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Grace Marshall  
*Lindenwood University*

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Edith Stein: Foremother of Catholic Feminism

Grace Marshall

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Until the late twentieth century, the work of Edith Stein was largely lost to history: a casualty of the Holocaust. In her short life, Stein produced an extensive collection of scholarly work consisting of twenty-seven separate volumes, the majority of which was completely untouched until the late 1950s. This vast repertoire covered a variety of topics, including her own autobiography, phenomenology and Thomism, and social issues. Stein's work continued to be overlooked in the English-speaking world because none of it was published in English until the late 1980s. One volume in Stein's repertoire, *Essays on Woman*, published in English in 1987, develops feminist ideology rooted in Catholicism that was radical at Stein's time of writing. Stein's feminist essays, which were largely ignored due to debates surrounding her 1986 beatification and the culture of the feminist movement at the time of publishing, focused on women's vocations, spirituality, and education. Through her *Essays on Woman*, Edith Stein anticipated many of the ideas of the Catholic Feminist Movement in America, indicating that the gender and education issues Stein faced are still present today.

The feminist work of Edith Stein has yet to experience the degree of scholarship it warrants in the English-speaking world. When Stein's work was first published in English in the late 1980's, few took notice. However, one of the few scholars who did take immediate interest in Stein's work, particularly her feminism, was Sr. Mary Catherine Baseheart, SCN. Baseheart's 1989 article, "Edith Stein's Philosophy of Woman and Women's Education," summarizes Stein's ideas on women. Baseheart notes early on in her article that Stein fell victim to the ban on non-Aryan writers in Germany while she was writing *Essays on Woman*, so her audience was limited to those who listened to her lectures; Stein's work could not have been widely read until 1959 when it was published in German.<sup>1</sup> Baseheart spends the bulk of her article summarizing

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<sup>1</sup>Mary Catharine Baseheart, "Edith Stein's Philosophy of Woman and of Women's Education," *Hypatia* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1989): 120, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3809938>.

Stein's ideas, focusing first on her general philosophy on women and then her application of those theories on women's education. She explains that Stein mediates two previously incompatible points of view: extreme feminism and traditionalism. While Baseheart's scholarship remained relatively general, she was one of the first to contribute said scholarship, therefore, her work cannot be ignored in discussions of Edith Stein's feminism.

Other relevant scholarly work includes Freda Mary Oben's *Edith Stein: Scholar, Feminist, Saint*. Oben provides detailed biographical context, drawing on Stein's own autobiography as well as accounts from friends and family members. While Oben spends little time analyzing Stein's feminist writings within their historical context, her unique perspective as a Jewish convert to Catholicism provides an interesting glimpse into Stein's life and work and helps to contextualize Stein's feminism.<sup>2</sup> Oben's biography is also one of the earliest works to give any mention to Stein's philosophy, putting her at the genesis of the discussion of Stein's feminism.

Those scholars who make up the small wave of academic interest into Stein's *Essays on Woman* appeared primarily from 1998 to 2004. One such scholar and historian, Joyce Avrech Berkman, editor and compiler of *Contemplating Edith Stein*, a collection of essays on various aspects of Stein's work, argues that Stein's feminist essays, which were "harbringers of Christian feminist thought in the late 20th century, remain fresh and vital."<sup>3</sup> Through her work, Berkman aims to examine Stein and her work as "creator of her times."<sup>4</sup> Within her collection, Berkman includes two biographical essays on Stein, the first, more general one, written by Berkman herself, and the second, which focuses on the details of Stein's academia, was written by

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<sup>2</sup>Freda Mary Oben, Ph.D., *Edith Stein: Scholar, Feminist, Saint* (New York, NY: Society of St. Paul, 1988), 41.

<sup>3</sup>Berkman, "Introduction," 2.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid 3.

historian Dana K. Greene. Both these essays are useful in understanding Stein's world and contextualizing her work.

In addition to these biographical essays, Berkman includes historian and sociologist Theresa Wobbe's "The Complex Modernity of Edith Stein: New Gender Relations and Options for Women in Early-Twentieth-Century Germany." In this essay, Wobbe examines Stein's intellectual cohort, analyzing her feminist actions rather than her writings. Wobbe explores the changing gender roles of 1920s Germany, arguing that Stein was a part of a "generation of female pioneers and warriors."<sup>5</sup> In addition to analyzing Stein's feminist actions as they relate to broader social progression in Germany, Wobbe also incorporates the effect of the social regression caused by the rise of the Nazi party, a development exigent to understanding Stein's motivations behind her feminist writings.

