



Artículo

The unfinished existence of man The struggle for real self-autonomy in the contemporary context –Edith Stein and Byung-Chul Han in dialogue

La existencia inacabada de la persona humana La batalla por la autonomía del yo mismo en el contexto contemporáneo –Edith Stein y Byung-Chul Han en diálogo

Matyas Szalay

PÉTER PÁZMÁNY UNIVERSIDAD CATÓLICA, BUDAPEST

szalayster@gmail.com

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5557-1877>

Resumen: Este artículo se centra en el término de la existencia inacabada, aceptado tanto por la antropología cristiana como secular, sin embargo, ambas perspectivas se diferencian en su comprensión del modo de llegar a la plenitud existencial. Adquirir dicha plenitud, implica una liberación, tanto externa como interna, pero la obtención de la autonomía personal depende de a cuál vía de la liberación se dé prioridad. Según el filósofo contemporáneo, Byung-Chul Han, en el nuevo paradigma postmoderno, la opresión de la persona se intensifica cuando los frutos del progreso técnico-informático se interiorizan (auto-optimización). Cuando esta praxis se establece como propuesta de liberación y como manera de adquirir autonomía, se hace evidente la naturaleza contradictoria y devastadora de la auto-engrandecimiento. El sendero tradicional de la *theosis*, especialmente si se considera la interpretación steiniana, no solamente parece razonable sino que adquiere un particular atractivo, ya que para ella, la conversión es una completa reintegración de la persona individual y es el camino de la reconstrucción de la comunidad humana, es decir la vida social y política incluyendo la resiliencia, que se opone al destructivo poder económico del mercado liberal.

Palabras claves: fenomenología, theosis, resiliencia, conversión, mercado.

Abstract: This article focuses on the term unfinished existence, accepted by both Christian and secular anthropology; however, both perspectives differ in their understanding of how to reach existential fulfillment. Acquiring such fullness implies a liberation, both external and internal, but the attainment of personal autonomy depends on which path of liberation is given priority. According to the contemporary philosopher, Byung-Chul Han, in the new postmodern paradigm, the oppression of the person intensifies when the fruits of technical-computer progress are internalized (self-optimization). When this praxis is established as a proposal for liberation and as a way of acquiring autonomy, the contradictory and devastating nature of self-aggrandizement becomes evident. The traditional path of *theosis*, especially if one considers the Steinian interpretation, not only seems reasonable but acquires a particular appeal, since for it, conversion is a complete reintegration of the individual person and is the path to the reconstruction of human community, i.e. social and political life including resilience, which is opposed to the destructive economic power of the liberal market.

Key words: phenomenology, theosis, resilience, conversion, liberal market.

Recibido: 29 de enero de 2024/ Aceptado:30 de junio.





Man is the only creature who refuses to be what he is. (Albert Camus,
The Rebel)

Those in the West should reconsider the ineluctable character of its
Christian identity. We should ask whether we are the unwitting victims
of a long deformation and obfuscation of that identity and if we can
recover that identity and repeat it differently. (John Milbank)

INTRODUCTION

Edith Stein's significant contributions to explore the mystery of human being are based on the following insight into man's unfinished existence. A critical evaluation of Stein's anthropological vision requires nothing less than a, however short, survey of the challenges tradition Western anthropology is facing today. Despite the significant differences due to philosophical methods, schools and trends traditional anthropology claims that there is such a meaningful unit as 'human nature' to be studied and truthfully described, i.e. it is not entirely a cultural, social and historic construct, although all these aspect play a significant role in understanding the "thing" that precisely allows for such interpretations. Moreover, traditional anthropology also claims that human nature is of a peculiar kind: is not completely defined. It was Pico de la Mirandola, who connected this idea with the special value of human life, i.e. human dignity¹. According to Italian renaissance author, human nature is not completely defined, and therefore the concrete value of human life within the hierarchy of beings depends on the personal answer one gives to his or her general nature in the particular form it is given to us. The dignity of human life is thus paradoxically unalienable while its concrete realization remains a challenge and a task².

Although this challenge and task to realize one's dignity is always personal, since nobody can be replaced with respect to giving the answer to his or her particular human nature, the way this challenge is conceived and the answer is formulated is always culturally defined and thus depends on the concrete cultural, social and historic circumstances. The thesis I would like to purport in this essay is that Stein's anthropology in general and her account on *self-autonomy* is relevant today. First, I would like to clarify the method, then with the help of Byung-Chul Han

¹ Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *De hominis dignitate, Heptaplus, De ente et uno, e scrittivari*, ed. por Eugenio Garin (Firenze: Vallecchi, 1942).

² Abelardo Lobato, *Dignidad y aventura humana* (Salamanca: San Esteban, 1977).

and would highlight those features of the current situation that are relevant to, finally, critically evaluate Stein's vision on self-autonomy.

