

Pro-Existence *and* Self-Realization— Edith Stein’s Studies on Womanhood

Katharina Westerhorstmann
University of Freiburg (Germany)

In his Apostolic Letter “Mulieris Dignitatem”, John Paul II, described the vocation of Man and Woman in relation to each other: Man and Woman “not only ... exist ‘side by side’ or ‘together’, but they are also called *to exist mutually ‘one for the other’*”. (MD 7) This “being there for each other” has to be understood as an essential task to be fulfilled by both woman and man: “The woman must ‘help’ the man - and in his turn he must help her - first of all by the very fact of their ‘being human persons’.” (MD 7) For an adequate understanding of the specific identity of being male or female, in “being one for the other”, which is described as not a mere function, but rather as a way of being, “a more penetrating and accurate consideration of the *anthropological foundation for masculinity and femininity* with the intent of clarifying woman's personal identity in relation to man” is needed.¹

This paper will analyze the concept of womanhood as we find it in philosophical lectures and writings of the German Philosopher and Catholic Saint Edith Stein / Teresia Benedicta a Cruce (1891-1942) in the light of her general philosophical line of thought. The anthropological premises that ground her position have to be taken into account if we are to perceive woman’s identity in a deeper way. Edith Stein’s philosophical studies on the nature of woman are marked by two essential features: first, that full personhood, as an indubitable foundation, is the starting-point of her analysis. Second—and this is important for our times in particular—that there is more to be said on the nature of human persons, namely that one is either a man or a woman. However, it is this latter fact that current discussion of the question of women and gender challenges from two sides. It either exclusively emphasizes everything human, regarding gender specifics as a mere accessory, or it totally denies the relevance of gender identity, i.e. basically, of man- or womanhood, from the outset.²

As early as the beginning of the last century, Edith Stein succeeded in developing a position that underscores the personal foundation of being human, while at the same time ascribing importance to being male and female, as essential to and creative of personal identity.

I. Anthropological Premises

I.1 Human Existence and Behavior

In the context of her philosophical studies on the human person, Edith Stein frequently uses the scholastic terms of nature and grace, and potency and act, partly in order to

¹ John Paul II., *Christifideles Laici*. Postsynodal Apostolic Exhortation, No. 50, URL: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_30121988_christifideles-laici_en.html John Paul II. here stresses the relation of man and woman to each other “that is, a diversity yet mutual complementarity, not only as it concerns roles to be held and functions to be performed, but also, and more deeply, as it concerns her make-up and meaning as a person.” CL 50.

² These positions can only be mentioned here, but not be further illustrated. An extensive comparison of Edith Stein’s position with current gender theories can be found in: Katharina Westerhorstmann, *Selbstverwirklichung und Pro-Existenz. Frausein in Arbeit und Beruf bei Edith Stein* (Paderborn, 2004) particularly 85-113; 315-345.

substantiate her statements about other topics. Human existence demands development. Although personal being exists right from the beginning, many elements in potency must be actualized step-by-step to be effective and to be under the individual's control. "Potency is actualized, as soon as (...) [man] meets his 'teacher.'"³

According to Stein, human existence defines the direction of conduct for individual action. An actualization that is adequate for man must be governed by a given norm, if it is not to degenerate into the superficial and arbitrary legitimation of behavior. Accordingly, man will find happiness and fulfillment in a lifestyle that corresponds to his being. "What a man *does* is the actualization of what he *can* do; and what he can do is the expression of *what* he *is*; by the actualization of his capabilities in his acts, his essence of being *develops* in the highest way."⁴ This includes an appropriate way of commitment to others.⁵ A special form of realizing one's life is found in the relationship to God. A holy person even achieves for himself a status of perfect self-actualization in his total surrender to God. It is central for him "to transform divine truth into the reality of life."⁶

In Edith Stein's eyes, an acting person actualizes himself by using his human and personal dispositions and capabilities, thus continuing to develop himself. Since man is not an exclusively pure immanence but is a spiritual being created with openness to transcendence, his behavior does not remain only within the personal and interpersonal or social spheres.

1.2 Education as the Forming of Man

Edith Stein's concept of man implies the idea of education as a development of one's potentialities that does not generate a change in one's deepest nature. Thus, alteration and permanence are both guaranteed at the same time. She proposes a theory of education which anticipates progress in knowledge and in the forming of the will through education.⁷ There are *several* powers in education that sometimes operate simultaneously. While man profits by those dispositions which are given to him by nature, he is nevertheless capable of actualizing these potential dispositions through exercise and instruction.⁸ The negative aspects of his weak nature are to be changed and improved in the process of education.

