

## Searching for Deep Truth



Edith cultivated an avid desire for learning which, from the beginning of her student days through to the end of her life, led her to search out the many facets of truth in all its complexity. Her own acute intelligence was an ever-present guide in her quest. She shared with her brother-in-law, Hans Biberstein, that characteristic which she termed “the questing nature of a researcher.”

In all she attended three universities — Breslau, Göttingen, and Freiburg — moving from one major field of learning (psychology) to another (philosophy) to better satisfy her thirst for meaning. Her thesis, “On the Problem of Empathy,” placed her among the leading proponents of phenomenology.

The choice of philosophy as her specialization reflected her desire for a tool of analysis capable of forging answers to the fundamental questions that intrigued her: What is the intimate nature of the things of this world and beyond it? What is the structure of the human person? How do persons establish and maintain communication with each other, with their communities, and other human groupings? What are their mutual roles in society?

Her choice of Edmund Husserl as a guide in her approach to these questions was significant. With phenomenology he had set going a new effort to break out of the subjectivist categories of idealism which dominated late nineteenth-century philosophy. Along with Husserl Edith sought after a truth that in later

terms would be called “holistic” for its ability to embrace more than abstract formulae and to include consideration of values, emotions, and ultimate concerns such as peace and solidarity in the struggle for harmony and progress.

### “EMPATHY AS THE UNDERSTANDING OF SPIRITUAL PERSONS”

The following passage is excerpted from her doctoral dissertation, “On the Problem of Empathy.” While it was written by a person of no religious affiliation, the text shows how the author nevertheless let herself be led by phenomenology’s openness to consider the behavior of believers (*homo religiosus*) as a phenomenon worthy of consideration.

I consider every subject whom I empathically comprehend as experiencing a value as a person whose experiences interlock themselves into an intelligible, meaningful whole. How much of this one’s experiential structure I can bring to my fulfilling intuition depends on my own structure. In principle, all foreign experience permitting itself to be derived from my own personal structure can be fulfilled, even if this structure has not yet actually unfolded. I can experience values empathically and discover correlative levels of my person, even though my primordial experience has not yet presented an opportunity for their exposure. He who has never looked a danger in the face himself can still experience himself as brave or cowardly in the empathic representation of another’s situation.

By contrast, I cannot fulfill what conflicts with my own experiential structure. But I can still have it given in the manner of empty presentation. I can be skeptical myself and still understand that another sacrifices all his earthly goods to his faith. I see him behave in this way and empathize a value experiencing as the motive for his conduct. The correlate of this is not accessible to

me, causing me to ascribe to him a personal level I do not myself possess. In this way I empathically gain the type of *homo religiosus* by nature foreign to me, and I understand it even though what newly confronts me here will always remain unfulfilled. Again, suppose others regulate their lives entirely by the acquisition of material goods, allowing everything else to take second place, which I consider unimportant. Then I see that higher ranges of value that I glimpse are closed to them; and I also understand these people, even though they are of a different type.

Now we see what justification Dilthey has for saying, "The interpretive faculty operating in the cultural sciences is the whole person." Only he who experiences himself as a person, as a meaningful whole, can understand other persons. And we also see why Ranke would have liked to "erase" his self in order to see things "as they were." The "self" is the individual experiential structure. The great master of those who know recognizes in it the source of deception from which danger threatens us. If we take the self as the standard, we lock ourselves into the prison of our individuality. Others become riddles for us, or still worse, we remodel them into our image and so falsify historical truth.

—PE, 115–16

## CONFRONTING BELIEFS

*In the pursuit of truth one ought to adopt an active, critical stance. Edith here explains how it is important to confront beliefs, if only to avoid untruth. She stresses the characteristic working concept of phenomenology — to put aside assumptions — as a means of grasping a fuller knowledge of things and situations.*

On the other hand, there exists a possibility that is not available with mere information. I can "take a stance" toward the attitude, in a new sense. I can accept it, plant my feet upon

it, and declare my allegiance to it; or, I can comport myself negatively against it. Suppose I accept it — that means that if it emerges in me I give myself over to it, joyously, without reluctance. Suppose I deny it — that doesn't mean I eliminate it. That's not under my control. "Canceling out" a belief would require new motives, through which the motives of the original belief are invalidated and from which the cancellation is established instead "all by itself." But I need not acknowledge this belief. I can comport myself just as though it were not present; I can make it inoperative. (It is this, the comporting, that Husserl designated as *epoché*. The acts rendered inoperative are "neutralized.") For example, suppose I'm expecting a message that will oblige me to make a trip. Then I hear from an unreliable source that the event in question has taken place, and belief in it immediately imposes itself. But I "want" not to believe as long as I have no confirmed report. I comport myself just as I would if the belief were not present: I make no preparations, I go about my usual daily tasks, and so forth — nevertheless, the stance of belief is undeniably there.

