



## Phenomenology of Religious Experience III: Visuality, Imagination, and the Lifeworld

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# Dual Anthropology as the *Imago Dei* in Edith Stein

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**Abstract:** This essay consists of two parts. The first part deals with the birth of a dual anthropology in Edith Stein's thought, whereas the second part treats the teleological origin of this duality. In order to explain how she elaborated her dual anthropology two themes become intertwined in my investigation: the question of the feminine in western culture and the teleological question of the human being as an image of God. In my discussion of the first theme, I examine both the historical development of the feminist movement, maintaining that the birth of the feminist movement in the West has its roots in Christianity, as well as the theoretical reflection of Edith Stein on a dual anthropology, which becomes ultimately linked to a theological framework and, hence, to the idea of "image." Here, we have to ask: What is the meaning of "image"? In what sense is the human being an image of God? Following the foregoing claim, I argue that Stein's dual anthropology is very helpful in our time to clarify some questions that arise in connection with "gender theory".

**Keywords:** phenomenology of religion; dual anthropology; dual theology; feminism; gender theory; Edith Stein

## Introduction

This paper is dedicated to the birth of the dual anthropology as we find in Edith Stein's philosophy and theology. Her thought is a point of arrival; for this reason I first of all go back to the Gospel of John to comment on Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman in order to show how he recognised through this woman the importance of woman. We have to keep in mind, in fact, that in Western culture feminism initiated in the early Calvinist communities, where women could read the Gospel directly. Through a brief description of the history of feminism I arrive at Edith Stein and her dual anthropology, an extraordinary key to understanding the role of both man and woman and to reading and discussing contemporary gender theory and queer theory.

## 1 Feminism's origin in the Christian Message

### 1.1 Jesus' message regarding woman

In order to demonstrate the Christian genesis of feminism, I turn to its sources by examining an important Gospel text to highlight the particularity of Jesus' action and behaviour toward a woman. The Gospel of John, chapter 4, recounts the story of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman. We read: "Now when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John

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(although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples), he left Judea and departed again to Galilee. He had to pass through Samar'ia. So he came to a city of Samar'ia, called Sy'char, near the field that Jacob gave to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and so Jesus, wearied as he was with his journey, sat down beside the well. It was about the sixth hour. There came a woman of Samar'ia to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food. The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samar'ia?" For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans. Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."

This passage reveals certain customs of the day, including that men could not speak in public with female strangers. But why did Jesus not respect this custom? It should also be remarked that he is speaking to a woman that is alone at the well, who is a Samaritan. The Samaritans and the Jews were viewed as conflicted peoples. With one action, Jesus transgresses two prohibitions and, most surprisingly, the woman, who knows them, still shows herself responsive and open to dialogue. Does she display what may be typically called female curiosity? Even if this was the case, she nevertheless presents herself as being open to newness; the dialogue also follows her line of questioning. The Samaritan woman demonstrates great acuity, reminding Jesus of the need to follow the customs that would have prevented their very conversation. But she also asks Him to give her the living water that would have put to an end her hard, daily work of going to the well and drawing water. Furthermore, she asks Jesus where he could possibly obtain such water, given that he did not have a pail.

To this point, one could say that the practical intelligence of the woman is guiding the dialogue. She remains disconcerted when Jesus asks her to go and call her husband, but she does not think to pretend about her husband; rather, on the contrary, a sort of "confession" unfolds when the woman speaks the truth about her marital status: "I have no husband," she declares. Jesus shows that he knows about her situation and responds, "You have spoken correctly by saying 'I have no husband.'" He says, "In fact, you have said the truth." The woman loses her self-confidence and replies to Jesus by identifying who He truly is: "Lord, I see that you are a prophet." Realising to whom she was speaking, the woman seizes the opportunity to ask an important theological question about the disagreement between the Jews and the Samaritans: "Our fathers worshipped God on this mount and the Jews say that Jerusalem is the place where one must worship." Jesus answers by pointing out that with his incarnation the problem of "where" to worship God becomes less important: God is worshipped in spirit and truth, because God is everywhere, even if salvation comes from the Jews, for Jesus, as a man, is the son of the Jews. He reveals to the woman: "God is spirit and those that adore Him, must worship Him in spirit and truth." Here, we have a private revelation, like the famous one made to Peter: the woman connects the words of Jesus to the figure of the Messiah, ultimately obtaining the full confirmation of Jesus as Messiah. She will tell the revelation to her fellow citizens, who will believe her words. They will contravene convention by respecting the word of a woman. Usually, women's speech and words were seen to be without value. This episode here reveals a background of social discrimination and the legal inferiority of women.