1. BACK TO THINGS THEMSELVES

Edith Stein is usually considered as a second-generation realist phenomenologist³. The Husserlian “Back to things in themselves” is the main principle of the philosophical program Stein herself claimed to subscribe in her “Was ist Phänomenologie?”⁴, originally conceived as a dialogue between two of her most important masters, Edmund Husserl and Thomas Aquinas. According to the notable historian of philosophy also inspired by the phenomenological movement, Balduin Schwarz, realist phenomenology is to a certain extent similar to Plato's radical rejection of materialist explanation and thus, is a type of second navigation⁵. Within the history of Western thought, it might be considered as the last paradigmatic attempt of renewal. The new method of phenomenology⁶ requires more than just a radical and sudden change of the natural attitude (*epoché*)⁷ by bracketing the existence of everything disclosed for and in the human consciousness. If the object of investigation is the unfinished existence of human nature then, one could rightly argue, exploring it includes more than just an approach characterized as “Dingphänomenologie”. Even if, in contrast to this method one concentrates on the acts through which this unfinished existence as such are brought about (*Aktphänomenologie*) the temporal and specifically historical aspects of these acts fall outside of the scope of investigation⁸. What captures the historic development and thus, accounts for the strange contemporary situation is *hermeneutics* as suggested by Paul Ricoeur⁹.

More specifically, the claim according to which human existence is undefined and therefore unfinished must be completed by an investigation on the contemporary interpretation of this very aspect of *conditio humana* as well as culturally available ways human nature can be brought to completion.

³ Barry Smith, «Realistic Phenomenology», en *Encyclopedia of Phenomenology* ed. por Lester Embree, (Dordrecht: Kluwer. 1997), 586-590; *The phenomenological movement: A historical introduction*, ed. por Herbert Spiegelberg, (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960)

⁴ Edith Stein, «Was ist Phänomenologie?», en *Wissenschaft/Volksbildung*, n. 5. (1924).

⁵ Balduin Schwarz, *Ewige Philosophie. Gesetz und Freiheit in der Geistesgeschichte*, (Siegburg: Verlag Franz Schmitt, 2000).

⁶ Josef Seifert, *Discours des methodes: The methods of philosophy and realist phenomenology*, (Frankfurt/Paris: Walter de Gruyter, 2013).

⁷ Angela Ales Bello, *The sense of things: Toward a phenomenological realism* (Cham: Springer, 2015); Iso Kern, «The three ways to the transcendental phenomenological reduction in the philosophy of Edmund Husserl», en *Husserl: Expositions and appraisals* ed. por Frederick A. Elliston y Peter McCormick (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), 126-149.

⁸ Stein's own investigation is not only a combination of these two movements but goes also beyond this distinction in both of her mayor works, *Ewiges und endliches Sein* and even more so, in *Kreuzwissenschaft* when it comes to the analysis of the dynamics of transforming through grace.

⁹ Paul Ricoeur, «Phenomenology and hermeneutics», *Noûs* (1975): 85-102.

2. VARIATIONS ON THE SAME THEME: THE UNFINISHED EXISTENCE

One of the most influential intellectuals today, who develops a sharp and detailed criticism on contemporary social structure with respect to overcoming human nature, is the Korean philosopher, Byung-Chul Han¹⁰. His vision is especially pertinent concerning a heritage of Christian tradition (theosis¹¹) up to Nietzsche's 'Übermensch': the recognition of man's unfinished nature and his infinite desire to self-transcending. Byung-Chul Han elaborates with keen critical insights on how the contemporary social-political, cultural and primordially economic structure aggressively exploits the fundamental desire of overcoming oneself¹².

To illustrate the novelty of the situation without which we cannot truly evaluate the contemporary relevance of Stein's anthropology, in his *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and new technologies of power*¹³ Byung-Chul Han argues for the insufficiency of the modernist anthropological (and therefore social, political psychological, etc.) accounts by pointing out that they understood the human person as 'subjects'. This notion however became increasingly problematic today.

When describing the modern area, he takes the term literally, i.e. the subject is subjected to somebody else and therefore the desire of self-transcending can only be fulfilled through the creation of the sovereign self. There is an external and dramatically tense relationship to authority through and in which the self is disciplined. Foucault gives a detailed account on how modern institutions aggressively regulate life both on a practical and reflective level by defining normality and by handling accordingly the abnormalities.¹⁴ The realm of liberty, indispensable

¹⁰ Byung-Chul Han, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and new Technologies of Power*, trad. por Erik Butler, (New York: Verso Books, 2017); Byung-Chul Han *The Transparency Society*, trad. por Erik Butler, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015); Byung-Chul Han, *The Agony of Eros*, trad. por Erik Butler, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017).

¹¹ The idea of *theosis* is the traditional Christian answer to the unfinished human existence: complete transformation through Jesus Christ. St. Athanasius of Alexandria wrote, "He was incarnate that we might be made god" (Αὐτὸς γὰρ ἐνηνθρώπησεν, ἵνα ἡμεῖς θεοποιηθῶμεν). In: Saint Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, 54.3, trad. por J. Behr, (Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011), 167; Maximus the Confessor wrote: "A sure warrant for looking forward with hope to deification of human nature is provided by the Incarnation of God, which makes man God to the same degree as God Himself became man (...) Let us become the image of the one whole God, bearing nothing earthly in ourselves, so that we may consort with God and become gods, receiving from God our existence as gods. For it is clear that He Who became man without sin (cf. Heb. 4:15) will divinize human nature without changing it into the Divine Nature, and will raise it up for His Own sake to the same degree as He lowered Himself for man's sake. This is what St[.] Paul teaches mystically when he says, »that in the ages to come he might display the overflowing richness of His grace« (Eph. 2:7)" (en Maximus the Confessor, *Philokalia*, vol. 2, 178); On the contemporary significance of this term see: Rowan Williams, «Deification» en *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* ed. por Gordon S. Wakefield, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983)

¹² This is a recurring topic of the author, most extensively treated en Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society*, (Stanford University Press, 2015); Byung-Chul Han, *Infocracy: Digitization and the crisis of democracy*, trad. por Daniel Steuer, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022).

