gradually approaching the fullness of existence, e.g. thanks to self-improvement. This can be achieved, as the author asserts, by following two roads: “The one is the road of faith, Self-revelation of God as the Being, as the Creator and the One who supports the existence of the world, (...) whereas the other one is the road of deductive reasoning, where one can encounter the proof of God’s existence. The cause and originator of both my existence and every finite existence may only be this kind of being which is not – like the human being – a being of received existence. This being must exist on his own: the Being that cannot exist the way everything that has its origin exists, but is the necessary Being.”²²

Closely linked with the issue of empathy, the philosophical concept of getting to know another person has undoubtedly played a significant role in the experience of relation, and eventually in the mystical bond with God. Edith Stein tries to extend the method of empathy to cover the cognition of God, when she asks: is “empathy” with God possible? The writer is convinced that this question can be posed irrespective of the belief in His existence. She answers the question in the affirmative, considering that saints and mystics may serve here as an apt example, for it is actually them who experience God through empathy. Such a conclusion can be drawn from the previous discussion on empathy understood as the experience of another’s consciousness in general. As it has already been mentioned, Edith Stein views empathy as a special act which is “an experience of another’s consciousness in general, regardless of the kind of object that is being experienced and the kind of subject whose consciousness is being experienced.”²³

Edith Stein has no doubts: this world as a whole – in all that it reveals, and all that it withholds – refers to beyond itself, to the One who mysteriously reveals himself in it. Thanks to being sensitive to the traces of the infinite in nature, the thought of a bold quest for the truth stood a chance of being fully expressed. This quest will take the form of mystical closeness to God. She writes: “The highest form of the realization of the spirit of the created mind – which obviously is not attainable on one’s own – is seeing (insight) that makes one happy, and which is granted by God who then unites one with Himself; by taking part in divine life, one has his share in divine cognition. On earth the nearest approximation to this highest aim is the mystical insight.”²⁴ Edith Stein is intent on finding – among the infinite fullness of meaning, into which all human cognition plunges – a way

²² Ibidem, p. 90.

²³ E. Stein, *O zagadnieniu wczucia*, op. cit., p. 25.

²⁴ E. Stein, *Wiedza Krzyża. Studium o św. Janie od Krzyża*, Wyd. Karmelitów Bosych, Kraków 1992, p. 59.

to capture the world in which “all the fullness of meaning, inexhaustible for the sum total of human cognition, mysteriously rings out.”²⁵

Conclusion

The times in which Simone Weil and Edith Stein lived are concerned with our immediate history, and afford a number of causes for reflection on the subjects of anthropology and religion. Moreover, the problems emerging in the recent years, such as the issue of the dignity and quality of human life, the sphere of work, the dilemma of warfare and totalitarian systems, and last but not least, religious fundamentalism and freedom of religion all give rise to numerous debates and conferences. Still, one thought remains distinct and lucid: man is above all free. “Nothing in the world can take away from man the feeling that he was born to be free. Never ever, no matter what happens, can he agree to subjection, for he is capable of thought.”²⁶

Faith is not a simple assumption made about the existence of God. It involves a constant process of getting to know the One whose existence is offered to us in a mystical act of desire. Even though this good is given to us, it cannot be ultimately exhausted. The act of cognition of God is forever open, and this act is faith. Therefore, faith means persisting in the desire of Good, persisting in the never-ending love. Such a state is right for every man. Every man feels such a desire, but it is not always directed at the supreme Good. It may be an attachment to the things in this world, in which case it becomes a lack of faith. It is a distortion of the intention of the desire, but nevertheless it can always turn into a chance of attaining the Good through conversion.

Religious intuition brings man to the problem of choice between good and evil, the pair of opposites with which he has to grapple from the beginning of existence. Still, sometimes one can get the impression that man has come to believe that thanks to cognition and the body of amassed experience, he can do good or evil at his own discretion. He has come to believe in his own infinite capabilities as well as the power of his own mind, which has brought about not only ambivalent, but also dramatic consequences in history. Can the audacity of thinking inspired by religious intuition – while preserving the beauty of the world and the pride of the human mind – point to some ways out of existential fractures and rifts in which modern man becomes entangled? The question still seems to remain open.

²⁵ H. Conrad-Martius, *Moja przyjaciółka Edyta Stein*, op. cit., pp. 11–12.

²⁶ S. Weil, *Dziela*, op. cit., p. 267.

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