



The Problem of Empathy: A Reach For Community Through the Humanities

by Hank Galmish

Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* depicts a vivid scene of a deep human truth focused on relationships and empathy. In the following scene, the young Topsy, the African slave girl picked up in the streets by Auguste St. Claire, has been given to his cousin, Ophelia, a northerner. This was to be an experiment to see if the liberal abolitionist can civilize her as Ophelia claims. In the scene, Topsy is being scolded for stealing and encouraged to be good. Topsy exclaims that she knew nothing about love, and despite Miss Ophelia's claims of affection for the girl, she knows that Miss Ophelia can't stand to even touch her, that she despises her for being a little black girl. Once Topsy says this, the appearances are stripped away and the truth revealed:

"I've always had a prejudice against negroes," said Miss Ophelia, "and it's a fact, I never could bear to have that child touch me; but I didn't think she knew it."

"Trust any child to find that out," said St. Claire, "there's no keeping it from them. But I believe that all the trying in the world to benefit a child and all the substantial favors you can do them, will never excite one emotion of gratitude, while that feeling of repugnance remains in the heart; it's a queer kind of fact,—but so it is."

"I don't know how I can help it," said Miss Ophelia, "they are disagreeable to me,—this child in particular,—how can I help feeling so?"

"Eva does, it seems."

"Well, she's so loving. . ." (Stowe 281)

Stowe's thesis is that unless people feel and touch the human experience of the other, in this case the slave, they will never be moved to overcome their unjust attitudes toward the other. Her book is an attempt to pierce this limiting attitude by showing her readers the living, breathing human beneath such terms.

She enraged the South by transforming the black slave, “a piece of property” only, into a feeling subject, a flesh and blood human being that demands a human response.

In these times of social and financial struggle, the Humanities are being compelled to defend their value in the public arena more than ever. The ability to establish an empathetic bond between different groups of people in this increasingly complex and diverse world is one of the essential values of the Humanities. The German philosopher Edith Stein offers in her thought a cogent and brilliant defense of empathy as an essential epistemological faculty to be developed in human beings if they are to function as social beings. By understanding her ideas, teachers of the Humanities are offered a precise intellectual tool to present and defend the traditional role of the Humanities in the educational endeavor. Empathy is a form of knowledge that allows us to know the other as other. Experiencing the other through story, drama, art, music, dance, or other forms of the Humanities, is a valuable way of inculcating that essential knowledge if we in a smaller and smaller world full of diverse cultures are to escape misunderstanding, fear and the violence these forms of ignorance breed.

Our capacity to be human depends primarily upon our capacity to be open to the other not as object (even couched in the well-meaning idea of “equality”), but as thinking-feeling subject. If we do not have this capacity, no amount of verbal trickery or adept rationalizing can disguise the absence. Average human beings recognize from early on in life the human capacity to know accurately what another thinks, even a person radically different from one’s own self; they also recognize more importantly what another person feels. In fact, this knowledge, if we reflect upon it, is obviously crucial not only for our own growth, but also for our well-being, even for our survival. A child, for example, knows

fairly quickly when a parent or significant adult in his or her life is angry, sad, happy, or threatening. A child thrives by responding appropriately to this knowledge.

In 1915, the German-Jewish philosopher, Edith Stein, presented for acceptance her Ph.D. thesis entitled *On the Problem of Empathy*, written under the direction of Edmund Husserl, the father of phenomenology. She maintains that empathy gives one the openness to know accurately the feelings and thoughts of another. For Stein, the empathetic ability is at the foundation of what it means to be human, and without it, not only would it be impossible for a person to think clearly about the external world, but it would also be impossible to think clearly, if at all, about the internal world. Thus, for Stein, Descartes’ “I think, therefore I am” is a radically flawed formulation, for the “I think” must imply an object, and the reality of that object must reveal itself to the potential thinker before he or she can think. Thus, in her thought, the proper formulation would be closer to “Reality is, therefore, I think about it, and therefore I can claim to be.” For the more complex being we name “human,” the knowing of the other must mean the knowing of the other as subject who is relating or not relating to us through independent thoughts and/or feelings. My knowing this, my ability to empathize with the subject forms the constitutive process by which my identity, my “I-ness,” comes to exist. Stein’s thought, in contrast to Descartes’, maintains, “You exist, and you think and feel about me, as I come to know and to respond to you as subject, and in that response, I come to exist as subject too.” To be is to be in community. Not to be for others, or to be to others, is, for Stein, ultimately not to be at all. To not feel the other, to not have any understanding of what it is like to be the other, constitutes a form of solipsism. And solipsism is suicide, a radical and final negation of one’s own existence as a human being.