## 1.2 The birth of feminism

The Gospel of John was studied, mostly by priests, from the early beginnings of the Christian Church, but John Paul II was the first to link explicitly and officially the aforementioned Gospel narrative to the recognition of women's dignity and her equality to men insofar as both are human beings. In 1988, John Paul II wrote an apostolic letter, with its famous beginning "*Mulieris dignitatem*" [*The dignity of woman*], to put an end to discrimination and prejudice against women in society and in the Church. He saw men and women as equals, challenging customs and traditions that were present not only in the Catholic Church but also in various secular institutional practices.

But this was not the first time that the Gospel – the story of the Samaritan woman among others – was read in this way. If we look at how women read the Gospels in order to understand Jesus' behavior toward women, we see that the 20<sup>th</sup> century was very rich and productive in this regard. We also note that

the Protestant Reformation, especially Calvinism, saw women in non-traditional terms. We see evidence of this “revolution” in Protestant thinking in the origins of the nascent United States and in the Puritan communities of England. Women who could directly read sacred texts, without the mediation of priests, took refuge in religion to affirm civil rights within the spirit of the Reformation. In particular, Reformed communities in the English Revolution gave to women an ideal of perfection that “...represented a unique service not connected to sex and in which women could be equal to men, even surpassing men.”<sup>1</sup>

But not everything was framed within religious practice, though religion provided the possibility of finding the strength for social and political action not only for women that belonged to higher social classes but also to those belonging to the lower classes, which was an unprecedented move. In England, women expressed themselves through petitions inspired by John Lilburne’s theory of the “Levellers,” who argued for democracy for religious sects within the sphere of politics. This was in 1642. The demand for the vote by the Levellers was accompanied by a similar request by women. The demand for the vote was also made by the Puritans who settled on the east coast of North America. We read, for example in the *History of Women*, that Abigail Adams asked her husband, who was a delegate to the Continental Congress, not to forget the demands of women in the new code of law, especially if he did not wish to face the challenge of a female rebellion.<sup>2</sup> In March 1792, similar petitions were made in France by 300 Parisian women who wished to constitute themselves as a national guard during the French Revolution.

Men’s response was always the same: women’s demands are impractical because women, by nature, are “incapable” of engaging with the social world. Women, however, were not discouraged, and the movement that originated within the sphere of religion became secularised, ultimately distancing itself from all churches. The deafness of men would come to determine in large part the fate of feminism, which was to become a secular movement.

Certain Protestant and Catholic groups formed in Germany, as Edith Stein reminds her readers when she cites such groups as “Free Protestantism” and the “German Catholic Movement”.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, in South America and Europe, individual women of the Catholic world, for example, Elena Guerra, began to claim the value of the feminine, as also happened later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Such claims essentially revolve around the question of the legal recognition of women’s rights. This is excellent because such recognition was achieved in western countries in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, at least on the theoretical level. Whether such recognition and rights lead to equity within the realms of practices and customs is a wholly different question.

Because the diffidence of men concerning the effective insertion of women into society and politics was always linked to the claim that women’s incapacity was rooted in a “feminine nature,” and because of cultural change brought about by and spread through schools and universities throughout the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, in particular, through the ruling classes, which included women, certain women manifested an interest in philosophy and, above all, in anthropological themes and questions, thereby turning their reflection and thinking to the question of the sense of the feminine.

## 2 Duality according Edith Stein

### 2.1 Edith Stein’s anthropology

Within this philosophical context and that of Germany in particular, we find Edith Stein. I wish here to explore her theoretical contributions, largely because I find her arguments both profound and convincing.

The novelty of Stein’s philosophy consists not only in her bringing to light the characteristics of the “feminine,” especially when she affirms that woman cannot be grasped without examining the characteristics of the masculine, but also in elaborating what I call a “dual anthropology.” Her anthropology

<sup>1</sup> Schulte von Kessel, *Vergini e madri fra cielo e terra*, in *Storia delle donne dal Rinascimento all’Età Moderna*, 172.

<sup>2</sup> Godineau, *Sulle due sponde dell’Atlantico*, in *Storia delle donne in Occidente. L’Ottocento*, 24.

<sup>3</sup> One finds a brief history of the Christian feminist movement in Stein’s text, “Problems of Women’s Education”, in Stein, *Essays on Woman*, 137–245.

deploys Edmund Husserl's phenomenological method, which analyzes the human being as a phenomenon that we encounter in ourselves and others.

