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THE HUMAN BEING ONTOLOGICALLY OPEN TO THE DIVINE. A REFLECTION STARTING FROM E. STEIN

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RESUMO

Este artigo examina, através da fenomenologia de Edith Stein, a abertura inerente do ser humano ao divino. Argumenta que a experiência humana da limitação — especialmente a busca por sentido e o confronto com a morte — revela uma orientação para uma fonte transcendente. Sinais externos na natureza e dinâmicas internas como a motivação, a força vital e a estrutura do “eu” indicam que os seres humanos se apoiam em um fundamento que os transcende. A síntese de filosofia e teologia proposta por Stein demonstra que a pessoa só pode compreender plenamente sua existência reconhecendo esse fundamento divino. Em contraste com as tentativas modernas de autocriação e transcendência tecnológica, o artigo clama por uma renovada consciência dos limites humanos e da responsabilidade ética que deles decorre.

Palavras-chave: pessoa humana; fenomenologia; transcendência; antropologia teológica; Deus.

ABSTRACT

This article examines, through Edith Stein’s phenomenology, the inherent openness of the human being to the divine. It argues that the human experience of limitation—especially the search for meaning and the confrontation with death—reveals an orientation toward a transcendent source. External signs in nature and internal dynamics such as motivation, vital force, and the structure of the “I” indicate that human beings draw on a foundation beyond themselves. Stein’s synthesis of philosophy and theology shows that the person can fully understand their existence only by acknowledging this divine grounding. In contrast to modern attempts at self-creation and technological transcendence, the article calls for a renewed awareness of human limits and the ethical responsibility that arises from them.

Keywords: human person; phenomenology; transcendence; theological anthropology; God.

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1. As an introduction

All human beings experience their own limitations in life, discovering that not everything they wish to do is possible, that they cannot answer questions about the meaning of their existence or whether there is an afterlife beyond earthly existence. Such questions, as G. Marcel teaches us, cannot be resolved by answering oneself «You are a reasonable animal»². Reason is not able to answer everything, let alone calm the restlessness that humans carry inside when faced with such radical questions.

Today, people try to overcome these questions and transcend their limits through technology. Consider, for example, the transhumanist movements that, starting from the inherent limits of the human being, attempt to enhance human capabilities through the insertion of *devices* or manipulating biological substance, in order to make life « [...] better, freer, more autonomous, happier, and longer»³. However, the attempt to overcome limitations and achieve immortality proves to be profoundly contradictory because it involves means that foster dependency and whose effects are unpredictable for both producers and users. Beyond the many attempts, real or possible, there is one inescapable fact: within humans, there is a strong desire for eternity, which, however, arises from a clear awareness of their limitations, the first of which is death. It is the definitive obstacle because it is «An unbearable mockery to our efforts for healing, eternal youth, and the instantaneity of virtual and imagined worlds. Death is that thing that should no longer stand in our way, which we hide and avoid»⁴.

In their desire to shape and improve themselves, in the attempt to achieve eternity, humans have usurped the role that once belonged to God. This, however, has not quelled the restlessness they carry inside because the questions remain, as do external and internal references that take them beyond themselves. At this point, there are two options: either one continues to believe in the possibility of becoming immortal, or one tries to understand the meaning of those signals that we intercept daily in our lives that point us toward an 'elsewhere'. In the first case, we should ask ourselves: once we have achieved eternity, what would we do with it? What J.L. Borges narrates in his story *The Immortal* is interesting. He describes immortal beings as inept troglodytes because «considering every undertaking as futile, they decided to live in thought, in pure speculation. They built the factory, forgot it and went to dwell in caves. Absorbed, they hardly perceived the physical world»⁵. They are beings, in other words, who, having attained eternity, find no meaning in

² G. Marcel, *L'uomo problematico*, Borla, Roma 1992, p. 19.

³ F. P. Adorno, *Antropologia del transumanesimo. Problemi e prospettive del divenire cyborg*, in *Humanity. Tra paradigmi e nuove traiettorie*, D. Calabrò, D. Giugliano, R. Peluso, A.P. Ruoppo, L. Scarfoglio (edd.), vol. II, Inschibboleth edizioni, Roma 2022, p. 33

⁴ A. Dufourmantelle, *L'elogio del rischio*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 2020, p. 79.

