

Article

Expressing Faith in a Phenomenological Mother Tongue

Magdalene Thomassen

SDP, VID Specialized University, N-0319 Oslo, Norway; magtho@online.no

Abstract: The article first exposes a section in Edith Stein's masterwork, *Finite and Eternal Being*, where she explicitly reflects upon the relation between philosophy and theology, and on the possibility of a Christian philosophy. Here, Stein enlarges the scope of rationality when propagating faith as a source of knowledge in its own right. The phenomenological first-person perspective and notions of intention and fulfillment help to elucidate the different ways of getting to know God, finding its utmost source in the lived mystical experience. Despite including theological content in her phenomenological analysis, Stein proposes a possible "common ground" where the non-believer is also invited to join in an epistemological effort. This proposition, I suggest, is pointing forward to the contributions of the so-called "new phenomenologists" of the last half-century, Emmanuel Levinas and Jean-Luc Marion being examples of how theology and philosophy, though separate, may enrich each other.

Keywords: Edith Stein; Christian philosophy; phenomenology; "new phenomenologists"

1. Introduction

The so-called "theological turn" in phenomenology is coming of age. After all these years and numerous substantial contributions, I do not intend here to revise or revive the discussions in the aftermath of Dominique Janicaud's somewhat polemical essay, fixing the borders of phenomenology, nor will I analyze the arguments and positions in this debate, several loosening the borders of phenomenology.¹ Initially, though, it might be pertinent to pose the question naively: if there was a "turn", when did it start? It is well known that the first phenomenological "circle" in Göttingen showed a vivid interest in religion and religious questions, the most prominent examples being Scheler, Reinach and Conrad Martius. Also, Husserl himself seems to have been more open and nuanced on the question of God in philosophy than is often assumed.² In this collegial climate, Edith Stein, as a young student, discovered a new path towards religion and religious belonging in her teens after having left the Jewish practice of her childhood.³

This both intellectual and existential itinerary is reflected in Edith Stein's work. From her conversion onward and even before, her writings were imbued with what she found in the tradition and the teachings of the Catholic Church. She worked on Thomas Aquinas of course, but also on the early church fathers, Augustine and Dionysius Areopagite, as well as more recent figures like John H. Newman.⁴ Still, Stein never left phenomenology behind; that is, she remained a philosopher also in her work on theology. So, the question seems of interest: what was her own conception of the relation between philosophy and theology?

In what follows, I will (1) first expose a section in Stein's masterwork, *Finite and Eternal Being* (Stein [1936] 2002), where she explicitly reflects upon the relation between philosophy and theology, and more specifically, on the question of the possibility of a Christian philosophy. Here, she boldly enlarges the scope of rationality when propagating (2) faith as a source of knowledge in its own right. The phenomenological first-person perspective and notions of intention and fulfillment help to elucidate the different ways of getting to know God, finding its utmost source in the lived mystical experience. Despite including theological content in her phenomenological analysis, (3) Stein proposes a possible "common ground" where the non-believer is also invited to join in an epistemological effort.



Citation: Thomassen, Magdalene. 2023. Expressing Faith in a Phenomenological Mother Tongue. *Religions* 14: 1094. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14091094>

Academic Editors: Espen Dahl and Theodor Rolfen

Received: 4 July 2023

Revised: 15 August 2023

Accepted: 17 August 2023

Published: 24 August 2023



Copyright: © 2023 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

This proposition, I suggest, is pointing forward to the contributions of the so-called “new phenomenologists” of the last half-century, Emmanuel Levinas and Jean-Luc Marion being examples of how theology and philosophy, though separate, may enrich each other.

2. Meaning and Possibility of a Christian Philosophy

The question of the relation between theology and philosophy—or between *fides et ratio*—is actualized for Edith Stein when she, with her solid phenomenological anchoring, approaches the Thomistic tradition. We find the most elaborate bringing together of the two in the work often named Stein’s “philosophical testament”, *Finite and Eternal Being*.⁵ In a section of the introduction, Stein explicitly focuses on the *Sinn und Möglichkeit* of a Christian philosophy (Stein [1936] 2002, pp. 12–29; [1936] 2006, pp. 20–36). Having thematized the linguistic difficulties of translation between modern and medieval philosophy in exploring the problem of being, Stein formulates her own position as follows: as the author of the book, her “philosophical mother tongue is the language of the phenomenological thinkers. She therefore uses phenomenology as a starting point to find her way into the majestic temple of scholastic thought” (Stein [1936] 2002, p. 12; [1936] 2006, p. 19). Thus, the relation between phenomenology and theology is indicated already at the outset.

