EDITH STEIN ON FAITH AND REASON FOR THE CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHER

Catherine Jack Deavel

University of St. Thomas, St. Paul

In his Regensburg Address, Pope Benedict XVI states, "A reason which is deaf to the divine . . . is incapable of entering into the dialogue of cultures" (para. 58). Unfortunately, as Pope Benedict notes, contemporary Western philosophy is in fact often unprepared for the task of dialogue among cultures precisely because it often cultivates this "deafness" to the divine: "In the Western world it is widely held that only positivistic reason and the forms of philosophy based on it are universally valid" (*ibid.*). How should a Christian philosopher understand the relation of faith and reason? In the present essay, I will present and defend Edith Stein's account of the proper relation of philosophy and theology, such that philosophy retains its character as a science apart from theology and yet does not stunt its investigations through artificial and self-imposed limits. In doing so, I will compare Stein's account with passages from *Fides et Ratio* and address several objections, most pointedly the claim that the Christian philosopher, insofar as she is identifiably Christian in the content of her claims, ceases to be a philosopher.

Relation of Disciplines

In *Fides et Ratio*, John Paul II urges that philosophy must reclaim a proper relation to theology. To help clarify this relation, John Paul II names a series of figures whose thought exhibits the abundant insight possible through a proper relationship between theology and philosophy (*FR*, 74). Edith Stein, canonized St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, is listed among the twentieth-century figures.[1] After her conversion to Catholicism, Stein attempted to synthesize modern philosophy (here, the phenomenology of her graduate training) with medieval Christian philosophy, in particular, the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas.[2] Before launching into this synthesis in *Finite and Eternal Being*, Stein addresses some particular difficulties of such an undertaking, including the question of whether there is a Christian philosophy.

Stein notes that one of the central difficulties of her project is to bridge the opposing positions taken by modern and medieval philosophy toward the relation of philosophy and theology.[3] Is philosophy a purely natural science, *i.e.*, "a discipline resting exclusively on reason and natural experience as its sources of knowledge," as many modern philosophers hold, or can philosophy legitimately "draw additional light from revelation" as the medievals claim?[4]

In *Fides et Ratio*, John Paul II describes the proper relationship between theology and philosophy as a circle (73). Theology begins with the word of God and seeks to understand this revealed truth more fully. This task is the individual pursuit of each human person and our pursuit in common: theology's "final goal will be an understanding of that word which increases with each passing generation" (*ibid.*). Human love of wisdom finds its formal and systematic

---

[1] Stein studied phenomenology under Edmund Husserl, one of the founders of this branch of philosophy. A Jewish woman, she converted to Catholicism and become a Carmelite nun. She and her sister Rosa died in the death camps of Auschwitz. In 1998, Stein was canonized St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross. She is one of five recent Western thinkers—and the only woman philosopher—named in *Fides et Ratio*. Sarah Borden includes a short biography of Stein as well as an overview of her thought in *Edith Stein*, Outstanding Christian Thinkers Series (New York: Continuum Books, 2003).

[2] Stein explicitly takes up this project in her *Finite and Eternal Being*, which considers "the *inquiry into the meaning of being*" in a comparative study of Thomistic and phenomenological thought (xxviii, original italics). Stein provides an interesting example of the philosophical synthesis that John Paul II urges because her education in phenomenology is her systematic home, so to speak. She comes to scholastic philosophy with her new Catholic faith but without years of formal philosophical training in these systems. For many contemporary Catholic thinkers, the project of synthesis works in reverse, *viz.*, exploring modern schools of philosophy from a background in the Catholic intellectual tradition, often Thomism. *Finite and Eternal Being: An Attempt at an Ascent To the Meaning of Being*, trans. Kurt F. Reinhardt, The Collected Works of Edith Stein, Vol. 9 (Washington, D.C.: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 2002).

[3] *Finite and Eternal Being*, 12.

[4] *Ibid.*

expression in the discipline of philosophy. Precisely as truths, the truths of theology are also proper objects of philosophical inquiry. Because all truth is a unified whole, the truths considered and uncovered by philosophy will intersect with revealed truth, though reason alone could not have arrived at certain truths unaided: "The truth made known to us by revelation is neither the product nor the consummation of an argument devised by human reason. It appears instead as something gratuitous, which itself stirs thought and seeks acceptance as an expression of love" (*FR*, 15). Some truths of revelation are beyond the scope of unaided human reason, *e.g.*, the position that God is a Trinity or the redemptive possibility of suffering that Christ makes known on the cross. Other truths are within the potential scope of reason alone, whether or not they have in fact been arrived at through reason alone, *e.g.*, the existence of a divine being. In the latter case, revelation gives the believer certainty independent of one's ability to follow a particular argument and independent of one's trust in the reason of others. As human reason stretches itself toward an increasingly more complete and rigorous understanding of creation, especially the human person, philosophy will also lead to deeper understanding of the truths of faith and to better means of communicating these truths (*FR*, 5, 103).