It is clear that by assuming the philosophical or phenomenological attitude, what first becomes evident is the universal structure of the human, which is analyzed on the basis of one's own personal experience and is confirmed by finding the same structure in others. The universality of the structure articulates itself in each individual singularity but between singularity and universality we find duality. Let us examine this singularity, which organizes itself in an absolutely personal way. Drawing on the insights of her teacher Husserl, whose manuscripts on the human being she transcribed and formalized in the second volume of his *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and a Philosophical Philosophy*, Stein presents a detailed analysis of the human being.

## 2.2 From the universal to the dual and to the singular

Western philosophical analysis isolates a structure that is common to all human beings, a structure that distinguishes itself from other historical, cultural, and social ones, and in which the singular individual is inserted. All of these structures also include gender. One of the achievements of feminist thought was to move from a universalist account of human being deprived of gender to the notion of sexual difference, thereby opening up a realm of further investigation.<sup>4</sup>

If we wish to privilege human experience, which is what we live daily, we observe that the women we encounter—and even men—present themselves in their unique singularity. In fact, we never encounter woman or man as abstract concepts; rather, we always see a person with his or her particular characteristics. This is an undeniable given of our experience. But when we reflect on sexual difference, in particular, on the feminine, even our language pushes us to generalise, hence, we speak of “woman” and seek the characteristic qualities present in every woman.

The foregoing reflective attitude is considered foundational for philosophical research, which seeks to make evident universal structures that we recognise as present, for example, when we meet one or more women and say that they are all women. But what exactly do we really “recognise”? These women have a determined physical structure that they carry within themselves, which ultimately raises a paradox: each woman is a singular individual, unique and unrepeatable, yet they are all women.

We can observe, then, that we have the capacity to move from the singular to the universal and vice versa. This given possibility presents great advantages, but also risks. If we stop at what is made evident universally, we lose sight of the individuality of the person and the experiential plane of presentation that gives us direct contact with the object. It gets missed or remains hidden. If, however, we pause to consider the unique singularity before us, we lose sight of all the common traits useful for a more developed theoretical account. In the capacity that holds both moments together in their complementarity and undeniability, one finds an equilibrium that can yield fruitful results when “thinking through experience.”

We feel the singularity, we grasp it through our own awareness of it and through acts of intropathy of the other. I deploy the word “intropathy” to transmit the vibrant sense of the German term *Einführung*, for the usual translation of the term, namely, empathy, has taken on a meaning and connotation that is not faithful to what the early phenomenologists intended by the term. Edmund Husserl and Edith Stein, for example, use the word in a philosophical sense to indicate the intuitive recognition of alterity. Certainly, this recognition may be the way to a greater understanding of the other, a becoming closer to the other, but this understanding involves other modes of living that approximate sympathy more than intropathy, and may include such things as attention, benevolence and love, all moments that may be simultaneously *lived* together, but all of which first require the originary recognition of alterity and our capacity to have lived experience. Here, we are referring to *Erlebnisse*, which Husserl first discussed as instruments in our possession that could potentially be used to place us in contact with ourselves and the external world.

<sup>4</sup> Ales Bello, *Tutta colpa di Eva. Antropologia e religione dal femminismo alla gender theory*. In particular, see part one, “La nascita del femminismo e la questione del gender” [“The Birth of Feminism and the Question of Gender”].

Intropathy, understood in the phenomenological sense, which includes the lived experience of recognising an alter ego that is both similar to me in all of its essential structures and, at the same time, unique in terms of its personal qualities, permits us to make a leap to the universal level of discourse, for it seeks the intuitive and immediate evidence of that which is common, even within the particularity of the lived experience of the singular, unrepeatably individual.

The experiential impact with myself and the other first occurs in the body. This fact allows us to analyze corporeity, which we cannot avoid, for western culture, through its scientific worldview, seeks to penetrate the inside of corporeity by analysing it from different perspectives, including physiology, anatomy and genetics, thereby demonstrating the presence of masculine and feminine characteristics that, in turn, show themselves in particular ways in every man and every woman. Medicine operates in the aforementioned fashion as it tries to understand changes in the human body while developing appropriate therapies. Medicine confronts singular individuals, in a sometimes difficult and even dramatic way, with what it learns in general about human beings.

One of the achievements of feminism was to make evident the necessity of distinguishing men from women; it did not stop its investigations and actions with the idea of a neutral sex. Two questions arise. First, we have to inquire about the fact that women have their own particular anatomical structure, but, at the same time, share many characteristics with men. In fact, one can generally speak of a human body that transcends the specificities of both male and female. It is this very observation that leads us to our second question: If we are unable to analyze woman without considering the fact that she is a human being, we then need to also examine man.