In the dialogue between the scholastics and the modern thinkers, Stein points to the fact that there are more fundamental than linguistic difficulties between the two concerning their relation to “revealed truth” and thus how they conceive of the relationship between philosophy and theology, and between knowledge and faith (Stein [1936] 2002, p. 12; [1936] 2006, p. 20).⁶ Inquiring into the possibility of a Christian philosophy, Stein starts by pointing to precisely these historic differences: whereas Thomas Aquinas and the medieval philosophers bathed in a Christian worldview, living in a universe of faith, modern thought has “severed [. . .] its linkage with faith and theology” (Stein [1936] 2002, p. 4; [1936] 2006, p. 13).⁷ This does not mean, though, that Aquinas’s philosophy, as opposed to modern philosophy, was simply and straightforwardly Christian. Stein takes care to show that Aquinas was convinced of the possibility of a philosophy based on natural reason alone, necessary as a common ground, for example, in the dialogue with “pagans and Moslems”. Natural knowledge, though not able to attain “the highest and ultimate truth”, may both eliminate errors of judgment and show how revealed truth may be compatible with natural reason. Hence, philosophy and theology are not on the same level: natural reason may pave the way, so to speak, for the truth of faith, the latter being “the measure of all truth” (Stein [1936] 2002, p. 13; [1936] 2006, p. 21).

The decisive role of a societal and communitarian context, always central to Stein’s thought, is here brought to the forefront: for the medieval philosophers, the doctrine of faith as well as the “lifeworld” of faith were evident conditions for the development of their thinking. A distinction elaborated by Jacques Maritain serves as a clarification for Stein to further discuss the question of the relation between philosophy and theology. Maritain, himself adhering to a strict separation between natural reason and faith, nuances the picture in elaborating the interaction between the two in terms of ‘nature’ and ‘state’: in its *nature* philosophy is “entirely independent of faith and theology”, determined only by its guiding principles, its goal and its object of study. However, philosophy is actualized within changing historical conditions, contributing to its *state* at a given moment in time. Thus, it makes sense to speak of “a Christian situation or condition of philosophy”, without, for that matter, establishing a substantial or formal dependence between the two (Stein [1936] 2002, p. 13; [1936] 2006, p. 22).⁸

The characteristics of philosophy, holds Stein, combine these two dimensions. As “*nature*”, philosophy is a science. That is, in its “*idea*”, it operates according to a guiding paradigm for the human mind in pursuit of truth (Stein [1936] 2002, p. 16; [1936] 2006, p. 24). Beyond true propositions and their corresponding perceived objects, ‘truth’ concerns the ultimate “*state of affairs*”, the ontological foundation of “the things themselves”. That is, philosophy has to do with the ultimate truth of reality as a whole. But this truth is not fully attainable. We live within the limitations of historic time and space and in its “*state*”

as historically embedded, philosophy must grapple with all the errors of history and all its scientific shortcomings. Still, it is called to search for the “fundamental principles” of all the other sciences, even if this is never exhaustively possible (Stein [1936] 2002, p. 19; [1936] 2006, p. 27). The search for clarity on the fundamental question of “true being” is the core philosophical endeavor, albeit never coming to a conclusion. If philosophy in its nature is concerned with the ultimate ground of reality, what, then, may be the characteristics of its state in a Christian era; what is “the meaning of the specifically Christian situation or condition of philosophy”? (Stein [1936] 2002, p. 21; [1936] 2006, p. 28).

Firstly, Stein notes, the world seen with the eyes of faith acquires a whole new meaning and this meaning may be philosophically explored. What has been made known to us by revelation confronts the believing philosopher with new tasks, since “he is compelled by his faith to extend his considerations beyond the realm of what is naturally accessible to him” (Stein [1936] 2002, p. 21; [1936] 2006, p. 29). There is not necessarily a contradiction between natural reason and revelation, but still what is established by a purely philosophical approach must be brought together with insights that theology may offer, to make the ultimate meaning of reality intelligible to us. Such a “harmonizing” (*in Einklang bringen*) is called for since for Christian philosophers, “revealed truth is the standard of measurement to which they have to subordinate their own judgement.” (Stein [1936] 2002, p. 23; [1936] 2006, p. 30). A believer does not cease to be a believer when working as a philosopher or vice versa—this should be evident even to the unbeliever!

Further, Stein highlights how Christian theology itself has fostered notions leading to the formation of purely philosophical concepts like, for example, those of ‘substance’ and of ‘person’. Independently of their origin in the context of revelation, these concepts have over time become of common use in philosophy. Hence, this is indicated as a “distinct temporal phase of the historical structure of philosophy—a structure which depends on faith and theology as the external conditions of its full realization” (Stein [1936] 2002, p. 24; [1936] 2006, p. 31). In this sense, in designing the state of philosophy as it unfolds in history, a philosophy may be called ‘Christian’ without it incorporating revealed truth as such.

