



A PHILOSOPHICAL APPRAISAL OF EDITH STEIN'S NOTION OF COMMUNITY



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Abstract

The continuous quest and drive to delve into the rational and empirical perspectives of reality in order to unravel the foundations and systems for a better harmonious living among people has always occupied a central stage in contemporary philosophical studies. One of these concepts is that of community. The term community has been perused and given different shades of meanings. The objective of this work is to consider how this notion of community in Edith Stein can be applied to communicate as an element for a harmonious existence among the various communities in the society. This work is not an exhaustive writing on the understanding of community but a perspective from Edith Stein to help give a new understanding to peaceful living together. In this work, the notion of community is considered, the rapport between the individual and the community is also noted; the various characteristics of community were also considered to enhance the level of understanding.

Key words: Edith Stein, Community, Individual, philosophy

Introduction

The idea of community covers different spheres of understanding ranging from political, educational, genders, cultural, ethnic and extending to the religious purview. The world today is in dire need of peace. This is because in recent times there have been tensions and violence witnessed in many parts of the world which unfortunately have led to the monumental loss of lives and properties. The various reasons adduced for this violence include but not limited to misunderstandings, intolerance, hatred, selfishness and illiteracy. Clearly the importance of examining this notion of community is essential in our time and clime even as the world is becoming more globalized. Globalization with its advancement in science and technologies has resulted to the reasoning today that the world is a global village and even beautifully considered as a global hand palm. Thus positively speaking, globalization no doubt have surmounted the barriers of spatial and temporal distances. Experiences lived from within the community represent the indelible, non-erasable substrate that each of us always carries within ourselves, at every instant of our own lives, and in whatever place we find ourselves, on whatever day. Thus, community is what we live. We acknowledge the pride of place of philosophy as a discipline that addresses human relations among the diverse groups

and human communities. In this way we affirmed that philosophy is interested in dialogue so as to remove the various invisible barriers between peoples and foster a better healthy communal co-existence, while being conscious of the others living in the same society. It is pertinent to acknowledge that philosophy is both a theoretical and practical discipline. It is both a study and a way of life. Philosophy has no definite definition; however it has been defined as “A rational search for answers to the questions that arise in the mind when we reflect on human experience.”¹ According to Kanu, “Philosophy is from two Greek words *philo* meaning love and *Sophia* meaning wisdom. Brought together, it means 'the love of wisdom'. The concept is a neologism attributed to Pythagoras.”²

The Notion of Community In Edith Stein

Edith Stein is one philosopher in contemporary period that has given a panache to the idea of a healthy living together among people. Right from the beginning of her career, her interest in investigating the communal dimension among human beings was evident. No doubt, her personal experience of community gave powerful impetus to her investigation of the genesis of communal contact among persons. The theme of community permeates Stein

¹Joseph Omoregbe, *Knowing Philosophy*, Lagos, Joja Educational Research and Publishers Limited, 2007, 3.

²Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu, *Philosophy of Religion with Essays in African Philosophy of Religion*, Bloomington: Authorhouse, 2018, 1.

philosophical writings. As a student and later secretary to Edmund Husserl, her works carries a phenomenological taint. It is pertinent to know here that generally the term community connotes or refers to grouping; be they animate or inanimate. She uses the term community to refer to the connections found among persons and thus referring to community of free persons. Hence, we can assert that community is lived. Human beings have been living in communities since time immemorial. Man has to live in community for his existence and welfare. Edith Stein places a great emphasis on the importance of the community for the better human co-existence. In fact, for Stein, community is a necessity for human relations. Her emphasis on community is not far-fetched from the idea that

Unlike angels, human beings unfold and develop as members of community. In fact, community is needed in order for the individual to unfold. The communities in which humans develop include the family, school, state, church, nation, race and so forth.³

The view of community in Stein is not only at a theoretical and intellectual level but also a pragmatic kind for she practically lived out the community experience. Edith Stein wrote thus;

³Marian Maskulak, *Edith Stein Selected Writings*, New Jersey, Paulist Press, 2016,99.