At this point, a hierarchy begins to form, whose structure we can see from top to bottom and in which we can see the correlation of both the masculine and feminine moments. In fact, the human being appears as both masculine and feminine. And if we are to proceed correctly, we need to keep these two aspects in mind. How can we theorise the forgoing point from a philosophical perspective? An investigation of the singular individual refers us back to the universality of the human being, but we are always constrained to distinguish the masculine from the feminine before we can begin to seize the singular individual. As we have discovered above, one can also do the reverse. Hence, the two trajectories are correlated and refer to one another.

Before we undertake an analysis of the human being as both male and female, we must reflect on the fact that if we wish to understand the human, that is, provide a philosophical anthropology, we must frame it as a *dual anthropology*. If we are able to distinguish some universal elements that differentiate certain universal characteristics from, for example, animal or vegetative beings, a deeper comprehension of the structure of human beings will lead us to an understanding of the aforementioned duality as both important and constative for our larger analysis. Edith Stein, who came to know the feminist movement while attending university, undertook such a study with great acuity, reflecting on the necessary philosophical base for the series of questions that arise in her study.

### 2.3 Duality and sexuality

The difference between man and woman expresses itself in the sexed body. But what is sexuality? According to Husserl and Stein, the living body was defined as a psycho-physical entity, whereas the human being was seen to be a complex entity that was also constituted as spiritual. If we wish to tackle the question of sexuality, then, we cannot limit ourselves simply to the level of the anatomical body but need to consider the whole human being.

In a lecture dedicated to woman and her relation to man, found in her text *Essays on Woman*<sup>5</sup>, Stein speaks of a double species that expresses itself as masculine and feminine and that includes all the human components, which English-language scholarship translates as the concept gender. Stein, following Aristotle, makes the distinction between the human genus and the masculine and feminine species, a

<sup>5</sup> Stein, *Essays on Woman*, 59–86.

historical distinction that is somewhat foreign to our contemporary way of thinking. We can say that what Stein understood as species could, today, be understood as gender. Stein saw species connected to sex. She refers to both the female and male sexes without reducing them to a narrow conceptual apparatus; she understands them broadly as including the whole human being with all of its differences. Clearly, sexuality does not include only physiological aspects but also the psychic and spiritual dimensions of the human being.

By not separating certain human components along sexual lines, Stein maintains that education and formation<sup>6</sup>, which are indispensable for human life, must contain “sex education.” Sex education consists in finding an equilibrium of the different aspects constitutive of both men and women, thereby definitively yielding a significant space to the human capacity for a free and motivated control of sexuality that arises in the spirit without, however, neglecting the psychic dimension of sexuality that expresses itself in our tendencies, drives and instincts, all of which we “feel” as not instigated by us, but as discovered in ourselves. Without negating the general structure of the human being, it is possible to analyse the components of the structure, sex, and psychology of the human. Husserl’s and Stein’s works affirm this possibility.<sup>7</sup>

## 2.4 Corporeal and psychic aspects of sexuality

One of the great accomplishments of Stein’s philosophy is that she never loses focus on the human being, understood in its universal structure, though she also studies its male and female aspects. Stein universalizes, but she does so not by relying on the notion of the “neutral,” but on the idea of the “dual.” In her study, she first focuses on the anatomical difference between men and women, though she does not dwell long on such difference as it is not the primary focus of her work. She focuses more on the psychic aspects, the tendencies that differentiate the sexes, namely, the unidirectionality of the masculine and the completeness of the feminine, which may also be found on the anatomical and spiritual levels.

Male unidirectionality, which is easily visible at the anatomical level, can also be seen at the psychic level as the tendency to focus on one specific element, to act according to one aim or focus while excluding everything else. Other directions and possibilities become “closed off.” Stein attributes wholeness or “completeness” to the feminine. Here, she speaks of completeness as a movement towards being open to receiving and as a closing that is experienced as an embracing. She understands the feminine as a kind of protective embracing, an essentially maternal movement. The masculine fixes its attention on one or more aspects while simultaneously excluding others. Again, the feminine can be seen to favour the human, understood in its completeness or wholeness, whereas the masculine views certain aspects of the human while excluding others.

## 3 Duality from a theological perspective

### 3.1 Duality as *imago Dei*

Up until now, we have spoken about the difference between men and women from philosophical and psychological perspectives, which are fundamental for Stein. But when we explore our question from another point of view, one which helped shape the birth of feminism, namely, the value of the masculine and feminine connected to the long history of discrimination against women on account of their supposed inferiority, she maintains that difference must be analysed from a moral point of view. To understand the question of difference, we must broach the idea of original sin. Her approach is both methodological and

<sup>6</sup> Education and formation are precisely distinguished from one another by Stein in her pedagogical writings. Education is largely “informative and must be completed in an existential project, which only formation can help develop and elaborate.” See: Stein, *Bildung und Entfaltung der Individualität: Beiträge zur Pädagogik*.