However, philosophy may also make use of material from Christian theology in its inquiries. Then, philosophy would be ‘Christian’ in the sense of relying on faith as a source of knowledge. Stein is careful to point out that even if this option does not turn the philosophy in question into a theology, it will no longer be a “pure and autonomous” philosophy; its propositions cannot claim to be intelligible in the same way that strictly philosophical arguments can (Stein [1936] 2002, p. 24; [1936] 2006, p. 31). This is because theology—the Christian doctrine of revealed truth—rests on faith, and even if faith gives knowledge, new insights and a certain comprehension, it also points towards the incomprehensible, unfathomable mystery of existence. In this sense, the enlightenment of faith is a “dark light” (Stein [1936] 2002, pp. 25, 27; [1936] 2006, pp. 32, 35). This expression appears also very briefly in Stein’s article on Dionysius Areopagite (Stein [1941] 2003) and echoes his work on “mystical theology”.⁹ Dionysius describes the experience of God’s transcendence and His overwhelming-but-hidden manifestation precisely as “illuminated darkness” and a “knowing beyond unknowing”. When the truths of faith and philosophical knowledge are unified, philosophy will also be marked by this “dark light” pointing beyond its own limits. Moreover, this does not seem foreign to a philosophical endeavor since according to its nature, we said, philosophy searches for the utmost truth and the ultimate ground of all being, an intention that exceeds what is humanly possible.

In sum, Stein’s views on the relation between philosophy and theology are complex. She upholds the full autonomy of philosophy proper. Still, in her call to “harmonize” philosophy and theology, theology has the last word: “the final judgement on the truth of both theological and philosophical propositions is left to theology, taken in the sense of its supreme significance as God’s word through the medium of the *magisterium* of the Church” (Stein [1936] 2002, p. 25; [1936] 2006, p. 33). But when Stein advocates the possibility—and the necessity even—of a “Christian philosophy”, far from closing it in on a strict orthodox doctrine, she opens it to the common human experience. The aim is to bring to fruition

all that theology and revelation may contribute to the intellectual and existential search of humankind. “Christian philosophy”, then, would designate not primarily the philosophical work of individual believers, nor the doctrines of the Church, but first and foremost *an ideal*, namely a “perfect achievement of reason” (*perfectum opus rationis*), the most accomplished knowledge possible. To achieve this ideal, philosophy needs to be augmented by theology to unify “all the knowledge which we have gained by the exercise of our natural reason and by revelation” (Stein [1936] 2002, p. 25; [1936] 2006, p. 33). In this way, in her account of Christian philosophy, Stein undertakes a bold enlargement of the domain of reason, relevant for philosophy and theology alike.

3. Faith as a Source of Knowledge

At the outset, Stein calls reason to modesty and ourselves to recognize the limits of our conceptual knowledge: our concepts and judgments, inadequate already for exhaustively understanding finite reality, are all the more inadequate for understanding the “infinite reality of God”. Not even the contents of revelation, being adapted to our usual ways of cognition, give us “the infinite plenitude of divine truth” (Stein [1936] 2002, p. 26; [1936] 2006, p. 33sq). A characteristic of faith is that it desires not only particular individual truths, be they natural or revealed, but the *one* truth: faith “always aspires beyond all revealed truth [. . .] It desires God himself, all of him, who *is* truth, and it seizes him in darkness and blindness”, that is, in the aforementioned “dark light” of faith (Stein [1936] 2002, p. 27; [1936] 2006, p. 35). What we name ‘God’ is the fullness of being, the fullness of truth, the ultimate ground and meaning of all that exists. Thus, the revelation of divine reality may contribute to reflections in philosophy whose inquiry concerns the very meaning of being.

Appealing to this enlarged notion of rationality, the admonition is clear: “Reason would turn into unreason if it would stubbornly content itself with what it is able to discover with its own light, barring out everything which is made visible to it by a brighter and more sublime light” (Stein [1936] 2002, p. 22; [1936] 2006, p. 30). Even if the meaning of revealed truth goes beyond all conceptual comprehension, this does not imply that it is unintelligible. What revelation communicates—though “in itself immeasurable and inexhaustible”—may be enlightened as meaningful by faith (Stein [1936] 2002, p. 22; [1936] 2006, p. 30). From this point on, natural phenomena may also be understood in a new way. By virtue of an enlarged reason, the supernatural light of the truths of faith may serve as the starting point for a renewed philosophical reflection on created realities.¹⁰ Philosophical tools, for example phenomenological descriptions, may also be used to explore the life of faith itself and elucidate the believer’s experience of God in new ways.