The final relevant additions to Berkman's collection are three essays that focus on Stein's feminist writings. In "Edith Stein: Essential Differences," philosopher Linda Lopez McAlister explains why Stein's feminist work was neglected immediately after its English publication, argues that this negligence should change, and Stein's ideas are essential to feminist ideology, both religious and secular. With "Edith Stein: A Reading of Her Feminist Thought," Rachel Feldhay Brenner explores Stein's feminism as foundational to many prominent modern feminists and argues that Stein's feminism is present in her other writings, while it may not be explicitly written or cited. Finally, Lisa M. Dolling analyzes Stein's focus on individual uniqueness as the foundation of her feminism, explores her ideas on women's education, and further contextualizes Stein with other philosophers and feminists with "Edith Stein's Philosophy of "Liberal"

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<sup>5</sup>Theresa Wobbe, "The Complex Modernity of Edith Stein: New Gender Relations and Options for Women in Early-Twentieth-Century Germany," in *Contemplating Edith Stein*, ed. Joyce Avrech Berkman (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2006), 122.

Education.”<sup>6</sup> Each of these essays is imperative in understanding the impact of Stein’s feminist work, particularly as it relates to other philosophers.

However, not all Edith Stein scholars hold her feminist work in the highest of praise. In *The Philosophy of Edith Stein: From Phenomenology to Metaphysics*, Irish philosopher Mette Lebeck contributes one chapter relating to Stein’s feminist writings. Lebeck argues that Stein’s tendency against repeating herself makes her work notoriously difficult to navigate, which would intimidate the average reader.<sup>7</sup> Lebeck, contradicting with Brenner’s aforementioned work, posits that the lack of scholarship on Stein’s philosophy on women is due to the fact that this philosophy is limited to one collection of works, and does not appear significantly in any other work, even though commentary on gender may have been relevant to the particular topic Stein was exploring. Lebeck concedes that feminist philosophy is a significant topic in Stein’s circumstantial writings, “but it is not in any way her most substantial contribution to philosophy.”<sup>8</sup>

Born in Germany in 1891, Stein abandoned her Jewish faith after the death of her father during her teenage years, then converted to Catholicism after college, ultimately becoming a nun of the Order of the Discalced Carmelites.<sup>9</sup> Edith was a studious child and became the first European woman to earn a PhD in philosophy, studying phenomenology under Edmund Husserl.<sup>10</sup> After continuing to work as Husserl’s assistant following graduation, Stein elected to try to make a name for herself in academia by applying for “habilitation,” a necessary step in

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<sup>6</sup>Berkman, “Introduction,” 8.

<sup>7</sup>Mette Lebeck, *The Philosophy of Edith Stein: From Phenomenology to Metaphysics* (Bern, CH: Peter Lang AG, International Academic Publishers, 2015), 1.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid, 102.

<sup>9</sup>Oben, *Edith Stein: Scholar, Feminist, Saint*, 5.

<sup>10</sup>Linda Lopez McAlister, “Edith Stein: Essential Differences,” in *Contemplating Edith Stein*, ed. Joyce Avrech Berkman (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2006), 201.

becoming a university professor. Habilitation was essentially an additional doctorate-level degree that “served as the academic community’s most powerful instrument of self-recruitment and social closure.”<sup>11</sup> Stein, like all women before her, was denied habilitation several times and was never able to achieve her goal of professorship. After her first rejection, Stein wrote a protest letter to Carl-Heinrich Becker, the highest official in the Prussian Department of Education. With Becker’s response came the decree to eliminate sex as a basis for habilitation, Stein, however, did not benefit from this reform.<sup>12</sup> Stein eventually left higher education to teach young women, just one of her motivations for turning her philosophical framework to feminist ideology. Stein developed her *Essays on Woman* from 1928 to 1932, while she was teaching at a Catholic school for girls; she wrote these essays after converting to the Catholic faith in 1922, but before entering the convent in 1934. These feminist essays primarily explore women’s vocations, spirituality, and education.

Stein’s work remained relatively untouched until 1959 when it was first published in German. However, until the late 1980s “scholars without German fluency had only limited access to Stein’s thought, a core reason for the dearth of published scholarship on Stein in English.”<sup>13</sup> While the Institute of Carmelite Studies began to publish Stein’s work in 1986, it took another decade for significant scholarship to appear in the English-speaking world. Stein’s work was largely neglected because discussions of her religious experience and debates surrounding her martyr status took attention away from the twenty-seven volumes she produced in her short life. Because she was born and raised Jewish, critics argued that she was killed by the Nazis for being Jewish, not for her Catholic faith, thereby negating her martyr status.

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<sup>11</sup>Wobbe, “The Complex Modernity of Edith Stein,” 124.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid, 129.

