

Edith Stein and the *Imago Trinitatis*

1.

One aspect of Edith Stein's remarkable intellectual pilgrimage in the years that followed her baptism is the increasing depth of her critical engagement with Thomist metaphysics. Like her friend and mentor, Eich Przywara¹, she sets out to stage a conversation between Thomism and the world of phenomenological thought, and to develop an ontology that would serve as a creative supplement – and in some aspects corrective – to the system of the Angelic Doctor. Stein herself tells us² that she was able to see drafts of the first part of Przywara's great *Analogia Entis*, and she notes the areas both of convergence and of tension between Przywara's approach and her own. When she addresses the question³ of whether there is such a thing as 'Christian Philosophy' – a seriously contentious issue in mid-century Catholic debate – she invokes Przywara's authority for her conclusion that philosophy needs to be completed by theology in the sense that it must take account of what revelation delivers to us, in order to arrive at secure conclusions, but does not thereby itself become theology. What this seems to mean is that philosophy as such has to acknowledge the limits of ordinary finite reasoning, but may do so in one of two ways: either it remains at the level of hypothesis and inconclusiveness, or it recognizes that its own method has to be supplemented by positive insight drawn from revelation. As a system that confesses itself to be incomplete and defers to revealed truth, it retains its integrity as philosophy but explicitly looks towards a further and fuller kind of knowledge that is not attainable by unaided reasoning; and it is this explicit reference forward to a fuller knowledge grounded in divine gift that ultimately defines what 'Christian philosophy' is. The unbelieving philosopher is free to use theological data as 'thought experiments', we might say, but can have no strictly philosophical reasons for either accepting or rejecting them.

Edith Stein's long and intricate analysis of *Finite and Eternal Being* is professedly an essay in Christian philosophy, in which, as we shall see, the factoring in of theological data is a means of enriching and extending a philosophical account of finite existence in general and human existence in particular. Like Przywara's *Analogia Entis*, it has at its centre the question of whether and how the phenomenological method spills over into an unavoidable consideration of metaphysics. Perception itself is marked by a tension between an act of knowing that inevitably locates itself within a temporal framework (we *come to* know, we respond to specific moments of perceptual stimulus, we 'narrate' our knowing in relation to other records of encounter) and the object that is known,

¹ Przywara had invited Stein to translate Aquinas's *de Veritate* into German, and Stein's eventual translation, published in 1931, turned out to be a highly original and controversial attempt to render Aquinas in phenomenological idiom. On the reception of this work, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *Edith Stein: A Philosophical Prologue*, London, Continuum 2006, pp.177-9, though he does not discuss in detail the continuing relation between Stein and Przywara. Philip Gonzales's vigorous and provocative monograph, *Reimagining the Analogia Entis. The Future of Erich Przywara's Christian Vision*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans 2019, adopts wholeheartedly a version of Przywara's sharpest critiques of Stein, but I hope to show reason for qualifying his very negative judgements.

² In the introduction to the posthumously published *Finite and Eternal Being* (tr. Kurt F. Reinhardt, Washington DC, ICS Publications 2002, p.25 (henceforth referred to as FEB).

³ In the opening chapter of FEB, especially pp.25-9.