Whoever deprives people of education, as was the case for centuries with women owing to their sex or with other people because of some common feature (e.g. Jews), is responsible for the degeneration of people's mental and other inner, positive dispositions. For a particular person this might even imply the loss of meaning and perspective. In the history of women, and in times of generally high unemployment, this

³ Edith Stein, "Was ist Philosophie? Ein Gespräch zwischen Edmund Husserl und Thomas von Aquin," *Erkenntnis und Glaube* (in short: *EG*), ESW XV (Freiburg, 1993) 19-48; here: 22. (All text passages originally German are transl. by K.W.)

⁴ Edith Stein, *Endliches und ewiges Sein. Versuch eines Aufstiegs zum Sinn des Seins*, ESGA 11/12 (Freiburg, 2006) 43f.

⁵ "Stein relieves this tension of self-possession and self-surrender by defining love as the freest thing existing. This means that only in the relationship to someone else, in the devotion to him, is personal selfhood and true freedom actualized. Self-actualization occurs solely in self-transcendence." Andreas Tapken, *Der notwendige Andere. Eine interdisziplinäre Studie im Dialog mit Heinz Kohut und Edith Stein* (Mainz, 2003) 279.

⁶ Edith Stein, "Elisabeth von Thüringen. Natur und Übernatur in der Formung einer Heiligengestalt," *Ganzheitliches Leben. Schriften zur religiösen Bildung*, ESW XII (Freiburg, 1989) 126-138; here: 132.

⁷ Cf. *EG*, 52.

⁸ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, q.117, a.1.

loss has frequently provoked unfulfilled and depressed moods, since man is not enabled to follow his inner vocation or is even hindered in doing so.⁹

According to Edith Stein, education is holistic in that it demands the efforts of the human being and his whole personality. He must internalize what he has learned so that new material can influence his thoughts, decisions and behavior. Hence, a learner must be willing to assume new material.¹⁰ Religious education is the decisive goal of man's lifelong education for Edith Stein,¹¹ for it renders possible an approach to God for children and other learners.

1.3 Self-Actualization as the Actualization of Being

The notion of "self-actualization" remains ambivalent—depending on the different understandings of it—although the term is largely established at present. And even though it does not derive from Stein's original language, it can be used to show how Stein's writings can contribute to the interpretation and differentiation of a goal of current political programs, and why it is a socially legitimate term in ongoing discussions. In the final determination of human existence, Edith Stein differentiates between "natural" and "supernatural" goals.¹² Man achieves his supernatural goal in the "beatific vision" of God (*visio beatifica*), which can be expected no sooner than after his earthly life. With respect to his natural goal, Edith Stein provides man with the idea of how he was originally conceived and, consequently, ought to be. As is suitable to man's fallen nature, which is "damaged" and through which man is restricted in his perception and action, he can naturally reach the goal of a true, virtuous and educated being through instruction and models. However, in order to attain his supernatural goal, man is in need of supernatural means.

In Edith Stein's opinion, the education of the soul and its capabilities is as much a part of the pedagogic responsibility of schools and educational establishments as is purely intellectual education. Only if man develops all dimensions of his personal being will he be able to develop himself in freedom to become what he truly is and ought to be.

In respect to adolescent women, for example, Edith Stein formulates a goal of education that considers the manifold reality of a human, individual and gender-specific life: "Real personhood and womanhood" can only be realized if a human being finds *his* or *her* way to acquire the "necessary belief in his own existence and the courage of his own existence; (...) the belief in an individual vocation to particular personal behavior, listening to this vocation, and at the same time being prepared to follow it."¹³

Thus, on the one hand, man himself is responsible for his actualization on all levels of his being and in accordance with this being. On the other hand, he, at the same time, requires the supporting assistance of other people, especially in those periods of

⁹ Cf. Letter "Edith Stein to Pope Pius XI (April 12, 1933)," Elisabeth Lammers, *Als die Zukunft noch offen war. Edith Stein—das entscheidende Jahr in Münster* (Münster, 2003) 111.

¹⁰ "In order to grow, [the soul] must take something in. And we have seen that only those things which are taken in interiorly pass into the soul's own being, so that the process can be regarded as growth and education; those things that are taken in only by the senses and by reason remain external property." *F*, 37.