<sup>13</sup>Joyce Avrech Berkman, "Introduction," introduction to *Contemplating Edith Stein* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2006), 4

Additionally, the publishing of Stein's feminist work came in 1987, a time when antiessentialism, an ideology seemingly contrary to Stein's that argued against any essential properties that define gender, was reaching its peak among English-speaking feminist scholars.<sup>14</sup> However, by the time Stein was canonized as St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross in 1998, both debates surrounding her martyr status and the appeal of anti-essentialist feminism had died down, albeit the former more so than the latter, opening the door for scholarly analysis of Stein's work.

As Stein progressed through her studies and into professional academia, she was surrounded by shifting gender relations. Stein was among the first generation of women to enter academia in Germany, being only the second German woman to earn a PhD. Women gained entrance into academia in Prussia in 1908, and World War I accelerated gender modernization, speeding up women's integration into the workforce. Stein's feminism was not only apparent in her writing, but in her actions: she became a member of a female student association and the Prussian Association for Women's Suffrage upon entering university in 1911.<sup>15</sup> Stein directly benefited from the gender modernization of World War I, as her male peers' involvement on the battlefield enabled her to assume her position as assistant to her mentor, Edmund Husserl, in 1917. While working with Husserl, Stein applied for habilitation multiple times, but was never granted a post. She eventually left her assistant post to start a private academy of philosophy, which lacked institutional status and could not advance her own professional career. With Germany's transition from empire to republic after the war came reforms for women; as early as 1926, "women's challenge to historic interpretations of culture and its gendered symbolic system inevitably not only led to reconstellated gender relations in social and political institutions but

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<sup>14</sup>Linda Lopez McAlister, "Edith Stein," 201.

<sup>15</sup>Wobbe, "The Complex Modernity of Edith Stein," 129.



transformed the overall understanding of culture.”<sup>16</sup> All of these events laid the foundation for Stein to begin her feminist writing in 1928.

Stein’s continuing professional frustrations, as well as a series of personal crises, and growing religious orientation led to her Catholic conversion in 1922. Following her conversion, Stein began teaching at a Dominican secondary school for girls, St. Magdalena’s. It was in this position that Stein deepened her knowledge of the Catholic faith and, in her later years of teaching, developed her written feminist philosophy. While teaching at St. Magdalena’s, Stein developed a reputation as a “distinguished teacher and scholar,” and was invited by large national Catholic women’s organizations to lecture on the nature and role of women and their education in different parts of Germany and Switzerland.<sup>17</sup> These lectures were compiled posthumously and would later become known as Edith Stein’s *Essays on Woman*.

As with any philosopher, Stein’s thought on women was shaped by the social and political climate of the country collapsing around her. Germany was amid its post-World War I economic collapse, which was only worsened by the worldwide depression in 1929. The economic situation in Germany only hastened the rise of the National Socialist party, which Stein viewed as a severe threat to society and “total moral dissolution.”<sup>18</sup> Stein’s feminist philosophy was contrary to the Nazi ideology that limited women to their biological function. Stein, a founding member of the German Democratic Party in Breslau during her college years, admonished women to “get involved in matters of national and international welfare,” especially as she witnessed the rise of the Nazi party.<sup>19</sup> Stein, a Jewish Catholic feminist academic, became

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid, 123.

<sup>17</sup>Joyce Avrech Berkman, "The Intellectual Passion of Edith Stein: A Biographical Profile," in *Contemplating Edith Stein* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2006), 38.

<sup>18</sup>Rachel Feldhay Brenner, "Edith Stein: A Reading of Her Feminist Thought," in *Contemplating Edith Stein*, ed. Joyce Avrech Berkman (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2006), 212.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid, 213.

a prime target as Hitler came to power. Although she managed to evade the wrath of the Nazis at the start of the war, Stein, as well as a number of Catholic Jews, was eventually arrested and taken to Auschwitz in reaction to a Catholic bishops' pastoral letter attacking their policies. Stein was murdered in the Birkenau gas chambers on August 9, 1942.

While many scholars can agree that scholarship on Stein's feminist writings is long overdue, many cite different reasons for this neglect. The reason for limited reaction at the time of writing is simple: Stein was writing when 'non-Aryan' individuals were banned from publishing in Germany, so her audience was incredibly limited. However, when her work was finally published in English in 1987, Stein's work was largely ignored by feminist philosophers. Stein's *Essays on Woman* "appeared exactly at a time when antiessentialism was reaching its peak among English-speaking feminist philosophers."<sup>20</sup> Essentialists, like Stein, believe that there is some essential quality to a woman being a woman; some argue this quality is biological, others think this quality relates to a person's soul. Biological is one of the most common, and most criticized forms of essentialism; this perspective states that men and women are unique from each other purely based on physiological faculties. Stein was a naturalist essentialist: she believed that "men and women have differing essences or natures on ontological and theological grounds- seeing this as a point at which the results of philosophy and theology converge."<sup>21</sup> While Stein did agree with aspects of biological essentialism, she felt the differences went deeper, and argued that all women have a naturally feminine soul, just as men possess a naturally masculine one.