¹³ Cf. Han, *Psychopolitics*, 5-35.

¹⁴ Cf. Michel Foucault, *Power: the essential works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984* (UK: Penguin, 2019).

for any self-transcendence, appears in terms of a resistance to both internal and external repression. The sovereign self is capable of controlling his or her own passions, urges and instincts, forms right concepts and passes an independent and objective judgement over the ‘Gegenstand’ of thinking, i.e. the object that stands against it by offering resistance. The fundamental and yet tacit precondition for the modern theories of the disciplined self-represented by different authors than Kant, Hegel, Marx is that the self conceives himself in relation to another, to something different than himself. The plenitude to be achieved – however differently according to the various accounts of modernity – is always interpreted as a radical change in this relationship, i.e. becoming autonomous and sovereign.

3. THE PARADIGMATIC CHANGE

According to Byung-Chul Han the paradigmatic changes that occurred in postmodernity render these accounts inadequate when applied to reality today¹⁵, for they do not explain most of the personal struggles we, contemporary subjects are faced with in our search for happiness, i.e. self-transcending ourselves. The main reason is that we do not conceive any longer ourselves properly speaking as ‘subjects’ but rather as ‘projects’: our actions aiming at creating rather than rediscovering our self-identity are not ordered by any ‘ought to’ but rather by the ‘you can’, i.e. by the possibilities of the self.¹⁶ The difference between these two criteria lies in that while the first has limitations imposing on us some necessities and coercions, the overcoming of which is perceived as freedom, the second option is essentially unlimited.

The crucial thesis of the Korean philosopher is drawn from this claim: the postmodern self seems fully autonomous in relation to limitations in a negative sense¹⁷; the problems lies in

¹⁵ “The walls of disciplinary institutions, which separate the normal from the abnormal, have come to seem archaic. Foucault’s analysis of power cannot account for the psychic and topological changes that occurred as disciplinary society transformed into achievement society. Nor does the commonly employed concept of «control society» do justice to this change. It still contains too much negativity.” en Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society*, 8.

¹⁶ Byung-Chul Han’s ideas differ in this respect from the analysis of Agamben (*Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998)). According to the Korean thinker Agamben’s main thesis according to which the subject is reduced to bare life, to its biological component and thereby deprived of political status and recognition, is not pertinent within the present achievement society. He is also critical to Baudrillard’s critique of contemporary society based on the metaphor of AIDS in his book *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena*. Cf. Jean Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena*, (New York: Verso, 1993). As John Picchione correctly observes “For Han, issues of power and violence can no longer be approached through a philosophy of immunology in as much as the viral menace does not pertain to a society driven by an excess of production and achievement. The immune system does not have to defend the body from any pathogen.” en John Picchione, «Byung-Chul Han: Digital Technologies, Social Exhaustion, and the Decline of Democracy», *New Explorations*, 3 (2). (2023).

¹⁷ “The society of positivity, from which negativity has disappeared, is a society of bare life, which is dominated exclusively by the concern «to make sure of survival»” en Han, *The Agony of Eros*, 25. The vitality of the human person stems – hence the

*the overwhelming positivity of options*¹⁸. This radical positivity never experienced before in the history of mankind and thus, never accounted for theoretically is due to the liberal market's invasion of all dimensions of life, even the most internal ones, that affects even the unconscious level up to the point of manipulating one's desires. The market of limitless free options rather than fulfilling necessities and desires, creates them so to speak behind the subject's back. Byung-Chul Han observes that the modern statistical methods and the political power based on them have never reached the depth of the soul; through the Big data, however, the market has not only access to the conscious self but also to our unconscious desires far beyond the limits of any authentic knowledge of others or even self-knowledge¹⁹.

At the same time, to exacerbate this already worrisome situation the immediate relationship with our own body is significantly influenced and even practically replaced by a relationship to the enhanced self by different technical devices²⁰.

4. THE PERVERSION OF THE SUPERNATURAL DESIRE AND THE NEED FOR RESILIENCE

Modernity promised to liberate the human person by imposing a severe discipline on both the political and the private self. Through the habits proposed by protestant ethics, the 'unfinished man' as a self was forced to liberate oneself from any external restrictions and limitations. As – among others – Servain Pinckaers suggested²¹, this modern image of a person reaching her autonomy in the sense of growing up and leaving the childish dependent relations behind, presupposes a concept of freedom forged by William Ockham and other nominalist thinkers. The idea of Ockham is a complex one but it is worth highlighting here two aspects: (1) it is thought of as opposed to the divine freedom and its object is to be found in a neutral world

Hegelian logic followed by Byung-Chul Han – from the inner tension. The negativity supposed to be introduced by the *eros*, yet for the overachiever and hyperactive self in the contemporary narcissistic culture the other appears as a comforting and pleasant force avoiding any real encounter and offering no real resistance. This has serious political implications as well for it puts into danger the basis of democracy: authentic human community.