⁵ J.L. Borges, *L'Aleph*, Universale Economica Feltrinelli, Milano 2020, p. 18.

anything and thus regress to a primitive state. In the second case, on the other hand, we embark on a journey to understand the signs that lead us into an ‘elsewhere’, towards a reality greater than ourselves. Yet, in both cases the divine is always encountered. In the first in the form of negation, as a way to assert the absoluteness of the human being; in the second, in the desire to follow its traces and reach it.

We will undertake this second path because it is necessary to understand what constitutes the finiteness of human beings and how they can experience a higher reality to which they entrust themselves. To find some answers, it is essential to determine whether there are references in the external world that lead us to God and, secondly, to investigate human beings and their structure to understand if there is within them a glimpse that leads to God. To pursue such paths, we will draw on the phenomenological tradition, particularly that of E. Stein, who, in her speculative journey, deeply and repeatedly examined the human being, offering a broad and articulated vision that reveals what constitutes the ontological openness of the human being to the divine.

2. External references. The natural world

How many times have we found ourselves gazing at a breathtaking landscape, facing the majesty of nature or natural phenomena, confronting which we have felt extremely small and powerless? How many times have we experienced a sense of awe, of harmony, of security in the face of so much beauty that has penetrated every fibre of our being? Or, who has not thought of human impotence in the face of overwhelming forces during an extreme event?

German Romantic philosophy as a whole made reflection on nature a central theme of its speculations. Consider Goethe and, even earlier, Kant, whose feeling towards the grandeur of nature is one of awe, both when it is peaceful and when it presents itself in its most terrible form, when human beings feel small, fragile, and finite. Apart from general philosophical considerations, the spectacle of nature brings about changes in the human emotional state. Either of gentleness and tranquillity when faced with serene realities, or helplessness when natural catastrophes occur. Such events affect our sensitivity and thus cause a feeling, meaning they are not without significance but speak to us because, according to E. Stein, from them «[...] something emanates that we can receive within ourselves and that, despite this, remains stored within us. And this is true not only for complex entities like landscapes but even for the simplest elements of the sensory world: colours, sounds, forms. Their spiritual meaning is what has value in them, what can penetrate us, make us rejoice, exult, and become enthusiastic»⁶. However, such realities should not be attributed a soul, nor is this feeling at all a projection of our state of mind. Indeed, if we are restless, in front of a breathtaking landscape, our soul calms down and we experience a deep peace. This is because even

⁶ E. Stein, *La struttura della persona umana. Corso di antropologia filosofica*, Città Nuova- Edizioni OCD, Roma 2013, p. 158.

material realities have a spiritual meaning, which reveals itself to us and from which we derive meaning. They are symbols of something else, of something that is above us and beyond the visible world, yet moves it and gives it meaning⁷. Nature, in fact, is not a machine, but an organised organism that conveys a meaning originating from a higher entity which might itself be spiritual and that we call God. Paradoxically, according to E. Stein, even a block of granite which has a material structure can be permeated by the spirit, as it carries a symbolic meaning. It, the phenomenologist writes, «[...] speaks to us of an unshakable stability and a solid reliability as personal qualities. This interpretation is by no means arbitrary or coincidental, there are precise symbolic connections, since clay or sand cannot be interpreted in the same way as granite»⁸. Moreover, besides a symbolic meaning, there is also a practical one, namely that «[...] what is made like this ancient stone has been capable of raising towering mountains, it has also served to erect monumental buildings destined to last for generations»⁹. The symbolic and practical meanings are intimately connected. Both point to something that is above, something that transcends them, that is, they «[...] suggest the presence of a personal spirit, which stands behind the visible world and has given each reality its meaning, which has given them a ‘form’ according to their destined position in the structure of the whole; the presence of a personal spirit which has written this ‘great book of nature’ and through it speaks to the human spirit»¹⁰.

Nature, therefore, is not endowed with a soul but with a meaning that, coming from a personal spirit, God, speaks to another personal spirit: the human being.

