

# Stein's Phenomenology of the Body: The constitution of the human being between description of experience and social construction<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Stein's phenomenology is one that is particularly sensitive to intersubjective constitution, and thus her constitutional analysis of the body is one that allows for an analysis of the body as 'socially constructed' (in so far as one understands this term to mean the same as 'inter-subjectively constituted'). The purpose of this paper is to give an account of Stein's phenomenology of the body as it appears in *On the Problem of Empathy*, her constitutional analysis being explicitly articulated in this work as including both subjective and intersubjective layers.

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Edith Stein, Husserl's first assistant after the First World War and editor of *Ideas II* and *III*, attempted to underpin Husserl's understanding that empathy was foundational for intersubjectivity by writing her doctoral dissertation on the problem. *On the Problem of Empathy* (1917)<sup>2</sup> originally comprised a hermeneutic analysis (now lost) of various occurrences of the theme in authors influencing the early stirrings of phenomenology such as Theodor Lipps, Max Scheler and Wilhelm Dilthey. This led up to an eidetic analysis of the essence of empathy (which is now the first chapter) and two constitutional analyses pertaining to what empathy contributes to the constitution of – the psycho-physical individual (Chapter Three) and the person (Chapter Four). Stein follows in these analyses what she understands to be standard phenomenological practice, and models her work on what she already knows of the entire project of Husserl's *Ideas*. She thus begins with a historical/empirical analysis of how the concept has been formed by others before her (the chapter now lost), proceeds to an analysis of essential structures (like *Ideas I*), moves on to constitutional issues (like *Ideas II*) before turning towards the sciences consequent upon the things thus constituted (as does *Ideas III*).

The problem of empathy, because it allows us to accede to intersubjective experience, is at the heart of the phenomenological project spearheaded by Husserl, and Stein understood her dissertation as a contribution towards the same. *On the Problem of Empathy* is therefore a kind of addition to *Ideas I*: something Stein understood to be missing in this work for the work to be complete. Later, when her attempt to edit *Ideas II* and *III* to publishable standards had left her convinced that Husserl was not acknowledging the necessity of this addition, she wrote her own contribution to the phenomenological project of founding the sciences, focusing on Psychology and the Humanities<sup>3</sup> the objects of which (psyche and spirit) she knew to

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<sup>2</sup> Edith Stein: *On the Problem of Empathy*, transl. by W. Stein, *Collected Works of Edith Stein III*, ICS Publications, Washington D.C., 1989; translation from *Zum Problem der Einfühlung*, Buchdruckerei des Waisenhauses, Halle, 1917 (to appear in *Edith Stein Gesamtausgabe*, Bd. V., Herder)

<sup>3</sup> *Philosophy of Psychology and the Humanities*, transl. M. C. Baseheart and M. Sawicki, *Collected Works of Edith Stein VII*, ICS Publications, Washington D.C., 2000; translation from *Beiträge zur philosophischen* © – Mette Lebech, 'Stein's Phenomenology of the Body: The Constitution of the Human Being between Description of Experience and Social Construction', in *Maynooth Philosophical Papers*, Issue 5 (2008), ed. by Simon Nolan (Maynooth: Department of Philosophy, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, 2009), pp. 16–20.

be most affected in their constitution by the lack of an appropriate analysis of empathy.<sup>4</sup> Already the analyses of the constitution of psyche and spirit in *On the Problem of Empathy* are superior in their systematic precision to the analyses of *Ideas II*. The two lines of enquiry, however, are further pursued in the two treatises post-dating her editorial work, with *Sentient Causality* exploring the constitution of the psyche and *Individual and Community* the foundation of the humanities. Together these two treatises form what has been translated as *Philosophy of Psychology and the Humanities*.