¹⁸ The link between the Christian notion of *theosis* and transhumanism established by David Bentley Hart is crucial here. Cf. David Bentley Hart, «The Anti-theology of the Body» *The New Atlantis Summer* 9 (2005): 65–73.

¹⁹ Moreover, by providing means for abolishing distance digital technologies contribute to objectification of the Other and, ultimately speaking to the disappearance of the Other. (See the term „primary distancing” en Han, *The Agony of Eros*, 12). This leads to communication and the radical loneliness of the self.

²⁰ In *The Agony of Eros* Han argues acknowledges that “[m]assive information massively heightens the entropy of the world; it raises the level of noise” (p. 50.) while the accumulation of data leads to “mere information” to “Google science”, unable to interpret the complexity of the world and thereby putting an “end to theory of the emphatic sort” (p. 49). The crushing quantity of information rather than helping to illuminate the state of affairs is an impediment of not just comprehensive analysis but above all of contemplative understanding: One cannot construct a critical narrative of the world.

²¹ Cf. Servais Pinckaers, «Les Sources de la morale chrétienne. *Sa methode, son contenance, son histoire* 3 (Fribourg: Saint Paul Fribourg Press, 1993); Cf. Anthony George William, «The impact of Ockham's 'Nominalism' on his understanding of human nature and the *imago dei* in man, in comparison with Aquinas, Bonaventure and Scotus» (tesis doctoral, The Open University, 2011).

void of all meaning and (2) it is not an intersubjective collaborative freedom, i.e. to be free is interpreted as free from the other's personal influence. One can better see the modern twist of freedom's concept when thinking about the exercise of the pre-modern freedom as an act of a relational being, i.e. a person who both discovers and realizes his own self through and with the help of others of his or her own community or with the term coined by Servain Pinckaers: freedom for excellence²².

Edith Stein's critical attitude towards modernity has similar strains, especially when it comes to the interpretation of human will. Rather than considering the human will in opposition to Divine will and nature and thereby considering human liberty as a permanent struggle against oppression of the highest metaphysical nature, she envisions the human will's proper functioning as getting more excellent in collaboration with divine will²³. Autonomy therefore is conceived here in relational terms, i.e. as the capacity to affirm what appears through grace in one's consciousness as something good. This concrete possibility does not emerge randomly from the context of a neutral world void of meaning but rather from an ultimately speaking Trinitarian context in which human vocation can be realized in a concrete community²⁴. The different communities one participates in help to discern and to culturally interpret both, the call and the mission²⁵ the given person should obediently follow. Listening to a transcendent call, from beyond all cultures and life-worlds allows for establishing a critical distance to contemporary cultural pressures that pervert human desire for the supernatural

²² Cf. Pinckaers, «Les Sources de la morale chrétienne», 354–378.

²³ In the chapter "Übergang vom Reich der Natur zum Reich der Gnade" of her 1921 work *Freiheit und Gnade* (1921) Stein places freedom between two dimensions: that of nature and of mercy. She claims that what is decisive concerning the subject's destiny whether freedom is on the side of one or the other. The transition defines the inner life of the soul. See: Edith Stein, «Freiheit und Gnade» en Edith Stein, *Freiheit und Gnade und weitere Beiträge zu Phänomenologie und Ontologie* (Freiburg, Basel, Wien: Herder, 2014): 8-72.; A critical review of the text is offered by Beate Beckmann-Zöller, «Edith Stein: Freiheit-Gnade-Berufung», *Katholische Bildung* 116.6 (2015): 261-272.

²⁴ For Stein not only the human person is *imago Trinitatis* but in contrast to the thomistic tradition according to which impersonal beings bear only vestiges (Spur) of God, she claims that they are images (Abbild) of the Trinity as well. In her *Endliches und Ewiges Sein* she writes: „Der hl. Thomas unterscheidet zwischen Spur und *Abbild*. Er spricht von Spur dort, wo aus der Wirkung, nur die *Ursächlichkeit* der Ursache zu entnehmen ist (wie man aus dem Rauch auf das Feuer schließen kann), von *Abbild* nur, wo in der Wirkung eine Darstellung der Ursache durch eine ihr ähnliche Form vorliegt (wie das Standbild des Merkur den Merkur darstellt). Mit Augustinus findet er eine Spur der Dreifaltigkeit in der ganzen Schöpfung, ein *Abbild* aber nur in den vernunftbegabten Geschöpfen, die Verstand und Willen haben (S.th. Iq 45 a 7). Indessen finden wir eine gewisse *Abbildlichkeit* auch in dem, was Thomas als Spur der Dreifaltigkeit aufweist.” en Edith Stein, *Endliches und ewiges Sein. Versuch eines Aufstieges zum Sinn des Seins*, (Freiburg: Herder Verlag, 1962), 328, 389-392; On the relevance of the Trinitarian vision in Stein Cf. Valentina Gaudiano, «Stein e Hemmerle in dialogo: percorsi di ontologia trinitaria» *Teresianum* 68.2 (2017): 363-388.; Agustina María Lombardi, «Vuelta a una ontología trinitaria. Persona y Trinidad en Ser finito y ser eterno de Edith Stein», *Veritas* 43 (2019): 89-106.

²⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Berufung. Die Antwort des Glaubens*, (Einsiedeln, Freiburg: Johannes-Verlag, 2003), 175-203; Cf. Hernán Rojas Edwards, «Dinámica vocacional de los ejercicios espirituales», *Perspectiva Teológica* 55 (2023): 451-468.

(theosis)²⁶. The primary source of cultural resilience is therefore the insistence on the transcultural nature of the divine call: deepening the desire for the supernatural, i.e. longing for the real divine-human communion. The loss of the self-autonomy can be avoided only if the unfinished nature of man is perfected through no other, but the desire for transcendence (rather than by any lower degree of culturally prescribed wishes and fancies). Then namely, abandoning oneself does not mean losing oneself, rather it means finding the real self as reborn through the encounter with the divine grace and divine self (Mt 16: 25)²⁷.

5. THE POSTMODERN PARADIGM OF UNFINISHED MAN

Edith Stein claims that man is a “Gottsucher”²⁸, somebody naturally looking for God. The self naturally endowed with a supernatural desire – as the theologian Henry de Lubac put it resuming the key point of the Christian tradition – suffers therefore because of two reasons: (1) the manipulation of the desire by the surrounding popular consumer culture mostly, by turning it towards oneself, i.e. depriving the desire of its natural self-transcending capacity and, (2) by the division of the self through fully internalizing the lord-servant relationship.

The derangement of the supernatural desire is a crucial part of transforming the modern subject into a pacific consumer. This operation is complex in the sense that it affects all faculties of the soul, the will, memory and imagination as well as the intellect and emotive capacities. It is most notably, that this radical malformation of the human self is not due to any aggressive external power. It occurs primordially by the gradual deviation of religious imagination, i.e. potential references to what is conceived and perceived as sacred, wholesome and therefore as

²⁶ According to Stein there is a specific freedom towards the world and its influences acquired by God’s children”. “Das befreite seelische Subjekt nimmt ebenso wie das natürlich-naive die Welt mit dem Geiste entgegen. Es empfängt auch in seiner Seele Eindrücke von der Welt. Aber die Seele wird nicht durch diese Eindrücke unmittelbar bewegt. Sie nimmt sie von eben jenem Zentrum her entgegen, mit dem sie in der Höhe verankert ist; ihre Stellungnahmen gehen von diesem Zentrum aus und werden ihr von oben vorgeschrieben. Das ist der seelische Habitus der Kinder Gottes”, en Edith Stein, «Freiheit und Gnade», en Edith Stein, *Freiheit und Gnade und weitere Beiträge zu Phänomenologie und Ontologie (1917–1937)*, (Freiburg: Herder 2004.), 16.

²⁷ For Stein the conversion is already a work of grace. She describes the turning around of the soul in relation to anxiety (Sorge) that is cured by grace when the subject is capable of turning away from his or her own self and fully embrace grace: “Und es gibt eine letzte Möglichkeit: sich der Gnade rückhaltlos in die Arme zu werfen. Das ist die entschlossenste Abkehr der Seele von sich selbst, das unbedingtste Sichloslassen. Aber um sich so loslassen zu können, muß sie sich so fest ergreifen, sich vom innersten Zentrum her so ganz umfassen, daß sie sich nicht mehr verlieren kann. Die Selbsthingabe ist die freieste Tat der Freiheit. Wer sich so gänzlich unbekümmert um sich selbst – um seine Freiheit und um seine Individualität – der Gnade überantwortet, der geht eben so – ganz frei und ganz er selbst – in sie ein. Und davon hebt sich die Unmöglichkeit ab, den Weg zu finden, so lange man noch auf sich selbst hinsieht. Die Angst kann den Sünder in die Arme der Gnade treiben. Die Angst, die von hinten treibt. Aber indem er sich ganz dahin wendet, wird er die Angst los, denn die Gnade nimmt Sünde und Angst von ihm.”, en Stein, «Freiheit und Gnade», 27.

²⁸ Cf. Edith Stein, *Was ist der Mensch?: Theologische Anthropologie*. en Edith Stein Gesamtausgabe Bd. 15, (Freiburg: Herder Verlag, 2005); Cf. Stein, «Freiheit und Gnade», 5-17.

most desirable. The anthropological turn Byung-Chul Han elucidates, implies an unwholesome connection between a deformed desire²⁹ and happiness whereas happiness is degraded from the experience of authentic communion to mere individual consumer satisfaction. Yet the patterns of consumer behavior implied here are promoted and even prescribed not in economic but in quasi-religious terms! Human desire because of its original designation to infinity, despite all perversions, cannot but assign to something (however unworthy it might be in itself) the title of ‘absolute good’ that must be “religiously” realized with the corresponding quasi-rituals and complete personal involvement³⁰. Moreover, precisely because the encounter of two *personal* wills (divine and human) is replaced by a simple relation of the almighty consumer’s self-realization through obtaining goods. Since the personal encounter was the guarantee of a human dialogue and a mitigation of the law, with its disappearance the law becomes impersonal and inhumanly rigid³¹. Indeed, the liberal market imposes on man a far more detailed and severe surveilling of human behaviors than any religious or political system has ever tried to implement. The market regulates all aspects of life; its clear commitment to nominalism³² reduces all values to mere quantities and numbers and thereby puts a prize to “spiritual goods” like silence, and paradoxically, even to ‘being disconnected’ from the market.