3. Internal references. Psychic causality

In addition to external references, there are some internal ones that lead from the human being to God, forces that, despite the extreme fragility and limited psychological and physical endurance of human beings, continue to sustain them, making them perform extraordinary efforts, actions above any human strength, without understanding how this is possible. A somewhat brief response to these questions is provided by E. Stein in the volume *Psychology and the Sciences of the Spirit: Contributions to a Philosophical Foundation*, which she published in 1922 in *Jahrbuch* by E. Husserl, and where there are extremely interesting insights, although not fully explored, on openness to the divine.

⁷ Cf. *ivi*, p. 158.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 160

⁹ *Ivi*, p. 160

¹⁰ *Ivi*, p. 160-161

In the first part of the work, entitled *Psychic Causality*, the philosopher discusses whether the same causality that operates in the natural world can be attributed to psychic reality, engaging in the broad discussion that arose at the beginning of the last century between *Naturwissenschaften* (the natural sciences) and *Geisteswissenschaften* (the human sciences). Before addressing this issue, Stein states in the introduction that the question of causality was not resolved by Kant, for whom causality is one of the conditions of exact science, has only a cognitive value and, as *natura formaliter spectata*, nature formally considered, it offers no answer to the question posed by D. Hume, which, according to Stein, would be more serious and closer to the phenomenological approach. In fact, for the phenomenologist, Hume does not reach a solution because he dismisses the question of the nature of consciousness too quickly, and this prevents him from finding those demonstrable connections «[...] which he seeks and ultimately leads him to set aside the phenomena from which he started»¹¹. Whereas the analysis of phenomena, of their richness and complexity carried out by phenomenological investigations, along with the consciousness that corresponds to them, has led to a correct understanding of the issue raised by the Scottish philosopher. For the aforementioned reasons, phenomenology, according to Stein, has the possibility of examining the psyche and psychic causality.

The first step that Stein takes is to prepare the analysis of psychic causality starting from the noetic moment, as Husserl had already done both in *Logical Investigations* and in the second volume of *Ideas*, where, particularly in §85, he speaks of *Erlebnisse*, lived experiences, as bearers of intentionality and of *Erlebnisse* understood as primary contents. Among these are the *contents of sensation*¹², such as data of colour, sound, touch, and similar, as well as the emotional moments of suffering, pleasure, pain, impulses, etc. These *Erlebnisse* are embedded in more comprehensive *Erlebnisse*, which «[...]taken as a whole, are intentional, in the sense that above these sensory moments, there is a layer that, so to speak, 'animates' them, that *confers* meaning (or implies in essence the conferring of meaning), through which *the sensory element, which has no intentionality in itself*, becomes the concrete intentional lived experience»¹³. It is precisely for this reason that Husserl considers that the noetic side of these *Erlebnisse* can be defined as psychic, entering into polemic with Brentano, who, although he had given space to the concept of the psyche, had strongly connoted it with intentional properties. The same concept of lived experience is taken up by E. Stein in her 1922 text, in which she further clarifies the distinction made by the master, namely that in lived experience it is possible to identify: «1. A *content* that is received into consciousness (for

¹¹ E. Stein, *Psicologia e scienze dello spirito. Contributi per una fondazione filosofica*, tr. it. di A.M. Pezzella, Città Nuova, Roma 1996, p. 40.

¹² E. Husserl, *Idee per una fenomenologia pura e per una filosofia fenomenologica*, vol. I, tr. it. e cura di V. Costa, Biblioteca Einaudi, Torino, p.213

¹³ *Ibidem*

example data related to colour or a sense of well-being; 2. The *living* of this content, its being grasped in consciousness (having sensations, feeling a sense of well-being); 3. The *consciousness* of this living, which, to a greater or lesser extent, always accompanies it, so that living itself is also referred to as consciousness»¹⁴. Stein starts from the analysis of the noetic moment because behind the noematic multiplicities, there are noetic multiplicities, which must be investigated in order to understand— this is the core issue of the essay—whether the causality found in the psychic realm is the same as that of mechanical-natural causality, and whether psychic life can be determined in advance and with absolute certainty.

