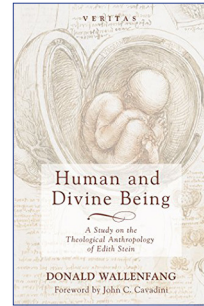


Book Review

Donald Wallenfang.
*Human and Divine Being:
A Study on the Theological Anthropology of Edith Stein*
Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2017.

Reviewed by, David Muthukumar S.
Fuller Theological Seminary



Edith Stein (1891–1942) was a German-Jewish philosopher who joined the Carmelite Order after her conversion to the Roman Catholic faith in 1922. She has written a number of books, out of which the *Potency and Act* (1931) and the *Finite and Eternal Being* (1937) stand as monumental works, in which she probes the wonder and mystery of human being in relation to the divine being. She suffered an untimely death under the Nazi regime at Auschwitz in 1942. She was later canonized as a martyr and saint by Pope John Paul II in 1998 as *Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross*.

In this book, Donald Wallenfang is presenting a holistic theological anthropology as he distils this theme from the works of Edith Stein. Through this attempt, Wallenfang is engaging the physical reductionist view of the contemporary postmodern worldview that leads to practical atheism, relegating the human person to a “random instance of atomic matter and energy.” He claims that Stein’s framework would provide a way to regain the sense of a holistic personhood that is rooted in right relationship with God.

As Wallenfang notes, Stein is combining the strength of phenomenology and metaphysics, especially the Husserlian phenomenology and Thomist metaphysics in her study of theological anthropology. He begins with Stein’s understanding of the universal human

vocation. For Stein, to be a human being is primarily to be an ethical being and human vocation is comprised of a call and a response. She avers, “To be authentically human is to be responsible for the other, to be responsible for all.” By harnessing the vitality of the Aristotelian and Thomistic potency–act hermeneutic and the notion of perennial philosophy (that truths do not change), Stein observes that despite all phenomenal differences, every human individual is in an honest pursuit of truth. As the change from potentiality to actuality is caused by a prior actuality that acts on the latent potentiality, the inherent human potentiality is actualized by an anterior actuality which is the “pure actuality” (*actus purus*) that Aquinas calls God.

She further conceives the divine Logos as the “meaning-principle driving the entire evolutionary process of the cosmos” comprising the physical, biological, historical, and cultural realms, of which the Logos is also its goal. Stein is incorporating a cosmic evolutionary understanding into her theological reflections and relates it to the Trinitarian conception of creation. She calls the logic of the cross as the logic of the double negative as in the reality of poverty and self-divestment, Christ redeems the world. Stein calls this pattern of self-abnegation the “science of the Cross” (*Kreuzeswissenschaft*). Her theological anthropology is thoroughly Christocentric in that she presents Christ’s self-emptying as the right model for deducing

the human vocation and is also concurrently pneumatocentric as she argues that only in this process we attest to the life of the Spirit in us. As a seed dies in order to bring forth the hidden life of the sapling, also an individual ego must die in order to participate in radical solidarity with a communion of other selves. She emphasizes the “personal alterity” as the ground of possibility for being spiritual being. As human beings, we become as “individuals only in relation to one another and authentic human personhood is realized in and through the opening to another.” Wallenfang thus presents Stein’s conception of the human vocation as Self’s essential relation to the Other by being enabled by its inherent relation to the Trinitarian God.

In her theological anthropology, Wallenfang notes that, Stein accounts for material and spiritual realms of an individual which she refers to as a “spiritual subject.” It is spiritual nature of a human being that defies being reduced into a mere material being by transcends the scope of mass/energy and its predictable and verifiable properties. Wallenfang thus juxtaposes Stein’s thought to the contemporary critical thought that denies the scope of spirit and also human soul.