<sup>7</sup> Ales Bello, A., *Il senso dell’umano. Tra Fenomenologia, Psicologia e Psicopatologia*.

theological in that she focuses on the origin of moral disorder.

Stein examines the writings of the Doctors and Fathers of the Church in order to begin her theological explorations. She affirms that there is much material on the question that may be read as a source of “critique.”<sup>8</sup> Unlike K. E. Børresen, Stein does not examine all the writings of Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas that speak about the “nature” of woman, especially the latter’s idea of the *mas occasionatus*<sup>9</sup>, woman understood as a deficient form of maleness. Stein herself cites a less aggressive but no less negative idea: *Vir est principium mulieris et finis* [*Man is the principle and end of woman*] in order to inquire about the origin of the claim. She writes, “It would then be necessary to refer to all scriptural passages from which a definition of the end of woman could be drawn (and likewise, anything concerning her subordination to man); and what appears here as principle and end would have to be compared to that sentence of St. Thomas.”<sup>10</sup>

The foregoing citations are taken from Stein’s essay “Problems of Women’s Education,” a manuscript that forms part of her lecture course held at the Münster Institute of Pedagogy in the fall of 1932. Answers to the questions raised above may be found in Stein’s lecture from 1931 given at the Ursulines of Aquisgrana titled “The Separate Vocations of Man and Woman According to Nature and Grace,” in which she comments on the origins of man and woman by exploring relevant passages in the *Book of Genesis*.

Stein was the first scholar to correlate passages 1, 26–29 and 2, 25–27. Later, John Paul II discusses the two passages in his apostolic letter *Mulieris dignitatem*. Stein observes that there is substantial agreement between the two passages insofar as both man and woman are born at the same time. God ascribes to them three tasks: to be the image of God, create a progeny, and dominate the earth. The last task is given to both humans; they are both seen to be absolute equals in this regard. The second passage seems, at the beginning, to give greater importance to man, as he was created first. But we also note in the subsequent text that inequality is not emphasised; rather, drawing woman out of man, God creates woman as a helpmate who stands “next to him.” Stein translates the Hebrew expression *eser kenegdo* to arrive at her conclusion of woman being a co-helper of man: “The translators who speak of a ‘helpmate suitable to him’ perceive it in this way. But one can also think of a counterpart, a pendant, so that, indeed, they do resemble each other, yet not entirely, but rather, that they complement each other as one hand does the other.”<sup>11</sup> Stein’s comment about finding in the text a discussion of the image of God is also significant: “But God is three in one; and just as the Son issues from the Father, and the Holy Spirit from the Father and the Son, so, too, the woman emanated from man and posterity from them both. And moreover, God is love. But there must be at least two persons for love to exist (as we are told by St. Gregory in his homily on the mission of the disciples who were dispatched two by two).”<sup>12</sup> Stein accepts that Eve was born from Adam’s rib, but if we understand the Hebrew text to be saying that Eve was born from Adam’s side, we can read a sort of making of Adam into a making of both Adam and Eve.

### 3.2 What is an image?

The definition of the human being as the “image” of God requires a brief analysis of the meaning of the word “image.” Phenomenology may assist us in capturing the specificity of an image with respect to other realities present in the human world. The image is “real” in the sense that we can know an image through its being sensed as a physical, tridimensional object. The image has its particular reality that is distinct from the concrete object. How does one live the difference of these two experiences, namely, that of the perception of physical objects and that of the image?

<sup>8</sup> Stein, *Problemi della formazione delle ragazze oggi*, in *La donna. Questioni e riflessioni*, 217. English Translation: “Problems of Women’s Education”, in *Edith Stein Essays on Woman*, 104.

<sup>9</sup> Børresen, *Natura e ruolo della donna in Agostino e Tommaso*.

<sup>10</sup> Stein, *Essays on Woman*, 180–181.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

The perceptual experience gives me the thing. The image is analogous to the thing, but it is never absolutely identical with it, as Husserl maintains in his writings found in volume 23 of the *Husserliana*, *Phantasie, Bildbewußtsein, Erinnerung*.<sup>13</sup> Here, the image is described as always being in tension, and it lies in contrast to the object of which it is an image. Only if the image is of pure phantasy does the tension not exist because no confrontation with a real object is possible. Edith Stein develops the theme of the image extensively in her *Finite and Eternal Being*. In her discussion of the image, she refers to Augustine's *De trinitate* as well as Thomas Aquinas's definition, which holds that one possesses an image when a representation of the cause exists in the image.