The life of the human being is an incessant flow and, at least in substance, is not determined by causality. Every flow is characterised by the passing of lived experiences, which, when they conclude, sink into the past, thus making room for new ones, which, as long as they are present, are enriched and produce new phases. The lived experience that has passed is not annulled but persists, remaining in the background to be retrieved through memory. The *Erlebnisse* constitute themselves as units within the flow, and one does not simply follow the other, but they are given simultaneously, even though each lived experience belongs to a different genre: colour sensation, sound sensation, sensitive state, and so on. Stein does not deny that, between the lived experiences causality exists, but it cannot absolutely be compared to that found in physical nature, because the cause is not intercalated between a causative event and a caused one, but the causative event itself gives a certain direction to the sphere of lived experience. In lived experience, the causing event is the vital feeling, while the caused event is the particular course that life takes. In this context, the cause precedes the causing event, determines it, and does not remain without effect, as in nature, where if the ball does not hit the other, there is no caused event. Fatigue (the cause), on the other hand, leads to a decrease in concentration (the causing event), which prevents continuing to study (the caused event). However, for E. Stein, there is a certain analogy between the two types of causality, the mechanical causality and the causality of lived experience. She writes: «The two modes of action, however, agree in that the effect cannot occur unless the cause and the causing event have intervened, and the latter manifests itself at the moment when this happens. And in both cases the effect is necessary in accordance with its material character: just as it is unthinkable that a ball thrown downward would go upward, so it is unthinkable that fatigue ‘vivifies’ the flow of consciousness»¹⁵. What makes the lived experiences flow more or less quickly, more or less intensely, is, however, the *vital force*, a concept absent in Husserl and taken by Stein from the scientific literature of the time, in particular from Th. Lipps, with whom she had interacted during the writing of her degree thesis. In fact, she writes: «In agreement with Lipps, we want to define

¹⁴ E. Stein, *Psicologia e scienze dello spirito*, cit., p.53.

¹⁵ *Ivi*, p. 51.

this something as a psychic *force* that, though not describable in greater detail, but quantitatively delimited, must be added to the excitement caused by a stimulus»¹⁶.

The analysis Stein provides of the vital force is full of examples to show how it serves as the link between the natural and the spiritual, both aspects present in human beings. The vital state, depending on the moments, presents a greater or lesser amount of vital force. It is difficult to explain why this happens; one can only say that the vital force draws from a reserve that is consumed as one lives. It is precisely this force that conditions and connotes the qualities of lived experiences and is the foundation of the psychic process, being its ultimate cause. The stronger the vital force, the more receptive and reactive one is to external stimuli. Lived experiences draw upon vital force, which diminishes whenever it is used. For example, intense activity can consume all the energy one possesses. Therefore, even on a psychic level, a cause is followed by an effect, although the psychic mechanism is not comparable to the natural one because the vital force that permeates individual lived experiences is not a *quantity that can be expressed numerically*, even though the psychic event connected to it is characterized by causal laws. Moreover, in addition to causality, motivation intervenes in human beings—the law of spiritual life—which overrides any causal mechanism. If fatigue prevents one from engaging in demanding reading, two alternatives are possible: either one gives in to fatigue or motivation takes over, which is the engine of any spiritual activity. It is within human capability to gather all available forces to concentrate if one must, for example, take an exam the next day. Motivation connects one act to another, causes one lived experience to arise from another. Such acts originate in the ‘I’, the *pivot* of motivation: it performs a certain act *because* it has already performed another¹⁷.

At this point, Stein introduces the concept of intention, which is an extremely important aspect, as it is *the truly “free” moment of willing*¹⁸. In fact, it inserts itself between the will's decision and the action and does not derive from the sensory sphere, nor from vitality, but rather from the spiritual realm.

In fact, if one is unable to complete an activity because one no longer has vital energy, it can still be completed through voluntary intention. This is because if one recognizes that the action to be performed is valuable, then, even without vividly feeling the motive, the intention is capable of giving life to the required action. At this point, «What produces and what is produced are no longer moments in a chain of causal events, but the ‘I’ is configured as the beginning, as the original locus of the events themselves»¹⁹.