As the following example shows, not only are certain actions abstained from (the "free" acts themselves), but rather the *epoché* can render the present attitude inoperative in actuality, so that even the — unfree — attitudes that it would have to evoke are discontinued. Suppose a mother hears from her son's buddies that he has died in the war. She's convinced that he's dead, but she "wants" not to believe it as long as she doesn't have the official report. For as long as she withholds her assent to the belief, the sorrow that would immediately develop from uninhibited belief doesn't awaken in her either. (This forestalling of sorrow by a neutralization of the motivating belief is, of course, basically essentially different from the struggle against sorrow when it imposes itself.) Or, suppose a convinced atheist is drawn into a religious experience of God's existence. He can't escape from the belief; but he doesn't plant his feet upon it, he doesn't allow it to become operative in himself,

and he staunchly sticks with his “scientific worldview,” which would be trashed by the unmodified belief. Or finally: Suppose somebody inspires my affection, and I can’t prevent it. But I won’t own up to it inwardly, and I withhold myself from it. That’s completely different from the struggle against a tendency that you don’t want to yield to. The struggle makes no sense at all as long as the inner consent isn’t granted. If the tendency is made inoperative in this manner, then not only do I refrain from the actions that it would have to motivate, but involuntary expressions of a genuine inclination also cease of their own accord and don’t even show up.

This adoption (or, denial) of an attitude, to which the attitude owes its character of being fully alive and operative (or, neutral), requires no independently executed act in order to exist; the attitude can emerge equipped with the one or the other from the start. But they could also be executed as acts in their own right at another time. However “free” I feel myself to be in this execution, it goes to show that I don’t have the consciousness until right then to arouse the belief properly into life, but rather, as it were, I impart existence to the state of affairs that I believe in. In that I bestow unreserved belief on the report of a death, to me it’s as though the event didn’t happen until I made it happen irrevocably by my assent. As long as I refuse the assent, to me it’s as though I still held fate at bay.

The counterpart to denial of a present attitude is adoption of one that’s not present. I can plant my feet on a belief that in truth I do not possess and that is not alive within me. For example, I presume that I’m assessing the circumstances of my life sufficiently in order to be able to “make plans.” Perhaps I resolve to take a trip next year, to move to another city, to finish up some work that I’ve begun, and so forth, and I arrange my present life entirely in regard to these future plans. However, deep down I am thoroughly convinced that some event is going to intervene that will trash all my plans. I deny my consent to this real live belief, and I don’t let it become operative in

me. The denial of an attitude is in every case equivalent to the adoption of a stance opposed to it; and the latter, although it is not a genuine living stance, now becomes determinative for my behavior subsequently.

Adoption and denial of attitudes have their motives and grounds, just as attitudes do. Motive and ground can coincide (as in the earlier cases). But they can also diverge. Suppose I refuse belief to a report because the messenger is untrustworthy. The untrustworthiness, and accordingly my knowledge of it, motivates and grounds my *epoché*, as it were. Or, I don’t believe the report because it’s unpleasant. The unpleasantness is my motive here, and the ground can be the same as before. However, it’s also possible that my comportment [toward some attitude] is entirely without any objective ground. Where the two diverge or there’s no ground at all, the attitude is an unreasonable one, and accordingly my comportment toward it, though free, is unintelligible.

It should be noted that in the field of information and attitude, a motive is never something irrelevant to rational grounding, something that lies beyond reason and unreason. In this sense, any motive has grounding power for a rational approach by the subject. Yet it can be that the subject makes a mistake in its approach; then it does something other than what is called for by the dominant motive. That which it does has its sufficient ground in a state of affairs that is not objective to the subject. In our example, the untrustworthiness is a rational motive of the *epoché*. The prejudice against it, which is called for by the *unacceptability* of the report, would be perhaps a defensive measure against what is reported. The *epoché* interpolates itself here as a surrogate for a functional defense. Such a “mistake” in approach, a sundering of motive and ground, takes place mainly when the motivation is not explicitly executed, and it can be unmasked by explication. Thus, implication is a source of deception and error; explication is the means to secure the supremacy of reason. Nevertheless, “irrational” mo-

tivations are possible only in the realm of reason. They are to be considered reason's fumbles.  
—PPH, 49–52

## EMPATHY BRINGS COMFORT TO A FRIEND

*In relating an incident during World War I Edith shows how well she used empathy as a key to the discovery of the truth of situations, no matter how intense.*

...It was wonderful to climb the mountain in the evening, to wander about in the ancient castle, to think of Ekkehart [not Meister Eckhart] and of Schiller's youth, here where many a captive once languished in the fortress.

In the morning we were off to the lake. To the sound of church bells, an old woman ferried us in a rowboat from Radofzell to the island of Reichenau. The monastery made little impression on me on that occasion. Vineyards under a deep blue sky, the shimmering sunlight, and the lake's green waves lapping the shores — those are my most vivid recollections of that day.

