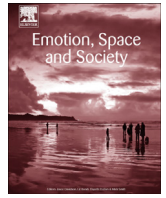




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Toward a phenomenology of community: Stein and Nancy

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I try to bring together the works of two philosophers, themselves quite different, around the idea of community. The paper has three parts. In the first section, I examine Edith Stein's early phenomenological work on empathy and community, emphasizing how, for her, the always already given 'we' of community is formed only within an ongoing appreciation of the other's alterity. In the second section, I examine Jean-Luc Nancy's description of community as inoperative, noting how he sees community as intrinsically challenging any notion of an authentic, or immanent, 'we.' And, finally, I describe the common trajectory of these two philosophers—namely, the establishment of a community of responsible writers who give themselves over to each other's singularity for the purpose of sharing what is to come.

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In this paper, I try to read and write together the works of two very different philosophers around the idea of community. First, I present the thought of Edith Stein, an early twentieth-century phenomenologist and student of Edmund Husserl. Among her many accomplishments, Edith Stein edited Husserl's lectures on time-consciousness and much of his writings on transcendental subjectivity. She also worked, independently of him, to extend his description of the pre-given essential structures of consciousness into descriptions of empathy and of community. As late as 1932, well after her publications on empathy and community, Stein still valued Husserl's insights into essential intuition [*Wesenschau*] and givenness [*Gegebenheit*], and she saw these as central to phenomenology's trajectory.¹

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¹ I am grateful to Rev. Paul Philibert, OP for passing on to me a copy of *La Phénoménologie*, which is a transcript of a discussion of the future of phenomenology held at a Dominican monastery on September 12, 1932. Gathered were a number of Catholic intellectuals from the Societe Thomiste, including Edith Stein. She remarks that "Husserl's phenomenology is essence-philosophy [*Essenzphilosophie*]; Heidegger's, existence-philosophy. The philosophizing I, which is the starting-point, centered around the meaning of being, is with Husserl the 'pure I', while with Heidegger is the concrete human person" (104, my translation). Furthermore, what separates phenomenology from something like the NeoKantian philosophy, Stein argues, is that the Neokantians deduce the transcendental conditions of the facts of science while Husserl brackets the factual operations of science and "goes back [*zurückgeht*] to scientific givennesses [*Gegebenheiten*]" in order to perform constitutive analyses of those within a reflective stance (103, my translation and paraphrase). Most noteworthy of all, however, is that for Stein, Husserl's phenomenology is a consistent exposition, with no 'transcendental turn.' The transcendental explorations of the essence of consciousness in the later *Cartesian Meditations* is already within, Stein says, the fifth and sixth *Logical Investigations* (103).

Jean-Luc Nancy, a later twentieth-century philosopher and critical theorist, engages in projects of disruption or deconstruction of both essences and givenness, projects that move within the same general trajectory as those of Jacques Derrida.² For Nancy, as opposed to Stein, community is inoperative and impossible. He sees community as inoperative and impossible because, Nancy claims, community has tended to rely for its attempted fabrication on a notion of the essence of the human being. But for Nancy essences, as in an essence of the human being or of consciousness, are nostalgic illusions we fabricate in order to *shut down* what is our most salient (and difficult) experience—namely, the absolutely singular character of each person who would, as singular, turn toward others for confirmation and support. Nancy's vision of community therefore arises as a hope or a demand (and never arises as concrete satisfaction or confirmation). Community is not an expression of our shared essence; it is not pre-given to us as something in which we always already find ourselves. Rather, community arises for Nancy because we share the exposure of our ineradicable otherness to each other. As such a mutual exposure, then, community *cannot* simply be given, can never be reflectively understood or adequately described, once and for all.

To bring together such apparently divergent authors and texts would seem to be a difficult, if not impossible, task. It is certainly a feat that, in my view, has not been attempted before. However, because of its difficulty and novelty, one must ask these questions: can such a task be accomplished? Is it worthwhile? How does one reconcile a penchant for the essential with a rejection of essences?

² See footnote 1 of "Literary Communism" (Nancy, 1991: 72).

How does one map an experience of community onto an experience of singularity?

This paper intends to answer these questions, and to accomplish its task of reading and writing these two philosophers together, in part by way of examining the role of *alterity* (the presence of which in Stein's work aligns her more closely with Nancy and his discussion of singularity) and the role of *writing* (which, in Nancy's work, aligns him more closely with Stein and the phenomenological process of 'constitution').