That the human being, both woman and man, is the image of God, we find in the Bible. This is a revelation and it is accepted in faith. Stein herself reflected on the relation between the human and the divine. She describes, in her dual anthropology, that the complex structure of the human arrives at a deep point of identity (i.e., the personal core or the soul of the soul). In *Potency and Act*, she writes: "The person's core is the be-ing which the person is in himself and through which he is a *similitudo* [likeness] of divine being. It is what positively lies behind the *analogia entis* [analogy of being] as its basis."<sup>14</sup> Analogy indicates there is a similarity and even great dissimilarity, for the divine cannot be reduced to the human.

One may object that one cannot justify the relation of the human similarity with God based on revelation. On the contrary, I maintain that one can philosophically justify the divine presence in us as well as the similarity between humans and the divine. Human beings have a tendency to absolutization and are never satisfied with finitude. They have a sense of eternity and permanence that does not arise with humans themselves, for the human being knows that s/he is limited and finite even though s/he does not desire to be so. Whence does this desire arise, if not from "feeling" the eternal and unlimited that dwells within each one of us, even if we do not wish to see it or know it?<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, the person who recognizes the divine in himself or herself spontaneously opens up and engages in a dialogue with this Something that is present in and transcends them, as is evidenced in prayer. Prayer is a dialogue with someone that can listen and is found in all forms of religion, even in religions that reject a personal God. When the faithful pray, they feel this Something that is similar to them. All of this is confirmed by the Judaeo-Christian revelation that we are all made in the image of God.<sup>16</sup> As Husserl stated, to be an image of God is not to be identical with the divine: there is always a tension, a dissimilarity, between the human and the divine, for we are imperfect images of Something perfect. We can certainly affirm this latter fact because we know what perfection is even though we are unable to achieve it. If we are an image of God, we are so in our duality and in the difference of male and female. In fact, human being, in its abstract form and neutrality, never gives itself. We only and always find a sexed human being.

### 3.3 The origin of the conflict between man and woman

Just within the framework of the passages of the Bible, Stein maintains that we cannot speak of the dominion of man over woman, for woman is seen as a companion and helpmate of man. How, then, does the inequality between them arise? The answer: sin. Because of the change it introduces in the relation between humans and God, a change also occurs in the relation between the two humans. Stein argues that original sin is framed within the context of procreation. She even says that we do not even know the mode of procreation prior to the fall, for the knowledge of good and evil promised by the serpent led the two humans to look upon one another with different eyes, ultimately causing them to lose the innocence of their reciprocal relationships. Hence, sin is not simply to be understood as disobedience: "Indeed, the act committed could well have been a manner of union which was at variance with the original order."<sup>17</sup> To

<sup>13</sup> Husserl, E., *Phantasie, Bildbewusstsein, Erinnerung 1898–1925*, n. 17, c.

<sup>14</sup> Stein, *Potenz und Akt: Studien zu einer Philosophie des Seins; Potency and Act*, 151.

<sup>15</sup> Ales Bello, *The Divine in Husserl and Other Explorations*.

<sup>16</sup> Ales Bello, *Il senso del sacro. Dall'arcaicità alla descalizzazione*.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

know evil, in this case, is to *do* evil because, even before the fall, humans knew the difference between good and evil, but they did not know evil because they had not committed it: “Adam and Eve had a more perfect knowledge of God, i.e., a more perfect knowledge of the highest good and, from that, of all particular good. But they were to be kept, no doubt, from that knowledge of evil which one gains in the doing of it.”<sup>18</sup>

Stein observes that the great deceitful trap of the devil was to assure human beings that if they knew both good and evil in the full sense, they would become like God. What, then, did human being aspire to become? Was it to know everything, and why things happen? Humans had a trace of the Absolute and therefore had some knowledge, however vague, of the nature of things. But humans are also aware of their finitude. If they do not humbly accept their finite condition, there arises in them, both Adam and Eve, the overarching desire to be like God. Here, we are dealing with the sin of pride, a sin which both first humans shared.