¹¹ Cf. Sabine Düren, *Die Frau im Spannungsfeld von Emanzipation und Glaube. Eine Untersuchung zu theologisch-anthropologischen Aussagen über das Wesen der Frau in der deutschsprachigen Literatur der ersten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts unter besonderer Berücksichtigung von Edith Stein, Sigrid Undset, Gertrud von le Fort und Ilse von Stach* (Regensburg, 1998) 229.

¹² Edith Stein, *Bildung und Entfaltung der Individualität. Beiträge zum christlichen Erziehungsauftrag* (in short: *BEI*), ESGA 16 (Freiburg, 2001) 77.

¹³ *F*, 180.

life that are characterized by dependence and neediness. However, these supporting people can never exempt him from the fact that he has to take charge of himself. For Edith Stein, the goal of Christian life is nothing less than perfection according to Christ's doctrine: "So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect." (*Matthew* 5:48) Here, man can find his fulfillment.¹⁴ Every Christian life which defines itself from the perspective of revelation receives its determination from it. By living rightly, thus becoming right and just in his existence as an individual, man attains a high standard in what constitutes his life. The fullness to which man is truly called can only be acquired by the assistance of divine grace.

II. The Nature and Vocation of Women in Edith Stein's Writings

Whenever Edith Stein tries to examine the nature of women she bears in mind the life stories of particular women of her time. In her time, women had only restricted possibilities for developing themselves, and frequently had to define themselves totally through their husbands' occupational efforts.¹⁵ Political appeals for the equality of women seemed to her to be less helpful than fundamental research, for which she saw herself destined.

Therefore, Edith Stein attempts to perceive the essential being of women phenomenologically by means of the "principle question of all questions about women"¹⁶: Is there a "species of women" which remains unchanged within altered historical and social circumstances, or is being female one of those types that can be modified, as it adapts to given circumstances?¹⁷ She considers the term "peculiarity" (*Eigenart*) appropriate for expressing the tension between genus and gender features on an ontological level.

Furthermore, Edith Stein meditates on whether to understand gender differentiation as an expression of the respective influential part of the bipolar rhythm of being that contains both elements and is specified through a "supplement" as man or woman. This conception, which is, according to Edith Stein, wrongly ascribed to Thomas Aquinas, appears to her to be less accurate for the description of being woman than the term "substantial form."¹⁸ In order to attain a satisfying answer to the question, a philosophical analysis "of the relationship between genus, species, type, individual, i.e., of the basic problems of formal ontology" is required.¹⁹

II.1 *Anima-Forma-Corporis*

Edith Stein often writes about "*the woman*," yet she is conscious of the fact that the particularly female mode, the specific "quality" of this gender, is truly a common basic structure of the soul, namely according to the Scholastic *anima-forma-corporis*-principle. In Stein's eyes, "the nature of women could" definitely "allow variation without

¹⁴ With regard to the connection of "being good" and "happiness" cf. Martin Rhonheimer, *Die Perspektive der Moral. Philosophische Grundlagen der Tugendethik* (Berlin, 2001) 15; 18; 63; 91-96.

¹⁵ Cf. Edith Stein, *Aus dem Leben einer jüdischen Familie und weitere autobiographische Beiträge*, ESGA 1 (Freiburg, 2002) 160.

¹⁶ *F*, 152.

¹⁷ "It must be examined whether there is (...) a unitary and unchangeable core in these types that can be called the species 'woman.'" *Ibid*, 141.

¹⁸ Cf. *Ibid*, 162f. On "substance" in Edith Stein cf. *WIM*, 13. Cf. also the text to which Edith Stein refers in this context: S. Thoma Angelica vom armen Kinde Jesu Walter, *Seinsrhythmik. Studie zur Begründung einer Metaphysik der Geschlechter* (Freiburg, 1932) 166.

¹⁹ *F*, 152.

neglecting the common nature of all women.”²⁰ The manifoldness of actual female life at her time remained the focus of her attention. In accordance with phenomenological methodology, she firstly turns to the body as the expression of the human soul and its reality. As its inner form, the soul provides the body with its specific gestalt. Hence, the body receives its specific form from the soul. A person develops into something singular and unique within this form, within the hereditary dispositions as well as under the influence of the environment—depending on the respective education, capabilities and milieu.²¹ Edith Stein emphasizes in many places that the unique nature of woman in its purest form cannot ultimately be specified on an empirical basis, because every woman modifies and obscures it through her weaknesses, defects and individual peculiarities. As a consequence, the specificity of her individuality repeatedly prompts Edith Stein to consider whether it is generally appropriate to inquire about the nature of *the* woman, and what is more, about whether *the woman* actually exists.

