

The Religious Philosophy of Edith Stein: Knowledge and Faith
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Edith Stein's (October 12, 1891 – August 9, 1942), collection of work, *Knowledge and Faith* (2000), contains five different philosophical writings composed between 1929 and 1941. Highlighted in this essay is her “*Knowledge, Truth, and Being*,” notes from lectures in Munster from 1932-1933. Stein, also referred to as Saint Teresia Benedicta of the Cross, or Saint Edith Stein, was a Jewish born German Catholic philosopher who studied under Edmund Husserl. The foundational ideas in this essay begin with the interplay of *knowledge*, a gradual step-by-step process in which an individual engages throughout the course of a life; *be-ing*, the individual as a material person living and interacting with others; and *being*, the whole individual as only fully known to the Divine. This asserts that as humans, we, as be-ings, are incapable of judging others because we do not fully know each other. Only the Divine, who fully knows each being, may then judge. For Stein, we will never have full knowledge of each other. Knowledge is a gift given to the individual so that a person may acquire an understanding of the world, yet knowledge is restricted by the be-ing's temporal existence. One is not born with knowledge; it becomes learned in a step-by-step process over time. Be-ings are always limited in the knowledge that they gain; they are limited by their temporal existence in the world

First, knowledge means, “grasping something that has not been grasped before” (65). In the extended sense, it includes “an original processing without a beginning and a having-in-possession that goes back to grasping.” Gaining knowledge is an action that takes place at a given time. Because each act of knowing occurs in a different moment in time, we know things

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differently depending upon when we encounter them. A person's way of being is "being-there-for-itself" and "being-open-for-what-is-other" (66). Being-there-through person and being-there-for persons prevents us from building our knowledge on purely subjective means. By relying on the other, our minds become more objective in the types of knowledge that we gain. No one can ever have complete knowledge and we are constantly building our knowledge as we learn from the other.

Next, Stein notes that a "Pure Act," which is "Absolute Being" and which is "everything that is and outside of which there is neither being nor be-ings, cannot transcend itself" (66). No "being can be unknowable (or more precisely, unknown)" (66). This means that only God as Absolute being may engage in Pure Act, and only God knows everything. A "be-ing's knowability" and "it's being known" have meaning only in reference to a knowing mind (of an individual) that "does not possess knowledge originally (as opposed to God) but must gain it step by step" (67). For Stein, it is "immediately obvious that *no one* can make statements about a be-ing of which he knows nothing" (67). Knowledge of others and the world around us has no starting point and is a step-by-step, lifelong process. We are always learning and gaining knowledge that is limited by its context, its "space and time" (65).

Stein states that the mind must be able to "distinguish what is new from what is not new" (68). When "at a later moment it will grasp something in the object that it has not grasped before," it "must add what is given later to what has been given earlier" (68). This helps with self-knowledge because self-knowledge for a be-ing is the "actuality phase which is a moment in a continuum (the act or living experience of temporal duration and, beyond it, in the living stream of experience)" (68). The example that Stein uses is that of a red rose. The judgment that "the rose is red" is called "a truth" but it is also said to be "true" (72). "Judgment"

is understood in different ways, which though objectively belonging together, are not the same thing. To each judgment belongs not only a simple act, but a whole assemblage of acts (72). The thing being perceived is grasped under a general idea “rose,” but at the same time it is perceived as “this and is placed as subject” (72). Something is selected from the perceived stock of being, again, under a general idea “being red” and is predicated of the thing (72). Knowing and judging the rose is part of one’s living experiences. Learning about and gaining knowledge of the rose and then making a judgment of the rose is a simple way of illustrating how one gains knowledge and then makes a judgment that may differ from another. Knowledge of the rose builds as one continues one’s experience limited by both time and space. No one ever fully knows the rose—that type of knowing is reserved only for the Divine. Just because they will never fully know each other, does not mean that they cannot ascertain knowledge of themselves and each other through the interplay of be-ing and knowledge limited in time and space. What Stein addresses next is whether a be-ing, through knowledge of him/herself and others, can ever know that anything is true. How a person comes to know whether something is true, as in judgment, is her next step in articulation of a rhetoric of responsibility. Judgment does not leave the realm of knowledge; it too for a be-ing is confined by space and time.

Stein addresses truth in the same manner she addresses knowledge. Contrasting the mind of the finite, a be-ing who is limited to a mind of the infinite, to God, which is never limited, we as individuals, as beings may never fully judge each other. In the case of the absolute mind of God, “being, knowing, and knowledge are one,” and “being and truth are also one” (71). For this reason the Logos, or the Word, can say: “I am the truth” (71). The finite mind that “knows in a temporal process,” the truth, that is, “the possession of a be-ing in knowledge,” may be called “the goal and the result of the knowing” (71). Stein notes that Thomas even speaks

of “*veritas creata*, or created truth” (71) in this manner. “Truth” in this case is transferred from the being-known to the knowing be-ing (71).

For something to be known, the “knowledge must have to come to a conclusion” (71). It is an “ongoing process,” demanding and “on and on” (72). To each judgment belongs “not only a simple act but also a whole assemblage of acts” (72). To restate, only the Divine, only God, really knows the “Truth”; as be-ings, as individuals in space and time, we can gain knowledge in a step by step process which can lead us to “truth” or “judgment.”

Stein’s spiritual and philosophical work has ethical implications. Her work infers that we are never capable of judging persons because we will never have complete knowledge of persons. Others are not given to us to judge, they are given to us so that we may know them and better know ourselves. As Ralph McInerny tells us, our individual faith does influence our individual philosophy; it affects our path of study and the questions that we ask. Stein’s Catholic faith intertwines with her phenomenology to produce a Catholic philosophy. Her philosophy does not exclude those who do not share her belief, but carves out a space for all to dwell and for all to know and continue to know each other. Her world was in crisis and her writings evidence this. Rachel Brenner’s *Writing as Resistance: Four Women Confronting the Holocaust* notes that because the atrocities of the time were so unthinkable, few were writing an eye-witness account of Hitler’s Final Solution (4). What was being written, were works like that of Stein, which correctly comprehended the moment and communicated a resistance to it. We must acquiesce and acknowledge that full Truth and full knowledge of the other is only available to the Divine infinite mind of God. Stein’s rhetoric begins with the act of empathy, situated with the realm of community, and put into use through the implementation tools of knowledge and faith and points toward an engagement with the other with the potential for a discourse of

stability and change.

Stein was deported in late July of 1942 to Auschwitz along with hundreds of other Jews who had converted to Christianity and murdered in the gas chambers in Birkenau on August 9, 1942. Canonized by John Pope II, October 11, 1998, Stein's intellectual work, philosophy, and moral vision fits into the conversations of this historical moment opening up multiple possibilities for ongoing conversations.

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