Stein's essentialist ideas are the foundation of her feminist philosophy. She uses the idea of a feminine soul as the basis for her arguments surrounding women's professions, spirituality,

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<sup>20</sup>McAlister, "Edith Stein," 201.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid, 205.

and education. In her first essay, “The Ethos of Women’s Professions,” Stein applies this ideology to an ethos, or “a constant spiritual attitude” that “must be understood in its relation to human action.”<sup>22</sup> An ethos provides unity to a person’s ever-changing behavior. Stein then applies this concept of a “spiritual attitude” to professional life: a professional ethos is a spiritual attitude that emerges from or is the formative principle in a person’s profession. Therefore, every profession, and every person, has a unique professional ethos shaped by their own disposition, purpose, and experiences. Having established her terms, Stein presents her thesis: women possess uniquely feminine souls that shape their professional life and that the “nature of woman draws her to certain professions.”<sup>23</sup>

To support her thesis, Stein explores a woman’s natural vocation and its ethos. She first establishes the conversation she is entering, citing the feminist movement and their opponents. Stein recognizes that the feminist movement denied that there are specifically feminine professions, saying that all professions are suitable for women. Stein claims that opponents of feminism refuse to concede this point and claim that a woman’s “natural vocation” is the only feminine vocation. Stein goes on to argue that both men and women have a “natural vocation:” parenthood, both literal and spiritual. While men and women share a basic human nature, Stein argues that because men and women have differing “basic faculties,” they must also have a separate type of soul.<sup>24</sup> Stein explains her rationale through citations of scripture, Church teaching on Mary, Christ’s mother, and the work of theologian John Henry Newman.

After establishing that women are called to a primary natural vocation, Stein discusses the possibility of other feminine vocations. To avoid critics twisting her words, Stein states her

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<sup>22</sup>Edith Stein, *Essays on Woman*, 2nd ed., ed. Dr. Lucy Gelber and Romaeus Leuven, O.C.D., trans. Freda Mary Oben, Ph.D. (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1987), 43.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid, 44.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid, 45.

position very clearly, saying “only subjective delusion could deny that women are capable of practicing vocations other than that of spouse and mother,” and that “there is no profession which cannot be practiced by a woman.”<sup>25</sup> Women are more than just their gender and have unique talents and abilities that serve them in the professional world, just as men do. Stein posits that, while there are professions that cater to feminine traits, if a woman approaches something with a feminine perspective, the profession becomes inherently feminine because of her natural ethos. According to Stein, the integration of women into every profession is a “blessing for the entire society,” as it provides an essential diversity of perspective.<sup>26</sup>

Stein’s second essay in her collection, “The Separate Vocations of Man and Woman According to Nature and Grace,” explores the role of women in society. In this essay, Stein defines “vocations” more clearly than in her previous work; she argues that “a vocation is something to which a person must be called,” it is “much more than gainful employment.”<sup>27</sup> Stein argues that this call comes from God and, within her writing, seeks to express how that call differs for men and women. In this essay, Stein is expanding upon ideas presented in her previous work, “The Ethos of Women’s Professions,” presenting an extensive theological basis for her arguments. She begins her exploration of scripture with the creation and fall of man, then dissects the controversial teachings of St. Paul in his Letter to the Ephesians. Here she advocates for the equality of the sexes, arguing that men and women were created as equals, and their disordered relationship is a “direct consequence of original sin.”<sup>28</sup> Stein later uses this analysis as the basis for her interpretation of St. Paul’s teachings.

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid, 49.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid, 50.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid, 59

<sup>28</sup>Ibid, 64.

Stein spends considerable time analyzing St. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians 5:22-33. In summary, these verses call upon women to serve their husbands as the Church serves Christ, and for men to love their wives as Christ loves the Church. This verse has often been used to justify the oppression of women. Stein, however, argues that this analogy is symbolic and does not relegate women to the slavery of their husband's every whim.<sup>29</sup> She determines that, if this analogy is to be taken literally, women are charged with a far easier task, as they are being likened to a group of human beings, the Church, while men are associated with God. However, "the husband is not Christ," and, therefore, does not have the power of the divine.<sup>30</sup> Stein uses this analysis to argue against the religious basis for the domination over women.