In Stein’s analysis of this question, and in the determination of the nature of women in general, it is striking that terms, such as “inner form,” “nature,” “species” and “type,” are sometimes used univocally.²² However, it is certain that Stein assumes that shared humanity is the decisive factor in the description of human beings. Hence, a moral way of living can be deduced from human nature which is adequate to personhood and less deterministic for the individual, thus supporting his free self-actualization.

A gender-specific classification is always subordinated to personhood. Consequently, Edith Stein pointedly emphasizes in a discussion of what can be considered female: “Being a Person is the foundation, being a woman is secondary.”²³ Irrespective of individual peculiarities, she nevertheless claims a common nature of women that physically manifests itself in their capability to have children, i.e., their “female disposition” which “is of a forming character.”²⁴ She regards the whole physical and psychical being of women as influenced by this fact.

II.2 Womanhood in Nature and “Fallen Nature”

Stein considers the female desire for human wholeness, for the development of (true) personhood in oneself and others, to be a peculiarity of women. This female peculiarity of being “focused (...) on wholeness”²⁵ enables women to take part in the lives and work of others in an intense way, thus providing a foundation for marriage.²⁶ They are interested in personal and individual matters, whereas abstraction is not part of their natural field of interest. However, it is also possible to arouse their enthusiasm for abstract matters, if the latter is connected with persons and if there is a concrete reference to them.

A woman is capable of subordinating her own interests to those of other (beloved) people and of finding fulfillment in doing so. In relation to a man (e.g. her husband), this ability is revealed, for example, in a concern for his “affairs,” his job.²⁹ For a man, a woman is, therefore, “a mirror (...), in which he could perceive his own

²⁰ Ibid, 160.

²¹ Cf. Edith Stein, *Aufsatzthemen*, ESAK, Sign.: B I 39a 45.

²² Cf. Sophie Binggeli, *La femme chez Edith Stein. Une approche philosophique, théologique et littéraire* (Lyon, 2000) 365.

²³ *F*, 246.

²⁴ Ibid. Cf. also ibid, 160.

²⁵ Ibid, 19.

²⁶ Cf. ibid.

²⁹ Cf. ibid, 19.

nature.”³⁰ In this essential capability of women to sensitively empathize with others, Edith Stein sees a high vital value, which is usually not yet fully developed. The reason for this lies in original sin, which is an obvious defect of human nature, concealing the original condition. When “fallen nature” becomes part of the order of redemption, female being again appears as curing and helping.³¹

Women share three natural dispositions with men: perception, the enjoyment of perceived things and creativity. From among these attitudes towards the world, she favors the second one, for it enables her to attain to a higher degree of “reverential pleasure in creation”³² through a specific and primarily rational cognition of things. She reflects things firstly in her spirit, which Edith Stein defines as the “center of a female soul.”³³

Women possess a highly religious sensitivity, facilitating their access to transcendence and making them appear particularly qualified for the part of educator in religious matters.³⁴ In society she should especially feel committed to “female culture,” which reveals the metaphysical foundation of life.³⁵ This notion can be frequently found in literature. The poet Gertrud von Le Fort (1876-1971), for example, writes in her book *The Eternal Woman*, which comprehensively treats the symbolic perspective of women, that the “actual female element” is “surrender.” This is exemplarily and perfectly displayed in the Lord’s mother.³⁶ Another German poet, Wilhelm Busch, once replied on a question asked by Luise Fastenrath: “*I should define ‘woman’? The main lure for this world, at best also for the other.*”³⁷

Thus a woman’s first and foremost concern, and role in life, is human companionship as a whole. Edith Stein describes the vocation of women as “being guardians of morality.”³⁸ She differentiates between an ability, and a calling that is the result of natural talents. Women *can* perform this task, since they have a sensitive feeling for what is good and beautiful. Their aptitude means that they are obliged to take responsibility for protecting “morality.”³⁹

³⁰ Ibid, 83. “Through her view of him and through communication, she grants him access to his own personality as a man, opens him to his vocation, and supports him in his behavior. However, this is only possible, if the woman acknowledges that she is different from men, yet being equal to them, being the ‘counterpart’ of a man, but not in borrowed masculinity, but in her own, irreplaceable femininity.” Jo Croissant, *Die priesterliche Frau oder das Priestertum des Herzens* (Hauteville, 1993) 7.