which does not depend for its inner structure on the history of our knowing. The sheer 'that' of the object is distinct from the 'how' of its actuality as it impinges upon us; yet this is a distinction that also requires us to recognize that neither pole can be thought without the other. There are no 'existents' simply lying around, so to speak, existing, but not existing in a mode of self-presentation; there are no bundles of apprehended qualities that can be thought independently of a substance that they activate or actualize. For Przywara, this entails beginning the metaphysical project by accepting an irreducible to-and-fro between 'that' and 'how', between the fundamental analysis of substance, the act by which something simply is, and the specifics of the historical and conditioned processes in which a substance comes to be known. The 'essence' of any object of knowledge is, in Przywara's famous phrase, 'in and beyond' the how of its actual existence, its act of existing as specifically presented here to a finite subject. This is the keystone of 'creaturely metaphysics' for Przywara, a philosophy that begins from the history of knowing, as we might put it, a philosophy that does not seek a perspective freed from its own contingent and embodied location.⁴ Both Przywara and Stein agree in identifying the difference between them as lying in the contrast between this approach and the more abstract methodology of Stein in FEB⁵; both cautiously acknowledge a complementarity rather than a complete polarity between their methods, though Przywara is discernibly more critical in his later comments, and some have argued for a deeper incompatibility between the two as representing the great twentieth century divide between an essentially modern and anthropocentric, method-dominated, phenomenologically-determined understanding and a (potentially) post-postmodern retrieval of theocentric emphasis.⁶

In any event, Stein's approach presents a clear contrast. If Przywara sees the relation of knowledge as existing always in a tense simultaneity between encounter with both 'that' and 'how', Stein begins with a restatement – in terms of Husserlian phenomenology – of the straightforward Cartesian position that what I am most fundamentally aware of is my own mental activity, and moves from there to a consideration of how essence informs existence. It is not that this self-certainty is in any sense the first 'thing' I know, nor is it even a 'first principle' from which to argue; but it is the unthematized and unreflective presumption of all I think and do.⁷ I cannot think at all without taking this for granted. However, we should not be too hasty in concluding that all we have here is a conceptually shaky variety of typically 'modern' epistemological obsession, let alone a reduction of an object world to the categories of the knowing subject. Stein is consciously going beyond Husserl in important respects: we are always, whether we like it or not, thinking about thinking when we think about any determinate thing, since we are always (implicitly) thinking about the tension between our own located, embodied, timebound position, from which we engage with the 'how' of some substance, and the fact that we identify a 'what' whose 'whatness' does not depend on our localized and

⁴ See, for example, pp.132-54 in the translation by John R. Betz and David Bentley Hart, *Analogia Entis. Metaphysics: Original Structures and Universal Rhythm*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans 2014.

⁵ FEB, pp.xxix-xxx, *Analogia Entis*, pp.596-612, especially pp.597-9, 602-4.

⁶ This is the burden of Gonzales's reading, in which Stein is presented as the forerunner of a Rahnerian enslavement to the Kantian tyranny of epistemological anxiety and the priority of consciousness over being; a judgment that I'd want to qualify in significant respect, as will become clear.

⁷ FEB, pp.35 ff.

mutable position, but is what it is apart from our conscious state at any point. It is worth noting at this point also that Stein's terminology differs somewhat from Przywara's: Przywara works with a binary of 'that' and 'how', Stein, as we shall see, with a more complex scheme – very roughly, a buried 'what', realized in a 'how', communicating further possibilities for the 'what.' The act of knowing is the moment in which we encounter something *in act*; but encountering something in act, encountering a temporal and embodied 'how', a difference-making presence here and now, is precisely to grasp that we do *not* in this moment grasp what it fully is as a *non-temporal* existent reality. Putting it slightly differently, to think about thinking is to think the inescapably temporal nature of finite consciousness *and* its entanglement with an unmanageable otherness in every encounter with another substance.⁸ And thus to think about thinking is also to think 'eternal' being in an oblique fashion: we are conscious that we have 'come to know', that our entire existence is in flux, and so that the moment when we apprehend an act from outside our subjectivity is a moment 'out of time'. Our localized subjectivity cannot reduce this 'alien' act to its own proportions. But by bracketing out this limitation, we arrive at the intuition of act-as-such, truly timeless, beyond all the processes by which the essence, the what, of something becomes thinkable and communicable. 'The ego thus arrives at the *idea of plenitude* by crossing out from its own being what it has come to know as privation.'⁹ So, in a way that both echoes and questions Przywara's *Spannung* of 'essence in-and-beyond existence', Stein offers a parallel tension between 'form' and 'fullness', between the totality of what a substance is and its embodiment as actual determinate presence in the world: essence is both active and 'empty' (essence is never an object as such, never a thing in the world), always real in and only in 'filling' and forming an object to be grasped – *and* to be grasped in its ungraspability.¹⁰