Our differences of religion and of family background never ruffled our friendship. Had they ever occupied our minds, we would have discussed questions about religion as frankly as those about anything else.⁴

She was a community person. In attesting to her being a communal person, evidences of this is found when she asserted that,

The pedagogical group was not the only academic society to which I belonged. Our weekly meeting was predominantly a social evening spent together. We discussed in general some questions that vitally interested us.⁵

This idea of Stein being a communitarian person was supported in the view of Michele D'Ambra. According to him, “She also immediately reasoned that a people in addition to having the ability to shape themselves in a certain way and to preserve themselves, also have a self-expressive ability which she will indicate with the term culture”.⁶ Talking about culture, Edith Stein reiterated that “The ideas of people and culture seem to me related one with the other. A

⁴ Edith Stein, *Life in a Jewish Family, An Autobiography*, Washington D.C. ICS Publication, 1985,190.

⁵ Stein, *Life in a Jewish Family*, 123.

⁶ Michele D'Ambra, “Persona e Comunita' in A.Ales Bello and A.M.Pezzella, *Edith Stein: Comunita e Mondo della vita. Societa Diritto Religione*, Citta del Vaticano, Lateran University Press,2008,39.

culture can be considered a creation of the human spirit in which all the essential human vital functions (economy, right and state, customs, science, technical, art, religion) have found expression. It is a people and a community that can bring out such a cosmos".⁷

In almost all aspects of life, man feels the need for a community. Biologically and psychologically, he is compelled to live in community, because a complete isolated life is unbearable for him and he cannot grow into a normal individual in isolation. The essence of this view is that man has always belong to a community of some sort without which he cannot exist at all. In supporting this view, Pope Francis reiterated thus "No one can face life in isolation. We need a community that supports and helps us, in which we can help one another to keep looking ahead."⁸ Community fulfills all of man's needs and provides security to him. Man is given birth to, lives and dies in community. Man learns all his social qualities from the community itself. Hence there exist a great deal of close relationship between an individual and community. Man is social animal not only by nature but also by necessity. Community not only fulfills a human physical needs and determines his social nature but also determines his personality and guides the course of the development of the human mind. Community moulds our attitudes, beliefs, morals, ideals and thereby molds individual personality.

⁸Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, no.8, <https://www.vatican.va>.

Community preserves and transmits culture to succeeding generations. The cultural heritage determines man's personality by molding his attitudes, beliefs and morals and with the help of social heritage man's inborn potentials are unfolded. Besides, man acquires and learns education from community. This education plays an important role in the development of the human mind, the self and personality.

Communities are centres for growth and development. Human potentiality develops only within community. It is considered as a healthy community when it succeeds in caring for the welfare of her citizens or members and helping them reach their potentials. Interestingly, the community is the locus of freedom because it includes free persons. Edith Stein noted that “If the community no longer contains any free persons, or none who builds up the community with their personal living then it is no longer capable of goal setting”.⁹ Again, putting into consideration modernity and globalization, the need to collaborate with other religious communities is indispensable in contemporary times.

The Fundamental Relationship Between the Individual and Community

Edith Stein, helps us to behold the relationship between the individual and the community to have a

⁹Edith Stein, *Philosophy of Psychology and Humanities*, Washington D.C. ICS Publication, 1985,276.

better foundation to the notion . It is the individual that makes up the community. In other words, community can be considered as the whole while the individual is the part. Be that as it may, however, it is this interplay between the individual and the community that clearly brings out what we referred to as community today. It is the joining of experiences that constitute the spirit of the community. According to Edith Stein “The commonality of experiences is the basis for social union.”¹⁰ The community is the basis of the state. In furtherance of clarifying the notion of community, Stein gave a distinction between a mass, and an association from the community.

The Mass: In the usage of the term mass, Stein implies a crowd or a mob. According to Edith Stein, “The mass designates the lowest social type.”¹¹ The mass here connotes a social unit of a peculiar kind, which particularly interest us in our context because it is well suited to delimit for us the merely sentient over and against the mental world. This view was expounded by Max Scheler when he asserted that “It is constituted by an uncomprehending so called contagion and an involuntary imitation.”¹² Stein goes ahead to clarify some features that distinguish the mass from association and community. She asserted succinctly that 'The individuals who are gathered together into the mass are generally not oriented

¹⁰ Edith Stein, *Philosophy of psychology* 2000,239.

¹¹ Edith Stein, *An Investigation Concerning the State*, Washington, ICS Publication, 2006,2.

