

Edith Stein's Value Theory and its Importance for her Conception of the State

By Mette Lebech, National University of Ireland Maynooth

There seems to be general agreement that Stein's *Philosophy of Psychology and the Humanities (Beiträge)*, written immediately after Stein took her leave as Husserl's assistant, were meant to complement Husserl's *Ideas II* in respect of the constitution of the psyche and the spirit. Stein's doctoral dissertation *On the Problem of Empathy* equipped her well for this task, as the complete constitution of both the psyche and the spirit depends on the mirror perspective offered by the other, accessed by means of empathy. The access to the experience of the other allows me to identify the world of values – the objects of motivation – as objective, and to understand myself as a being whose nature stands under the influence of the motivation which my I is subject to as a person, that is, it allows me to identify myself as a sentient being in possession of a psyche.

At the heart of the constitutional analysis of the psyche and the spirit thus stands a value theory. This theory integrates elements from the respective thoughts of Dilthey, Reinach, Husserl and Scheler, but gains, by doing so, in systematic precision, complexity and comprehensiveness compared to theirs. Stein's theory accounts for the experience of values, for what values are experienced to be, and for the effects of valuation on the individual psyche, on the community, and in history. Her understanding of mental energy allows her to analyse the formation of the 'we' which arises from the sharing of motivational energy and gives rise to communal experience. With the understanding of the flexible formation of the communal subject a map of the dynamic structure of intersubjectivity is achieved, and with it, as its correlate, an understanding of the intersubjective constitution of the world; a model of what could be called its 'social construction'.¹

¹ 'If there is any core idea of social constructionism, it is that some object or objects are caused or controlled by social or cultural factors rather than natural factors, and if there is any core motivation of

What is remarkable about Stein's phenomenological value-theory is not only its comprehensiveness, but also the fact that it is unitary, and therefore non-relativist.² Stein considers the world as inter-subjectively constituted from diverse perspectives that remain irreducible to one another, but she does not regard this constitution to be unintelligible: we can in fact understand what makes the world look like this to some people and like that to others. Because we can do that and because our perspective is unitary with the unity of the personal I, our ordering of the values into one hierarchy comes about. Because we have experience of many values (experienced directly, by means of empathy, and perhaps even emptily grasped in this manner), we also always have the possibility of realising that the values we have deemed to be the highest are in fact not the highest simply, as others might manifest a higher motivating power.

It is the community-forming ability of values that make them of decisive importance for Stein's concept of the State, as the state is a community or at least relies on community. To explain this we must start by (1) accounting for the systematic relationship that obtains between personality and community according to Stein and (2) also discuss the relationship between personality and the various types of commonality: mass, association and community. We can then (3) discuss the state in relation to these types and in particular in relation to association and community. Finally, we can ask the question concerning the constitution of the state and of the specific type of value response upon which it relies. This analysis should in principle amount to a blueprint of the social construction of the state.

1. Personality and Community

Only persons are capable of community.³ *En revanche* persons are *essentially* capable of community. This is so because the person is constituted from the I's value-relatedness, *as* the I's value-valence or possible value-relatedness. Being a person

such research, it is the aim of showing that such objects are or were under our control: they could be, or might have been, otherwise.' *Stanford encyclopaedia*, 'Naturalistic Approaches to Social Construction'.

² Although she in principle shares this tendency with all her mentors, the systematic elaborated coherence of her theory explains what in their theories often remains merely affirmed.

³ This section incorporates insights from *On the Problem of Empathy* and *Philosophy of Psychology and the Humanities*, fine-tuned by means of later studies such as *Introduction to Philosophy* and *The Structure of the Human Being*.

essentially involves openness to or capacity for motivation; a person is capable of accessing motivational energy from values. This means that a person can accomplish acts on the basis of other acts, acts motivating other acts, acts for the sake of other acts: it is capable of following motivated sequences, of reasoning and of knowing the why⁴ Motivation is the law of the spirit, and persons are the subjects, the antennae/receptors, or the carriers of the spiritual world. This sets the person apart from the realm of nature, which in contrast to the realm of the spirit is characterised by causality. As the person's spirituality allows it to act in the spiritual world as such it is not necessarily psycho-physical. Those persons, however, like human beings, who are psycho-physical, understand themselves to act through their bodies in a material world which concretises the world so that the objective motivating powers (the values) are mostly experienced as pertaining to material things or complexes of these.⁵ This, however, does not prevent us from knowing things spiritual, but it means that we tend to seek our knowledge of it confirmed by the senses and indeed expect values to have importance in the physical world. The value of a human person, for example, is experienced to pertain to the whole of the person, spiritual and physical, even if we experience the value itself, that is the motivating power as such, to be purely spiritual.