The phenomenological notions of *intention* and *fulfillment* guide Stein on the path to explore and describe different stages of knowledge of God. Beyond natural knowledge, both a living faith and the “mystical vision” are ways to insight. Stein points to the mystical or “beatific vision” as the perfect fulfillment of all knowledge because this gift of union with God lets us partake in the divine wisdom itself (Stein [1936] 2002, p. 26; [1936] 2006, p. 34). But for the believer, a daily source and a preliminary stage to this utmost fulfillment is knowledge acquired by faith. ‘Faith’ is explicated in its double meaning of the act of faith, i.e., the personal apprehension of what is believed (*fides qua*), and the content of faith, i.e., the revealed truths (*fides quae*). A presupposition for both, and for the actualization of a “living faith” which is Stein’s concern, is faith basically being a trust in God himself, in his existence and his revelation: Faith means believing “that God *is* and that he is *God* [. . .] the supreme and absolutely truthful being.” Faith, furthermore, implies to “strive toward God [. . .], a taking hold of God” (Stein [1936] 2002, p. 27; [1936] 2006, p. 34sq). Faith in this sense is possible only as a gift of divine grace and presupposes already having been seized by God. In this explication of the relational work of grace, Stein emphasizes that not only the “beatific vision”, but already the actualized faith gives to participate in divine and eternal life.

Still, Stein’s exposition points towards the experience of the “mystical vision”, elaborated in the tradition of “mystical theology”, as a favored area to further develop the

reflections on the knowledge of faith. The thematic is omnipresent in her later works, and one illustrious example is her article on Dionysius Areopagite entitled “*Ways to know God: The ‘Symbolic Theology’ of Dionysius Areopagite and its Objective Presuppositions*”.¹¹ Here, the possible knowledge of God is offered to philosophical interrogation in a thorough phenomenological analysis, where the relationship between the different “ways” is described in terms of degrees of fulfillment (*Erfüllung*) of the intentional experience of the object. Each “way” points beyond itself to as yet incompletely realized aspects of the “phenomenon”.

As the subtitle of the article indicates, the context for Stein’s explorations is how the image–language of symbolic theology may be conceived and on what it depends. A primary presupposition is that for the “theologians”¹² to be able to form an image, they must have some kind of awareness (*kenntnis*) of God, a “knowing” or a familiarity (Wege, p. 38). When, for example, Moses describes God as a “consuming fire”, it is not at random: the image suggests itself “since this was the way he experienced God” (Wege, p. 37sq). Stein recognizes three potential sources for this awareness, i.e., three ways to come to know or experience God.¹³

The first source is *natural knowledge of God*, which, through the use of our natural reason and conceptual thinking, is “inferable from our knowledge of the created world” (Wege, p. 39). The experience of the world in which we live and exist, of it being “a meaningful whole that speaks to us with a thousand voices” (Wege, p. 40), points beyond a mere natural sensible perception of the physical world to the experience of the fullness of creation as given.

The second source described by Stein is *faith*. In faith, we accept and retain the supernatural revelation of God through the transmission of his Word, heard in the witness of the prophets and the “theologians” (Wege, p. 43). Since faith involves receiving the Words of the Bible as the revelation of truths communicated by God himself, faith also points beyond itself: for what experience is this that allows the “messengers” of the word to recognize that they are speaking on behalf of God? That is, what “makes the prophet certain that he is standing before God?” (Wege, p. 45). The question brings us to the third source of knowledge of God.

This third source Stein calls “*supernatural experience of God*” (*Übernatürliche Erfahrung Gottes*), and it implies “a personal experiential knowledge of God” (“*eine persönliche Erfahrungserkenntnis Gottes*”) (Wege, pp. 44, 47). Only this we may call a true experience of God, she claims, and it leads us to the heart of “mystical theology”. Stein describes it as “the ‘feeling’ that God is present; one feels touched in one’s innermost being by him, by the One present. We call this the experience [*Erfahrung*] of God in the most proper sense. It is the core of all mystical living experience [*Erlebnis*]: the person-to-person encounter with God” (Wege, pp. 45–46). This living experience of God, beyond concepts, not mediated by images or “anything that may be given a name”, gives us “God’s self-revelation in stillness” (Wege, p. 52).

We see here a central phenomenological concern brought to the forefront, namely *the personal experience of givenness*, describing phenomena from the first-person perspective. In the descriptions of the “experiential knowledge” of the mystical encounter, “meeting God person-to-person” is the truest and most fulfilled God-experience possible. And of all the sources of the images of symbolic theology, the most important is precisely to be personally and inwardly touched by God without words or images. For in this personally lived experience, we gain the intimate knowledge of God that makes it possible to “shape the image according to the original” (Wege, p. 49).