¹² Max Scheler, *Formalism in Ethics*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1973, 526.

towards one another. They do not consider one another reciprocally as objects as in association, nor are they committed to one another as subjects living in common”.¹³ Moreover, the mass do not execute acts against the backdrop of possible unity of understanding. In fact, their sentient life occurs only isomorphically with that of others, who are joined with them into a unity by being gathered together spatially and to be sure, as a result of this being together. Stein reiterated that “The mass is a togetherness of the individual comporting themselves isomorphically,”¹⁴ It lacks any inner unity out of which the whole might live; it lacks any psyche.

Association: In contrast to mass or crowd, association is specifically a better and personal union. A characteristic of association is that the individuals are joined together within it for the attainment of a purpose. Edith Stein posited thus

The peculiarity of association in contrast to community is seen in the fact that in an association each of the individuals is just an object for the others; they are precisely objects and are not subjects living together as in community.¹⁵

In association, there is a 'ceasure' of existence. In other words, association does not exist infinitely

¹³ Edith Stein, *Philosophy of psychology* , 241.

¹⁴ Edith Stein, *Philosophy of psychology* , 243

¹⁵ Edith Stein, *An Investigation Concerning the State*, 4.

rather its existence is finite and limited in time. Associations have their origin in optional acts of solitary persons, through which they are instituted. Their existence begins at the moment of institution. Stein averred that “The numbers of their members are not restricted to the institutors; new ones can join and old ones can leave. The association need not cease to be if temporarily no members are present. It reaches a natural end if the purpose for which it was founded is attained”.¹⁶ The life of an association is the functionality directed towards the purpose that is to be attained or split into series of a single functions of various kinds distributed to single members or to certain groups of members. The development of the association is distinguished by the stages advanced towards the goal and by any arrangement required for reaching it such as multiplication of the members and division into groups for the fulfillment of certain functions. The functions take place only from the requirements of purposive functionality, and the result is the co-operation of the various functions and of the individuals who must merely be in possession of certain abilities in order to be able to fit themselves into the framework of the association at a certain place. Like the inception and the end, every stage in the course of development of the association also traces back to an optional act. The association does not grow like an organism; rather, it reminds of a machine that is invented for a certain purpose and adapted in progressive improvement

¹⁶ Edith Stein, *Philosophy of psychology*, 225..

through alterations of parts or insertion of new ones. In fact, the life of the association subsists in the functionality required of its members by its purpose. In this manner, it is non-essential that precisely these individuals perform the work in question. Hence in principle, life as a member of the association does not coincide with someone total life but forms only a small sector of it. The association owes a determinate character to this origin which comes to light in its behavior towards its environment as well as in its inner life. the association comports itself like an individual subject in the service of its purpose. Thus under a unitary co-operation of its various sentient capabilities, it applies itself in regard to an environment that must be encountered as sometimes demanding and sometimes hindering and that must be utilized or fought accordingly. Depending on the nature of its purpose, the character of the association is a common one.

The Reality of Community

Communities confront us as realities in our environment. We always dwell within communities. Our families, communities which we all belong to in one form or another help us to comprehend that we are social beings. in other words, through these various forms we recognized that we are not alone but belong to a community. The livelihood and growth of the human being cannot take place except within a community. A child for example cannot grow without

stimulation; he cannot develop all of its human faculties without some relation to the outside world. Humans by nature are not wired to live in isolation rather humans are made in such a way that they can only function and realize themselves within a community. Thus living together is the primary experience of all human beings. The world of human beings is a social world in which every individual plays a specific role and often different roles.

It is the ontic reality of community that makes the foundation of the relation with the other possible. In other words, it is the complementarity dimension of the existential reality of human beings. This idea of community is vividly expressed in the document *Nostra Aetate* thus “One is the community of all peoples, one their origin, for God made the whole race to live over the face of the earth.”¹⁷ We also recognize that religious plurality is not a new phenomenon. This thought has indeed been a constant feature of the teachings of Pope John Paul II. Essentially in one of his address , he asserted that “While we have walked in silence, we have reflected on the path our human family treads: either in hostility, if we fail to accept one another in love; or as a common journey to our lofty destiny, if we realize that other people are our brothers and sisters. Either we learn to walk together in peace and harmony, or we drift apart and ruin ourselves and

¹⁷ Pope Paul VI, *Nostra Aetate*, n.1. <https://www.vatican.va>.