This viewpoint is challenging and revolutionary. Her rigorous analysis of the human capacity for empathy provides and explicates a philosophical underpinning for the current valuing of diversity in the academic world; her ideas also help to explain the spontaneous and irrepressible hungering for communities of all kinds that we see around us these days. Our intense focus on the individual has led us into myopic dead ends. Stein offers us the corrective lenses the modern person seeks; a communion with the other.

Edith Stein's life informed her thoughts. The basic facts are found in Waltrud Herbstrith's biography *Edith Stein* and Sr. Mary Catherine Baseheart's *Person in the World: Introduction to the Philosophy of Edith Stein* (Baseheart; Herbstrith).

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Edith Stein was born October 12, 1891, interestingly enough upon the feast of Yom Kippur, the high Jewish feast of Atonement. In April 1911, she entered the University of Breslau where she studied languages and classic humanities. She became very active in the emerging women's movement, that was advocating at this time, full equality for women in the work place. During the years 1912-1913, she studied psychology but was disappointed by its lack of precision, especially due to its lack of rigorous terminology. Then she read Edward Husserl's *Logical Investigations* and immediately decided to study philosophy. She writes in her autobiography:

All my study of psychology has persuaded me that this science was still

in its infancy; it still lacked clear basic concepts; furthermore, there was no one who could establish such an essential foundation. On the other hand, what I had learned about phenomenology, so far, fascinated me tremendously because it consisted of such a labor of clarification, and because, here, one forged one's own mental tools for the task at hand. (qtd. in Basehart)

Stein moved to Gottingen in 1913 so as to be able to study directly under Husserl. She became very active in philosophical circles of this energized center in which the new discipline of phenomenology was forming. She continued at the university until 1916, earning her doctorate with her dissertation *On the Problem of Empathy*. Her studies were interrupted by World War I, and she served as a nurse tending the wounded in the field hospitals nearby. She returned to her home in Breslau in 1916 and began teaching, but moved to Freiburg-im-Breisgau when she was asked to serve as Husserl's private secretary, organizing and editing his voluminous papers. She stayed at this work until 1918. After a difficult time seeking work and being turned down directly because no university at that time would hire a woman, she ended up taking a minor teaching position in Speyer Dominican sister's school.

On New Year's Day, 1922, she converted to Catholicism. For the next ten years, she was very active in academic institutes throughout Germany teaching, translating, lecturing, and pursuing her own studies. In 1932, with the rise of Nazi power, she was forced to resign her teaching position. In 1933, at the age of 42, she entered the Carmelite convent in Cologne. The situation became so difficult for Jewish people that her convent moved her to the Netherlands in

1938 where she lived in a Carmelite community until 1942. On August 2, 1942, in an act of German reprisal against an outcry by Dutch bishops over Nazi atrocities, hundreds of Dutch Catholic-Jews were arrested and transported east to the death camps. Edith Stein was among this group. On August 7, Edith Stein, with thousands of others, was taken from the holding camp at Westerbork and transported by rail to Auschwitz. On August 9, 1942, Edith Stein died there in one of the infamous gas showers. These basic facts of her life are significant for helping to understand her philosophical ideas.

The eminent philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre notes while commenting on the life of Edith Stein that she had a unique ability to “cross boundaries” while at the same time maintaining the essential integrity of her initial identifying and formative community. As she developed throughout her life, it was as if a series of expanding ringed circles, as in a tree, becoming more than she was by taking on difference, without giving up the core of who she was (MacIntyre). Thus, Edith Stein is a Jewish born woman from out of a traditional Jewish family who is also a noted philosopher at home in a fundamentally agnostic academic world of men. She remains true to both worlds; she becomes a feminist leader speaking forcefully for female rights in the work place, and at the same time, she enters the Carmel, living the life of a recluse, a contemplative nun. During this period, she immersed herself more deeply than ever in her philosophical work, the phenomenological studies that were her beginning. She also spent time studying her own Jewish roots that remained her first love as manifested especially through the person of her mother. Stein, as MacIntyre notes, had the unique gift to enter into a divergent community without denying the community out of which she had been formed; she lived the life of empathy that she wrote about in her first major academic work. Finally, in the complex

simplicity of oneness, unified in her person, Edith Stein, Jewish-Catholic-German-feminist-intellectual was murdered in 1942 at Auschwitz, ironically at the hands of those who have come to be symbols of people who most radically failed as humans, the Nazis. She died at the command of an institution run by people who failed totally in their ability to empathize—failed in their ability to know the thoughts and feelings of an entire race of people. In fact, the institution that

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commanded her death was under the control of highly educated people who failed to even acknowledge that an entire race of people were people.