We experience concrete human persons to be carriers of value in a variety of ways. We evaluate their character, for example, which we constitute from our understanding of their value-response, in particular from the order in which we see them place the values, their value-hierarchy. The personality of a person is, according to Stein, the specificity of the person determined or stamped by its character.⁶ Whereas the character of a person is a pattern that in principle can be shared with others, personality is less sharable as it is individual with the radical unity of the personal I. Personality is not however, like the person, pure spiritual capacity: it is this capacity

⁴ 'Motivation, in our general sense, is the connection that acts get into with one another: (..) an emerging of the one out of the other, a self-fulfilling or being fulfilled of the one on the basis of the other for the sake of the other', *Philosophy of Psychology and the Humanities*, ICS Publications, p. 41. Forthcoming in ESGA, p. 35 in the Niemeyer edition.

⁵ Later, in *Finite and Eternal Being*, Stein will talk about the fallen world as the world in which material values tend to overshadow the spiritual ones, and where matter is experienced as hiding rather than revealing the real. *Finite and Eternal Being*, ICS Publications, p. 234; *Endliches und ewiges Sein*, ESGA p. 205.

⁶ We tend to call people 'personalities' when their specificity is marked, and lacking in personality when their character is common and less marked. Who we judge to be personalities and of a good or a bad character depends of course on our own character.

as already determined in certain ways by typical or decisive value responses, and hence has the beginnings of the individual substantiality about it, which we see fully constituted in the soul. The personality reflects the choices of the person and marks what he has done with himself as a person; it is the source of the specificity of the person's spontaneity and the first expression of the person's creativity as such.

Whereas a person is capable of spiritual life, a personality stands before us as already motivated and hence as a source of a specific type of motivation. That it is already motivated in this manner means that the values which motivate it shape it, producing a relatively permanent tendency towards striving for their realisation. It goes without saying that most of our personality traits remain unnoticed by us, and may be revealed even to our own gaze only by painstaking observation and strenuous analysis. What makes this specificity inconspicuous is the fact that we often share these traits with those around us, those with whom we exist in community. Only when we encounter persons who do not display these traits do we discover them. We tend to share them with those around us because values as objective are publicly available and can streamline many persons for the same objective. Those around us tend to discover what we value and why and therefore tend to value the same things. Values draw persons into a relationship of co-motivatedness, which is experienced subjectively as a unity that allows for the 'co-ordination of actions', as Habermas terms the defining trait of normativity.⁷ When reflected upon, this unity is understood to be the basis for what we call community. Community arises from the experience of being already organised by one's subjective initiative and personal creativity (i.e. by one's personality) into larger overlapping realities of 'likeminded' people, i.e. of people engaged in realising the same values as one self. These persons share mental life-power with each other and consequently experience themselves as being able to say 'we', and to pertain to the same super-individual subject.

2. Personality and Commonality

Whereas similar experiential structure is the precondition for the experience of commonality, sentient contagion and association constitutes two further ways of

⁷ J. Habermas: *The Inclusion of the Other*, Polity, p. 3 onwards.

sharing mental energy apart from community. In the case of sentient contagion the energy is shared horizontally, i.e. it is transmitted directly from one psyche to the other, without intentionality involving value-response on the part of the contaminated one. This person (or indeed animal, as animals also are capable of psychic contagion) is being energised from the energy of someone else, who in turn may or may not be intentionally motivated. The subject contaminated, as non-intentionally motivated, is unaware of the source of his motivation, but is still acting on it. He has in other words shut part of his personality down and is vicariously living by the motivation of someone else by means of his sentience or psyche. In this manner he forms a super-individual entity, if not quite a subject, with this other (or these others), who may or may not have knowledge of the source of the motivation in question. (Demagogues have knowledge of the motivations, herds of animals or schools of fish have none.)

In the commonality of association, by contrast, the value response is decided upon in a kind of commitment brought about by means of an act of will, and the choice therefore need not accurately reflect the spontaneous value-response of the individual. It nevertheless makes his value-allegiance public and (relatively) predictable, and it in principle involves some knowledge of the values to which a commitment is made. Here the energy from the values to the realisation of which one is committed through membership of the association (the party, the society, the institution) might not be directly accessed and hence the values chosen might not be appreciated in their full motivating power (whether positive or negative). This means that the personality of the member of the association might not accurately (or indeed at all) reflect the values the association is formed to promote.

Of the final type of commonality, community, personality is an accurate reflection. This is because the community relies on the sharing of energy issuing from values that community members experience personally. These values are perhaps not conscious in the sense that persons can list them or name them, but they are conscious in the sense that if they are named and explained, the person will be able to identify himself as motivated by them. Others see this motivation as expressing itself in the personality of the community member.

The different ways in which I am motivated, by sentient contagion, commitment or personal value response, hence show in my personality. That I am open to sentient contagion shows up as suggestibility and a certain vagueness of character making the person susceptible to sway in various directions. The suggestible person has a somewhat unfinished character, as we see it in children. The associational commitment of a person shows up as a willingness to choose certain defined purposes expressing certain values (whether or not they suit the personality). They show something about the character one pretends to have, wants to have, chooses to have or accepts as one's own, despite, or in accordance with, one's own personality.

We can illustrate the differentiation of commonality and its impact on personality structure by an example that became all too familiar to Stein as to all Germans:

1. One can be a Nazi because everyone else is (by sentient contagion),
2. One can be a member of the Nazi party even if one is so for reasons that do not coincide with the values the party strives to realise (by association), or
3. One can be a Nazi by conviction (by being motivated by the values the Nazi party was formed to realise, and hence being part of the Nazi community).

