

Brian Welter

*Anthropologie phénoménologique et théorie de  
l'éducation dans l'oeuvre d'Édith Stein*  
by **Éric de Rus**\*

By the end of *Anthropologie phénoménologique et théorie de l'éducation dans l'oeuvre d'Édith Stein*, readers will clearly identify her as a leading Catholic thinker of the twentieth century. Raised Jewish, Stein (1891-1942) converted to Catholicism in 1922, was investitured as a Carmelite in 1934, and was later murdered by the Nazis. A student of the phenomenologist Edmund Husserl, she maintained lively correspondences with some of the great thinkers of her day, including the Protestant philosopher and mystic (and Stein's godmother) Hedwig Conrad-Martius, the phenomenologists Roman Ingarden and Max Scheler, and the Catholic philosopher Dietrich von Hildebrand. De Rus acquaints readers with the Carmelite through extensive citations of her writings, including her autobiography and letters. De Rus succeeds in portraying the philosophical and theological roots to Stein's outlook on education by discussing, among other topics, her metaphysical and theological positions at length (particularly in relation to the structure of the human soul), her reflections on the education of women, and her

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rejection of Heideggerian metaphysics. Though firmly rooted in her faith, Stein also remained up to date with the intellectual currents of her era.

The author shows how phenomenology, in its attempts at clarity and methodological rigor, informed Stein's notions of the soul and, from that, informed her understanding of education. She rejected psychoanalysis (too materialist to establish a true soul-to-soul connection), German idealism (too optimistic to explain human irrationality), and Heidegger (too nihilist and reductionist to develop a viable metaphysics) as bases for sound pedagogy. Phenomenology, Stein believed, could help explain the soul in metaphysical language and in terms that respect the individual. Phenomenology could explain this "essential reality" because "the phenomenological attitude consisted of 'directing its view on the *essential*'."<sup>1</sup> It sought the "immediate intuition" instead of trying to adhere to a theory.<sup>2</sup> Throughout this book, readers get a sense of how Stein's sober and realistic assessment exemplified this phenomenological perspective.

Stein's understanding of the human soul was informed by many sources, including such writers as Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, the Norwegian Sigrid Unset, and the German Gertrude von le Fort, the latter two being Catholic converts. De Rus cites Stein's thoughts on the insights of these writers which also indicated her ultimate pedagogical concerns:

[I]n penetrating into the concrete reality of the individual and in following the complexity of the soul as explorers unto the ultimate depths accessible to the human, one arrives at the point at which the soul's relationships no longer stem from interconnections to the worldly environment. This is the point at which the action of spiritual forces becomes visible.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> De Rus, *Anthropologie Phénoménologique et théorie de l'Éducation dans l'Oeuvre d'Édith Stein*, 59.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

Much of de Rus's discussion occurs at this challenging and abstract level. He highlights how Stein did not reserve her insights into the depths of the human soul for the mystical. He does not try to prove that Stein was or wasn't a mystic or interested in mysticism. Her philosophical and theological pursuits led to her simple concern with the soul. After many chapters, the author arrives at the point at which this can be developed into a more systematic pedagogical view.

Though deeply infused with the Catholic faith, Stein's views on anthropology and education did not contest the German concept of education, *Bildung*. As how de Rus depicts things, Stein did not seek to separate Catholics in her country from their culture or the German tradition of education, though she called on education to "conform to the supernatural finality [finalité] of the human being," Christ.<sup>4</sup> Unsurprisingly, Stein evoked the Rule of St. Benedict. De Rus shows that Stein's views, if followed by German educational authorities, could have reenergized German education by appealing to the medieval roots of teaching and learning. Sanctification, the end of such an education, would amount to "the *formation* of the human being to the image of the Christ archetype, which is to say as a process of configuration to the person of Christ."<sup>5</sup> Education would spark the recreation of the human, with educators as "co-creators in the formation of a human."<sup>6</sup> De Rus links *Bildung* to the noun *Bild*, citing M.-D. Richard in a footnote:

[T]he term *Bildung* (the equivalent of *Bild*, image), as well as the verbs *einbilden* (conform interiorly), *über-bilden* (conform to that which is above oneself), *ent-bilden* (renounce the image), built on the root *Bild*, were medieval neologisms created by . . . Meister Eckhart (1260-1327) to designate mystical experiences of the human being becoming the image and the resemblance of

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 290.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 293.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 294.