¹⁶ *Ivi*, p. 57.

¹⁷ Cf. *ivi*, p. 73.

¹⁸ *Ivi*, p. 119.

¹⁹ E. Stein, *Psicologia e scienze dello spirito*, cit., p. 119.

However, despite being a driving force, intention requires energies drawn from the vital sphere, which are necessary to achieve the goal. When this energy is exhausted, all activity ceases, including the will. Intention, which arises from a free impulse—such as the urge to help someone in need, for example—can completely consume vital energy. However, it can happen that voluntary intentions persist if there are valid objective foundations, even in the absence of sensitive vital energy. Stein wonders where all of this originates. Certainly not from the human sphere but from a beyond that the philosopher cannot examine in this text. She writes, in fact: «This marvellous capacity to produce impulses from itself clearly points to a source of strength that lies beyond the mechanism of the individual personality, flowing into the willing ‘I’ in which it is anchored. A deeper investigation of these relationships, which lies outside our objective here, takes us into the realm of the philosophy of religion»²⁰. Thus, within human beings, there is a source of strength that surpasses their possibilities and reaches them because they are anchored to a foundation from which they draw nourishment, enabling them to carry out important actions even when mere human strength would not suffice. Examples of such strength sustaining human beings are numerous; for instance, consider the many saints who have testified with superhuman strength to the love of God.

3. Internal references. The configuration of the human being

E. Stein reorganised and synthesised the in-depth analyses conducted by her mentor on the human subject, found in the second volume of *Ideas* by E. Husserl. This material provided her with the theoretical foundation to address the question of the person, which would later be further enriched by the contributions of Christian anthropology. The teachings of Scheler, considered one of the founding fathers of modern anthropology, were also very important to her. In *The Position of Man in the Cosmos*, the philosopher offers «some clarifications on the essence of human beings in relation to plants and animals and on their particular metaphysical position»²¹, which Stein would later incorporate into *The Structure of the Person. Course in Philosophical Anthropology*. In this work, before investigating the human being, Stein reviews the natural and physical world, because human beings, as bodies, are matter and are therefore subject to the same laws as the physical world. However, human beings are also living beings, which makes it necessary to understand what they have in common with plants and animals, until reaching the aspect that belongs to them alone: the spirit, the *Geist*, which makes them different from all other living beings.

The Steinian anthropological view is, fundamentally, the classical one that sees the human being as consisting of body, soul and spirit.

The body is the center around which the entire spatial world is ordered and enables the ‘I’ to move, speak, and be visible to others; it is the place where what comes to us from within is

²⁰ *Ivi*, p. 120

²¹ M. Scheler, *La posizione dell'uomo nel cosmo*, trad. da Rosa Padellaro (Roma: Armando, 1999), 118.

reflected. In fact, through a person's expression, one can perceive what they are experiencing: joy, sadness, boredom, etc., because the body is the place of manifestation (*Schauplatz*) of the soul, as all the states that the subject experiences are transcribed onto it. This also allows for empathetic understanding, as the sad expression on a person's face lets me know that they are going through a difficult moment. The living body is animated by the psyche. These two aspects make human beings similar to animals. However, the psyche does not coincide with consciousness, nor with the stream of consciousness or the totality of lived experiences. The former represents the most natural aspect of the person. Consciousness, on the other hand, is free, opposed to everything that exists, and it is through consciousness that it becomes possible to affirm that everything appearing before me is here. Alongside the psyche and consciousness is the soul, which Stein *discovers* when she converts to Catholicism, as for phenomenologists, psyche (*Psyche*) and soul (*Seele*) had the same meaning. The soul is endowed with an inner space in which the 'I' moves and only there does the 'I' feel at home. «My soul», Stein writes, «has breadth and depth and can be filled by something, something can penetrate into it. Within it, I am at home in a way totally different from how I am in my living body. [...] *There can be no human soul without an 'I'*; the personal structure belongs to it. But a human 'I' must also be a psychic 'I', *it cannot be without a soul*; its very acts are characterised as 'superficial' or 'profound', having their root in a greater or lesser depth of the soul».²²

In the deepest part of the soul lies the core (*Kern*), where the truest being of the person is enclosed, waiting to be realised. For the phenomenologist, this concept becomes fundamental for understanding the person because it «[...] prefigures how their life can and must unfold and what they can or must become. What they are in themselves [...] must be actualised and [...] preserved; if this happens, it is gained for eternity. What could have been actualised but was not, is lost for eternity».²³ This means that the person must follow the internal development outlined by the core; one cannot become whatever one desires if what one desires is not prescribed within the core.