Stein began her doctoral work under Husserl at the very moment that her master was engaged in his radical shifting from his earlier views of realism to his later views of idealism. Stein was drawn to and deeply influenced by the early Husserl reflected in his *Logical Investigations*, and in her thought, she remains a realist to the end. She accepts the phenomenological discourse, especially Husserl’s insight into the role of intentionality in human cognition, but never accepted his reductive bracketing. For Stein, the cognitive ability to know a reality provides a steady and reliable testimony to the existence of that reality apart from the knowing self. She maintains that the mind is informed by the world and not the opposite, the mind forming the world. This key to her thought she holds without wavering. Later, it will be one of the key ideas by which she bridges to the thought of Aristotle, and ultimately, Aquinas and other scholastic thinkers.

The mind is created with the capacity to know reality apart from itself in all its diversity

and so cannot be actualized without an actual world of such diversity. Self-knowledge and self-development are dialogical in that they are dependent upon a fuller knowledge of what the other is, or, to state it differently, a fuller knowledge of what one is.

Stein's philosophy is based on a concept of personhood that must be understood to understand the conclusions she reaches. The question of identity is one of the key ideas she reduced phenomenologically in her dissertation *What is the meaning of "I" we use so ubiquitously in all human discourse?* She proceeds step by step analyzing it in this manner:

- 1) The pure "I"—as in the famous "Cogito/I think"—is so abstract and universal by definition that it is meaning-less and cannot be used in real situations to indicate anything of meaning.
- 2) The phenomenological "I" that the average person experiences in the seemingly endless comings and goings of thoughts, feelings, perceptions, urges, fears, and impressions that seem extended across time—that is they are found to exist in the past through memory and to exist in the future through the faculty of apprehension. This "I" exists within the fluidity that writers refer to as "the stream of consciousness" (a phenomenon that modern novelists like Woolf and Joyce sought to duplicate).
- 3) But Stein argues, this "stream" of image has "banks," clear limits that give to the subject a perception of ownership, i.e. these thoughts are mine and not yours. This frame or shell that gives unique identity to my fluidity Stein terms the soul. This is not to be confused with religious entity, although it does embrace that idea in her later thoughts. For Stein, the soul provides the context of a purposed whole—it is

what establishes the sense of a unitive self.

- 4) But immediately, Stein states that a human soul cannot exist without or apart from a physical body. Stein's anthropology demands a body as the natural substance in which a soul finds its identity. To have a soul implies that one must have a body. Here and only here is where the "I" is to be found. The idea will help her, of course, to bridge effortlessly, in her later thoughts, to the hylomorphism of Aristotle, which will also be taken up by Aquinas (MacIntyre).

In summary then, the "I" that we speak of in common discourse is a unitive being capable of diverse and fluid processes, bounded by a soul that exist only within a physical body, and this "I" can only come to a sense of self-identity within this body. The "I" is thus dependent for its self-understanding upon the stimulation coming from received sense data. We know ourselves only to the degree that we know the other be it subject or object. Individual identity cannot be achieved outside a network of complex, continuous relationships. We exist as human beings within a community or we do not exist at all. Alasdair MacIntyre, in reflecting upon his thoughts, asks

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us to reflect upon the process in which a very young child comes to develop a personality and an identity. There is the ritualized play of the child gazing upon the mother or father receiving signs of love, pleasure, laughter, approval, joy, and with the reception, the child responds in a similar manner, which elicits from the parent further feelings. Through this reiterative or echoing manner, the complexity of the "I" constitutes itself. This process continues, Stein maintains,

throughout one's life. Consider, for example, this type of statement:

I was so happy to see how pleased you were when I invited you to my home after I had learned you were feeling so saddened by my own tragedy.

The other comes to us evoking a movement out of ourselves in response, and through that continued and multifaceted response, our potential to become a human being is either actualized or it is not. Without a capacity to comprehend, to know accurately what another person thinks or feels about me, is to be cut off forever from knowing and realizing certain important capacities that are uniquely human. Of course, there are clear risks in such in such development, for as Topsy in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* understands, we are often formed by the hateful or disparaging thoughts, feelings, and actions of others. The term "empathy," a translation of Stein's German "Einfuhling," was a relatively new term in Germany having been created by Theodore Lipps in the 19th century to describe the aesthetic feelings evoked by a great piece of art. Edith Stein explains her own process of choosing this idea for her dissertation in this way:

In his course on nature and spirit, Husserl maintains that one could only experience an objective external world inter-subjectively—that is, by a plurality of knowing individuals who can communicate experiences with one another. Such an exterior world presupposes the experience of other individuals. Husserl called this experience Einfuhling (empathy), but did not explain what it consisted of. This was a gap worth filling: I wanted to find out what empathy meant.

