

AUTHENTIC FREEDOM AND HAPPINESS: AN INTERPRETATION OF THE ETHICS OF EDITH STEIN

Nicoletta Ghigi (Università degli Studi di Perugia)
Translated by Antonio Calcagno

This article seeks to advance a way of being in the world of the human person that encompasses both the truest sense of freedom of choice and its result, namely, happiness. Starting from the proposal of a relational ethics in Stein I intend to show how, in the authentic relationship through Einfühlung, it is possible to arrive at the "revelation" of what is deeper in ourselves, i.e., the personal core that characterizes us as unique and unrepeatable entities. The growth and development of our personalities occurs coherently with who we are. But the "choice" to adhere to the authenticity of a deep self is a choice of freedom that also leads one to harmony, to the acceptance of one's finitude and weaknesses, and thus to living well with who one "really" is. This result coincides with being happy.

Cet article entend faire avancer une manière d'être dans le monde de la personne humaine qui englobe à la fois le vrai sens de la liberté de choix et son résultat, à savoir, le bonheur. Partant de la proposition d'une éthique relationnelle chez Stein, j'ai l'intention de montrer comment, dans la relation authentique à travers l'Einfühlung, il est possible d'arriver à la « révélation » de ce qu'il y a de plus profond en nous, par exemple, la découverte d'une partie qui nous caractérise en tant qu'entités uniques et irremplaçables. La croissance et le développement de notre personnalité se produisent en cohérence avec qui nous sommes. Mais le « choix » d'adhérer à l'authenticité d'un soi profond est un choix de liberté qui nous conduit aussi à l'harmonie, à l'acceptation de notre finitude et de nos faiblesses, et donc, à bien vivre avec qui nous sommes « vraiment ». Ce résultat coïncide avec le fait d'être heureux.

The First Step Toward Freedom: Learning to Be Responsible for One's Actions

From an early age, the child must know that every action has a consequence. According to Edith Stein, choices should not be imposed on children by a teacher but rather by a guide who stands nearby, who shows them the ways to find harmony with their own beings and with the surrounding world. The child, therefore, must not be formed from the outside, molded, or, worse, “indoctrinated”; the child must not be a “mere semblance of training,” an “externalized shade of itself” (*tinteggiatura esteriore*),¹ but, rather, he or she should be situated within a framework of free self-training from an early age. Children must deploy their own strength to draw from the help of those who, mindful of the children’s deepest needs, stand alongside and offer the materials suitable for such training. The process of self-formation, Stein emphasizes, “already begins in the child, before they are able to make use of their freedom, before they can start to form themselves, before they can voluntarily grant or deny access to the impressions that they perceive and that act in them.”² However, it is thanks to the support of aware formators that the child’s formation can become an authentic unfolding of the ego, the free choice to self-form in harmony with “what has been assigned to him as an end.”³ In other words: everyone can be formed only *if they decide to be formed*. But only if one decides to form oneself in relation to one’s essence, will one truly form oneself.

In her conception of *Selbstbildung* or self-formation, Stein delineates what she sees as the first sense of freedom (that is, if we understand it in an authentic sense, as being “true”). It is based on a sense of responsibility: we have “in hand the maneuvering device”⁴ and we are absolutely responsible for what we become. “Having the instrument in hand” means that it is up to us to direct our lives in one direction rather than another.

This ethical model of behaviour, for Stein, must start from early childhood. In fact, it makes no sense to impose, from the outside, a sense of responsibility on adolescents, if they have not previously

¹ Edith Stein, *Formazione e sviluppo dell'individualità*, (tr.) A. Pezzella and A. Togni (Rome: Città Nuova, 2017), 69.

² *Ibid.*, 69–70.

³ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁴ Edith Stein, *La struttura della persona umana*, (tr.) M. D'Ambra, (rev.) A. Pezzella and M. Paolinelli (Rome: Città Nuova, Roma 2013), 110.

accepted their “original” being, that is, if they have not been guided, first, to a self-understanding of their own needs. Education, or, more precisely, the *Bildung* or personal training and formation that aims toward self-understanding, must be a prerequisite for an ethics that facilitates for the person an authentically free and happy comportment. But what does “authenticity” mean?

To be authentic, one must first not retreat, pretend, or put on masks. Rather, it is necessary to welcome, and, even before undertaking “suspensive listening” to oneself, to be non-judgmental.⁵ But this must be taught. A good teacher, therefore, has the primary task of leading children toward themselves, their talents, and their needs. A critical eye must be developed in children,⁶ an ability to recognize the truthfulness of their own behaviour while removing any element of fiction from it. Christ’s model must be the best guide, says Stein. Even in moments of difficulty and doubt, his Word can offer the right solution; it can also steer the child toward the right relationship of “interior dialogue.”