As Stein acknowledges, the vocabulary she develops is very different from the more familiar usages of Aristotelean and Thomist ontology, but she is careful to note the differences and to attempt to clarify her own use as far as possible. By the end of the first six sections of FEB, she has outlined an ontology in which the basic pattern is the tension between active form and *actualized* instantiation. Each 'active form' is a 'unit of meaning' within creation, a limited cluster of realizable potentialities, so that, although it does not itself change in time (not being an actual subject), it is always oriented towards temporal actualization.¹¹ Any substance is primordially a sort of 'field' of possibilities, a spectrum of coherent actualities; and the actual object of knowledge is the result of the essence becoming the fullness, the content, of a phenomenon in the world – being, as Stein likes to say 'carried' by the phenomenon. In any specific act of knowing, I know the phenomenon, but not the field, since no actualized instantiation exhausts that field. Przywara's essay on Stein characterizes her view as a form of 'pure essentialism' because of its emphasis on the atemporal form as a reality that is in some way determined prior to its existential realization; Readers like Philip Gonzales argue

⁸ Frustratingly, Stein nowhere connects this discussion with her groundbreaking analysis of the foundational character of 'empathic' imagination in her dissertation on the concept of empathy.

⁹ FEB, p.56.

¹⁰ E.g. *ibid.* pp.153-66; cf p.105.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.353.

that this ultimately puts Stein on the side of a resolutely non-historical method, a focus on the transcendental conditions of subjectivity rather than the actual historical business of response to the continual bestowal of life and gift from God, and an aspiration to the total conceptual mapping of the finite environment. But even the very sketchy summary here might suggest that this was a questionable judgement; and Przywara himself outlines a model of 'essence' not by any means wholly at odds with Stein's account, and his account of the relation between 'concept' and 'mystery' has parallels with Stein.¹²

Be that as it may – and the relation between the two thinkers deserves far more discussion – the salient point for our purposes in this essay is that Stein's ontological structure becomes in the remainder of the book the basis for her unusual and creative treatment of the *imago trinitatis*. What she has said about the relation of form to actualization makes it possible for her to present a trinitarian image that is *ubiquitous* in the finite world, not simply restricted to human beings. Gonzales more than once expresses an understandable anxiety about Stein's hospitality to something that can sound very like a Scotist univocity about God and being¹³, and there is certainly ground for some puzzlement over phraseology such as Stein uses in the second section of FEB¹⁴ about how Aquinas, in *de ente et essentia*, successfully included finite and infinite being together within 'being as such.' I think what she means is not that there is a class of existing beings including both finite and infinite instantiations, but that what might be called the 'grammar' of *existing* is common to finite and infinite in the sense that we know we are talking about the act of being in both contexts, even if the *essence* of finite and infinite is radically incommensurable, since in infinite being there is absolute coincidence between the act of being and the nature of the active subject. On this basis, it would be hard to convict her of outright univocity; the *dissimilitudo* is, as she admits, an 'abyss.' But it is true that her discussions of analogy are weaker than Przywara's and the Scotist language of *ens commune* is something she is prepared to accept. The ambition to create what is in effect a quite fresh model for the trinitarian image in creation requires her to leave a good deal of space for the idea that to speak of finite and infinite acts of being must be more than just equivocal. And we shall turn next to what this means as she elaborates her trinitarian thought.¹⁵

2.

Stein begins her extended and very complex trinitarian meditation by discussing the notion of the divine persons as 'carriers' of the divine essence (*ousia* in the vocabulary of the Fathers). This is not to see the persons as instances of a general nature, since the divine nature or essence, 'what it is to be God', is not divisible in the sense of being

¹² See, e.g., *Analogia Entis*, sections 4 and 5, and the important 1939 essay on 'Philosophies of Essence and Existence' published with *Analogia Entis* (pp.317-347).