The second point mentioned above concerning the internalization of the lord-servant relationship is an original contribution of Byung-Chul Han’s investigations. One might think that becoming one’s own master is the highest point of autonomy, yet the Korean philosopher leaves no doubt about that this is tantamount of being completely exposed to the market’s malignant influences. It is rather the pattern of a cruel self-exploitation in which the optimization of the market is translated to personal terms: the imperative of reaching one’s full potential and thus getting to the highest market value is internalized and carefully carried out. The result of this internalized lord-servant relationship is a *narcissistic ego* with the well-known syndromes of burnout and depression³³.

²⁹ The critique of Han comes close to Marcuse when it comes to appreciate of how art and fantasy and creativity by evoking the deepest desire of the heart are essential to resist the unprecedented pressures on the self by the technical and cultural realities of what Han calls “achievement society” and Marcuse calls “performance principle”. Cf. Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1962), 128-140; Cf. Han, *The Agony of Eros*.

³⁰ Concerning the activity of the influencers Han speaks of a „character of liturgy” through which they share what they consume. “Social media is a church: like is ‘amen’; sharing is communion; consumption is salvation.” en Han, *Infocracy, Digitalization and the Crisis of Democracy*. 8.

³¹ Charles Taylor rightly calls this “code fetishism” and “nomolatriy” en Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, (MA/London: Belknap, 2007), 707-709.

³² See the critique of this point elaborated by Thomas Molnar en Thomas Molnar, «The Liberal Hegemony: The Rise of Civil Society», *The Intercollegiate Review* 29.2 (1994): 7.

³³ On the idea of narcissistic ego see also Pope Francis’ “Let us dream together!”. Pope Francis suggest that there is a threefold

According to this diagnosis, the salient feature of the political and cultural paradigm we face today is *voluntarily self-exploitation and perpetual self-optimization* leading to a *commodifiable self*³⁴. This tendency of voluntarily enslavement presents an unprecedented violation to human dignity. Regaining the wisdom on attaining the autonomous self is not any more an abstract theoretical issue but a burning problem of our destroyed political and personal communities. In short: The actual crisis of self-identities is due mainly to the market's pressure creating liquid identities instead of „vocational selves”.

Stein offers a liberating anthropological vision that is highly relevant in the contemporary cultural-social and economic context. She offers some resistance to market's pressure by elaborating a completely different path alongside with the Christian mysticism, more precisely with the Carmelite tradition of deepening one's desire. I would like to concentrate here on one of the key issue of *becoming an autonomous self*, in three steps: (1) Conversion, (2) The core of the subject, (3) Vocation as the real revolution.

6. CONVERSION

In the contemporary cultural context we have the tendency to think that any problem has a technical solution³⁵. Thus the opinion according to which the lack of personal and political freedom so typical for the Western culture based on the alliance of liberal democracy and free market can apparently be overcome by some form of social revolution or by new devices of more unrestricted and democratic communication (facebook, twitter). Yet, as Byung-Chul Han reminds us, in the new paradigm the repression of the self is from within and since, it is not caused by external forces it cannot be amended by destroying or reforming them³⁶.

danger: narcissism, desolation (desanimo) and pessimism. Cf. Pope Francis y Austen Ivereigh, *Let us dream: The path to a better future*, (London: Simon and Schuster, 2022).

³⁴ Cf. Han, *The Burnout Society*; Cf. Candence Chen, «The Effective Exploitation of the Self», *The Science Survey*, 16 de Marzo de 2022, en: <https://thesciencesurvey.com/editorial/2022/03/16/the-effective-exploitation-of-the-self/>

³⁵ Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief history of tomorrow*, (New York: Harper, 2017).

³⁶ Already Marcuse was clear about that the free election of the governing lords does not resolve the dialectic between lords and servants just as much as the free election of the infinite multitudes of goods does not mean freedom if these goods and services only maintain the social control over the life full of anxiety and worries, i.e. alienation. In his critique on the developed societies Herbert Marcuse (Herbert Marcuse, *One-dimensional man: Studies in the ideology of advanced industrial society*, (London: Routledge, 2013)). analyses the phenomena described in the Marxist terminology as alienation and exploitation. Marcuse observes that the resistance becomes increasingly difficult as the welfare and technical advances create lifestyle and power structure that pacify the opposition against the ruling power. The disappearance of the opposition is not so much a consequence of the terror as it is of the technical advancement bringing about more subtle ruling and governing mechanisms.

The alternative to a mere political solution is the radical transformation of the inner life. We could insist therefore with Stein that the key to any reconstruction of social and political life, i.e. human community, included here the resilience to the destructive economic powers of liberal market, is the complete reintegration of the individual person; a complex movement that is usually called *conversion*. Let us bracket for a while to whom the person is converted in order to and concentrate on the “metanoia” that is realized. In her work the *Der Aufbau der menschlichen Person*³⁷ Stein conceives the human person as a trichotomous interplay between body, soul, and spirit that is embedded in causal relations using the Aristotelian-Thomistic framework. Stein points out „that the soul can be understood only according to the metaphysics of formal and final causality while also affirming its relation to the physical body as articulated through material and efficient causality”³⁸. Conversion in this metaphysical framework requires a reintegration of body, soul and spirit by the discovery of the last cause, the divine as it is revealed to the soul as the effect of a graceful will in the soul.