To Stein constitutional analysis is part and parcel of the phenomenological method: it is an analysis of how something is brought together or coming together, how it is identified in experience from various elements or sources. A cup is constituted from various acts of seeing, touching, remembering, using, comparing etc.; it comes together on the background of other experiences (e.g. green, textured, heavy, moody, etc.) which recede to the background or become qualities of the cup when the cup is constituted as such. Furthermore, the cup is constituted as objective in the field of tension between subjective experience and inter-subjective experience accessed by the means of empathy: You see a cup - I think 'there probably is a cup' - you point it out - I see a cup. It is easy for me to identify a cup because I have learnt to do it in a community that sees no reason to take cups to be controversial. In a society where cups were controversial (say great value were attached to any object, which could obtain the denomination 'cup') the identification or constitution of a cup would be more difficult, it might involve attestation by experts, the possibility of fraud and pretension, and even danger (if one, say, identified one in the possession of someone who did not have a licence for possessing one). My experience, in other words, comes to me as something that can be challenged by the experience of others, so that *our* experience does not necessarily coincide with *mine*. The articulation of the different types of interdependence of subjective experience that structures inter-subjectivity are discussed by Stein in her treatise *Individual and Community*. Here she shows how sheer togetherness, sentient contagion, association and community allow for different types of collective experience, which I may identify as 'our' experience depending on how I identify myself in relation to them. The constitution of my personal self (as member of this community, influenced by that person, determined by that value) thus defines the type of intersubjective experience I will contribute to the 'social construction' (the inter-subjective constitution) of the world experienced as objective by others as well as myself. The understanding of how constitution and experience is motivated is the proper object of the sciences of the humanities,<sup>5</sup> and Stein therefore envisages motivated constitution as something that can be explored in them, in e.g. anthropology, sociology, politics, history, literature and art. The body and its constitution as influenced by culture is indeed often addressed by these sciences. What they are investigating is the motivation behind particular types of constitution.

*On the Problem of Empathy* is not primarily analysing how the act of empathy is constituted (although Chapter II on the essence of empathy implicitly does that). It is rather analysing how *those entities that could not be constituted without the contribution of the act of empathy* (because they are subjective in nature) are constituted: i.e. the psycho-

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*Begründung der Psychologie und der Geisteswissenschaften*, Max Niemeyer, Tübingen, 1970 (to appear in *Edith Stein Gesamtausgabe* Bd. 6).

<sup>4</sup> Sawicki, Marianne: 'Making up Husserl's Mind about Constitution', in *Yearbook of the Irish Philosophical Society* 2007, ed. Will Desmond, pp. 191-216, and *Body Text and Science*, Kluwer, 2000.

<sup>5</sup> 'The Humanities' are called *Geisteswissenschaften* in German: 'Geist' means 'spirit', and Stein understands spirit as motivatedness.

physical individual (including its parts: body, soul, psyche, emotions, character) and the person (in its spiritual space defined by motivation and concretised by a personality relative to chosen values). Stein is in other words analysing how the body, the soul, the psyche and the spirit is ‘coming together’ for us, how it comes about that we experience ourselves as we do. We cannot really say that this presupposes that we in fact have body, soul and spirit – Stein is rather showing what the experiences are that contribute to us identifying ourselves in terms of these. Constitution cannot be forced (although it can be conditioned – ‘that is not a cup, otherwise your children will suffer’); identification is essentially motivated. Thus our understanding of our body is motivated by our experience in its entirety.

So what is this experience that allows us to identify ourselves and our bodies?

‘I’, the pure I, constitutes itself from experience as the qualityless pole or subject of all experience. That is, the I is always there, essentially related to experience. But that is the only thing that is essentially related to experience. The other and the body is not quite that, they are only essentially related to the type of experience which is recognisable as ours:

In various authors, such as Lipps, we have found the interpretation that this is not an ‘individual “I”’ but first becomes individual in contrast with ‘you’ and ‘he’. What does this individuality mean? First of all, it means only that it is ‘itself’ and no other. This ‘selfness’ is experienced and is the basis of all that is ‘mine’. Naturally it is first brought into relief in contrast with another when another is given. This other is at first not qualitatively distinguished from it, since both are qualityless, but only distinguished simply as an ‘other’. This otherness is apparent in the type of givenness; it is other than ‘I’ because it is given to me in another way than ‘I’. Therefore it is ‘you’. But since it experiences itself as I experience myself, the ‘you’ is another ‘I’. Thus the ‘I’ does not become individualised because another faces it, but its individuality, or as we should rather say (because we must reserve the term ‘individuality’ for something else), its selfness is brought into relief in contrast with the otherness of the other.

I quote this passage in full to show that Stein does not think that the body is the principle of individuation of the I (as does for example Aquinas, whom she later will criticise for this), nor that it is ‘before’ constitution as Marianne Sawicki claims it is in her otherwise brilliant analysis of Stein’s editorial work on *Ideas II (Body, Text and Science)*. The latter would have compromised Stein’s adherence to the phenomenological method. The body is constituted, for Stein, because it is the best way of making sense of what we in fact experience, but this is a matter of fact, not of necessity. Also, the body could not be prior to constitution as nothing can be, given that constitution is identification.