¹⁸ John Paul , 11, *Address to the representatives of the Christian churches and Ecclesial Communities and of the World Religions*, no.5. [https:// www.vatican.va](https://www.vatican.va).

others”.¹⁸

One of the essential way to affirm the reality of community is in the makeup of the human being. Ontologically, the human person is a makeup of body, soul and spirit. Thus, the human person is a makeup of material and immaterial substance. In highlighting the spiritual aspect of the human being, Pezzella asserted that,

To be a spiritual subject means being attuned to one's consciousness and being directed towards something, and this something can either be internal or external to the person. The person is therefore endowed with a double openness:(1) from within, towards oneself (2) and to the outside, towards others and the world. Even if the person does find herself separated from others because of her material body that does not allow her to enter the body of others, she is still able to comprehend, understand and feel the others living: she is aware.¹⁹

In clear terms, the aphorism that no man is an island unto himself is affirmed. There is no one that is actually absolutely secluded so much that he has no contact with the other either with humans or inanimate in his religious activities. Also

¹⁹ Anna Maria Pezzella, *“Intersubjectivity and Community in Edith Stein's Thought”* in A. Calcagno (ed), *Boston Studies in Philosophy, Religion and Public Life*, Vol. 4, 61.

will be pertinent to make a distinction between a relationship of a kind of subject to object and that of a subject to subject. In the subject to object relationship, the other person is viewed or expended as an object. This kind of relationship is not healthy for interaction and dialogue because it reduces the dignity and respect of the others. The subject to subject relationship is wholesome and desired because it sees the other as a person with dignity and value and attention properly accorded. This subject to subject relationship blossoms human relations and should be supported and cherished. A reaffirmation of this idea of subject to subject relations for a better community is seen in Edith Stein

Where one person approaches another as subject to object, examines her, deals with her methodically on the basis of the knowledge obtained, and coaxes the intended reactions out of her, they are living together in association. Conversely, where a subject accepts the other as a subject and does not confront it but rather lives with him and is determined by the stirrings of his life, they are forming a community with one another.²⁰

Thus we see that a community is not a windowless monad rather it is like an organism that grows with all the attending interior and outer

²⁰ Edith Stein, *Philosophy of Psychology*, 177.

openings that warrant an intertwining of people.

Characteristics of Community

We have established from the ongoing that the community is a living organism that possesses some characteristics. Among the characteristics are motivation, responsibility, freedom, imagination and empathy.

Motivation: The various communities possess a peculiar motivation. There is an atmosphere of motivation that continues to inspire and motivate the members of communities so that they are inspired and encouraged to live out their convictions as they go about their daily activities. Activities in the communities are consciously motivated. Clearly “Motivation is detected by being inwardly felt, as an urge that is resistible and therefore non-causal”.²¹ This motivation sometimes includes intellectual connections and activity. Pezzella writes “In the majority of cases however, motivation is really present in consciousness but it cannot be made manifest. We do not notice motivation, it remains unperceived.”²² Again, in elucidating further on the combination of motivations and intellectual activity, Stein writes “As interest, which holds the truth itself to be valuable for its own sake and aspires to it, or a practical interest, which pries knowledge as a means to the attainment of

²¹ Edith Stein, *An Investigation*, XVII

²² Anna Maria Pezzella, *Intersubjectivity and community*, 61.

rule, intellectual occupation has need of an emotional stimulation.

This is so for the community just for the single members for one people, thus signifies the highest value, and that nation pursues scientific knowledge. Another people is oriented chiefly towards economic value, and scientific knowledge is for only a means to the advancement of economic goals.”²³ Stein went ahead to distinguish between two kinds of motives which are the common motive and the operative motive. The common motive is the communal motive while the operative motive is the individual motive. In giving clarity to the difference between the two kinds of motives, Stein gave an analogy. According to Stein “Suppose that I am working at natural science because the epistemological penetration of nature as such excites me, while others perhaps are working at natural science in order to raise technology to a higher level. With my research I take my place within the common research activity but with the operative motive I stand alone.”²⁴

Freedom and Responsibility: The quest for a peaceful coexistence among the different religious communities is one that is also paramount. The community is one of free persons that is not devoid of responsibilities. In this perspective Edith Stein opines

²³ Edith Stein, *Philosophy of psychology*, 171.