What controls everything, the control center of the person, is the 'I'. It holds together the stream of consciousness, gives unity to personal life, and is behind every experience. Behind every action, there is always an 'I' that has freely and knowingly chosen to act in one way rather than another. In fact, behind every act there is an 'I' that can be grasped in its functionality. Its activity is decisive for the life of a human being. The 'I', in fact, has the ability to shape the soul, as it is thanks to the 'I' that the deepest intimacies are reached; it can freely decide to control pleasant or unpleasant feelings that might interfere with an important activity; it is also, together with the will, the locus of free decisions. The 'I' is a complex, rich, and multifaceted reality, though finite. It

²² E. Stein, *La struttura*, cit., p.119

²³ Edith Stein, *Potenza e atto*, trad. Anselmo Caputo, Città Nuova, Roma2003, p. 214.

possesses many possibilities connected to its freedom. Indeed, it can choose not to abandon itself to a purely instinctive life, to live according to values, to behave responsibly, to choose between good and evil.

Human beings are, therefore, as M. Zambrano would say, a cosmic heterodox. They are different from all other living beings because they can understand themselves, others, the world, and unlike other living beings, they are the *masters of themselves*, *vigilant*. They are spiritually free. [...] Personal spirituality means being *vigilant* and *being open*. Not only *am* I, not only do I *live*, but I *know* about my being and my living. [...] The knowledge of oneself is an opening to the inside, the knowledge of the other is an opening to the outside [...]»²⁴. Therefore, human beings are free and conscious because they can or cannot do something. Things can attract and awaken the desire to possess them. The animal always follows this attraction, unless a stronger instinct holds it back. Human beings do not surrender to the play of stimuli and reactions; they can resist, they can oppose what attracts them, all of this depends on their freedom. In other words, human beings are different from all other living beings because they are endowed with spirit. By virtue of this difference, human beings understand themselves and the reality around them, and become aware that they are unable to answer many questions, especially those concerning origins and the meaning of their life. They do not know where they come from, what the meaning of their existence is, or if there is another reality after earthly life.

Through the 'I', in *Finite Being and Eternal Being*, E. Stein reaches being, as had been done before her, for different reasons, by Augustine, Descartes, and even Husserl. And by following this path, she finds the way to the divine within the human being. But let us follow the reasoning that the phenomenologist develops. «What is – Stein asks herself – the 'I', which is aware of its being? What is that movement of the spirit, in which I find myself and in which I am aware of it as mine and as a movement? »²⁵. To answer this question, she conducts an in-depth investigation into the temporality of the 'I', an introspective analysis. The 'I' always positions itself behind the flow of lived experience, it lives in every experience, it does not end or pass; it is always in the now. The being of the 'I' is in a punctiform actuality, between a no longer and a not yet. I am now, I am no longer what I was before, nor what I will be later. This actuality is never pure because the present is always something in action, real, but still possible; it is real as the actualisation of a previous possibility, and it is possible as potentiality to be. Therefore, the living of the 'I' is a living in time. By looking backward, it can also embrace the course of past life and make it live again in itself; the 'I' does not exhaust itself in its experiences, but maintains an actuality that allows it to be the

²⁴ E. Stein, *La struttura della persona umana*, cit., p. 109

²⁵ E. Stein, *Essere finito e Essere eterno. Per una elevazione al senso dell'essere*, tr. it. di L. Vigone, pres. di Ales Bello, Città Nuova Editrice, Roma 1988, p. 73

master of its being, it can recall an event from the past, just as it can presentify something that has not yet occurred. But it often finds itself with gaps in memory that can only be filled by others or trying to recall forgotten things. «When the ‘I’ looks at its past», she writes, «and proceeds further and further backward, it ends up not seeing anything distinct, everything *becomes confused* [...] The ‘I’ alone never reaches an origin»²⁶.