These analyses show, furthermore, Stein’s phenomenological understanding at work: the “ways” are characterized by how the “intended object” of experience is given in different degrees of “presence”. The personal-experiential knowledge of God has a character of immediacy akin to a direct experience of “what is present itself”, as opposed to “what is merely grasped through its effects”, as in the natural knowledge of God, or “made present by messengers”, as in the knowledge of supernatural revelation in faith (Wege, p. 48). We come to know God through degrees of “fulfillment”, each of the sources deepening,

widening and pointing beyond itself. The intention of natural cognition is fulfilled by faith, which provides a “clear understanding” of that which natural cognition only “dimly perceives”. Faith confirms and enriches the content of the vague perception and “answers the questions raised by natural cognition”. However, the intention of faith is fulfilled in the personally lived experience, in a similar way as in experiences where “I see something with my own eyes that I only heard about before” (Wege, p. 51sq). Still, not even this experience gives a final fulfillment: again, it points beyond itself to a more accomplished fulfillment in higher stages of mystical experience and finally in the “visio beatifica” of eternal life (Wege, p. 48).

We see that for Stein, a “Christian philosophy” is both possible and meaningful, and even more, it opens a domain of knowledge in its own right, establishing faith in revealed truth as a source. In this opening, phenomenology leads the way in a thorough analysis of religious phenomena and truths of faith. Stein’s analysis of Dionysius thus gives an original phenomenological contribution to mystical theology. Conversely, among the ways in which Stein’s text could contribute to philosophy, especially, perhaps, as Sharkey points out to philosophy of religion or philosophical theology, is “her use of religious writings in philosophical treatises” (Sharkey 2023, p. 57sq). But from the point of view of the unbeliever, how may this contribution make sense?

4. A Common Ground

We have already quoted Stein underlining how Aquinas argued that the recourse to natural reason is necessary to find a “common ground” and enable discussions with those not believing in the Christian revelation (Stein [1936] 2002, p. 13; [1936] 2006, p. 21). Still, Stein holds, natural knowledge must be complemented by the knowledge of faith to attain “the highest and ultimate truth”. So, the question remains: what may this complement give when Christian faith is not (yet) an option?

It seems foreign to Stein’s whole way of writing and thinking to cordon any area off in dogmatism. On the contrary, Stein is what Mette Lebech calls a “with-thinker”, always sensitive to the societal context of thought, open to “in-feeling” in the other person’s lived experience and recognizing the importance of community for understanding at all levels (Lebech 2015, p. 134sq). For Stein, “Christian philosophy exemplifies a context-sensitive kind of philosophy, which, like other contexts, remains essentially open for anyone to test by his own lights, taking as hypotheses what the Christian (or the scientist) accept as theses” (Lebech 2015, p. 139). And this openness “for anyone to test” is precisely what Stein formulates in this text on Christian philosophy (Stein [1936] 2002, p. 28sq; [1936] 2006, p. 36). Just as the Christian may enter a common effort in learning “from the Greeks and from the moderns” alike, the unbelievers, if they “are willing to join us at least part of the way”, may examine the truths of faith “not as ‘theses’ (as do believers), but only as ‘hypotheses’” (Stein [1936] 2002, p. 28; [1936] 2006, p. 36). The issue at stake is not one of a syncretist effort concerning faith—the issue is to open a possibility of a joint philosophical scrutiny. This may lead to agreement or disagreement; the goal is an elucidation of the “thing itself” from all possible angles. Stein’s questioning here concerns the possibility for dialogue and mutual understanding, beyond faith or worldview. In this openness to a common epistemological effort, Stein invites the unbeliever to join without worry of compromising their philosophical rigor: “No one prevents them from applying the criterion of reason in full stringency and from rejecting everything that does not measure up to it” (Stein [1936] 2002, p. 28; [1936] 2006, p. 36). They may test the propositions of a Christian philosophy as any other proposition if, that is, they are “as unbiased as, according to their own conviction, genuine philosophers ought to be” (Stein [1936] 2002, p. 29; [1936] 2006, p. 36).

Finally, then, a contribution from phenomenology to theology “could be the invitation to explore this “common ground” where Christian believers, believers of various faiths and non-believers alike may meet. Maybe this appeal is also what we see in the enlarged phenomenological horizon explored by the phenomenologists of the so-called “theological

turn"? Let us briefly look at Stein's contribution in light of this (in)famous "turn" and the thematic questions of this journal's special issue.

At the outset, Stein's position as to the relation between phenomenology and theology may seem distinctively different from most of the figurants in Dominique Janicaud's critical review of an alleged "theological turn" in phenomenology. We saw Stein's reservations as to the status of a Christian philosophy, saying that a philosophy including revealed truth in its content is no longer a "pure and autonomous" philosophy (Stein [1936] 2002, p. 24; [1936] 2006, p. 31). But central targets of Janicaud's critique like Emmanuel Levinas and Jean-Luc Marion go much further: both simply refuse the labels of being respectively "Jewish" or "Catholic" philosophers at all. Marion puts it quite bluntly: rejecting the claim that he should be the foremost "Catholic philosopher" of our time is, he says, because

something like 'Christian philosophy' is meaningless. [...] There is no more a Catholic philosophy than there is Protestant mathematics. When a Christian enters philosophy, he thinks philosophy, does philosophy and ends up with philosophy. And if, on the other hand, he is concerned to work as a believer in the order of thought, then he devotes himself to theology. (Marion 2021, p. 9sq, my translation)