¹³ E.g. Gonzales, *Reimagining*, pp.156 ff.

¹⁴ FE, p.4.

¹⁵ Gonzales, *op.cit.*, pp.166-7, defends himself against neglecting Stein's trinitarian reflection on the grounds that it is vulnerable to just the same complaints about univocity that may be made in regard to her ontology in general, privileging a mode of self-knowledge as 'immediacy' that is supposedly common to finite and infinite subjectivity. Once again, I think this is too hasty a judgement on her thought, as will be apparent.

diversely manifested in different carriers. In this context, the divine person is not (in the Boethian phrase) the 'individual subsistent of a rational nature' but something much more elusive to define. Self-subsistence cannot be intrinsic to divine personal life, because the divine persons are not thinkable without one another; they 'depend' on each other for their specificity, and so cannot be bearers of diverse attributes or accidentals. Just as 'essence' is an 'empty' term, so here 'person' is empty; that is, the divine person is the concrete 'how' and 'that' of the 'what' which is the divine essence, but this determinate 'thatness' is nothing but its relation to the other divine persons. There is no content, no fullness, that is actualized in distinction, only what we might call the 'directionality' of each person towards the others. There is nothing in the persons that is not the divine essence – hence their 'emptiness'. But that divine essence is spirit in its archetypal form, and 'spirit', says Stein, is that which is free to go out from itself without loss or diminution. Spirit is life moving into communication, leaving behind its self-enclosure; and so if God is spirit, the divine persons are entirely life moving into communion – not, of course, realizing a potential for communion over time, but eternally and immutably actualizing a life that is other-directed. 'Because personal life is going out of oneself and simultaneously being and abiding within oneself, and because both of these characteristics pertain to the nature of spirit, personal being must always denote spiritual being.'¹⁶ The personal is, in the finite order, the most clear instance of distinct existence that is defined in its active life by its capacity to go beyond its own borders – which is what 'spirit' signifies.

Spirit is to be distinguished from 'soul': soul is an element in the complex activity of the finite subject, something that can be described as the organizing and animating centre of a living substance,¹⁷ the self-contained interior pattern of energy upon which free consciousness works to realise the optimal level of the potential of the 'field' within which it exists. And the person is thus the whole of this field 'behind and above' the actual fusion of body and soul perceptible in the world. It is not the transcendental pure ego, the 'I' abstracted from the actual workings of an embodied individual; it is what opens out on to a depth never fully conceptualized or mastered but always nourishing the unfolding life of body and soul together.¹⁸

This is the context in which we should think about human personal being; Stein adds a lengthy consideration of what might then be thought by analogy about bodiless created spirits, arguing that we must suppose something like the literal matter upon which spirit works in the human constitution, a passivity or receptivity that is formed into fuller life and fuller levels of communion between such spirits.¹⁹ But she then returns in fuller detail to the question of how the threefold structure that is emerging with greater and greater clarity may be identified in inanimate, animate and human creatures respectively, fleshing out the general lines laid down in the transitional sections between the discussion of bodiless spirits and the first discussion of the divine image in the inanimate world.²⁰ In brief, this amounts to a distinction between the basic structuring

¹⁶ FEB, pp.358-63, quotation from p.362.

¹⁷ Ibid., p.369.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp.376-7.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp.408-11.