Others can testify that I came into the world on a certain day, that I cried, that I was silent as a child, but they cannot answer whether the being of the ‘I’ also had an origin, nor can they answer satisfactorily the question of its possible end. It is at this point, Stein says, that «A void opens in various points of its being; has it come from nothing? Does it go towards nothingness? Can the chasm of nothingness open beneath it at any moment?»²⁷ The ‘I’ is found as coming from a past and reaching into an already future living: «[...] itself and its being are inescapably there; it is *thrown into being*»²⁸. So the ‘I’ suddenly finds itself face to face with nothingness, thrown into existence without knowing how it got there and without any apparent meaning. However, in the face of the fleeting nature of the being of the ‘I’, another certainty emerges: «[...] despite this transience, I *am*, and moment by moment I *am preserved in being*, and in this fleeting being of mine, I grasp something enduring. I know I am preserved, and for this reason, I am calm and secure: it is not the certainty of someone standing on solid ground by their own power, but the sweet, blessed security of a child supported by a strong arm—a security, objectively considered, no less reasonable. Or would a child who lives in fear that his mother might let him fall be considered *reasonable*?»²⁹. In my being, then, I encounter another being that is not mine but that sustains me; it is the foundation of my being, which in itself is without foundation. This being sustains me, it is within me. Human beings, then, are inhabited by a higher reality. To understand what this is, it is necessary to proceed along two paths. The first is that of faith, the Revelation of God as the Being, the Creator, which finds its full expression in the words of Jesus: «*Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life*»³⁰. The second is that of the argumentative thought, of the demonstration of the existence of God: the foundation and author of my being [...] can only be [...] a being that is not received. [...] a being that must exist *of itself*: a being that cannot, like all things that have a beginning, also not exist, but that is necessary»³¹. The argumentative path and that of faith are different because argumentative thought is not capable of perceiving God, as it places Him at the distance characteristic of all that is conceptual. The path of faith certainly gives more than the philosophical path, but the latter is

²⁶ *Ivi*, p. 89

²⁷ *Ivi*, p. 90

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

²⁹ *Ivi*, pp. 95-96

³⁰ Gv, 11, 19-27

³¹ E. Stein, *Essere finito e Essere eterno*, cit., p. 96.

important in reference to a Christian philosophy that has the task of preparing the way for faith. A Christian philosophy which for the phenomenologist is not a wooden iron, as Heidegger defined it, but rather a *perfectum opus rationis*—a perfected work of reason—that manages to unite what is provided by reason and Revelation. This approach was typical of the medieval *Summae*.

Pure philosophy, as the science of the entity and of being, according to Edith Stein, in its ultimate foundations, cannot reach full completion; it must open itself to theology and be integrated by it. Yet theology itself is not a completely closed and defined system. It also develops historically as a progressive assimilation and penetration of the revealed heritage transmitted by tradition. The task of Christian philosophy, therefore, is to prepare the way for faith. For this reason, according to Stein, St. Thomas sought to build a pure philosophy on the foundation of natural reason, because only in this way can a stretch of the road be travelled with non-believers, who, if they consent, might perhaps be guided beyond what they initially intended. Non-believers can use reason to refute what does not satisfy them. It is also up to them to choose to consider as valid the results achieved with the help of Revelation. They will accept as a hypothesis what believers accept as a thesis, but in this way, both believers and non-believers will have common ground, a common measure, to verify whether the conclusions they have drawn are rational. Furthermore, for Stein, it is the result of a great deal of patience and waiting if the non-believer manages to arrive together with the believer at a comprehensive vision of reality, which for the believer is the result of natural reason and Revelation, and therefore at a broader understanding of entities and being. And if he/she is free «[...] from prejudice, as [...] a philosopher must be, he/she will certainly not hesitate to make this attempt»³².

In conclusion, Stein believes that a rigorous anthropological analysis reveals that the human being is ontologically open to the divine, and that in order to fully understand itself and answer many existential questions, it needs Revelation, that provides him/her with those certain answers, a certainty that is instead lacking in philosophy and science, whose answers remain within the realm of possibility.