³¹ “Only through redemption does female nature [gain] its purity and healing power.” *BEI*, 167. Cf. Hanna-Barbara Gerl-Falkovitz, “Frieden durch Frauen? Gedanken zu einem schwierigen Feld,” *Die Frau: Erzieherin zum Frieden. Welttag des Friedens 1995, 1. Januar 1995*, ed. Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz (Bonn, 1994) 16.

³² *F*, 69.

³³ Ibid, 92. “The spirit manifests itself in emotions (such as pleasure and grief), moods (such as cheerfulness and gloominess), in statements (enthusiasm, disgust), dispositions (love, hatred). They represent man’s confrontation with the world (and oneself).” Ibid. Cf. also Gerl-Falkovitz, *Nach dem Jahrhundert der Wölfe. Werte im Aufbruch* (Zürich, 1992) 132.

³⁴ Cf., for example, *F*, 25f and 195.

³⁵ Friedrich Schiller wrote the following poem about the “dignity of women”: “Worship women! They braid and weave heavenly roses into earthly live.” Friedrich Schiller, “Würde der Frauen,” *Schiller Werke*, vol. II, ed. P. Stapf (Wiesbaden) 138-140; here: 138.

³⁶ Cf. Gertrud von Le Fort, *Die ewige Frau. Die Frau in der Zeit. Die zeitlose Frau* (München, 1938) particularly 11-29.

³⁷ Wilhelm Busch, *Was beliebt ist auch erlaubt* (Gütersloh, 1998) 1032. In the “presence [of a woman], one can never remain (...) indifferent; she causes either confusion or clarity. Her presence is sufficient for men to behave differently, depending on whether she inspires the best or worst in them.” Croissant, *Die priesterliche Frau*, 185.

³⁸ Stein, *Aufsatzthemen*, ESAK, Sign.: B I 39a 15.

³⁹ Cf. *BEI*, 167.

Edith Stein frequently refers to the dark side of female existence in her writings on womanhood. Yet, her intention is not to degrade women through her depiction of female weaknesses and defects. Rather, she is trying to present a realistic view of humankind in general and of women in particular and that requires her to analyze the features specific to the female sex. Influenced by Scholastic modes of thinking, Stein strives for a kind of realism that does justice to nature, fallen nature and redemption. Accordingly, the peculiarity which she actually encounters in people appears to her not to be the purity of female existence, but the “raw material” from which the feminine essence in its most beautiful and valuable form must be extracted.⁴¹

In the role of wife or bride, a woman is able to subordinate her own, personal interests in order to support and share in her husband’s affairs.⁴² The danger of this talent lies in an excess of interest, and in the corresponding need to talk, which may cause a man, who is more focused on “his own business,” to feel hemmed in or cornered.⁴³

The obverse of the ability to encounter people and all things at an inner level and to place oneself in relation to everything can be found in a form of “avarice.” This may manifest itself in an appropriation of things or even people, and degeneration into an insipid and inactive life driven by appetite. If a woman leads a dissipated life she will probably not be able to assume her motherly duties at the same time.⁴⁴ According to Edith Stein, such a mother will guard her children in an inappropriate manner, thus wrongly tying them to herself and seriously impeding their positive free development. Instead of serving her husband and children in love, in order to support their development, she robs them of their natural happiness and will not be happy herself, either.⁴⁵ If a woman ties a child, her husband or other people to herself to such an extent that she wants to possess them, her vocation is turned upside down. Therefore, Stein suggests that women should lead an intense religious life in order to rediscover and highlight the female nature, which occurs in its purest form only in the “Immaculata.”⁴⁶

Where the employment of women is concerned, Edith Stein was far ahead of her times, especially in a Catholic environment. She assumed that almost all women should learn and practice a profession, though it might be voluntarily or out of necessity, and irrespective of their marital status.⁴⁷ Owing to “strong individual differences” among women, she simultaneously draws attention to the impossibility of demanding a “division of professions” into male and female professions. “Every ‘male’ profession can surely be carried out properly by certain women, just as every ‘female’ profession can also be carried out by certain men.”⁴⁸ According to Stein’s prognosis, the “average”

⁴¹ Cf. *F*, 5.

⁴² In her analysis of the biblical stories of creation, Edith Stein translates the Hebrew expression (*ezer*) in *Genesis* 2:18 as: a “help as if opposite to him.” *F*, 58. In the Hebrew version of the Bible, this term is repeatedly used as a divine attribute of Jahwe, e.g.: “I raise my eyes toward the mountains. From where will my help [*ezer*] come?” *Psalms* 121:1. Cf. Helen Schlügel-Straumann, “Genesis 1-11,” *Kompendium Feministische Bibelauslegung*, ed. Luise Schottroff et al. (Gütersloh, 1998) 1-11; here: 4. Cf. also Simone Twents, *Frau sein ist mehr. Die Würde der Frau nach Johannes Paul II* (Buttenwiesen, 2002) 92.