Having established her egalitarian perspective, Stein goes on to discuss the vocations of men and women. While she spends little time discussing men's vocations, she does argue that men should put the well-being of their families ahead of their professions. Although this comment is far from profound, it came at a time when conversations on vocations, professions, and family dynamics focused primarily on women; commentary on the role of men was rare. Stein goes on to analyze the role of women, both within and outside the home. She concludes that, while motherhood is an important and, perhaps, the preeminent vocation of women, professional life outside the home does not "violate the order of nature and grace."<sup>31</sup> Stein states that there is a limit to professional activities when they jeopardize the family and community, but those limits apply to both women and men.

Stein's final section of this essay tackles the idea of "masculine and feminine professions."<sup>32</sup> Stein argues that, while there may be some professions that men and women are

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<sup>29</sup>Ibid, 67.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid, 68.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid, 79.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid, 82.

more suited for due to physical strength or natural disposition, there is no logical reason to bar any person from a profession based on their gender alone. She goes on to say that, because of the “extreme economic distress” of her time, the distinction between masculine and feminine professions is not feasible or logical.<sup>33</sup> People needed to take any job offered to them, regardless of how it suited their natural disposition. While pursuing a profession that was contrary to a person’s natural inclinations was not ideal, extreme economic depression necessitated forgoing some of those inclinations for the sake of saving a collapsing nation.

In her subsequent essays, Stein uses this logic to explain the importance of a woman’s spiritual and educational development. She argues that without proper development of these two things, women cannot reach their full potential in their professional or domestic spheres. Stein clarifies that the same can be said for men, and proceeds to elaborate on such application, but spends the majority of her work focused on women.<sup>34</sup>

Edith Stein spends the bulk of her feminist writing focused on women’s education. Her work on women’s education came as a response to Germany’s major economic crisis and the rise of the Nazi party.<sup>35</sup> She emphasizes the value of education in each of her essays, particularly as it relates to preparation for professional and domestic life. However, Stein dedicates two of her essays solely to the subject of women’s education, “Fundamental Principles of Women’s Education” and “Problems of Women’s Education.” In the former, Stein establishes that the European “educational system has been in a state of crisis for decades.”<sup>36</sup> She argues that all education requires reforms, but women’s education has its own unique problems, and the two must be considered together to achieve a solution.

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid, 82.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid, 71.

<sup>35</sup>Brenner, “Edith Stein,” 212.

<sup>36</sup>Stein, *Essays on Woman*, 129.

Stein begins her analysis of education by defining the system in which she was taught, and, eventually, entered as a teacher herself. She targets her concerns toward elementary and high schools and teachers' colleges, stating that universities and other vocational schools are rooted in a different foundation. Elementary, high schools, and teachers' colleges, Stein argues, are "a child of the Enlightenment."<sup>37</sup> According to Stein, these schools emphasize memorization of as much information as possible, rather than understanding and critical thinking. She claims that the purpose of education is to develop and form the human person, not force memorization of an arbitrary set of facts. The internal process of learning is far more important than the external process of educating.<sup>38</sup> Stein determines that "because the Enlightenment did not deal with the essential factors of formation, its system of education had to suffer shipwreck."<sup>39</sup>

Stein proceeds with her theories on women's education by summarizing her previously stated thoughts on women's nature and vocations. Here, unlike in her previous essays, Stein emphasizes the individuality of each student, and recognizes that different students will require different educational processes. Although the majority of her philosophy on women is rooted in essentialism, Stein shows here that she does not restrict women to one character type, contrary to the assertions of her anti-essentialist critics.<sup>40</sup> This attitude is present in Stein's other essays but is most evident in her work on women's' education. However, Stein argues that before considering these differences, the educational system must first consider woman's essential nature, which she outlines throughout her work. She advocates for a sort of Montessori structure, meant to be followed up until vocational school, in which students pursue their own interests, rather than a formally structured classroom, with an emphasis on emotion, reason, and practical

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<sup>37</sup>Ibid, 129.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid, 130.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid, 131.

<sup>40</sup>McAlister, "Edith Stein," 208.

intelligence.<sup>41</sup> According to Stein, this model would allow educators to differentiate between and cultivate individual student's gifts, better preparing them for future vocations.

In her second, far longer essay on women's education, "Problems of Women's Education," Stein further examines her previously stated ideas, and analyzes additional factors surrounding education. She begins by contextualizing herself within the European feminist movement, pointing out its' victories and failings within the previous decade. As the first woman to earn a Ph.D. in philosophy in Europe, and the second woman to earn a Ph.D. in Germany, Stein had firsthand experience with these victories and failings.<sup>42</sup> She was not content to settle for the victories she experienced herself. Stein viewed her role as an educator as her sacred calling and sought to fulfill that role in the best way possible.<sup>43</sup> Stein recognized that, although strides had been made in women's education, there was still far to go, and she was primarily concerned with elementary and secondary education.