As a conclusion

The Steinian lesson shows us that human beings are inherently open to God and that this reality can only be grasped if they are willing to read the signs coming both from outside and, above all, from within, and to fully embrace them. Often, as has happened in the history of philosophy, this path was not pursued because human beings claimed to be the masters of their own being. Just

³² *Ivi*, p. 67

think of Nietzsche, who declared in *The Gay Science* the death of God, a necessary killing so that he himself could become a deity: «Isn't the greatness of this act too great for us? Must we not ourselves become gods, in order at least to appear worthy of it? There has never been a greater act: all those who come after us will belong, by virtue of this act, to a history higher than all histories until today!»³³ The individual, in madness, having no answer, lets the lamp fall because they arrived too early.

However, the times today seem ripe, especially because an anthropological change has occurred, the basis of which is the idea of a human being with an indeterminate nature, allowing him/her to become whatever they want. This view, not new, is a reinterpretation of the Pichean vision presented in *Oratio de dignitate hominis*, according to which human beings, the sovereign creators of themselves, can shape themselves as they please. To do this, it is necessary to know and control the processes at the origin of life, because today the aspiration for a happy life, one that is in accordance with one's nature³⁴, is no longer in question, but we are faced with the desire for a true transformation of biological life, whose limits are experienced as a prison. Human beings, having understood their own limits, want to overcome them, to go beyond, to occupy the place that once belonged to God. It is no coincidence that science has focused on the human cell, in which all information about life is contained. Naturally, this attitude raises a series of ethical questions that philosophers, scientists, and politicians are called to answer. If, on the one hand, *Homo Sapiens* stands at the top of the evolutionary chain, capable of transforming sensory stimuli into conscious knowledge, usable and expandable, on the other hand, precisely because of these peculiarities, it is the responsibility of *Homo Sapiens* to preserve life in all its forms. This does not mean renouncing improving life—scientific advances have eradicated many diseases and helped many people live better—but understanding how far it is possible to go without breaking intangible ethical barriers. This was already glimpsed by H. Arendt in the late 1950s, when in *The Human Condition* (*Vita Activa*) she wrote: «This person of the future, whom scientists think they will produce within a century, seems possessed by a kind of rebellion against human existence as it has been given to them, a free gift from somewhere (speaking in secular terms) that they wish to exchange, if possible, for something they themselves have made. There is no reason to doubt our ability to make such an exchange, just as there is no reason to doubt our current power to destroy all organic life on Earth. The question is only whether we want to make use of our new scientific and technical knowledge in this direction, and it is a question that cannot be decided by scientific means; it is a

³³ F. Nietzsche, *La Gaia Scienza*, Mondadori Editore, Milano 1971, p. 125

³⁴ Cfr. Seneca, *Sulla felicità*, tr.it. e note di D. Agonigi, Bur, Milano 1996.

question of first-order politics, and therefore cannot be left to the decision of professional scientists or even professional politicians»³⁵.

The possible realization of the desire for eternity has been aided not only by the undeniable progress of science but also by science fiction literature which, as Arendt already noted, represents a crucial vehicle «for mass feelings and desires»³⁶. At the beginning, Transhumanism was mentioned, which, with its goal of transcending the limits of corporeality towards an unspecified immortality, finds its primary source of inspiration in science fiction literature and cinematography which, despite lacking rigorous speculative foundations, exerts an undeniable fascination on the masses.

Life, and therefore the human being, however, is too serious a matter to be left in the hands of science alone or mythopoetic narratives. It requires in-depth reflection, capable of getting to the essence of the issue. It is necessary to return to reflecting on the limits and possibilities of the human being, who, without renouncing improvement, must respect life, understand their limits, and learn to trust, because without trust, the umbilical cord with God is cut. Without God, life and existence lose their significant part because, as E. Stein demonstrated, the human being is ontologically open to God.

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³⁵ H. Arendt, *Vita activa. La condizione umana*, tr. it. di S. Finzi, Bompiani, Milano 1998, pp. 2-3.

³⁶ H. Arendt, *Vita activa*, cit., p. 2.

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