(De Fabregues 23)

Stein restricts the words to a definite meaning—The ability to know clearly what another person feels or thinks and this insight is ground-breaking in the way that only a basic common sense statement can be. Today, the concept has been taken over by the discipline of psychology. One eminent psychologist Robert Coles writes about the power of literature (significantly of stories) to develop and strengthen the sense of understanding and compassion in the average person (Coles). Many studies are being done on both the process by which empathetic awareness is formed in a human being, and probably more importantly, how it is that some people remain solipsistically and selfishly locked in the prison of an unauthentic, unrealized "I." The "I" devoid of empathy.

At the end of her thesis, Stein tries to elucidate the relationship between the manifestations of the body (the primary vehicle by which information is received that allows for an empathetic understanding) and the inner state of the subject herself. For example, she asks, what is the relationship between a person physically pulling back or cowering and the mental state of fear? Or what is the relationship between the smile and the inner state of happiness? Stein explores three possible relationships: a) the two are identical; b) the two are contingent but only in an accidental manner; c) the inner state generates within normal operations the outer manifestations. Stein maintains that the third possibility is the one that best expresses the phenomena of human judgements based upon the capacity to achieve an empathetic understanding of another. This stable, generative connective is what allows for a true understanding to take place in a way that is generally consistent and trustworthy. But it also is what accounts for mistakes of judgment at times, due to conscious deception by a subject or by a physical anomaly. A person can choose to smile even when in actuality he or she is consumed with anger. But

in typical human development, within normative ranges, we are built to interpret and to judge the mental state of another through his or her physical manifestations, and it is those judgments that allow us to modify our behavior toward the other in a way that is most appropriate for life and growth. Thus, we know through the use of sense and the corresponding empathetic capacity

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the difference between a teeth-baring snarl and a teeth-baring smile and act appropriately when faced by each respectively. It should be remembered that Edith Stein worked for a period of time during World War I as a nurse in a field hospital caring for wounded German soldiers.

The role of nurse illustrates perfectly the need for a developed sense of empathetic understanding, a sense that all biographies indicated Stein possessed to a high degree. A nurse must be able to know quickly and accurately the mental and psychological state of her patients, sorting out the ones truly in pain or distress from those seeking attention only, and a nurse must be able to act upon those judgements and knowledge with some degree of certitude.

In this brief overview, I have tried to elucidate the salient points of Edith Stein's doctoral thesis, *On the Problem of Empathy*. I conclude by recognizing the value of inherent in her ideas to the defense of the Humanities.

- 1) Stein's approach constitutes a radical break from the philosophical traditions of her time that focused on individualism. The difference is seen clearly by contrasting Descartes famous search for irrefutable

truth described in the *Meditations*: alone, at night, in his room, imprisoned in his mind alone he seeks a way out; for Stein as her life demonstrates the search for truth can only begin and end in community—family, academic colleagues, national service for a cause, sisterhood. The life blood of a community is empathetic understanding.

So by establishing empathy at the core of the human conscious act, Stein points to the essential need for others in all that we know and do if we are to become the fullest human being that we are capable of becoming.

- 2) Stein reengages the world as a realist, giving to her readers a phenomen-ological understanding as to why realism is true even while she recognizes the subjectivity of all human knowledge. For Stein, realism is affirmed through the process of what she terms inter-subjectivity bolstered by rigorous and disciplined communication. She writes, "Thus empathy as well as the basis for intersubjective experience becomes the condition of possible knowledge of the existing outer world, as Husserl, and also Royce present it" (64). It is as if she were able to have the six blind men of the noted fable sit down and carefully discuss their relative knowledge with each other about their own experiences of the elephant. Out of the community of experience, a fuller picture of realty informs the mind. There is no other way to accurately touch the outside world except through the function of empathy exercised within a community. The discipline of the Humanities, as taught in the traditional curriculum, is a crucial tool to embed the student into the lived communities of those in other communities both in time and space.