⁴³ On the problem of the difference in verbalization between men and women cf. Christa Meves, *Manipulierte Maßlosigkeit, psychische Gefahren im technisierten Leben; Die Schwierigkeit im Wohlstand glücklich zu sein, “Befreiung zum Sex”—30 Jahre danach, Gleichheitsideologie am Ende* (Stein am Rhein, 1997) particularly 162.

⁴⁴ Cf. *F*, 70.

⁴⁵ Cf. *ibid.*

⁴⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, 20 and *BEI*, 167.

⁴⁷ “Every woman possesses individual dispositions and gifts, and thus the precondition for a particular profession, irrespective of her female gender.” *F*, 34.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 75.

individual among male and female workers will naturally tend to practice those professions that are considered gender-typical.⁴⁹

II.3 Pro-Existence as a significant ability of Female Being

In contrast to the mainstream of contemporary philosophy, Edith Stein understands human beings as God's creatures, and hence as predetermined in a certain way in their very being on the basis of their creation. According to this understanding, a created being has potentials that can be and should be realized. It follows that man not only receives his life and himself from God, he is also responsible for himself. In Stein's eyes, this primarily involves the search for one's own, individual vocation, as well as the development of one's own aptitudes and potential capabilities.⁵⁰

Thus women are responsible for both her own existence and the development of others, that they may become what they are to be. Although she can experience a strong confirmation by following her own vocation, she is in particular able to help those who need her support thanks to her sympathetic and empathetic nature. Taking *Genesis 2:18*, Edith Stein describes the ultimate original duty of women, namely contributing their female spirit wherever private, professional or other reasons may reveal a need. This spirit is able to truly perceive others and to sense individual needs. Actually, this requirement and vocation is relevant for all people. Everybody is responsible for his neighbor, the one "who needs us most, irrespective of whether he is a relative or not, whether we 'like' him or not, whether he is 'morally worthy' of our help or not,"⁵¹ so that "man be not alone."⁵²

This inner attitude and willingness can be accurately interpreted as *pro-existence*. In this context, the term does not have the same meaning as in a Christological context. There it denotes the soteriological effectiveness of God's will through the surrender, the death and resurrection, of Christ his Son.⁵³ In our context it means an existence that "stands in for someone's existence,"⁵⁴ a *being there for* the other, *with* the other, and *in the very place of* the other. This goes far beyond mere co-existence or even solidarity, for it means being there for others with one's whole being.

The term "pro-existence" accurately names what Stein calls essentially *female* action as an expression of her inner being, from a perspective that sees life primarily as being there for others and not solely for oneself. Although this attitude appears to be a universal demand directed at all people, it is a disposition (*habitus*) that accords especially with the female nature, according to Edith Stein.

The term itself does not occur in Stein's writing. Yet, the idea of being there for others, as implicit in all human action, can be found in her doctrine. She defines "devotion," "assistance," "serving others," or personal "help" and "companionship" as complex expressions for the spiritual dimension of the natural female disposition. This

⁴⁹ Cf. *ibid.*

⁵⁰ Cf. *AMP*, 140ff.

⁵¹ Edith Stein, *Das Weihnachtsgeheimnis. Menschwerdung und Menschheit* (1931), in: *Geistliche Texte I*, ESGA 19 (Freiburg, 2009) 8.

⁵² *F*, 50.

⁵³ For a foundational analysis of this matter cf. Heinz Schürmann, "'Pro-Existenz' als christologischer Grundbegriff," *Jesus—Gestalt und Geheimnis. Gesammelte Beiträge*, ed. Klaus Scholtissek (Paderborn, 1994) 286-315. The term was taken up and further developed by Hans Urs von Balthasar, Karl Lehmann and other theologians.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 287.

dimension manifests itself in the physical aspect of being able to become a mother.⁵⁵ Moreover, being there for someone also connotes loving attention. According to Stein, the special ability of women to love emanates from a specific feature of female nature.

Hence, pro-existence is a term that, although not used by Stein, essentially accords with her philosophical concept of woman. The term invokes not the perspective of action, but the perspective of being. Moreover, the term “pro-existence” directly recalls its origin in Christ’s human life of atonement, climaxing in his expiating death. The essential trait that is important in this context is *being there for others*, as this emanates from an *existence for God* and a life in accordance with His divine will.⁵⁶ It thus includes being in solidarity with human beings, and a self-conception of the human person as one who does not have the reason for his existence in himself (ex-istence),⁵⁷ but who rather receives existence from someone else and for someone else.