²⁰ Ibid., pp.417-20

source of action, what I have here called the 'field'; the condition of actualized and intelligible life, meaningful being; and the sharing or bestowal of this life on what is outside it or different from it. This is what it is to be 'in act' in the finite world; and this is as it is because of the participation of all things in the divine act of being, in which the Son as Logos is 'the archetype of all finite units of meaning',²¹ and the Spirit is the bestower of life on what is not God. But this does not mean that the Spirit is, so to speak, God facing outwards: God, as infinite spirit, eternally and timelessly actualizes the divine essence; spirit means 'self-transparency' (not needing to overcome any adventitious external obstacle to self-perception), but the 'self' that is known in this eternal reflexiveness is both meaning and love. This love cannot be less than free and personal (it can't be simply an attribute): God sees God in the life of the Logos and loves God in the life of the Spirit, but that Spirit is not simply a function of the Father and the Word but is itself an active freedom and personal presence. As such the Spirit is the archetype of every finite act of self-communication, self-manifestation, self-propagation. The trinitarian pattern of divine life may be thought of as the fundamental thereness of active presence, the field of divine life, which is realized as the plenitude of meaning (intelligibility, self-consistency, internal order) in the Word – a *plenitude* of meaning, in contrast to the way in which meaning is imperfectly and gradually actualized in the world of time – with the Spirit as the reality of divine self-communication, self-offering.²² To look back to an earlier stage of Stein's discussion,²³ we can say that if God is spirit, then for God to say 'I am' is the same as God saying, 'I give myself wholly to a Thou', so that what emerges is a living 'We' that is neither the sum of two distinct and separate agents nor a shared characteristic of both, but a 'that which' is not reducible to the Father or the Word or both together, and so is a bearer of divinity distinct from both and thus personal.

This is spelled out in a variety of ways, but the central recurrent theme is that the structure of finite being itself, as active, temporal life, is as *it* is because God is as *God* is. All finite substance is a unity in plurality of 'field', intelligible actualization and self-presentation or propagation. Even the inanimate world 'propagates' in the sense of presenting itself, radiating the order and inner beauty in which it lives, radiating the 'Logos' character of being and thus making the inner logos fertile in some way. In God and in finite substance, we can rightly say that no element is real or thinkable on its own. Each level or aspect is empty in itself, incapable of being an existent in itself. The field of form/essence is empty in the sense that it has no actualized content, no concrete thereness, simply as such. The specific thereness of the actual intelligible carrier of the essence is also empty in itself as it is without any fullness except what it receives. The outward movement into generation or propagation is nothing but the actualization of the form as the fullness of self-imparting *life*. In every finite substance, the same pattern is present, an analogical sharing in the threefoldness of God. As Przywara puts it, in the context of a slightly different argumentation, 'this ontology or metaphysics of creaturely being logically comes to completion when it envisions God: since the tension of the correlation of existence and essence (essence in-and-beyond existence) proper to the

²¹ Ibid., p.418.

²² Ibid., pp.419-20.

²³ Ibid., pp.350-1.

realm of the creaturely points beyond itself to an *absolutum* of existence-an-essence: to God, that is, understood as the essential identity of existence and essence.²⁴ The creaturely apprehension of finite substance as a field of possibility actualized in diverse ways or levels over time and unfolding towards its most fully generative realization makes sense in the context of the revelation of divine life as eternally, simultaneously and perfectly field/form/essence, logos/meaning/intelligible existence and self-sharing/generativity of life/love.

3.

As this might suggest, the characterization of Stein as a ‘pure essentialist’ – let alone an exponent of ‘monadology’ – is far more just as a characterization of what she is after in her metaphysics.. The essence that is the object of the intellect’s activity is never a thing in itself: almost by definition, it does not *exist* – or rather it exists only as that which ‘fills’ the determinate historical actualization of its field, and this latter is not dispensable in the knowing of the essence. Indeed, we could say that the trinitarian theological underpinning of this schema secures precisely this point: there is no person of the trinity whose existence is simply functional or instrumental to any other divine person, no divine person whose reality is somehow ‘second-order’. So if we have in the entire world of finite substance a real structural analogy with infinite being, there will be no possibility of abstracting a discarnate essence as an independently knowable object.