When this is said, I do experience my I, not only as experiencing a stream of experiences that seems organised according to patterns such that fields of experience can be distinguished according to what I must identify as different senses: the fields of vision, hearing, touch etc. These patterns, Stein affirms, is the material from which the soul is constituted as the substantive root of that specific set of abilities, inclusive of the ability to place things into categories, which is mine. Not only do I experience my experience as peculiarly structured, but I also experience my I as embodied. It is

persistently there when I experience myself, and that in different ways. It is given in outer perception to be sure, but not in that alone. If it were, we would have

the strangest object. This would be a real thing, a physical body, whose motivated successive appearances exhibit striking gaps. It would withhold its rear side with more stubbornness than the moon.<sup>6</sup>

Besides exhibiting these gaps, some of which I might be able to touch (the back of my head) but not see, although I can see everything else that I can touch, it also has this peculiarity that I cannot walk away from it:

I can approach and withdraw from any other thing, can turn toward or away from it. [.. It is ..] given to me in an infinitely variable multiplicity of appearances and of changing positions, and there are also times when it is not given to me. But this one object (my physical body) is given to me in successive appearances only variable within very narrow limits. As long as I have my eyes open at all, it is continually there with a steadfast obtrusiveness, always having the same tangible nearness as no other object has. It is always 'here' while other objects are always 'there.'<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, I sense my body in all its parts, so that this 'here' where I am (my zero point of orientation), is extended in space: the sensations arising from all the entities making up my body are amalgamated into a unity, so that the unity of my living body is constituted as taking up space from the sensations of all these places. And this unity is constituted as the same as the outwardly perceived body:

I not only see my hand and bodily perceive it as sensing, but I also 'see' its fields of sensation constituted for me in bodily perception. [...] This is exactly analogous to the province of outer perception. We not only see the table and feel its hardness, we also 'see' its hardness. [...] The seen living body does not remind us it can be the scene of manifold sensations. Neither is it merely a physical thing taking up the same space as the living body given as sensitive in bodily perception. It is given as a sensing, living body.<sup>8</sup>

Movement, sensations (*Empfindungen*) like pain and pleasure, moods and spiritual feelings (*Gefühle*) are all experienced in the body; they are constituted from bodily experience. The body is thus as a whole a sophisticated sense organ that allows me to interact as a constituting I with a material world that makes sense. I find myself experiencing in my body and by means of it.

But if I had only my own experience to sample from it is quite possible I would never get to constitute this world as meaningful or as separate from my body. I would not identify what is experienced in the body as something dependent on *my* bodily nature rather than on the world as it is. Without empathy, I would think that the world is as I feel it is. But in fact (again not by necessity) I have the experience of

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<sup>6</sup> *Empathy* p. 41, III, 4, a.

<sup>7</sup> *Empathy* p. 41-2.

<sup>8</sup> *Empathy* p. 44-5.

the other to sample from by the means of empathy. Like I 'see' my own fields of sensation (the sensitivity of the hand), I see those of the other, whose body I have learnt to constitute according to the same type as my own:

The hand resting on the table does not lie there like the book beside it. It 'presses' against the table more or less strongly; it lies there limpid or stretched; and I 'see' these sensations of pressure and tension in a con-primordial way.<sup>9</sup>

Sensual empathy, which I also have with animals and to a limited extent with plants, is the type of empathy that allows me to 'feel into' what the other is feeling (sluggish, content, threatened) although this feeling is motivated by a value only a spiritual I can identify as such (the good, the pleasant, the threatening as such). I would only know this, however, when I have learnt to spiritually empathise and therefore is capable of spiritual empathy. Spiritual empathy, in contrast with sensual empathy, is what enables me to identify and understand spiritual persons, i.e. I's who consciously perform one mental act because of another. It involves understanding the other's motivations (why he thinks he does what he does as distinct from why he does it – I can also know the latter of animals and plants), and these motivations can be followed in so far as what is felt gets expressed in a glance, an attitude, in language or in art.

I do not necessarily constitute myself as a spiritual person, i.e. I do not necessarily know that I am motivated. Were I to be raised among wolves, it seems as if I would constitute myself on the type of the wolf, and consequently not learn language and categorisation, although I might well be capable of it for a while as a very young 'cub'. I might attempt to use my limbs as does the wolf, and not constitute the pain we would expect a child using its hands and knees for running at speed would feel as important. Education in a human community enables me to observe in others what I can find in myself, and it is indeed pointed out to me with great attention and care so that I would learn to identify myself as a person and consequently be able to take my place in society and be capable of what we call responsibility.

Stein's constitutional analysis of the body thus shows how empathy, the act in which we relate to foreign experience, enables us to constitute our own body in parallel with that of the other on a type that can be varied (e.g. wolf, Marsian, Irish, woman, human person). The body is not fixed but allows for a continuum of interpretations characteristic of different communities. Stein's analysis in this way incorporates an aspect of social construction as it explores the significance of empathy for the constitution of the being that we are.

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<sup>9</sup> *Empathy* p. 58.