Edith Stein finds the root of the special ability of women to love and support others, in Christ’s example and loving surrender. “Hence, pro-existence means a very radical (‘rooted’), divesting, extreme behavior that first occurred in such a radical form in Jesus’ behavior.”⁵⁸ The close connection between being and acting, which is indicated by this term, justifies making a link between existence and work through the term “pro-existence.”⁵⁹

Since both aspects of human life are and should be closely connected in Stein’s teaching, the term “pro-existence” can accurately refer to female existence as well as to the conscious actions of women. Thus conscious actions function as an expression and indication of the kind of pro-existence that implies a positive altruism, seeing other people in their neediness and loveliness, though without ultimately losing oneself.

Furthermore, Edith Stein’s concept of women is captured in the field of tension between immanence and transcendence, individuality and sociality, and between self-surrender and self-development. It can never be viewed solely from a single perspective. Stein presents the common aspects of a vocation to (and of) personhood, womanhood and individual existence as being part of human nature. At the same time, she underscores that social demands on individuals can differ, depending on the cultural or historical standards of a particular context. Women of her time were faced with only a few, fixed patterns for their lives from which they might at best be able to choose. Nowadays, autonomy, freedom to shape one’s life and to develop one’s potential, are often regarded as the highest goods of human existence. The demands made on us have become more complex and sometimes even too much for us to handle. Successful relationships in any form are still among the determining goals of life, although it now appears that they cannot be reached by everybody. Relations within families, for example, demand that every single person engage and surrender himself: a woman to her husband and children, a man to his wife and children. The network of relationships between relatives, in which the individual is integrated, is an expression of man’s

⁵⁵ “That which is called a disposition for motherhood, when it comes to physicality, is called—in its psychical reverse—empathy with weaker beings or with attractive superordinate ones, adaptation, help for the development of others, an aptitude for companionship: in short: spirit, as Edith Stein preferred to call it.” Gerl-Falkovitz, *Nach dem Jahrhundert der Wölfe*, 132.

⁵⁶ “Jesus’ ‘pro-existence’ can be experienced as a claim made on us — both in everyday life as well as in spiritual life. Thus, we can live in a ‘pro-existent’ way, as Jesus did.” Cordula Langer, *Pro-Existenz Jesu. Das Jesus-Bild Heinz Schürmanns: Glaubenszeugnis der exegetischen Reflexion und Ausdruck seiner Jesus-Beziehung* (Münster, 2003) 346.

⁵⁷ Cf. Schürmann, *‘Pro-Existenz’ als christologischer Grundbegriff*, 288.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 289.

⁵⁹ Cf. Westerhorstmann, *Selbstverwirklichung und Pro-Existenz*, 285f.

natural, essential sociality. Hence, he must take a certain amount of responsibility not only for himself but also for his fellows.

Edith Stein's concept of women can be understood more easily against the background of these ideas; it is a concept that she develops from two foundations, on the one hand, personhood and individuality, and, on the other hand, feminine being and peculiarity. In our postmodern society where change occurs with breathless speed people find it hard to discern what is of timeless value and truth. However, Edith Stein's metaphysical concept of woman presupposes a high standard and might once more be relevant for today, because it is directed to women in general, and not exclusively to rich or poor, underprivileged or privileged women. At the same time, a woman's female identity is bound by certain parameters some of which are of a biological nature and some of which emanate from the female talents that emanate from that same nature. Stein subsumes them under the terms "motherhood" and "companionship." She integrates these basic "professions" of women into her metaphysical examinations, explaining their natural and supernatural implications.

The duty to actualize one's own being in such a way that individual and human dispositions are taken into account is valid for both men and women. According to Stein, the common structure of female nature cannot be detached from the demands of morality and responsibility. The "rules" that Stein elaborates for the way of being female refer always to the human person as such, whose personal development should be the centre of attention.

Stein would have accepted a standardization of female behavior only with regard to a lifestyle that is fitting to the individual. What is more, she is aware of the possibility for women to humanize family, social and professional interactions by means of female traits, freeing them from persistent one-sidedness.