Through this inner journey enabled by the collaboration of will and grace – as described in her *Freiheit und Gnade*³⁹ - the *autonomous self* will eventually appear with respect to both external and internal causal influences. Seeking personal autonomy thus and the liberation of the person of social and cultural influences goes along with a philosophical and existential search for the final cause within the soul in order to discover that Stein famously referred to as “secretum meum mihi”⁴⁰, the encounter with the most intimate Alterity, the source of one’s own vocation.

Concerning the elaboration of this inner path, let us not turn back to what we bracketed before, i.e. to the question on ‘what we turn to’ and ‘who is the subject of conversion’! According to Stein converted to Christianity, what we turn to in conversion is the Triune God as disclosed within the soul’s inner life. Faithful to the thomistic tradition in this respect she claims that to give a truthful account of the encounter with God the unified forces of faith and reason is required. As argued already in her imaginary conversation between Husserl and

³⁷ Cf. Edith Stein, «Der Aufbau der menschlichen Person: Vorlesung zur philosophischen Anthropologie» en *Edith Stein Gesamtausgabe*, Bd. 14, (Freiburg: Herder, 2004), 103-133.

³⁸ David S. Muthukumar, «Donald Wallenfang. Human and Divine Being: A Study on the Theological Anthropology of Edith Stein Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2017» en *The Evangelical Review of Theology and Politics*, Volume 5, 2017 Book Reviews, BR25-28.

³⁹ Cf. Stein, «Freiheit und Gnade», 2014.

⁴⁰ Cf. Ken Casey, «Edith Stein and “Secretum meum mihi”: Are Religious Conversions Necessarily Private?» en *Edith Stein: Women, Social-Political Philosophy, Theology, Metaphysics and Public History: New Approaches and Applications*, ed. por Antonio Calcagno, (Heidelberg-New York: Springer International Publishing, 2016.), 253-266.

Thomas Aquinas⁴¹ what is disclosed for the soul in the religious experience not only intelligible and therefore accessible to reason but it is precisely the very object through the study of which reason reaches its completion. In her *Scientia crucis*⁴² she goes even further by phenomenologically describing the different steps and levels of the mystical experience and thus, showing how faith can illuminate new dimensions of reality for reason.

Focusing on the divine-human encounter and thus obediently following its proper dynamic is one of the best ways to avoid the highly criticized implications of onto-theology (by Heidegger, Derrida and others) starting with the mistake of objectifying the One who reveals oneself as a community of persons. God is no thing; the divine must not be objectified. But if the divine is not a mere object of the intellect, but a vivid person to be discovered through and in the mutual self-gift and free self-disclosure than conversion is far from being a mere moral issue; it becomes the way to discover the truth on human nature and ourselves as free subjects. In the chapter entitled “The soul, the ego and freedom” of her *Kreuzeswissenschaft*⁴³ Stein distinguishes three types of subject: the subject of enjoyments, the truth-seeking subject and the ego-subject that can only be overcome through suffering through the mystical darkness. Religious experiences generally speaking and participation in liturgical act certainly do help to get leave behind the initial status of the ‘subject of enjoyment’ that is promoted and reinforced by what Zygmunt Bauman called “*Erlebnisgesellschaft*”⁴⁴, yet in order to get truly transformed according to Stein there must be a mystical experience, i.e. a real encounter with Trinity⁴⁵. It is all the more important because religious experiences or experiences religiously colored runs the risk under the current pressure of the market to be commodified. Even in the mystical experiences when challenged in liminal situations these different ego-types can decide whether to succumb to the extraordinary motivation presented to them to overcome oneself according to their best knowledge and intentions. Stein highlights that only the believer knows that there is Somebody, whose view is unrestricted and who, on the contrary to the limited human self, can oversee everything. Therefore, the believer cannot be satisfied with his or her best knowledge

⁴¹ Cf. Edith Stein, «*Husserls Phänomenologie und die Philosophie des hl. Thomas von Aquino*» (1929), en Edith Stein, Gesamtausgabe, Bd. 9, (Freiburg: Herder Verlag, 2014), 119-142.

⁴² Cf. Edith Stein, *Kreuzeswissenschaft, Studien über Johannes A. Cruce*, (Drueten: De Maas & Waler, 1983).

⁴³ Cf. Stein, *Kreuzeswissenschaft*, 102-107.

⁴⁴ Cf. Zygmunt Bauman, «*Erlebnisgesellschaft in Europa und Nordamerika*», *Concilium* 35.4 (1999): 404-410.