This pride lies at the base of God’s condemnation as well as the conflict between human beings. God declares, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.”<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, Stein remarks that though she accepts that God is referring to Mary, Mother of God, in this passage, she also maintains, “This, however, does not exclude the other meaning; the first woman, to whom Adam gave the name “mother of all living creatures,” as well as all her successors had been given a particular duty to struggle against evil and to prepare for the spiritual restoration of life.”<sup>20</sup>

Confirmation or proof of this task may be found in Eve’s words on the occasion of the birth of her first son: “..I have gotten a man from the Lord [or in more contemporary language: “I have brought forth a male child with the help of the Lord”].”<sup>21</sup> She recognises the blessing of the Lord, and this is why the women of Israel have always wanted to procreate in order to create a generation that would see salvation, the redemption of Jesus, son of Mary. Redemption introduced into history the possibility of overcoming the opposition of man and woman, if we allow ourselves to be led by grace. This is the message of hope that Stein draws from her reading of the Bible and which she hopes to communicate through her own teaching. Her lectures on woman and her pedagogical writings are dedicated to this goal and are still relevant for us today.<sup>22</sup>

## 4 The actuality of Edith Stein’s dual anthropology

### 4.1 The human being according to “nature” and “essence”

Stein’s treatment of the theological method also contains another valuable insight relevant to our understanding of what is currently occurring in western culture. Her insight is interesting because it revolves around the relation between “nature” and “essence,” as taken up in the writing of Thomas Aquinas. To understand what Stein intends, one must recall her own philosophical training. Husserl’s phenomenology, which Stein embraced as a young student, distinguished itself from positivism, which dominated European thought at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It focused on “nature,” understood in physical-mathematical terms. Positivism identified all of reality with nature. This naturalistic interpretation of reality was rejected by thinkers such as Husserl.

Hence, the use of the expression “the nature of things,” as deployed by Thomas Aquinas, is not found in Husserl’s texts; rather, he speaks of the “essence” of things. By “nature” Husserl meant physical nature. In her early, strictly phenomenological period, following Husserl, Stein uses the term “essence” in order to grasp the “sense” of phenomena to be investigated. When Stein engages medieval Christian thought,

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 63–64.

<sup>19</sup> Genesis 3, 15.

<sup>20</sup> Stein, *Essays on Woman*, 64.

<sup>21</sup> Genesis 4, 1.

<sup>22</sup> Stein, *Essays on Woman*.

especially that of Thomas Aquinas, she realizes that for him the essence of the thing is defined as the “nature” of things, though Thomas does not refer to physical nature, that is, the internal structure of things.

Stein writes, “With St. Thomas, *natura* and *essentia* are used frequently as synonyms. Both denote that which the thing is in itself.”<sup>23</sup> She also remarks, “But this “whatness of the thing itself” can be understood from different perspectives: first, as that which is given to the thing in the act of creation, as it was placed into existence and, therefore, as it was destined to function. And thus the term *natura* is suitable. This “whatness” can also be understood as that which we find in the thing which is proper and necessary in contrast to all external qualities, behavioral patterns, and manners of appearance, i.e., which depend on the external, accidental conditions of its existence. And for that the term essence is suitable.”<sup>24</sup>

Stein does not accept Thomas’ equivocation of nature and essence as she distinguishes an essential structure from an empirically existent reality. She claims that if one wishes to know the structure of a thing, one has to individuate its essence, that is, one must grasp its sense. An existing reality is a realization of an essence that contains within itself particular variations. Here, Stein is once again bringing to the fore the Husserlian theme of eidetic variation: All empirical realities contain essential moments that may be grasped over and above the concrete modes in which a thing presents itself. Here, one grasps the invariable among the variables. In fact, the very variability of the variable is conditioned by the reality of the invariable. Human cognition may grasp variations, but if one has to say what a thing is, human beings are capable of grasping the sense of the thing.

If we apply the foregoing Husserlian insight to Stein’s study of woman, to her nature and to her vocation, as Stein does, one could say that one finds in woman a range of variations that coincide with an invariable essence or sense. Theologically speaking, of interest here is the ends of woman, her vocation, her nature. Stein recognizes that the question of essence is purely philosophical and not theological. The difference between the two approaches in no way impedes the possibility of obtaining valid insights from both fields of inquiry. Whether philosophically or theologically considered, the distinction between nature and essence can serve as an interpretative key for grasping key moments of western culture’s views on the question of “gender.” The non-identification of nature and essence add something new to current discussions. For example, various discourses on homosexuality, transsexuality, and intersexuality take up the question of the male/female binary, and in doing so, do they not need to make the distinction between nature and essence?

I maintain that the phenomenological tri-partite distinction of human beings as body, psyche, and spirit must be considered in the foregoing discourses. Also, we must continue to consider the unity of psycho-physical living body (*Leib*), which is directed by the spirit. How do we understand this unified tri-partite human being in relation to nature and essence? I propose that we read masculine and feminine as constituting two ideal poles that may be more or less perfectly realized in nature. Stein takes up this position when referring to a feminine essence and to the vocation of woman in general as well as each woman’s personal vocation.