The separation between philosophy and theology here seems absolute and a possible "Christian philosophy" is excluded.¹⁴

Stein granting final authority to the truths of faith also seems contrary to the stand of these philosophers. Both Levinas and Marion argue that they make no appeal to the authority of religious texts or the truths of faith in their work. When Levinas uses notions drawn from the Jewish tradition in elaborating his philosophy, it is not as argumentative evidence but to shed new light on human situations: "Biblical verses do not function here as proof but as testimony of a tradition and an experience" (Levinas 1972, p. 108; [1972] 2003, p. 66). When biblical texts are used in the philosophical explorations, it is to open up new layers of meaning: "A philosophical truth cannot be based on the authority of a verse. The verse must be phenomenologically justified. But the verse can allow for the search for a meaning. [...] I illustrate with the verse, yes, but I do not prove by means of the verse" (in Robbins 2001, p. 62). Likewise, Marion explores the truth of revelation as a possibility only, not as actualized phenomena or an actual historical event: "Here, we are not approaching Revelation in its theological claim to truth, this only faith can dare to do. We are outlining it as a possibility [...] of phenomenality" (Marion [1997] 2013, p. 7, my translation). Exploring revelation in philosophy is to pose the question: if there would be a revelation, how could it be experienced and described?¹⁵

Despite these propositions strictly separating and delimiting the domains of philosophy and theology, both Levinas and Marion are also protagonists in showing and verbalizing the fruitfulness of the exchange between the two. Levinas explicitly expresses a wish to bring to Western philosophy an enrichment coming from the sources of the Hebrew tradition, wanting to "express in Greek those principles about which Greece knew nothing" (Levinas 1994, p. 200; [1982] 2000, p. 233). He acknowledges the impact of a lifelong reading of the Hebrew Bible and the resources of Jewish theology for his philosophical thought.¹⁶ Marion, who continuously thematizes the relationship between phenomenology and theology, their independence as well as their interrelations, also steadfastly brings to the forefront their possible mutual fructification, as, for example, in proposing that "broadening phenomenality to include phenomena of revelation, by granting the possibility of phenomenizing Revelation [...] might fulfill phenomenology as essentially as it would liberate the rights of theology" (Marion 2008, p. xii).

We see here, I would suggest, a pointing forward from Stein's work to the work of what has been called the "new phenomenologists" of the last half-century or more. Even if allowing the positive theological truths to be included as material for philosophy, Stein also opens for exploring these truths as "hypothesis" only, opening up a *common ground* for believers and non-believers, for theologians and philosophers alike. For Stein, as Kathlee Haney points out, "the sciences of philosophy and theology engage each other,

preserving their distinctive domains while enriching each other by sharing their strengths” (Haney 2015, p. 449). It is possible and fruitful for phenomenology to draw on theological resources and for theology to be informed by phenomenological analysis—both disciplines, without merging, challenging their own limits.

5. Concluding Remarks: Limits, Borders and Openings

I shall stick to my promise from the introduction of this article not to revise or revive all the discussions in the aftermath of Janicaud asserting a “theological turn” in phenomenology. Nevertheless, it seems clear that Edith Stein’s work raises questions similar to those so amply discussed. Does *theology* invalidate *phenomenology* in her studies? Is she breaking the borders, *exceeding the limits* of phenomenology? There is “certainly no doubt that Stein is pushing the limits of what phenomenology is and how it can be done”, according to S. B. Sharkey (Sharkey 2023, p. 49sq). On the other hand, phenomenology is about exploring what is given in subjective experience—and God, possible or actual, intended or existing, is undoubtedly part of what humans claim to experience. Thus, precisely when bracketing all natural assumptions, a subjective experience of God may be described and analyzed phenomenologically.