That being said, it is true that Stein parts company with Przywara in one important respect. Przywara – in one of his familiar ventures into convoluted neologism – sees metaphysics as simultaneously ‘meta-ontics’ and ‘meta-noetics’ – i.e. as a critical or (in the Hegelian sense) ‘speculative’ questioning of the foundations both of the category of being and of the act of knowing. The dimension of ‘meta-noetics’ is the interrogation of how reflection on consciousness opens out on to a reflection on being, alongside the direct interrogation of the object of knowledge as object.²⁵ According to Przywara, ‘Our question concerns which of these definitions of metaphysics is *primary*, but not which definition is *exclusive*.’²⁶ It turns out that each needs the other, and that a method that treats only one as determinative is going to be flawed. There must be a certain priority for ‘meta-ontics’ as to speak of an ‘act’ of knowing is already to make an ontological assumption about action and potentiality; yet meta-ontics cannot begin without acknowledging the belonging-together of consciousness and being in the act of knowledge. *Pace* Gonzales, it is not clear that there is the kind of methodological gulf between the two thinkers here that he argues for; *but* it is fair to note that Stein’s interrogation of the act of consciousness is not of the same order of complexity as Przywara’s. She is unmistakably doing what Przywara describes as ‘taking aim’ from consciousness in the direction of being, but is less interested in problematizing consciousness and the precise nature of its participation in being. To this extent, we can grant that her intellectual world is more unreconstructedly ‘modern’ than Przywara’s; but Przywara himself cautions against a ‘meta-ontics’ that fails to acknowledge the need

²⁴ *Analogia Entis*, p.407.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.120-1.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.121.

for attention to epistemology (perhaps like Etienne Gilson's robust but narrow defence of philosophical realism).

Stein's ontological model nonetheless serves to anchor her epistemology in the 'creaturely' and historical realm to a certain extent; and while she speaks²⁷ of the goal of philosophy as *perfectum opus rationis*, the completed work of reasoning, we should beware of assuming that this is equivalent in her mind to some sort of absolute knowledge in a debased Hegelian sense. It is true that we hope to become participants in divine wisdom through the exercise of philosophical reasoning amplified by revelation; but this participation is not a comprehensive conceptual mapping of the universe since it goes 'beyond all conceptually intelligible particularized knowledge unto the simple comprehension of the one truth'²⁸ that lies on the far side of the darkness that faith introduces into our minds. The allusion here to St John of the Cross looks forward to her full-length treatment of John in *The Science of the Cross*; and it draws from Przywara, in his remarkable essay on Stein and Simone Weil²⁹, the judgement that Stein, in both FEB and the book on St John, treats the Doctor of the Dark Night as, in effect, providing a rationale for her 'essentialism' in his account of radical detachment. Przywara discusses John's theoretical work in terms of an abandonment of the creaturely in a search for immediate awareness of God (so that Stein's use of John of the Cross can be assimilated, despite the difference between the two writers in other respects, to Simone Weil's ideal of 'decreation'³⁰). Neither Stein nor Weil (with her more 'existential', less epistemologically slanted reading of the 'dark night' tradition) does justice to the other John of the Cross, who in his poetry celebrates the nuptial joy of union with God, in which 'The flowing back-and-forth of nuptial love in encounter and response becomes transparent to the flowing back-and-forth within God himself.'³¹ In other words, Stein might have found in St John a richer source for trinitarian reflection than she seems to imagine. And Przywara concludes his essay with what is even for him a painfully condensed and gnomic meditation on how the essentialist reading of John in terms of 'night as light' (the dwelling in a nocturnal hopefulness beyond the realm of particular intellectual conceptualities) and the 'existentialist' understanding of 'light as night' (illuminating and transfiguring grace pushing us deeper into the mystery of God's embrace of and presence within the horrors of the historical order) both together constitute an 'analogy of night' in which the reciprocal tension of these perspectives evokes the recognition of the 'ever greater' reality of God's own *Ein-nachtung*, God's identification with the night in which creatures live, an identification that is at the heart of divine self-giving, and which is poignantly embodied in the very different 'martyrdoms' of Stein and Weil.³²

This restlessly creative and critical reading of Stein alongside Weil and in relation to John of the Cross deserves a full-length treatment of its own, which is not going to be possible here. But it is worth observing that Przywara's compulsive reaching for

²⁷ FEB, p.23.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.28.