In order to analyze and amend her educational systems, Stein first examines the state of women in Europe. She begins by investigating women's attitudes towards the issues of her time, such as marriage and motherhood, vocation, the role of women in national life and politics, and religion. Stein then illustrates society's attitude toward women, including that of general public opinion, the state, and the Catholic Church. In her characterization of the general public's attitude toward women, Stein claims that women were still viewed as "the weaker sex," and that "gains won during the last decade are being wiped out" because of Nazi ideology.<sup>44</sup> She argues that "violence is being done to the spirit" of women due to her confinement to the home.<sup>45</sup> The

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<sup>41</sup>Stein, *Essays on Woman*, 140.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid, 147.

<sup>43</sup>Lisa M. Dolling, "Edith Stein's Philosophy of 'Liberal' Education," in *Contemplating Edith Stein*, ed. Joyce Avrech Berkman (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2006), 227.

<sup>44</sup>Stein, *Essays on Woman*, 157.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid, 157.



perspective Stein presents on the state's view of women is far more positive; while she acknowledges there was still work to be done, women had won suffrage and had legal access to equal education. Stein does, however, advocate for more civic responsibilities and government positions for women.

The final perspective Stein analyzes is that of the Catholic Church. She first distinguishes two different perspectives within the Church: that of traditional doctrine and the hierarchy of the church, and that of God. Stein claims that there is no "precisely defined dogma ex cathedra on the vocation of women and her place in the Church," but traditional doctrine declares a woman's "most essential duty is to be the heart of the family."<sup>46</sup> However, Stein posits that, as evidenced by the increasing number of women employed by the Church, the views of Catholic leaders have changed. Stein then clearly lays out the perspective of God surrounding women. According to Stein, "the call to Catholic action was issued to both men and women," the Church needs women.<sup>47</sup> She determines that God never made a significant distinction in terms of status between men and women so, therefore, men and women are equal in the eyes of God.

After establishing these perspectives, Stein delves into the problems of girls' education, starting with examining the solutions that had already been attempted. She argues that the primary issue with her present education system is that it was created entirely by men, for men, and women were integrated as an afterthought. This issue was perpetuated as girls were integrated into the education system due to the lack of female teachers. Even the motivation to educate women was male-centric; Stein cites two passages focused on women's education from a male perspective. The first argues that women should be educated so they can share their husband's interests and avoid boring them with their stupidity. The second argues that women

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<sup>46</sup>Ibid, 159-160.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid, 161.

can only learn from men, specifically their husbands, fathers, and brothers.<sup>48</sup> Here Stein shows that there was very little consideration for women in the discussion of women's education. She argues that the issue improved due to increased education for teachers and a growing number of female teachers, but further work was necessary to remedy the "obvious defects of our masculine Western culture" and education system.<sup>49</sup>

Stein then conquers the notion that education reform for women is not possible within the realm of the Catholic Church. She points to the success of the Catholic Women's Movement, whose mission had been labeled as futile by "the interdenominational feminist movement."<sup>50</sup> This label came from the misconception that the Church was incapable of change or social progression. Stein disproves this criticism of Catholic feminism, arguing that while many aspects of the Church are constant, "the Church is a human institution and like all things human, was destined to change and evolve."<sup>51</sup> She claims that this, combined with the Catholic educational systems for girls already in Germany, indicated that reform within and through Catholic education was possible. The Catholic Church has historically been concerned with the education of all children, including young girls. While it began several decades after the interdenominational feminist movement, the Catholic Women's Movement was originally organized with education as a primary goal.<sup>52</sup> Stein focuses her ideas on educational reform through this lens, arguing that, while it is important to work in conjunction with secular educational reform movements, theological education is imperative to her reforms.

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<sup>48</sup>Ibid, 165.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid, 167.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid, 169.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid, 169.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid, 170.

Stein continues her analysis of women's education by connecting it to the nature of women. She defines education as "the formation experienced by a person designated for development" and argues that educators must understand the "object" they are forming, that "there is a fundamental practical requirement of the person for whom this work is designed."<sup>53</sup> Stein then explores four different methods of analysis for understanding students in order to establish an adequate educational system: physiological, psychological, philosophical, and theological. According to Stein, each of these methods is necessary because none are entirely comprehensive. The most thorough perspectives are that of the philosophical and theological because, in addition to being subjects relating to Stein's doctorate, they most clearly support her naturalist essentialist perspective.<sup>54</sup> Here Stein pauses to refute biological essentialism- the notion that men and women are essentially different purely due to biological and anatomical characteristics- as basis for differing educational methods. She argues that because the mind is unaffected by physiological differences between men and women, these differences cannot be the motivation for the distinction between the sexes in the realm of education. Stein claims that, therefore, educators must not be focused on those physiological differences, but "education must be geared either to overcoming the limitations of the specifically masculine and feminine natures or to developing their potential strengths."<sup>55</sup>