After her conversion, God and God-experience are at the center of Edith Stein’s attention, life and writings. How could she not take it into her philosophical work? And how could theology, the science of faith, be kept out? Furthermore, does this inclusion mean that she would have to silence her “phenomenological mother tongue”? On the contrary, one would say in reading Stein, she believes that theology presents means to get to know God: “This is at bottom the goal of all theology: to clear the way to God himself” (Wege, p. 51). The question, of course, is *how* to “clear the way”. We have seen eloquent examples and attempts at this, both in *Finite and Eternal Being* and in her article on “Ways to know God”, studies deeply anchored in a phenomenological commitment. Phenomenologically speaking, the way to come to awareness and knowledge of the experienced “object” must pass through the patient and unbiased descriptions and analysis of *what appears as given*. Maybe this, then, would be one of Edith Stein’s contributions in the search for a *perfectum opus rationis*: to challenge the limits and the borders and to open an exchange between theology and philosophy through meticulous phenomenological labor.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ For a presentation of these debates and of developments in French phenomenology, see for example (Simmons and Benson 2013). Also, the augmented English version of Janicaud (2000)’s essay has an instructive introduction by B. G. Prusak (2000) as well as other supplementary essays.
- ² See (Spiegelberg 1994, p. 79sq). See also (Housset 2010). An illuminating discussion of the possible consequences of Husserl’s “reduction” as to the question of God is found in K. Haney (2015), see especially pp. 442–46.
- ³ In the autobiographical narrative *Aus dem Leben einer jüdischen Familie* (Stein [1934] 2002), this is commented on: When Edith Stein was fourteen, she lived for a period in her sister’s home, and she recalls that “Hier habe ich mich auch das Beten ganz bewußt und aus freiem Entschluß abgewöhnt” (p. 109). In Göttingen the year 1913/14, she followed the seminaries of Max Scheler and she notes: “Das war meine erste Berührung mit dieser mir bis dahin völlig unbekanntem Welt. Sie führte mich noch nicht zum Glauben. Aber sie erschloß mir einen Bereich von «Phänomenen», an denen ich nun nicht mehr blind vorbeigehen konnte. [...] Die Schranken der rationalistischen Vorurteile, in denen ich aufgewachsen war, ohne es zu wissen, fielen, und die Welt des Glaubens stand plötzlich vor mir” (p. 211).
- ⁴ The work of Edith Stein is published by Herder in the 28 volumes of *Edith Stein Gesamtausgabe*, ESGA, completed in 2014. The ESGA include also Stein’s many translations, among others of Aquinas and Newman.

- 5 The English translation of Stein's work is published by *The Institute of Carmelite Studies* in the series *The Collected Works of Edith Stein* (CWES). *Finite and Eternal Being* came in 2002, translated by Kurt F. Reinhardt (Stein [1936] 2002). In ESGA, *Endliches und Ewiges Sein* was published as Volume 11–12 in 2006 (Stein [1936] 2006).
- 6 The question of the relationship between philosophy and theology was in fact extensively debated among academics at the time when Stein wrote *Finite and Eternal Being*. It was at the outset primarily a “French debate” with contributions from the philosophers Etienne Gilson, Emile Bréhier, Maurice Blondel, Gabriel Marcel and others. Greg Sadler's work *Reason Fulfilled by Revelation* presents an English translation of the central texts in this debate, including a detailed historical introduction and a bibliography of relevant additional literature. See (Sadler 2011).
- 7 Let us recall here that the separation of theology and philosophy into two distinct disciplines came about rather late in their history. The Early Church Fathers considered themselves philosophers and the designation ‘theology’ did not come into common use until the 12th century, shows Philippe Capelle-Dumont in his study of historic developments in the relationship between theology and philosophy (see Capelle 2005, p. 11sq). So, it seems that Stein's “use of religious writings in philosophical treatises” (Sharkey 2023, p. 57sq) was a novelty to “the moderns” only.
- 8 The text of Maritain that Stein is commenting on here, *An Essay on Christian Philosophy*, is later published in English translation by E. H. Flannery (Maritain 1955), The essay elaborates on the notions of the ‘nature’ and ‘state’ of philosophy, the relation between theology and philosophy and the question of whether a Christian philosophy is at all possible.
- 9 See (Stein [1941] 2003, p. 42), English translation in (Stein [1941] 2000, chp. V, sct. II.4. b).
- 10 Stein exemplifies this herself for example in (Stein[1936] 2006, chp. VII) on *The Image of the Trinity in the Created World*, where her elaborations on the notion of ‘person’, a continuous preoccupation in Stein's work, here is accomplished in a trinitarian anthropology.
- 11 In ESGA vol. 17, the article is published together with Stein's own translations of Dionysius' writings. The English translation by Walter Redmond is included in *The Collected Works of Edith Stein* vol. 8, a volume precisely on the theme of *Knowledge and Faith*. For the translated quotations, I use the Kindle edition of this work. As it is not paginated, I refer here only to the pages in the German ESGA edition, abbreviated as “Wege”.
- 12 Let us recall here that for Dionysius, as Stein points out, the “theologians” are not specialists in one academic discipline or another; they are theologians because they utter the *theo-logos*; they speak God's Word and thus witness to God. The biblical authors, therefore, are the prime theologians (Wege, p. 26).
- 13 For a more detailed analysis of this article, see (Thomassen 2014, chp. IV, pp. 79–110). The points that follow are elaborated on pages 88–91.
- 14 Levinas also frequently insists on working as a philosopher and not as a theologian, see for example Levinas (1994, p. 116; 1996, p. 31sq): “my point of departure is absolutely non-theological. This is very important to me. It is not theology that I am doing, but philosophy.” And as to his core term, the *transcendent*, it “is what cannot be encompassed. This is an essential precision of the notion of transcendence, utilizing no theological notion.” (Levinas [1961] 1971, p. 326; 1969, p. 293). See also the interview with François Poirié in Jill Robbins (2001, pp. 61–62).
- 15 Cf. (Marion [1997] 2013, p. 385): “le phénomène de révélation reste une simple possibilité: nous allons en effet pouvoir le décrire sans présupposer son effectivité, tout en en proposant une figure précise; nous dirons seulement: si une révélation doit, peut ou a pu se donner dans l'apparition phénoménale, elle ne l'a pu, ne le peut, ou ne le pourra qu'en se donnant selon le type du paradox par excellence—tel que nous allons le décrire.”
- 16 For a discussion of the relation of philosophy–theology and its double movement in Levinas' thought, see (Thomassen 2017, p. 16sq).