## 4.2 Nature and essence in sexuality and gender theory

We can apply Stein’s understanding of male and female essence to the discussion of sexuality. “Nature,” as Stein understood it, expresses itself in the realization of the individual. Is it possible for disharmony among the constituent parts of the individual to arise, for example, between body and psyche? Yes. “Nature,” understood in this way, then, may not actualize a specific essence. This means that the disharmony between the parts does not respect the ideal, for example, in cases of hormonal imbalances, problems with the development of genital differentiation (either male or female), or reproductive or phenotypical problems. But can we say that in such cases the essence is less present? No. This is the case because the two poles of male and female are biological points of reference that we also find in medicine and law.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 277.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

Even if we recognise in some individuals the ambiguity of sexual differentiation from a genetic and/or endocrinological standpoint, we still proceed with caution in our various treatments aimed at resolving the said ambiguities because sexual orientation concerns the entire structure of the human being, Stein would say. It could be the case that another form of sexuation may occur later other than the one chosen.<sup>25</sup>

We find a different approach in queer theory, however. It provocatively claims that sexual differences are socially constructed, and given that there are clear ambiguities, it attributes to human beings the capacity to choose one's sexuality as one wills. Paradoxically, one finds in queer theory a confirmation of the value of human freedom, an activity of the spirit, which seeks to deal with the emotions and reactions of psyche that stem from largely oppressive environments. Admittedly, a culture's customs cannot always be considered as rules that need to be followed; we have to evaluate customs with criteria not determined by reactions and resentments. We have to follow the guide of conscious reflection that follows universal criteria.

That male and female represent the two ideal poles of the human being's essence and are not, as Judith Butler<sup>26</sup> maintains, merely social constructions, does not lead to the existence of a third neutral gender; rather, what we have before us is the realization of possible forms or variations of the two ideal poles. This is important, as it does not jeopardize the idea of a dual anthropology. Stein recognizes that the "dose" of the essences of the two sexes, not being definitively set, may appear in different ways in individuals.

Concerning the theme of singularity, it should be noted that Stein's idea on personality and the personal core are highly prized. We see her ideas being connected to various gender discourses, especially those rooted in the idea of the will or in frameworks of deep personal identity. Here, we have to ask: In the personal core, which constitutes the essence of the human person, is there a "specifically" rooted male or female essence? Stein does not directly answer this question, but given that one's destiny as an individual is present in the personal core, one could reasonably include the sexual orientation of the body, psyche, and spirit, all of which, from both philosophical and human perspectives, was created in the image of God as man and woman, as revealed in the Old Testament. Furthermore, as sexuality is an important part of the human being, the personal core, understood as the *soul of the soul*, transcends the foregoing distinctions because there exists a moment of eternity in human beings, which also allows for the transcendence of nature, though it remains connected to "nature." The question before us is not easily resolvable with the tools that Stein gives us, though her thinking allows us to take the first steps towards articulating a hypothesis.

## 5 Synthesis

We have seen *grosso modo* how Stein fits within the feminist movement. Her originality consists, first, in philosophically considering the question of the feminine and in maintaining the necessity of treating the essence of human being in all of its universal aspects, which includes the duality of both male and female. Second, she gives us the opportunity to consider sexual difference from a psychological perspective. Third, she gives us a theological framework to consider the originary conflict between the sexes. Stein allows us to think the human condition as created beings who disobeyed God, thereby introducing evil into the world as well as conflict between the sexes.

Hope in Christian Revelation is certainly a way out of the conflict, but it is not automatic. It requires an active engagement on the part of all humans. Without the recognition of the Christian message and without a real belonging to Christ, human beings fall prey to mutual aggression. Stein helps us to understand not only the duality of human beings but also the "variations" of this very duality. Who knows what Stein would have said if she had known about the so-called "theological" interpretations of those who intend to

<sup>25</sup> I develop these arguments at length in a book: Ales Bello, *Tutta colpa di Eva. Antropologia e religione dal femminismo alla gender theory*. See also: Cirotto, "Identità di genere. Considerazioni di un biologo"; Balsamo, "Genetica e sviluppo della sessualità"; Cavana, "Questione del "genere", diritti del minore e procreatività"; Palazzani, "I disturbi della differenza sessuale e l'intersessualità: una questione gender tra teoria e prassi".

<sup>26</sup> Butler, *Undoing Gender*.

radically put into crisis the aforementioned duality in the name of an absolute liberty, as espoused by queer theory and queer theology? What we can do here is place ourselves in the rich philosophical furrow of Edith Stein's thought in order to develop an even-keeled, constructive position.

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All biblical quotations come from *The Bible*, Revised Standard Version; <https://www.biblestudytools.com/rsv/john/4.html>