But we came away with more than memories of happy outings, for impressions of a more serious nature were made, also [in Freiburg]. The first or second night after Erika's arrival there, we were awakened by an air raid. I was accustomed to that by this time and made little of it. Erika slept in another room; her bed was against the wall adjoining the room occupied by the landlady's elderly in-laws. During the night, suddenly, the man knocked at my door and told me in his Baden dialect that my companion was weeping. I dressed immediately and went over to her. She was, indeed, shedding tears but not for herself. She had been told that from Freiburg one could hear the artillery fire from the Vosges mountains and her brother Hans, a lieutenant, was stationed there.

Now she heard shells exploding and said, "If it sounds so terrible here, what a hell it must be there!"

I knelt beside her bed and comforted her. What we were hearing were the anti-aircraft guns from the *Schlossberg* which protected the entire city. All one could hear from the Vosges mountains was a very dull rumbling. Thereupon the tears stopped at once. Erika was completely comforted. She even noticed the dress I had thrown on so rapidly.

"You have found the style that suits you," she said.

—LJF, 406–7

## EMPATHIC HELP FOR OTHERS

*Ever the alert teacher, Edith Stein here describes her educational priorities. Imparting information or goals must always serve realistically to help the pupils, not aim blindly at fulfilling pre-established curriculum requirements.*

College Marianum, Münster,  
October 20, 1932

Pax!

Dear Sister Callista,

A distressing mound of letters has piled up for me in the last week — distressing, when one thinks of answering them. One wishes so much to send a word of thanks immediately, and yet I can only accomplish it very, very slowly. Now I am operating according to priority. Answer first those with urgent questions. Therefore you will receive a few lines so promptly.

Surely the children who attend convent schools should gain there the strength to form their lives in the spirit of Christ. Surely it is most important that the teachers truly have this spirit themselves and vividly exemplify it. At the same time they also need to know life as the children will find it. Otherwise there will be a great danger that the girls will tell themselves: "The Sisters have no notion about the world"; "They were unable to

prepare us for the questions we now have to answer"; and the [danger is] that then everything might be thrown overboard as useless.

I have the impression that the Rhineland-Westphalian convents are more advanced in this (altogether the educational system here is decades ahead of the Bavarian one). You personally, though, have the advantage of not having entered too soon and of having belonged to the youth movement. That gives you access to much that others lack. However, it is necessary to keep up contacts. Today's young generation has passed through so many crises — it can no longer understand us, but we must make the effort to understand them; then perhaps we may yet be able to be of some help to them. There is not much use in recommending books to you since you do not have the time. But it seems to me you should be able to gain many an insight through your sister. Besides that, you probably have people come to consult you in the speakroom who see more of life than you do. And, of course, the children themselves bring in all sorts of things. All this has to be utilized.

As far as the faculty is concerned: I am convinced that it should be predominantly feminine. But *only* feminine? That I would not consider the ideal situation. In a family, it is also preferable if both father and mother are present and, together, bring up the children. There are paternal tasks a teacher has toward the girl students. Of course, it is preferable to have no male teachers than unsuitable ones. The same applies to the director. I consider a woman quite acceptable, but would not turn down a male just on principle. And if he were a skilled educator of girls — that is, one who at the same time is aware of the limits of his influence — then, where there is a *mixed* faculty it might be preferable.

Naturally I am also for a subject-oriented school system. I believe the weakness regarding education could be compensated if one had truly responsible "homeroom teachers" who gave as many courses as possible to their classes. If you teach German,

history, and English to a class, you have enough opportunity to exercise an educational influence.

From the end of July to the beginning of September, I was in Breslau. The day before yesterday my mother had her 83rd birthday; things are still going well with her. My sister [Rosa] will have to continue to be patient. Please return Irmgard's letter at your convenience. I know nothing about an invitation to Mannheim.

Heartfelt thanks and best regards to your Mother Prioress.

*All the best, your*

*Edith Stein*

— SPL, 122–23

## "DEEPER" IMPRESSIONS

*Edith Stein would always appreciate the effect of art and architecture on the human spirit. The following passage shows how contact with religious depictions or structures left striking impressions destined to be reappropriated even more deeply in her later life.*

Nor am I certain any more on which of the two trips I met Pauline Reinach in Frankfurt. We had a great deal to tell one another while we strolled through the old section of the city, so familiar to me because of Goethe's *Gedanken und Erinnerungen*.

But the deepest impressions were made on me by things other than the Römerweg and the Hirschgraben. We stopped in at the cathedral for a few minutes: and, while we looked around in respectful silence, a woman carrying a market basket came in and knelt down in one of the pews to pray briefly. This was something entirely new to me. To the synagogues or to the Protestant churches which I had visited, one went only for services. But here was someone interrupting her everyday shopping errands