Learning to Communicate Authentically

The second step toward authenticity involves learning to be free and achieving happiness through *authentic* dialogue with oneself and with the other. This can be obtained through *entropathic* listening with the other and with oneself. It is necessary here to prepare oneself for listening, which entails not merely hearing the words of the other, but also “tuning in” to the emotions and moods that the other expresses either verbally or physically. Its whole essence consists in speaking, communicating, and asking to be “understood.” Obviously, the complete intellectual understanding of the other is impossible: *the other is not a measurable quantity*. The other is a person with an elusive, ever-changing and ever-growing personality. Nevertheless, from a certain point of view, I can “recognize” what the other feels on the basis of a shared common ground of personal being, namely, emotionality. We are both able to feel emotions, and

⁵ Cristiano Barreira, “Escuta suspensiva,” in *Anais do V Seminário Internacional de Pesquisas e Estudos Qualitativos: Pesquisa Qualitativa na Educação e na Ciência em Debate*, (eds.) M. Kalinke, M. Aparecida Viggiani Bicudo, and V. Spididião Kluth (Foz do Iguaçu: UNIOESTE, 2018), 1–12.

⁶ Stein precisely defines this particular gaze of the spirit as “eyes of the spirit,” with which the trained/formed human being is able to “understand” the truth. Edith Stein, *Formazione e sviluppo dell’individualità*, 84.

although the emotions may differ in intensity or with regard to their specific objects, we “feel” *in the same way*.

The empathic acceptance of the other, then, consists in “recognizing,” in an indirect way, what the other experiences in the other’s own skin.⁷ Welcoming the other means suspending the judgment of value on my world and “opening myself” to the world of the other. It is about seeing the world, the same world, Stein tells us, from different perspectives, with different moods, and with an absolutely unique personality core in both cases.⁸ But openness allows me, the one who is listening, to learn a new and enriching way of seeing, as the other sees. It allows the other to feel freely “able to narrate themselves,” to be able to open their heart in an authentic way and without fear.

This relationship, which Stein says allows me to see myself from the point of view of the other, and therefore to know things about myself that I did not know or imagine, is one that invites freedom and that allows the possibility of the authenticity of the human person. Today, a purely subjective view of intersubjectivity is untenable; that is, intersubjectivity cannot simply be a mere projection of one’s own subjectivity onto the other. Nor can empathy be deployed to claim that it allows an identification of the self with the other. One cannot live exactly what the other lives. This is impossible.

Phenomenology teaches that empathy must be understood as a transposition, a function of the creative imagination that allows us to hypothesize that we “remain” in the perspective of the other. However, this does not mean the I replaces the other or experiences the other’s emotions. The distinction between the two egos must always remain constant. There is no fusion; there is no identity. The other and I are and remain two different entities, but these two entities, however, “can” communicate by virtue of the same original layer that unites them. The same root, the same source that created us and sent us into the world to choose and live our unique life paths, holds us together, thereby allowing us to obtain mutual understanding. Empathy is not an identification, but a “realizing” what the other is

⁷ In this sense, Stein claims, the experience of a foreign consciousness really occurs in an act of empathy, and indirectly so, that is, when my “non-primordial experience...manifests a primordial experience” present in the flow of the other’s lived-experiences. See Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, (tr.) W. Stein (Washington: ICS Publications, 1989), 7.

⁸ Empathizing, writes Stein, I “put myself in the place of the other” and therefore I can see myself from the other’s perspective. Edith Stein, *Introduzione alla filosofia*, (tr.) A. Pezzella (Rome: Città Nuova, 2001), 217.

experiencing.⁹ This “realizing,” however, does not mean intellectually understanding the other’s experience and having an intellectual vision of the other’s inner universe. Rather, it means “glimpsing in the other” a sense that inhabits and characterizes them in their personal intensity. It also means, on my part, being able to feel. And this is my retrospective task as well. To listen and welcome are, in fact, also valid in the case of a direct empathy for one’s own self. By applying the same experience of “realizing” to one’s inner life, and by learning to welcome experiences without a value judgment, while listening to the flow of one’s life of consciousness in all its states and in all its nuances, a further pathway opens to the freedom to be oneself. This certainly equates to a precise choice: I decide to be the protagonist of my existence, to have the maneuvering device of my life in hand. I choose to become “who I should be”: I am free to choose.¹⁰ But this choice of freedom is also the key to my fulfillment, the way to happiness.

The Way to Freedom through the “Trace”

I come to look within myself, to recognize myself, after the experience with the other, as a unity of experiences that experiences its own existence on the same existential level as the other, yet occupies a space of its own. I can understand that I and the other are a *wanted* experience, chosen by ourselves and guided toward the realization of a specific goal. This goal, however, despite being chosen by us, is wanted and helps realize our identity and freedom because it is equivalent to becoming “who I am,”—it is an objective that reveals transcendence. According to Stein, it is willed by us, but before us, it is willed by the Creator. Our freedom and our free action thus become the expressions of a higher, transcendent freedom and will that stem from the will of the Creator, who guides our actions through the personality core given to us.¹¹

The freedom to follow the divine will is, therefore, the freedom, following Søren Kierkegaard, that guides us toward the choice that placed us in the world: a freedom, due to its structure, that can only lead to absolute happiness. The dream of the reunion of the creature

⁹ Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, 110.