Stein goes on to reiterate her philosophy on the unique nature of women, then notes that it is imperative for educators to acknowledge the types into which students can be further divided. She acknowledges that, while many women are called to the vocation of marriage and motherhood, this is not the case for all women. Stein then catalogs a few types of girls teachers

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<sup>53</sup>Ibid, 172.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid, 183.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid, 183.

often encounter: maternal, romantic, level-headed, and intellectual. She claims that many students fall into one category, many are a mix of types, and many fall into different groups altogether.<sup>56</sup> Here Stein again steps away from her essentialist label, focusing on the importance of emphasizing the individuality of students. While she claims it is beneficial for educators to understand these types to better connect with their students, she warns against schematically classifying them into categories at the risk of reverting to the rigid system she was trying to remedy.<sup>57</sup> Stein also indicates that, unlike a person's inherent nature, these types are not fixed and change as a person navigates life.

After discussing the nature of women as it relates to individual students, Stein explores the goal of education. She argues that the nature of women proscribes a threefold goal: "the development of her humanity, her womanhood, and her individuality."<sup>58</sup> While she divides the goal of education into three parts, each return to the same basic idea; each is an aspect of leading young people to God. Stein's threefold goal presents God himself, Mary, the mother of Christ, and a person's individual gifts as imperative to the path to salvation, therefore imperative to education.<sup>59</sup> She further expounds especially on the importance of individuality, reflecting back on her previously explored types of students. Here Stein calls for an independent Catholic education system for girls, which would accomplish the goals she lays out, defend the position of women in cultural life against Nazi ideology, and combat the anti-Christian movements of her time.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup>Ibid, 186.

<sup>57</sup>McAlister, "Edith Stein," 208.

<sup>58</sup>Stein, *Essays on Woman*, 192.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid, 202.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid, 206.

Stein continues her thoughts on the problems of women's education by determining who bears the responsibility of accomplishing the goals previously discussed. She argues all human beings bear some responsibility in educating young people, but that the family, the state, and the Church bear the primary weight. Stein was not alone in her assertion that any person could function as an educator, as education theorists of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries expressed similar ideas.<sup>61</sup> The family has the most immediate goal of education, as children begin learning and growing immediately, years before they enter formal education.<sup>62</sup> Because, Stein argues, education deals with the development of the whole person, not simply the academic faculties, the responsibility of the family does not diminish when a child enters primary school; parents are responsible for fostering the same growth throughout a child's life. The idea of the ongoing process of education was not unique to Stein, but it was not reflected in public schools.<sup>63</sup>

The responsibility of the state is far more regimented. Stein argues that because the state is concerned with public welfare and is an organized power like no other social structure, it has the responsibility to educate citizens so that they are able to perform their civic duties and protect and promote education. Finally, Stein explores the responsibility of the Church, arguing that education is a direct obligation.<sup>64</sup> The Church bears a similar responsibility to the family, but this responsibility is heightened due to the Church's role as a global institution. Unlike the state, the family and the Church possess "natural agents for human development."<sup>65</sup> The state must create those agents by raising educational work to a national goal emphasizing the role of teachers.

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<sup>61</sup>Dolling, "Edith Stein's Philosophy of 'Liberal' Education," 233.

<sup>62</sup>Stein, *Essays on Woman*, 208.

<sup>63</sup> Dolling, "Edith Stein's Philosophy of 'Liberal' Education," 231.

<sup>64</sup>Stein, *Essays on Woman*, 212.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid, 214.

Stein clarifies that while the bulk of responsibility for education falls on the family, the state, and the Church, there is value in the formal educational structure. The human mind is designed to understand “a multiplicity of cultural disciplines,” and encountering those disciplines most directly occurs within formal education.<sup>66</sup> According to Stein, schools should introduce students to a variety of disciplines, and make those disciplines effective in the development of the individual. Stein highlights language, art, science, history, mathematics, and philosophy as necessary disciplines.

Stein concludes her perspective on women’s education by evaluating different methods of education. She explores the advantages and disadvantages surrounding both homeschooling and institutional education. She argues that because very few homes or schools can educate students to an ideal degree, they should work in conjunction with each other.<sup>67</sup> Because of the importance of individuality in education and the danger of an overloaded curriculum, Stein believes that the fundamental subjects in a primary school are religion, language and literature, including the classics, and history, adding that only the foundational aspects of math and science are necessary.<sup>68</sup> Higher education should expand from this foundation, offering more disciplines that students can pursue by choice.