This description of the relationship between philosophy and theology may inspire both enthusiastic agreement from Christian thinkers and immediate suspicion from some who do not share this faith. Before entering into dialogue, a Christian philosopher would do well to consider what precisely her discipline is. What is the particular sphere of philosophy, as distinct from theology and other disciplines? And once the autonomy of theology and philosophy has been established, even if one grants that a relation between these disciplines could prove fruitful, why should one accept the stronger claim—made by both Stein and John Paul II—that philosophy compromises its own goals as a discipline if it does not relate properly to theology?

Stein's discussion of Christian philosophy is divided into two general sections. She proceeds by first attempting to define philosophy as a discipline and then examining what is designated by "Christian philosophy." As she begins her investigation, Stein notes that the term "philosophy" can be ambiguous. As a guiding insight, Stein cites Jacques Maritain's distinction between the nature of philosophy and the actual situation or condition of philosophy.[5] Applying this general division to philosophy or any other science, one can distinguish between the science as an idea and science in its historical setting (or science as it actually is). In our scientific practice and study, human beings are guided by the ideal of a science as the complete set of true statements about the proper objects or sphere of this science, all "causally and logically correlated or . . . integrated into a conclusive scientific theory."[6] This ideal is not, of course, fully attainable by earthly minds. Instead, we find every science in a particular historical setting. At any given time, a science as it actually is will be a fragmentary collection of the truths presently known (through the efforts of various thinkers up to and including those in the present historical context) about the proper objects of the science.[7] Actual science reflects the particular insights and errors of the individual human thinkers who have contributed to the practice of a science and the content of scientific knowledge as it presently stands.

This division may initially seem to undermine the position that there is such a thing as Christian philosophy. If a Christian philosopher agrees that we can distinguish between the

[5] *Ibid.*, 13. This distinction can be applied to any science. In Stein's initial discussion of Maritain (which I do not discuss), she notes that Maritain's definition of philosophy as a "formal structure of the mind" implies both "a vital intellectual activity and an enduring intellectual habit," *e.g.*, the act of judging as well as the ingrained disposition to judge with a certain logical precision or according to certain criterion (14). Stein quotes and comments on a German translation of Maritain: *Von der Christlichen Philosophie*, trans. Balduin Schwartz (Salzburg, 1935).
[6] *Finite and Eternal Being*, 16. "*Wissenschaft as an idea*—that enduring substrate of every concrete human knowledge and science—is then to be understood as the "pure" (quasi, as yet bodiless or disincarnate) expression of all those states-of-affairs in which that which is [*das Seiende*] unfolds itself according to its own inner necessity" (*Ibid.*, 18).
[7] *Ibid.*, 15-16.

nature of philosophy and the actual situation of philosophy, why not simply admit that the former, "pure philosophy," is philosophy? Anything decidedly Christian is an accident of historical context and already outside philosophy proper. The modern understanding of science only makes matters worse. After explaining the division between the nature and actual situation of philosophy, Stein gives three senses of philosophy. First, following Maritain, she states that philosophy is "a formal structure of the mind,"[8] as reason is conformed to objective reality. Philosophy is a mental habit of knowing, inquiring, and judging, or the carriage of mind that allows one to be properly receptive to reality. Second, philosophy is the corresponding activity that exercises this habit, *e.g.*, actively knowing a certain object. Third and most fundamentally, philosophy is first and foremost a science (*Wissenschaft*). The science of philosophy is "the inquiry into the meaning of being and of existents as such [*des Seins und des Seienden als solchen*]."[9]

Stein points out that, while for the medievals the term "science" (*scientia* or *Wissenschaft*) could "denote knowledge [*Wissen*] (as a habit and as act) as well as science,"[10] modern thinkers will tend to understand science as a "structure of concepts, judgments, and demonstrations, all interrelated and joined together according to definite laws."[11] This modern definition treats science exclusively as a highly organized body of information. This understanding entirely bypasses any consideration of a proper relation of knower and known (whether habitual or active) and thus rules out the first and second meanings of philosophy above. Being a "good knower" in habit and act allows one to add to or learn a science, but knowers are at best the contributors to or beneficiaries of a science, technically speaking.