²⁹ *Analogia Entis*, pp.596-612.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.610.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, p.612.

complementary polarities has left us not only with a rather skewed picture of Stein's epistemology but also with a curious reading of St John that does not seem to recognize that the 'theoretical' works (it's an odd way to describe them) are commentaries on the poetry, Nor does Przywara really weigh the fact that the question in all of the Juanist *oeuvre* is really not at all about the knowledge of God as somehow a problem about how God can be known only when the specifics of the finite world are forgotten; it is a question about how God is to be loved by a finite subject radically entrapped, *not* by finitude and particularity or embodiedness as such, but by a desire that terminates in the transitory world of particulars. By attaching to created realities the hopeful desire that only God merits and only God satisfies, the creature deifies other creatures and is enslaved to them; there is no opening up to the comprehensive meaning that creation has in and from the God who is everywhere present and everywhere speaking in the finite world. Only when our habitual obsession with or addiction to this absolutizing of the finite world as the end of our desire has been eroded in the night of sense and spirit are we free to see the created world for what it truly is. I don't think that this commits Juan to an 'essentialist' notion that the realm of finite manifestation is simply to be left behind as such; what *is* to be left behind is the deep misapprehension of this realm as being the final determinant of our desire.

As a matter of fact, Stein's account of Juan is very attentive to the poetry, to the nuptial imagery and to the trinitarian context of all the reflections on contemplative practice and the pains and frustrations of the *noche oscura*. Once again, what she actually says is a good deal closer to Przywara than the Jesuit theologian seems to allow, in that she sees the night of faith as precisely what transforms merely philosophical ambition into the desire for participation in God's own wisdom, which is definitively not an ensemble of accurate conceptual accounts but opens up the revealed truth of what the relation is between God and all finite being³³, so that something entirely new appears. If philosophy meanwhile takes account of what revealed theology claims in regard to the trinitarian life, it will see how the structure of finite being is *not* in fact a realm of monadic essences but a world in which all that *is* is engaged in a self-concretization through time that allows its essence to be given into the life of the other. This engagement is the image in time of the self-giving that is eternally and unchangeably God's life.

Two final points about Stein's schema may be mentioned here. Does the assimilation of the Father to the depth or abyss of divine being fall into the trap of making the Father functionally identical to the divine essence – a trap into which a good few theologians, ancient and modern, have fallen? I think Stein can defended, but there is a certain lack of clarity here, partly because of Stein's idiosyncratic terminology. It is not that the Father is somehow identified with the divine nature; rather that – as in classical Eastern Christian thinking – the Father is the single source of that act by which the divine nature is shared with or bestowed upon the Word and the Spirit. Essences, as we may recall, don't 'exist', they are not *there* except as actualized. The Father, in Stein's account, is active in the sense that he initiates that act of manifesting and making intelligible that is the Word. The Father is unmistakably a 'how' as well as a 'what'. Analogically he

³³ FEB, p.22.

corresponds to the form that must be 'filled', but he is also the agency of 'filling', not a passive content for the active intelligence of the Word. Still, the exact outworking of this is not wholly plain, and reducing Stein's ambitious ontological analogy to a completely coherent structure needs a good deal of further labour.