Not only is Stein’s work on women’s education relevant in addressing traditional issues in education, it is pertinent to modern educational debate.<sup>69</sup> Her emphasis on individuality is reflected in modern critiques of over-standardization in education. While not directly cited, Stein’s attitudes are reflected in modern American educational philosopher Nel Noddings’

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<sup>66</sup>Ibid, 217.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid, 225.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid, 234.

<sup>69</sup>Dolling, “Edith Stein's Philosophy of 'Liberal' Education,” 226.

rejection of a standardized curriculum through grade twelve.<sup>70</sup> Additionally, both Stein and Noddings emphasize the mutual trust and respect between teacher and student. While Noddings' *Philosophy of Education* relates to exclusively secular realms of education, her connections with Stein's work indicate that the issues she addressed were not solved.

Within her essays, Stein creates a bridge between the feminist movement and its opponents. She accepts and explains Catholic Church teaching on the natural vocation of women, while simultaneously using that same logic to advocate for additional vocations.<sup>71</sup> Stein was among the first to provide a theological basis to support women in the labor force. By explaining the natural vocation of women through Church teaching and then applying that information to professional life, Stein creates a strong argument for women's professional vocations. This idea would have seemed shocking to many traditional Catholics, as the longstanding attitude was that women had two basic options: get married and have children or become a nun. Many traditionally feminine professions, such as teaching, nursing, or artistic fields, were deemed acceptable, but motherhood and religious life were supported over professional work. The idea that women could participate in any profession would have been even more radical; Catholic women pursuing traditionally masculine fields such as engineering, accounting, or medicine was exceptionally rare. However, without actively arguing against any Church teaching, Stein's simple and clear logic on this point significantly alters traditional Church perspective. If all women naturally possess a feminine soul and spiritual attitude that affects all that they do, any task a woman approaches becomes inherently feminine, by nature of that ethos. Stein also comments on the decline of family life, a topic frequently discussed among Church leaders and often blamed on working women throughout the feminist movement. Stein

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<sup>70</sup>Ibid, 235.

<sup>71</sup>Baseheart, "Edith Stein's," 124.

argues that the issue as it relates to women is not those in the workforce as a collective, but rather those who neglect their ethos. Stein determines that the only way to solve this issue is improved education for young girls, then outlines a detailed process for how best to create and implement those improvements. This concluding argument is contrary to many traditional attitudes of her time of writing, the 1930s, as women's education, especially higher education, was still relatively controversial.

Many of the ideas present in Stein's work are reflected in modern Catholic feminism in America. The notion that women can play valuable roles both in and outside the home is central to the movement, as reflected in Pope John Paul II's "Letter to Women." This letter also cites the same passages in Genesis as Stein that establish the equality of men and women.<sup>72</sup> While John Paul II does not discuss the meaning and significance of these passages as thoroughly as Stein, their presence indicates that the ideas shared in both works are still relevant, decades after Stein took pen to paper. This theological basis for equality presented by Stein and echoed by Pope John Paul II is central to Catholic feminist ideology. Debates surrounding women's roles in society, particularly in regard to labor inequality, are prevalent in modern American society. While these debates have evolved past women working outside the home and now focus on gender discrimination in specific industries, they are a continuation of the issues Stein faced. Furthermore, the common notion that women cannot be competitive in certain professions is directly discussed in Stein's work.

Additionally, while the issue of education bears less emphasis on gender discrimination in modern America, Stein's philosophy on education proves relevant today, nearly a century after it was originally written. Modern American philosopher of education Nel Noddings echoes

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<sup>72</sup>Letter by John Paul II, "Letter to Women," June 29, 1995



Stein's call for the emphasis on the individuality of the student, criticizing standardized curricula and testing. Catholic feminists continue to advocate for school reforms and increased education options for their children. The modern notion of life-long learning is clearly reflected in Stein's ideas, as is the desire to foster growth of the whole student in schools, not just that of the intellect.<sup>73</sup> While men and women in America have equal access to education, many of Stein's reforms are still relevant to the struggling system.

Stein's feminism, written at a time in Germany when, as a Jewish Catholic woman, every idea she presented increased attention and danger from the Nazi party, has retained its relevance through its tumultuous journey to publishing and into modern day. Stein not only made a considerable contribution to feminist thought, but she also embodied her ideology, both in her social activism in college, and in her classroom. Her essentialist perspectives on women's education and vocations were written as radical solutions to the social issues she encountered in the early twentieth century. Shaped by a rise in new opportunities for women and a crumbling economy, Stein sought to continue the progress that had been made before her. Her belief that the equality of men and women is theologically proven, that women have an essential nature which their education and vocation should revolve around, and the notion that Catholic women could have valuable vocations outside of the home are all ideas that catapult Stein beyond her time and into the twenty-first century.

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<sup>73</sup>Brenner, "Edith Stein," 222.

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\*denotes primary source