---

[8] *FEB*, 14.
[9] *Ibid.*, 20.
[10] *Ibid.*, 14.
[11] *Finite and Eternal Being*, 15. I have passed over Stein's initial discussion of Maritain's account. See note 8.

(Think of a science as a house. Human beings can build or live in the house, but one can point to the house apart from those who can build houses, those presently building, and those who live in the house.) Even if the Christianity of some philosophers has helped them to be good contributors to or learners of philosophy, the modern thinker might claim, the Christian cast of the philosopher does not directly influence the resulting structure of concepts, judgments, and demonstrations, *i.e.*, the science. In short, philosophers may be Christian, but the science of philosophy is not.

As a first rejoinder, Stein points out that the modern definition of a science does retain a connection to knowledge. Even understood as a structure of concepts, *etc.*, a science "presupposes the existence of an objective reality and of knowing intellects."[12] Propositional sentences are not primarily about other sentences nor about human thoughts; they are about the nature of objects. Because propositional sentences are grounded in states-of-affairs, "in this sense it may be said that these propositions are or 'exist' prior to their being conceived by a human mind and prior to their being formulated in the *material* medium of a human language."[13] In the progress of a science, human minds will not formulate all of the possible sentences that describe objects and states-of-affairs, but those propositional sentences that we do formulate must be judged according to the reality in question. Stein claims,

> Every *Wissenschaft* aims at true being. Being antecedes every *Wissenschaft*: Not only every human knowledge and science understood as an arrangement for the elaboration of true propositions and for the description of the tangible total residue of all the endeavors leading up to true propositions, but even *Wissenschaft* conceived as an idea. . . . . Sentences express existing states-of-affairs *and have their ontological* foundation in them.[14]

---

[12] *Ibid.* Stein claims that this definition also implies that the knowing intellects are discursive, meaning that they come to knowledge by stepwise reasoning. Presumably, only a discursive intellect would have need of the demonstrations that partially comprise a science, for example, or a structure of concepts informed by a method of inquiry.
[13] *Ibid.*, 17-18.
[14] *Ibid.*, 17.

The fundamental criterion of whether a propositional sentence should be added to or retained in a science will be its adequacy to these objects and states-of-affairs, *i.e.*, its truth.

At this point, let us clarify what precisely is the point of disagreement regarding the possibility of Christian philosophy. In *Fides et Ratio*, John Paul II describes three possible stances of philosophy toward theology, all of which are found in Stein's discussion of Christian philosophy. Following Thomas, Stein and John Paul II both note that philosophy as a natural science entirely apart from revelation is surely possible, *e.g.*, the philosophy of Plato or of Aristotle. But this first stance of philosophy to theology has at least two versions. Reason can and does legitimately pursue knowledge of the truth completely apart from the truths of revelation when these revealed truths are unavailable to reason. The insistence of some modern philosophers on a similar isolation of reason from faith belies a different carriage of mind, however. One should not infer that the man who leaves his car at home and the man who has no car hold the same views about efficient and enjoyable transportation simply from the fact that both arrive on foot. If philosophy is true to its own methods and objects of investigation, John Paul II argues, then "as a search for truth within the natural order, the enterprise of philosophy is always open—at least implicitly—to the supernatural" (*FR*, 75). The separatist tendencies of some modern philosophers suggest an unwillingness to search out truth wherever it may be found.

A second stance philosophy can take to theology can rightly be called Christian philosophy, which is "a Christian way of philosophizing, a philosophical speculation conceived in dynamic union with faith" (*FR*, 76). In investigating truths of revelation, philosophy is not in danger of becoming theology because philosophy maintains its characteristic rational method. Philosophy attempts to understand the truths of faith as fully as possible by means of natural reason. For the individual thinker, "faith purifies reason" (*Ibid.*). Christian philosophy invites the virtues of humility and courage—humility guards against the temptation to elevate reason to misrepresent the powers of reason or, worse, to lose sight of the limit of one's own intellect, and courage prompts one to take up thorny philosophical problems that demand consideration of revealed truths (rather than avoiding these questions altogether). Here, we see faith helping reason to regain its sapiential dimension, urging reason to intellectually honest and thorough pursuit of truth. Stein notes that the benefits of grace apply to "philosophy if we consider it as an attitude [*habitus*] and an activity [*actus*] of the intellect."[15] Because grace is always a gift to the human subject who engages in or studies a science, "Christian philosophy" in this first sense describes the practice of philosophy. John Paul II refers to this purification of the individual intellect as the subjective aspect of Christian philosophy. The term "Christian philosophy" also encompasses advances or concepts in philosophical thinking that have resulted from Christian belief, either directly or indirectly (*FR*, 76), *e.g.*, creation as the free act of a personal God, or the distinction between concepts of person and nature. [16] John Paul II calls the Christian influence of and contribution to the content of philosophy the objective aspect of Christian philosophy. In Stein's terms, "Christian philosophy" in this second sense describes the actual science of philosophy when Christianity influences practice and content such as distinctions and categories.