¹⁰ Edith Stein, *Introduzione alla filosofia*, 110.

¹¹ “God gave humans their natural disposition and gave it to them in the form of a seed, intended to unfold and develop.” Stein, *Formazione e sviluppo dell’individualità*, 71.

with the Creator, the supreme peace of the vision of Sense (*Senso*), which only faith can guarantee, simultaneously offers a way to the knowledge of God, in us, who are made in His image and likeness. Happiness, again, is a consequence of the realization of free choice. Guided by the will to be ourselves, we are, in fact, pushed to the origin, to the source, to the first breath from which we come. But this realization is not only the realization of our ego, the unfolding of our personal core: here it is also a recognition of the origin, of the “true” motivation for which we are in the world. The happiness of having had the constancy of empathically “pursuing” oneself through the other, of “wanting to be a Self” with the other, rather than a simple, empirical self that “survives” by not choosing, is now doubled. In short, happiness becomes the happiness of oneself, which consists in the ability to place oneself in authentic relationships (with oneself and with the other) and in the discovery of the origin, of the *telos*, of the trace of God, of which we are individually the only bearers.

Everyone who listens entropathically and welcomes the Self (one’s own and others) can therefore reach their own authentic freedom—a true freedom—by simply choosing to be themselves without interfering with internal conflicts and frictions, and allowing the personality core of which they are carriers to unfold.¹² For Stein, our personality core is already a trace. It cannot lie and it cannot lead us to misbehave. It must be listened to, welcomed, and nourished; without care, like a plant, *it atrophies* and loses the consistency of its vital force.¹³ If it is cared for and cultivated in all its complexity, however, the personality core can help us achieve an ethical life, achieve what is good and true, and realize our freedom and happiness.

Ethics: Morally Right Behaviour

The empathic attitude that leads us to the roots of the empirical self and offers us the possibility of becoming a personal self is, therefore, a guarantee of moral correctness. Ethics, understood as the choice of a community to adopt certain behaviours rather than others, could hypothetically be based on the Steinian perspective. There is much talk of the “ethical void,” of humanity’s lack of direction, of the loss of

¹² For the development of this theme, see Angela Ales Bello, *Edith Stein o dell’armonia: Esistenza, Pensiero, Fede* [Edith Stein or On Harmony: Existence, Thought, Faith] (Rome: Studium, 2009).

¹³ Stein, *La struttura della persona umana*, 108.

values. Stein proposes we return to a dialogue with ourselves through the other, a powerful interaction that leads us to listen not only to our own universe but also to the whole universe, to the human world, as well as to the *Lebensumwelt* that surrounds it. Taking the sense of freedom as a possibility and interpreting, again, the word “power” as the *ability to become* and to choose to be the core that I carry with me from birth through life, with all its problems, with all its experiences, with all its parts (even the uncomfortable and tiring ones), carries the implication of a new human ethos. First, each of us would approach the other regarding them not as an adversary or enemy but as a possibility. Possibility, because through the other, I may catch a glimpse of another part of the world that, from my perspective, I cannot see; possibility, because through the other I acknowledge my originariness and, as mentioned, aspects unseen by me but seen by the other.¹⁴ Second, if relationships are authentic self-explanations, or if they allow us to be as we are, then all senses of fear and pretense no longer make sense. The welcome would dispel our mania for creating multiple masks to hide ourselves for fear of not being loved or accepted just as we are. A truly authentic formation, following Stein, truly aims at this goal in order to ensure that the possibility of being, as it is, is accepted without value judgments. Barreira speaks of a “suspensive listening,” a listening that does not call into question judgments or narcissisms on the part of the other.¹⁵

Stein’s empathic care could offer, therefore, a valid alternative to the individualistic or anthropocentric ethics that have developed in history and led us to nihilism or to narcissism and individualism. Her ethics, by contrast, aims at the formation of authentic interrelations and escapes the foregoing problems by making relationships the centre: her focus is not the single ego, but the relationship of each personal core with itself, the other, the universe that surrounds us, and, ultimately, the original source that brought us into being. For this reason, in addition to being a guarantee of an authentic communal ethic founded on the freedom to be oneself-with-the other,

¹⁴ Stein speaks of a “reciprocal exchange” that allows us, on both sides, to “clarify some features of our life, which have escaped our personal experience, but which become visible from the outside.” Stein, *Introduzione alla filosofia*, 214.

¹⁵ Barreira, “*Escuta suspensiva*,” 1–12.

Stein's ethics provides a path to self-fulfillment, as well as individual and communal happiness.¹⁶

Nicoletta.ghigi@unipg.it

¹⁶ I further develop this theme in my work: Nicoletta Ghigi, *L'etica fenomenologica di Edith Stein: Dalla vita emotiva all'individuo comunitario* (Rome: Fattore Umano Edizioni, 2021).