God (*imago Dei*). This concept therefore had a mystical-theological origin.<sup>7</sup>

De Rus shows the place of Stein's educational theory in German educational history and practice.

De Rus argues that Stein followed this German educational tradition and shows how this makes sense because elements of the Catholic perspective survived at the core of this tradition. Again from a footnote (though it needs more forceful emphasis), we read M.-D. Richard's words reflecting the heart of de Rus's own argument:

Hence, for Edith Stein, *Bildung* (formation) must penetrate to the deepest part of the soul, so that the human in his totality "reproduces in himself the image (*Bild*) of God so that he realizes in his being human nature in its purity, of which Christ is the original image (*Ur-Bild*). *Bildung* is the work of God working by Himself or via those instruments that He chooses."<sup>8</sup>

This points to the relevance of Stein's pedagogical theory for today's teachers and educational theorists.

De Rus's depiction of Stein as a careful metaphysical thinker adds to this sense of contemporary relevance. Based on her practice of phenomenology, she identified clear real-world implications for metaphysics, including for education. Education has clear metaphysical implications: "Education penetrates right to the soul itself, in order to give it a new form. By doing so, it recreates the human in his totality." This transformation "goes beyond natural possibilities" because the soul is the "receptacle of divine life."<sup>9</sup> De Rus helps us see and appreciate Stein's sober and reasoned style of thinking, which adds to her credibility. Education's metaphysical impact affects all of us, not only an elite or mystical cadre. Stein goes so far as to call education "a work of sanc-

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 279.

tification”<sup>10</sup> because the “ultimate end of the formation of the person is his configuration to Christ.” *Formation*, from de Rus’s French, corresponds to *Bildung* and represents whole-person education. *Formation* fosters a deeper vocation or life calling than simply a career.

*Formation* or *Bildung* according to Stein leads us to the Christian liberty which enables us to freely choose to develop into who God has created us to be. This path, unique for every man and woman, is a participation in the Logos. De Rus therefore notes the connection for Stein between liberty and the center of the soul.<sup>11</sup> This discussion comes toward the end of the book and builds on the earlier analysis of Stein’s philosophical and theological development of the soul and of human anthropology in general. Thus readers at this point have no problem with the following type of observation:

The liberty to orient oneself toward the center of the soul is a possibility of the I [capitalized *Je*] which can move itself in the soul’s space . . . The power to move toward the center of the soul belongs intrinsically to liberty in terms of it being an essential property of the will. An individual can therefore determine to situate himself in the most profound part of himself in order to take, from this point, ultimate decisions.<sup>12</sup>

The educator is called to support the flourishing of the person.

Given the rich philosophical thinking of *Anthropologie phénoménologique et théorie de l’éducation dans l’oeuvre d’Édith Stein*, some readers may be disappointed that the discussion on education does not take a practical direction. Yet Catholic educators who are searching for a clear and robust articulation of their mission need look no further. As how de Rus explains things, Stein’s development of a coherent vision of the human person far surpasses the image of the materialist and choice-besotted *individual* of contemporary culture. Stein envisioned a

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 283.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

person, starting from the deepest core of the human soul (with the soul having its own interior hierarchy), capable of flourishing through vocation and development. This development follows a unique, individual path that depends, naturally, on outer forces as well as the person's interior resolve to be steadfast and true to the inner calling. Such a vision of the human and the educator's pivotal role can support and revitalize Catholic education. That concrete mission makes this book essential reading.



*Anthropologie phénoménologique et théorie de l'éducation dans l'oeuvre d'Édith Stein* by **Éric de Rus**

SUMMARY

This paper is a review of Éric de Rus's book: *Anthropologie phénoménologique et théorie de l'éducation dans l'oeuvre d'Édith Stein* (Paris: Les éditions du Cerf, 2019). According to the author, de Rus succeeds in portraying the philosophical and theological roots to Stein's outlook on education by discussing, among other topics, her metaphysical and theological positions (particularly in relation to the structure of the human soul), her reflections on the education of women, and her rejection of Heideggerian metaphysics.

KEYWORDS

Eric de Rus, Edith Stein, education, theology, philosophy, metaphysics, anthropology, phenomenology, human soul.

REFERENCES

De Rus, Éric. *Anthropologie phénoménologique et théorie de l'éducation dans l'oeuvre d'Édith Stein*. Paris: Les éditions du Cerf, 2019.