One can be Christian, Jewish, German, Danish, Irish or of any other religion, nationality or party in the same way, as these adjectives refer to the quality characterising the individuals pertaining to different communities.

These distinctions are so familiar to us that we often overlook the experiences that allow us to identify them. The merit of Stein's value theory is to explicate our over-familiar intuitions: how we read motivations from people's behaviour and characters and how we conclude to their relationships with others from what we see of these motivations. The subtle and necessary understanding of who we are in relation to our surroundings relies on these intuitions, which indeed we sometimes resist explicating for fear of what we might see.

It remains that a personality, as it concretises the person's value response, *ipso facto* stands in relation to other persons motivated by the same values.⁸ This relation constitutes the possibility of the community that might arise as a concrete unity involving an overlap of many different value responses. Association is a kind of commitment to community and sentient contagion a shortcut to it, which in fact also cuts the person short of its value response. The person, thus, is involved by its essence, in communities corresponding to its personality so that the social reflects the individual and the individual the social reality of the person.

3. The State as Community and Association

The analogy between the individual person and the super-individual agent allows Stein to compare the relationship between personality and person to the relationship between community and state. Like the personality is providing spontaneity and specificity to the person, so the nation provides content and direction to the state. The state whose essence is sovereignty combined with being the source of positive law and independent government provides a default unity allowing for supra-individual action, in the same manner as the transcendental unity of the personal I allows for action in accordance with its personality. In the individual person, the person is the source of the unity of the personality, but on the supra-individual level this relationship is reversed: the state does not confer unity upon the community underlying it; this unity is in contrast provided by its cultural creativity. The state seems to endure better if it confirms an already existing cultural unity, and in this sense it relies for its life on the life of the community of which it is the organising principle. The community may exist without the state: in Poland and Ireland for example, national communities existed for centuries without a state to express them. A personality, in contrast, cannot exist independently of the person whose personality it is. In this manner an individual person is experienced as being presupposed or found as it constitutes itself, whereas the super-individual agent which is the state is constituted in a manner that is experienced to be constitutive of this agency.

⁸ Complete isolation is obtained only when the only value valued is the value of one's own self.

How, therefore, do we constitute the state? In so far as the community needs to be able to act as one, it tends towards constituting itself as a state, i.e. towards positing its own sovereignty in terms of which it legislates and governs. The state may also accommodate several communities, but then it does not serve the purpose of enabling *individual* communities to act as such; then it can only act for several communities at the same time. These considerations explain the relative stability and meaningfulness of the nation state, and the peculiar hollowness that can be observed in artificially constructed states (emerging from colonialism or the hazards of war and imperialism). If we cannot act as 'us' we cannot attribute meaning to acting collectively. This 'us' may be formed by community (in which case it is strong and conscious), by association (in which case it is chosen, reluctantly or enthusiastically) or by sentient contagion (in which case it is transferred in accordance with or against the interests of the individual). The strength of the state relies on the amount of people who let themselves be determined by its sovereignty to determine it as their 'we'. It relies in other words on the number or proportion of people within the community or communities over which the state extends its sovereignty that value the ability to act as a super-individual agent by means of it, whether these people value this agency directly or have committed themselves to it by choice, or indeed have contracted the valuation from others, whether parents, superiors or peers. It remains that some must value the agency to set the standard for those who commit themselves to the value, and to provide the mental energy for contagion of those who are motivated by sentient contagion.

There are thus two ways in which the state can be weakened: by weakening the community that underlies the state, and by weakening the will to value the ability to act as a super-individual *in this manner* (whether because the community is split or its initiative is made redundant by spontaneous peace and harmony).

Conclusion

To Stein the state is not by itself good, i.e. it is not part of its essence that it is beneficial to those who constitute it, whether subjects or outsiders. But it is in contrast part of the essence of the state that it maintains its sovereignty. This means that the state essentially possesses a tendency to eliminate orders that are not its own, and on

the other hand that it is up to those who constitute the communities underlying the state to ensure that the state is harnessed to positive values. The state is not able by itself to discern such values, nor to realise them, but the community can, because individual persons can.

The social construction of the state relies on our valuation of the ability to act as a super individual person. Whether we could stop valuing the ability to act in common is doubtful, but it is clear that it is dependent on the existence of a commonality, a community perhaps, that gives sense to acting in common. This commonality does not have to consist of nations. It could be religious or ideological or indeed universal. It seems to have to correspond to who we really are. This is why Stein moves on in her later career to consider the question of who, and what, the human being is as such. She comes to see this question as fundamental to both social and political philosophy and therefore no longer needs to discuss these: *An Investigation Concerning the State* is in this sense conclusive of a chapter in her life. The phenomenological understanding of our ability to affect the intersubjective constitution of the world, however, is to underpin all her later philosophy and inform it with a kind of lucidity which allows for gentleness. Her philosophy is kind because it takes into consideration that there are a multiplicity of perspectives on the world which need to be accommodated. Her later anthropology and ontology is for this reason also highly original.