It is the third possible stance that causes heated debate. Stein's discussion of philosophy as a science clarifies why philosophy, as part of its efforts as an independent

[15] *Ibid.*, 21. Stein notes these two considerations as ways of interpreting Maritain's account of the nature of philosophy (*Ibid.*, 14).

[16] The first example is found both in *FEB* and *Fides et Ratio* (76). The second example is Stein's (*Finite and Eternal Being*, 23). She points out that questions posed by matters of faith, *e.g.*, how best to understand the Eucharist, have occasioned distinctions among concepts and careful reasoning that then become part of the general vocabulary and discourse of philosophy itself.

discipline, will consider the truths of revelation. Because of its focus on truth, philosophy's proper sphere of objects will overlap with those of other disciplines.[17] Philosophy

> aims at ultimate clarity. It wants to give an account (lovgon didovnai) of the ultimate attainable causes. . . . [The world of experience, which acts on sense and intellect,] thus points toward the ultimate sphere of intelligibility, that is toward *being as such* and toward the *structure of the totality of that which is* [*das Seiende als solche*] with its *essential divisions according to genera and species*.[18]

Philosophy considers both the foundations and the findings of the other sciences in its own study of what is. As part of the discipline of philosophy, then, reason will consider the claims of theology. Generally, the genera and species that serve as the proper spheres of objects for other disciplines are available to natural reason alone, *e.g.*, atoms and molecules are available to natural reason in the discipline of chemistry. While revelation may supply truths that are unavailable to human reason, God too exists and acts as a cause. We cannot have a comprehensive account of what is without including spiritual beings in this account.

> If philosophers then want to remain faithful to their goal, if they want to understand that which is [*das Seiende*] in the light of its ultimate causes, they will be compelled by their faith to extend their reflection beyond that which is naturally accessible to them. There are existents beyond the reach of natural experience and natural reason but which have been made known to us by revelation; and they confront the receptive human mind with entirely new tasks.[19]

Philosophy cannot achieve "ultimate clarity" if it ignores the claims of theology.

Stein recognizes that this position invites the objection that Christian philosophy as just described ceases to be philosophy. She acknowledges that, to the extent that Christian

---

[17] "It is one of the functions of philosophy to elucidate the fundamental principles of all the sciences [*Wissenschaft*]" (*Finite and Eternal Being*, 19). Other disciplines generally take their objects of study and methods as starting-points; philosophy examines these starting-points. Insofar as someone considers the bases of his or her discipline, this person is acting as a philosopher.

[18] *Ibid.*, 19. Original italics.

[19] *Ibid.*, 21. Or again: in light of the data of Christian revelation, "it appears impossible for a pure philosophy to perfect itself . . . . It needs for its completion the aid of theology without, however, becoming theology." (23)

philosophy as an actual science embraces revealed truths, it ceases to be autonomous; however, this concession does not imply that philosophy has covertly shifted into theology:

> If . . . philosophy in its exploration of that which is meets with questions which it cannot answer by making use of its own devices (as, for example, the question concerning the origin of the human soul) and if, in order to arrive at a more comprehensive knowledge of things that are, it appropriates for itself the answers given by Christian theology, then we have a Christian philosophy which uses faith as a source of knowledge. In this latter case we can no longer speak of a *pure* and *autonomous* philosophy. Are we justified in calling it theology? I think not.[20]

In defense, Stein offers an argument by analogy. If a historian includes a summary of a scientific theory and its influence in her consideration of a historical period, she incorporates the claims of natural science without herself becoming a natural scientist and without transforming her writing into a work of natural science. Similarly, a philosopher may incorporate the claims of theology without becoming herself a theologian and without transforming her work into theology. Stein cautions that the analogy is not perfect: the historian is concerned with the historical aspects of a scientific theory, regardless of the truth or falsity of this theory, while the philosopher is concerned with the truth of the claims borrowed from theology (and from any other discipline). Nevertheless, the point of commonality in the cases remains. For both the historian and the philosopher, "another discipline must be consulted to make it possible for scholars to progress in their own field."[21] This turn to another science is a necessary condition for completing the work of the first science.