By using the quadratic causality framework of Aristotelian-Thomistic conception, Stein points that soul can be understood only according to the metaphysics of formal and final causality while also affirming its relation to the physical body as articulated through material and efficient causality. She conceives the human person as a trichotomous interplay between body, soul, and spirit. Utilizing the potency–act rubric, Stein understands the material body (*Körper*) as that which is primarily in *potentia*, while the soul functions as the spiritual and actualizing principle of the body. Though accounting for a trichotomous composition of a

human being, Stein emphasizes the unity of the human being by reiterating its intrinsic relation to the physical body. Stein identifies the soul as the form of the body. But the soul itself does not “have the power to actualize what is potential in it” and in turn depends on the “personal actuality of spirit, namely, God.”

As a critical phenomenologist, Stein identifies the human soul as “the innerness of consciousness” from which everything else is perceived. She finds the realm of consciousness and its intentional spiritual life as constitutive of the human soul’s voluntary activity. She further relates this identification of consciousness and soul to the aspect of redemption of the transient material being by the intransient spiritual nature. The spiritual being of an individual works to redeem both matter and spirit, both body and soul. The inescapable entropy, that is the apparent destiny of material being toward degradation, disorder, and disintegration, is transformed and redeemed by the potentiality of the inner spiritual being. But, it is the human soul of Christ that is the actualizing medium through which the divine life is channelled to all other human souls. Because human beings exist at “the intersection of material being and spiritual being,” the incarnation of Christ absolutely incorporates “the ontological totality of the created order.” It is Jesus Christ who recapitulates and sums up the whole of creation in his incarnate Being. Here, Stein is alluding to a universalist understanding of the human creation. For her, the logic of resurrection coincides with the logic of the natural order in the form of paradoxical continuity of being. Therefore, to remove the human soul from the human is to remove personhood from the person, and the human soul can be comprehended only in reference to the incomprehensible God who chose to reveal

divine incomprehensibility to us through that which is comprehensible.

Wallenfang remarks, as part of her Carmelite spirituality, Stein captures the importance of empathy through a forceful presentation. Stemmed from the German term *Einfühlung*, empathy is “the paradoxical lived experience of the self whose source material is the lived experience of the other.” As the experience of the self is constituted by the lived experiences of both self and other, empathy is that which defines that outward movement toward the other which is the essential trait of spiritual being. To participate in the affective life of another person involves a movement of self-divesting. The human vocation is thus constituted in the awareness of the unity of spiritual and material nature of a human being and its essentiality of movement toward the “Other” through empathy.

Wallenfang’s engages Edith Stein’s theological anthropology as a polemic against the prevalent material reductionism and is making a strong argument for the revival of understanding human personhood in its soul, body, spirit dimensions. Yet at times, Stein’s notion of spirit as transcendental/immaterial and body as finite/material substance betrays strands of rigid “Cartesian dualism.” Though Wallenfang refutes this fact by pointing to Stein’s understanding of the unitary composition of body and soul, in the light of modern cognitive neurosciences and kinaesthetic-proprioceptive cognition, it seems Stein’s conception is over “spiritualized” at the expense of predominantly sensory existence of human beings. The influences of the Carmelite spirituality run thick in her account. Also, her reliance on the trichotomous view of human composition does not do justice to the biblical notion of using spirit and soul in an interchangeable

fashion. Also, this effectively undermines the cognitive function of the soul or consciousness being totally divorced from the spirit. Stein’s conception of human being as *imago Dei* also relies on this trichotomous view. She considers the soul “in and by itself” to be regarded as an image of the triune God. She further elaborates this by equating the soul as the substantial image of God the Father. By way of analogy, through a Trinitarian understanding, Stein conceives the human soul as an image of God the Father, the body as the incarnated Son, and the spirit as the Spirit of life. But, as she prioritizes the spirit over the soul, she later argues that it is only the spirit that can sustain the spiritual nature of the soul, devoid of which the soul would be lost. To a modern ear, this would sound like a confusion of categories.

But then, this is definitely an anachronistic critique against Stein. By bridging between metaphysics and the natural sciences through the innovations of the phenomenological method, Edith Stein does present a comprehensive view of human personhood and vocation that places human beings in their right relationship with the Creator God.