The paper has three parts. In the first section, I examine Edith Stein's phenomenological work on empathy and community, emphasizing how, for her, the always already given 'we' of community is formed only within an ongoing appreciation of the other's alterity. In the second section, I examine Jean-Luc Nancy's description of community as inoperative writing, noting how he sees the impossibility of empathy and how he views community as precluding an authentic, or immanent, 'we.' Finally, in the third section, I describe the common trajectory of these two philosophers—namely, the establishment of a community of writers who give themselves over to each other's singularity for the purpose of sharing what is "to-come."³

1. Stein: community as rooted in empathy and co-responsibility

1.1. Empathy, memory, and anticipation

The only people who can form a genuine community for Stein are ones who can empathize. Empathizers are able to recognize each other as other subjects, and more particularly, to recognize others' experiences as they live them. Because of their ability to experience with others while remaining distinct, such empathetic people can also participate in an authentic, multiple, and unified communal life.⁴

For Stein, as for Husserl, empathy, as the foundation of community, presents itself as immediately, though "analogically," engaging my awareness of my own temporal self-relation. I feel empathy with other persons, I sense their experience as they live it, because what it means to unify two 'I's, two lived experiences, is not foreign to me.⁵

When I restrict myself to my own temporal self-relation, I can prove to myself just how familiar uniting two 'I's, two streams of experience is. I remember my past 'I' and my former lived experience as belonging to that 'I.' I anticipate a future 'I' that I will be with his experience as different from the one I am now having in the midst of my expectation. And in so doing, in memory or anticipation, I come to bridge or to relate myself to myself, as if I were simultaneously separate from myself and together with it. In fact, it is clear that I am together with myself by means of the differences or gaps between the person now remembering or anticipating and the person remembered and anticipated.

³ This term is one Nancy uses frequently to describe the character of community. See especially the following: "Community without community is *to come*, in the sense that it is always *coming*, endlessly, at the heart of every collectivity (because it never stops coming, it ceaselessly resists collectivity itself as much as it resists the individual)" (Nancy, 1991: 71).

⁴ See Sarah Borden's *Edith Stein*, particularly chapter two. There Borden succinctly argues that, for Stein, not only community but also self-experience as such is possible only given empathy: "It is through such empathy and reiterated empathy that we come to share a world and recognize our own inner experiences as real. Thus Stein argues that I cannot see myself or my own experiences as part of the world until I have experienced another so understanding me" (Borden, 2003: 29).

⁵ See Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations*, particularly the Fifth Meditation: "Something as my memorial past... transcends' my present, the appresented other being 'transcends' my own being" (Husserl, 1977: 115).

In some important, similar way, when I consider my experience of empathy, of perceiving another's feelings as she lives them, I find that I can recognize another person, another 'I,' even though (and indeed *because*) she stands apart from me, outside of my control. Within an experience of empathy, then, I can, and to some extent I have always already begun to, bridge mutual gaps toward a shared, empathic life.

Indeed this 'bridging' that occurs in empathy appears as something that matters to me because it immediately resonates with the way in which I am continually bridging my own gaps toward a unified self. By means of empathy, we "learn to make ourselves into objects;" by means of empathy, we "become clear on what we are not" (Stein, 1989: 116). If memory and anticipation prepare me for empathy, then, empathy equally gives me back to my memories and anticipations, to the distinctness of myself within the unity of past, present, and future that is my ongoing, continuous life. Empathy, in short, allows me to 'become clear' on how I am an 'object' of my own perception by becoming an object of another's.

As much as self-perception and empathy share some common structural traits, however, they are not identical. In fact, Stein argues that empathy is a "sui generis" mode of perception or intuition (Stein, 1989: 11). She argues this as follows: First, she claims that, "in contrast with the memory, expectation, or fantasy of our own experiences," in empathy two subjects "are separate and not joined together, as previously, by a consciousness of sameness or a continuity of experience" (Stein, 1989: 10–11). Second, she argues that the *other subject* is primordial: "this other subject is primordial although I do not experience it as primordial... I feel as it were led by a primordial one not experienced by me but still there, manifesting itself in my non-primordial experience" (Stein, 1989: 11). Unlike memory and expectation, then, there is no 'consciousness of sameness' in empathy. The experience is not 'continuous.' And yet the other person and I, we two, are still together. But we are not together in empathy as self and self but as the one leading and the one who is fundamentally de-centered and 'led around.'

Because in empathy I am 'led' and not primordial, the experience is always new: "the level where I am at the foreign 'I' and explain its experience by living it after the other seems to be much more parallel to the primordial experience itself than to its givenness in inner perception" (Stein, 1989: 34). Thus, empathy also has something in common with immediate perception, in which I answer to the demands of the object. The object of my perception, like the other person, is not something I can be fully prepared for by my memory or my expectation of it. Perception is fundamental openness and the ability to be led to greater interpretative work.

1.2. Moving phenomenology forward toward Community—Stein and Husserl

In framing empathy as other than a 'consciousness of sameness' or 'continuity,' Stein makes at least a break in emphasis from her mentor, Edmund Husserl. And this is rather significant in making the case that one should read her in connection with Nancy, who in a sense has moved beyond phenomenology. Please allow me to turn briefly to Stein's own description of memory to see her break from Husserl and in doing so the newness of her claim.

In this description, Stein pays attention to a term that Husserl had already begun to deploy in his own descriptions of *both* memory and empathy, i.e., the German word *Deckung* and its cognates. In his use of the term, Husserl means to focus the phenomenologist's attention on the way in which all experience (perception, memory, and empathy) is unified by means of 'overlapping' or 'coinciding' layers. Suffice it to say that, although he too saw the gap between self and other in empathy to be larger and more primordial than the gap between one's own present and

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