But, an objector might press, the point at which the analogy fails has been passed over too quickly. Perhaps a philosopher might make use of a claim of revelation without thereby compromising his philosophical reasoning, but this kind of borrowing must be acknowledged as a move into the hypothetical. Because natural reason alone cannot ground the claim in

[20] *Ibid.*, 24.
[21] *Ibid.*, 24.

question, the line of reasoning remains philosophy only if the argument is treated as an exercise in determining coherence among beliefs rather than truth. If one were to accept certain claims of revelation, then other positions might well follow. To accept the initial claims, however, the objection continues, is to operate outside the realm of philosophy; therefore, an honest philosopher must treat matters of faith as hypothetical suggestions or remain silent.

Stein meets such a challenge with several distinctions. First, she agrees that the honest philosopher will make clear when he or she is borrowing a truth of revelation. Revealed truths and the conclusions based upon them must be acknowledged as less intelligible to the human knower than the claims and conclusions of natural reason alone. This difference in intelligibility is not evidence against the truth of revealed claims nor against incorporating them into one's philosophical thinking, however. Different degrees of intelligibility are to be expected, since the finite human intellect cannot comprehend God.[22] Second, Stein acknowledges that a philosopher certainly could make use of the claims of revealed truth in a hypothetical mode. She suggests that non-Christian philosophers who choose to engage claims of revelation or conclusions dependent upon them will do precisely this: "they will accept the truths of faith not as 'theses' (as do believers) but only as 'hypotheses.'"[23] The point of disagreement comes in Stein's claim that this hypothetical mode is not the only legitimate philosophical stance when examining claims of revelation.

The purpose of philosophy (considered in its nature and, hopefully, in its practice as well) is to investigate beings and to formulate a comprehensive theory of existents and causes.

---

[22] "Since the ultimate ground of all existence [*alles Seienden*] is unfathomable, everything which is seen in this ultimate perspective moves into that 'dark light' of faith, and everything intelligible is placed in a setting with an incomprehensible background" (*Ibid.*, 25). In a related move, Stein claims that some proofs for God's existence, including her own, are not strictly speaking proofs in a demonstrative sense. Sarah Borden gives a clear and concise account of Stein's proof for the existence of God in her chapter on Christian philosophy in *Edith Stein*, Outstanding Christian Thinkers Series (New York: Continuum Books, 2003).

[23] *Finite and Eternal Being*, 28.

In this pursuit, a contemporary philosopher has before him the claims of the various other disciplines, including theology. A Christian philosopher believes that the claims of revelation are in fact true; these claims provide information about the existence and nature of certain beings. Far from being dishonest as a philosopher were he to take account of revealed truths in his philosophical thinking, as the objector argues, exactly the opposite is true. A Christian philosopher would be dishonest *as a philosopher* were he not to take into account claims that he holds to be true. He would effectively abandon in practice his commitment to philosophy because he would no longer attempt to investigate all beings nor to formulate a comprehensive theory of existents and causes. Again, philosophy makes use of theology but does not become theology:

> While it is the task of theology to establish the facts of revelation as such and to elaborate their specific meaning and interrelation, it is the task of philosophy to harmonize those propositions at which it has arrived by using its own devices together with the truths of faith and theology. Only thus can reality be made intelligible in its ultimate reasons and causes.[24]

If a Christian philosopher were to follow the advice of our objector, he would find himself in an intellectual muddle. He would be committed both to the position that, because of its nature and goal as a discipline, philosophy must incorporate all truths and to the position that, because of its nature and goal as a discipline, philosophy must not incorporate some truths (*i.e.*, revealed truths)—or at least must not incorporate them as truths.[25] Again, a philosopher could treat the

[24] *Ibid.*, 23.

[25] Our objector might further think that truths of theology are inadmissible on the grounds that natural reason must be the gatekeeper of philosophy. But such an objection needs to be clarified. The position might be a complaint about reasonableness of the content of the revealed truths, the reasonableness of one's criteria for accepting such truths, or both. If the former is the case, then one would need to proceed proposition by proposition, showing that the content of each claim is in fact irrational. If the problem is the criteria according to which one accepts revealed truths, our objector needs to show that the various criteria are below the rational standards of the criteria under which we accept other sorts of truths. (Above, when I speak of the Christian philosopher accepting revealed truths, I assume that our philosopher has some reasons for doing so.) In either case, an appeal to reason in general is not persuasive; an objector would need to make particular arguments in each case.

truths of revelation as hypotheses, but the Christian philosopher carries out her work as a philosopher in part by taking these truths as theses. In doing so, the Christian philosopher maintains both her commitment to the aim of her discipline and her own intellectual coherence.