The question about the equality or equalization of the sexes in all fields of human life remains open in this context. Although called for in the name of gender justice in recent years, there is little mention of an innate principle that gives *meaning* to the concept of justice. On the one hand, society pleads for justice; on the other hand, this claim is restricted to the case of women. As far as the question of motherhood and its consequences are concerned, public debate seldom pays attention to the needs of the child, although justice would demand that this be done.

III. Being Female as Pro-Existence *and* Self-Realization

In her own time, Edith Stein and her lectures on women were caught in the tension between social expectations, natural givens and individual lifestyle choices. In the continuation of the women's movement, women are achieving a substantial degree of autonomy and freedom to choose their own way of life. In the context of women's lives, this often produces a "*development from 'being there for others' to a life according to one's own choice.*"⁶⁰ 20th Century emancipation has thus established the possibility for women to have their own existence and a freely chosen lifestyle, two things that had been almost impossible for them previously because of gender roles. The one-sided self-definition of women through their families was forced to give way to a changed self-conception, to new female individuality.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, "*Vom 'Dasein für andere' zum Anspruch auf ein Stück 'eigenes Leben'.* Individualisierungsprozesse im weiblichen Lebenszusammenhang," *Soziale Welt* 34 (1983): 308.

⁶¹ Cf. *ibid*, 308f.

The possibility of free decision making between different professions and choices is one of the indisputably positive achievements of this ongoing process. Yet, progress in this field has sometimes been ambivalent: securities that were part of the female role, because of women's involvement in their family, were replaced more and more by insecurities in relation to the necessary redefinition. The reason for this can be found in the fact that the professional lives of women did not yet have the same social identity and acceptance as in the case of men. "The models for women's lives have been lost—they are more open and less protected than they used to be,"⁶² and the drastic change in women's lives simultaneously includes the "hope for but also the compulsion to experience a 'private life' of one's own".⁶³

In Edith Stein's eyes, womanhood meant the dynamics between the two poles that Beck-Gernsheim describes as leaving one thing and being entitled to another.⁶⁴ On the one hand, the nature of women is characterized by a special capability of devotion, of "being there for others," of loving assistance. On the other hand, women must nevertheless develop themselves and their skills, and apply them at work and in their families. In this way, they play a direct and decisive role in the organization of society.

Several essential features of the female reality of life manifest themselves in an internal, polarized attitude, namely in the field of tension between pro-existence and self-actualization, i.e., between "being there for others" and a simultaneously desired development of one's personal potential and resources.⁶⁵

Although some things that are important for the questions being asked today remain unmentioned in her writings, Edith Stein's philosophical-theological analyses of womanhood and the vocation of women impress us with the sharpness of the terminology and their phenomenologically exact observations. Her statements on the nature of woman, predominantly as mother, challenge the reader to appreciate motherhood and its numerous facets and implications, to emphasize once again its importance as a value for our times, and, if necessary, to revive it. Through her eyes, the correctly understood self-actualization of women in their families or professions receives the necessary reference back to sociality and community, ethics and responsibility, in order to avoid an egoistic and one-sided interpretation. One's own actualization becomes a self-development for which one takes responsibility. Work receives a deeper meaning; the natural part of female identity need not be made absolute nor must it be negated. As a consequence, women are neither caught in a self-denying devotion to others, nor trapped in inflexibility through desperate attempts to realize egoistic concepts of life. Stein does not sacrifice the tension between the two poles for a uniform ideal, but rather maintains it in order to enable fulfilled womanhood.

Dr. theol. Katharina Westerhorstmann
University of Freiburg (GERMANY)
Email: k.westerhorstmann@gmx.de

A former version of the paper was published in German as:

Westerhorstmann, K.: Pro-Existenz als Stärke weiblichen Seins – Die Studien Edith Steins zum Frausein. In: Beckmann-Zöllner, B.; Gerl-Falkovitz, H.-B. (Eds.): Die *unbekannte* Edith Stein: Phänomenologie und Sozialphilosophie, Frankfurt a. M. 2006, 201-217.

⁶² Ibid, 309.

⁶³ Ibid, 310.

⁶⁴ This displays a basic element of Stein's conception of personhood. Cf. Tapken, *Der notwendige Andere*, 279.

⁶⁵ Gerl-Falkovitz finds this tension in every human being: "Spiritualness is in its basic structure both autonomy and surrender. The one who searches for himself, whether man or woman, is well advised to acknowledge that both poles, which appear to be contradictory to one another, are related to one another, and to live accordingly, or else surrender turns into a negative abandonment and freedom into empty autonomy." Gerl-Falkovitz, *Nach dem Jahrhundert der Wölfe*, 149.