- 3) Stein returns philosophical discourse to the realm of the common sense, the reality of experience that is ordinary and average. Her philosophical discourse analyzes what is commonly understood by most, if not by all. Like Aristotle, Stein accepts common human experience to be trustworthy; then she uses the tools of phenomenology to elucidate logically and carefully what one already knows experimentally.
- 4) Stein's thought emphasizes the key role that emphatic understanding holds in terms of psychological development. For her, a healthy human being is able to not only accurately judge another's feelings, but is also able to evaluate accurately those feelings *vis a vis* the situation. One knows, for example, that in certain situations too little anger is just as damaging as too much anger. Both responses of a subject can be valued, can be evaluated, against a healthy norm. A man who feels nothing at the death of his child is acting in an unhealthy manner no less than another man who is unable to arise above his grief in the same situation. Stein thoughts lay the philosophical background for a study of evaluative judging, or in other words, for an understanding of ethical judgments.

These are the significant points that should be recognized as present in this seminal piece of writing by Edith Stein.

In an increasingly diverse and yet more compressed earth, the ability to know what others think and feel may soon become the primary skill needed for human survival. Stein helps us to understand the need for community and the function of empathetic knowledge in the formative process of a healthy human being. Her study does not focus on the question of whether or not empathy is a form of knowledge that can be taught just as the more traditional forms of

knowledge can be taught. We can teach people to know the biological makeup of a human, and we can test for this knowledge as is done at medical schools all the time. One significant role of the Humanities in its multiple forms, is to teach a person how to know the thoughts and feelings of a person constituted in part by those biological parts.

The teaching of literature especially through the experience and analysis of story is one of the most direct ways of expanding human consciousness and empathy. As Robert Coles writes:

The whole point of stories is not "solutions" or "resolutions" but a brightening and even a heightening of our struggles—with new protagonists and antagonists introduced, with new sources of concern or apprehension or hope, as one's mental life accommodates itself to a series of arrivals: guests who have a way of staying, but not necessarily staying put. (129)

A good novel invites strangers into our home, and forever we are changed as they become a part of our extended consciousness.

It is essential for us as educators in the Humanities to teach others how to relate to others who are different in significant ways. If Edith Stein is correct, this is only possible if we ourselves are genuinely open to differences. The dilemma of the failed educational approach devoid of the Humanities is perfectly illustrated in another famous piece from the 19th century literature, Charles Dickens' *Hard Times*. As the book ends, the narrow, rationalist, utilitarian Gradgrind comes up against the hard dangerous effects of his own maiming form of education in the person of his former student, Bitzer. Gradgrind begs for mercy for his son caught in a crime in the following manner:

“Bitzer,” said Mr. Gradgrind, broken down and miserably submissive to him, “have you a heart?”

“The circulation sir,” returned Bitzer, smiling at the oddity of the question, “couldn’t be carried on without one. No man, sir, acquainted with the facts established by Harvey relating to the circulation of the blood can doubt that I have a heart.”

“Is it accessible,” cried Mr. Grandgrind, “to any compassionate influence?”

“It is accessible to Reason, sir,” returned the excellent young man. “And to nothing else.”

They stood looking at each other, Mr. Grandgrind’s face as white as the Purser’s. (Dickens 266)

Often in disagreements, we are left staring face to face at another mystified by the puzzle staring back at us. It takes “heart” to solve that puzzle. What does it mean “to have a heart”? For Stein, only the man or woman who has a developed capacity for empathy can fully answer that question. A person without a capacity for empathy will act like a disease within a community offering sickness and division and fear, while the person who can engage the other through empathy brings health, community, and life.

In August of 1942, Edith Stein was taken from her convent in the Netherlands and transported to Auschwitz, along with her dearly loved sister, Rosa, and thousands of others, and there, for the crime of being “Jewish,” was systematically killed. A group who controlled one of the most intellectually enlightened countries in modern history implemented her death. One of the terrible ironies of the Holocaust is that many of the achievements of the modern scientific minds and of our technological civilization were what helped it to happen with such horrifying

efficiency and such maddening order. The Nazis moved with relentless logic to solve a perceived problem once and for all with what they termed “a final solution.” But they acted not as complete human beings; they acted without a heart, as Dickens might say, or they acted without a capacity for empathetic understanding, as Edith

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Stein would say. Stein’s writings and her life both witness to the need for empathy in the modern world if we are to survive at all. The divisions of the modern world are too great; there is no other way across except by building an empathetic bridge across the chasms of misunderstandings that we face. The Humanities are an important vehicle in helping to develop the faculty of empathy. It is a case that we can make, and must make, in the market place. Edith Stein’s ideas and her life can show us the way.

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