References

- Capelle, Philippe. 2005. *Finitude et Mystère*. Paris: Cerf.
- Haney, Kathlee. 2015. Inviting Edith Stein into the ‘French Debate’. In *Intersubjectivity, Humanity, Being*. Edited by Mette Lebeck and John Haydn Gurmin. Bern: Peter Lang, pp. 435–65.
- Housset, Emmanuel. 2010. *Husserl et l'Idée de Dieu*. Paris: Cerf.
- Janicaud, Dominique. 2000. *Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn”*. *The French Debate*. Translated by Bernard G. Prusak. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Lebeck, Mette. 2015. *The Philosophy of Edith Stein. From Phenomenology to Metaphysics*. Bern: Peter Lang.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. 1969. *Totality and Infinity*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. 1971. *Totalité et Infini*. Paris: Kluwer Le Livre de Poche. First published 1961.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. 1972. *Humanisme de l'autre homme*. Paris: Fata Morgana, Le Livre de Poche.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. 1994. *Beyond the Verse*. Translated by Gary D. Mole. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. 1994. *Liberté et commandement*. Paris: Fata Morgana, Le Livre de Poche.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. 1996. *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*. Translated and Edited by Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. 2000. *L'au-delà du verset*. Paris: Minuit. First published 1982.

- Levinas, Emmanuel. 2003. *Humanism of the Other*. Translated by Nidra Poller. Chicago: University of Illinois Press. First published 1972.
- Marion, Jean-Luc. 2008. *The Visible and the Revealed*. Translated by Christina M. Gschwandtner. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Marion, Jean-Luc. 2013. *Étant donné*, 4th ed. Paris: Quadrige PUF. First published 1997.
- Marion, Jean-Luc. 2021. *À vrai dire. Une Conversation. Entretiens avec Paul-François Paoli*. Paris: Cerf.
- Maritain, Jacques. 1955. *An Essay on Christian Philosophy*. Translated by Edward H. Flannery. New York: Philosophical Library.
- Prusak, B. G. 2000. Translator's introduction. In *Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn". The French Debate*. Edited by Dominique Janicaud. New York: Fordham University Press, pp. 3–15.
- Robbins, Jill, ed. 2001. *Is It Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Sadler, Greg, ed. 2011. *Reason Fulfilled by Revelation: The 1930s Christian Philosophy Debates in France*. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press.
- Sharkey, Sarah Borden. 2023. *Edith Stein's Finite and Eternal Being. A Companion*. London: Lexington Books.
- Simmons, J. Aaron, and Bruce Ellis Benson. 2013. *The New Phenomenology*. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Spiegelberg, Herbert. 1994. *The Phenomenological Movement*, 3rd ed. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publisher.
- Stein, Edith. 2000. *Knowledge and Faith*. Edited by Gelber Lucy and Linssen Michael. CWES vol. 8. Washington, DC: The Institute of Carmelite Studies. First published 1941.
- Stein, Edith. 2002. *Aus dem Leben einer jüdischen Familie*. ESGA band 1. Freiburg: Herder. First published 1934.
- Stein, Edith. 2002. *Finite and Eternal Being*. Translated by Kurt F. Reinhardt. CWES vol. 9. Washington, DC: The Institute of Carmelite Studies. First published 1936.
- Stein, Edith. 2003. *Wege der Gotteserkenntnis*. ESGA, band 17. Freiburg: Herder. First published 1941.
- Stein, Edith. 2006. *Endliches und ewiges Sein*. ESGA, band 11/12. Freiburg: Herder. First published 1936.
- Thomassen, Magdalene. 2014. *Den troende tanke. Studier i Edith Steins forfatterskap*. Oslo: Emilia.
- Thomassen, Magdalene. 2017. *Traces de Dieu dans la Philosophie d'Emmanuel Levinas*. Paris: Cerf.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.