The second point is once again a qualification of too simple an assimilation of Stein to the Rahnerian-Kantian-'modern' pole in contemporary Catholic theology. One implication of Stein's ontological analogy is that being is intrinsically giving of itself: the third level of actuality in her various triadic schemes is that of the self-gift that is definitive of the life of spirit. This means, among other things, that there must be some convergence here with the way a theologian like Balthasar³⁴ speaks of being as *giving itself to be known*- itself a kind of theologized version of Husserl's insistence on the object as necessarily 'giving itself' to a knowing subject. We are not here dealing with a focus on consciousness as the source of meaning, or being itself being redefined simply as meaning. We are invited to think of being as always inviting a reappropriation of itself, always generative of a new and different iteration. Being imparts itself; and, in Stein's framework, it does so because of its trinitarian grounding. The 'ontological analogy' restores to the entire finite world, animate and non-animate, its character as mediating the divine welcome, as an interdependent network of life in which each substance may be the channel of divine act for each and any other. Despite the loose ends of this as expressed in Stein's own writing, it is a perspective that must qualify very seriously the picture of her as simply privileging a 'modern' epistemology at the expense of a participatory and doxological understanding of the finite world. And this element of the ontological analogy has some practical implications both for ecumenical theological discussion – in opening doors to the Eastern Christian picture of the world as a system of *logoi* – and for new explorations in a theology of the environment.

This has been a very brief and superficial engagement not only with Stein's most mature work of philosophical analysis and speculation but also with some of the work of her friend and critic, Erich Przywara. The works of both are proverbially of impenetrable intellectual sophistication and terminological complexity: neologisms abound, argument is often impossibly dense and allusive, intellectual interlocutors are drawn from an exceptionally wide world of debate. It is also necessary to remember the circumstances in which Edith Stein was writing, circumstances not exactly conducive to lucid and leisurely exposition. I have noted at some points surprising awkwardnesses of terminology – not least in those passages where she sails so close to the Scotist wind and implies a degree of univocity in relation to finite and infinite reality that does not quite do justice to her most abiding intuitions as a Christian philosopher. It is fair to assume that – like some other mid-century Catholic thinkers – she was reacting to a variety of rigid Thomism in which talk about analogy often tilted towards the pole of equivocity; some elements of Scotus will have seemed a welcome corrective at the time. But ultimately, I believe we must judge her theology of the trinitarian image to be an

³⁴ See for example Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit; Eine Theologische Ästhetik III.1. Im Raum der Metaphysik Teil II: Neuzeit*, Einsiedeln, Johannes Verlag 1965, section III (ET, *The Glory of the Lord*, vol.5, London, T. and T. Clark/Bloomsbury, 1991) on the metaphysical significance of beauty as the radiant self-diffusion of being.

unusually original and bold contribution to theology. Without compromising the sense in which humanity is spoken of as God's image in a unique sense, she sees the language of trinitarian imaging as something that decisively illuminates the nature of being itself. She recognizes that the logic of creation itself pushes us towards a more capacious account of the divine image, the universal participation of finite being in its infinite archetype. She is unmistakably still working within the context of current arguments within European phenomenology; but it would be a mistake to see her as allowing herself to be held captive by the epistemology of modernity in the way some critics have argued. Returning to the very first pages of FEB, we may remind ourselves that the 'completing' of the work of philosophy in 'a unity and synthesis of all the knowledge we have gained by the exercise of our natural reason and by revelation'³⁵ is, for Stein, something clearly different from a system that can be tabulated; the mode of knowing is changed in and through the darkness of faith. We share in some sense in God's simple vision of the created world; but this is very different from possessing exhaustively the sum total of 'individually separated truths.'³⁶

Ultimately, Stein writes as a contemplative, whose goal is not just the refinement of a 'Christian philosophy', but the vision of God in Trinity. That her own life was to become – not long after she was writing her essay on *Finite and Eternal Being* – a living analogy of that unreserved generative self-giving about which she has so much to say gives her words an added depth for the modern reader. Martyrdom does not make a writer infallible. But it undeniably directs our attention to the way in which the workings of her extraordinary mind shaped her decisions as a sister of Carmel; and her analysis of what it is for us to exist in the threefold divine image becomes all the more a painfully searching question for her interpreters. *Ora pro nobis.*

³⁵ FEB, p.25

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.27.