²⁴ Edith Stein, *Philosophy of psychology*, 172.

that the individual person has a responsibility to the community and also to the divine. Stein opines that the peaceful living among the individuals in a community entails a certain kind of regulation implying that as much as we are free we ought to conduct our affairs with some sense of decorum. Edith Stein maintained that freedom and responsibility, “have this character of regulation even if they are not clothed in the form of statements of obligation.”²⁵ However, Stein differentiates between collective responsibility and equal responsibility. This means that every member of the community has the responsibility to act accordingly as a group of free persons. The community can make decisions and these decisions are agreed and carried out collectively. However, the individual members have the responsibility to their actions. Stein asserted “Thus the right to be recognized as citizens corresponds to the duties of the citizens, and a collective responsibility of a plurality of persons which is entirely different from the equal responsibility of the single individuals”.²⁶

Imagination: Communities just as the individuals also possess imaginative abilities. Here one can picture the various stories that have been handed down to us from the past. These stories are also part of the common patrimony of humanity. Phenomenology resolves the dilemma between the fantasy intention and fantasy intuition of the imagination. The intuition

²⁵ Edith Stein, *An Investigation*, 41.

²⁶ Edith Stein, *An investigation*, 81.

of the imagination does not itself give the object proper, as in the case with perception. Imagination makes the object present and in so doing, each person configures the object of imagination in his or her own way. In other words, we all know what a castle is; an enormous building with fortified walls, battlements, moats, drawbridges and others. However the moment we proceed to configure a castle through imagination, every individual has his or her own castles. Unlike in perception, the object of imagination can be constructed in the way one wishes: "Perception's object strikes me as an object independent of me, exempt from my discretion; the fantasized object strikes me at living at my mercy, given into my hand".²⁷

Empathy: Empathy is the link that joins the members of a community together as they carry out their individual lives in the community. The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English defines empathy as "The ability to understand another person's feelings, experience, etc"²⁸ It is through empathy that the relation with the other in the community is enhanced. It is through empathy that we are able to understand what the other individual may be experiencing. Empathy serves as a bridge or the strong bond that binds community life. In fact, without empathy the life of the community will be that of indifference and nonchalance. It is the experience of another

²⁷ Edith Stein, *Philosophy of psychology*, 150.

²⁸ A.S.Hornby, Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, Oxford University Press, 2015,502.

consciousness that is independent of and different from the subject who -is carrying out the act of empathy.

We can assert that “Empathy is not perception, representation nor a neutral positing, but *sui generis*”.²⁹ Empathy is different from memory, expectation and fantasy because the subject of the empathized experience is not the same subject empathizing but another. Empathy is a kind of act of perceiving. Edith Stein writes thus “Empathy which we examine and sought to describe is the experience of foreign consciousness in general, irrespective of the kind of the experiencing subject or of the subject whose consciousness is experienced”³⁰ Taking a cue from her mentor Edmund Husserl, Stein noted that the self starts with its own self –consciousness, and that the other person is an alter ego, another I, another zero point of orientation, located over there. Empathy therefore entails an involvement of an I's on primordial experience that do not originate in its own life. In fact for Stein, the practice of empathy became the foundation for all intersubjective relations. Patrizia Manganaro buttressed this notion view of Edith Stein on empathy by writing thus:

Empathy is a word that in ordinary linguistic commerce designates closeness, proximity,

²⁹ Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, xviii.

³⁰ Edith Stein, *Empathy*, 11.

understanding sharing, identification, care, solidarity, agreement, communion, compassion, altruism. These different meanings find their common denominator in the positive, familiar and reassuring meaning to which they all refer, so that the word today enjoys fame and fortune. We find it in the most disparate contexts, with extraordinary semantic efficacy. If on the one hand it makes the task of a univocal definition difficult, on the other hand, it confirms an important result: empathy is a peculiar experience with its own distinctive quality.³¹

Conclusion

The above writings clearly depict that a better understanding of community is apt. Here it will be appropriate to make some recommendations. Firstly, leaders have the onerous duty to deliver continuous education and enlightenment to their followers. Education is crucial for the passing on of the ethics for a healthy communal living among peoples. Education helps to make people aware and sensitive to the rights and privileges of others. Also, this teachings must include the respect for the sanctity of life and respect for human rights. In doing this, illiteracy will be drastically reduced and there will be peace and mutual understanding. Education they say is likened to a light that enlightens those who walk in the dark. Secondly, the respect for gender should be considered so as to give everyone the atmosphere and freedom to practice their convictions. It is clear that in our various

communities there are people with varied convictions and places of exercising those convictions. Hence, there is a clarion call to respect one another so as to foster a harmonious living together. Finally, we ought to recognize that we are all humans and ought to be our brothers and sisters keeper.

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