⁴⁵ Cf. the chapter “*Vereint mit dem Drei-Einen*” of *Kreuzeswissenschaft* in which Stein offers a poetic and yet phenomenologically accurate description of the unification as a fire causing a sweet wound in the soul (*Liebessverwundung*). en Stein, *Kreuzeswissenschaft*, 126-131.

but is committed to satisfy the will of God. Instead of measuring things according to our will, evaluating our own will in dependence to the will of God implies a radical change of perspective: a real conversion. Contrary to the modern imagination according to which an ego is posited in front of a neutral world, i.e. pure nature void of grace Stein's description of a collaboration of divine and human will starting with what she calls "preparative grace"⁴⁶ suggests a very different a different metaphysical account. The reality has always already a Trinitarian structure and it is this – nature pervaded the supernatural – that is partially illuminated by grace to the soul. Despite of this initial help as Stein puts it: "Each of us is perpetually on the razor's edge: on one side, absolute nothingness; on the other, the fullness of divine life"⁴⁷. The subject is not autonomous in the sense of starting the dialogue with the divine will, but certainly is in terms of being capable to answer to this heterogeneous or even mystical reality expressing a clear appeal to the subject to follow the light up to its origin.

Abandoning oneself is a fundamental decision, i.e. the basis for all other decisions concerning succumbing one's own will to the divine will and thereby most radically reinterpreting freedom paradoxically as growing in obedience, i.e. deciding *in relation* to God. Stein claims that the freest act of freedom is giving oneself away in obedience⁴⁸.

Stein, following John of the Cross' poem recognizes three different modes of being united with God: due to the encounter with the Trinity as radical transcendence within the immanence of the soul the person acquires a new perception of the divine presence in everything created. What was only a deem light in the external world, now shines through all realities of the consciousness. Discovering the divine presence also leads to a renewed appreciation of one's own self. This reaches the climax in the unification through perfect love, in which God by fully giving oneself away appropriates and transforms the soul. Stein's metaphysically grounded observation (based on her critical dialogue of Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus on the individuality of things⁴⁹) is that human nature's unique expression and thus individuality in a perfect sense is due to a relationship that not only transforms the soul, but

⁴⁶ Cf. the notion of "Vorbereitende Gnade" en Stein, «Freiheit und Gnade», 27.

⁴⁷ Cf. Edith Stein, «Wege zur inneren Stille», ed. por Waltraud Herbstrith, (Aschaffenburg: Kaffke, 1987), 12.

⁴⁸ "Die Selbsthingabe ist die freieste Tat der Freiheit. Wer sich so gänzlich unbekümmert um sich selbst – um seine Freiheit und um seine Individualität – der Gnade überantwortet, der geht eben so – ganz frei und ganz er selbst – in sie ein." en Ibid., 27.

⁴⁹ Cf. Edith Stein y Lucy Gelber, *Endliches und ewiges Sein*, (Freiburg, Herder Verlag, 1950), 395-422, Cf. especially the notions "Eigenart" and "Einzelsein". (419-422).

does in a personal and thus unique way. In short: the more the relation becomes personal, the more unique human person can emerge. One is unique not only in relation to other beings, humans but also and primordially in relation to God's unique idea of this person. The leading idea for Stein is the Psalm 32,15: "Qui finxit singillatim corda eorum"⁵⁰. Each and every step on this long road of graciously consent and affirm this gift of one's own existence and personhood leads to an inner transformation and a more unique expression of the self. One might want to complement this idea of personal individuality stemming from matter, forma and ultimately speaking one's vocation, i.e. the soul's relationship with God by highlighting that his process evolves in time and thus shapes one's narrative identity⁵¹.

Gifted by our own self we cannot offer God anything but himself. As Stein insists, despite of all sins one might have God does originally live in each human soul. Thus, the question is not so much 'letting him in' as if he was a stranger, but rather leading a personal life in relation to the Personal being *par excellence* already present at the foundation of our lives – and thereby re-founding our own existence. Self-conscious life lived in time becomes more personal, more gracious as one grows in readiness to acknowledge reality disclosed through love, faith and hope through signs of everyday life.

It is this growing attention to the divine other revealed in both the inner and the external dimension of eternal life becoming temporal helps to the self to gradually become 'other-centered' and perceiving oneself as such and thus, becoming increasingly immune to the temptations of ego-centrism and narcissism characteristic for our Western culture.

This radical discovery self-transcendence within the immanence of the soul helps to resist falling victim of consumerism of material or even semi-spiritual goods both leaving the self tragically, but necessarily fragmented. The fragmented self is not only the result but also the very prerequisite of the depersonalizing economic and social mechanism⁵².

⁵⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 422.

⁵¹ As Ricoeur insists on: narrative identity mediates between linking with each other facts and the ethical impetus thus it is in-between description and prescription not reducible to either of this. Cf. Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as another*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.) 114-5, 152-168.

⁵² David Bentley Hart explains eloquently how the liberal market is based on a distorted desire as well as it nurtures it: "That market thrives on a desire that recognizes no commonality of needs, a desire that seeks to consume and to create an identity out of what it consumes, a desire that produces out of its own energy and in indifference to a shared proportion of the good that might limit invention or acquisition. A desire that expands to the limits of which it is capable: not an analogical desire for God or the other, but a desire for nothing as such, producing in order to desire more." En David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth*, (Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004), 432.

The desire that is not focused on human completion and thus, without any unifying factor, seeking momentarily satisfaction and empty intensity in an accelerate world produces a self-consciousness full of anxiety. For a fragmented self-consciousness no real encounter with the other, no real self-transcending knowledge is possible since all social relations become a mere mirror of one's own self. It is important to see that the market is not responsible for this original tendency of human nature described by St. Augustine as *defluxus in multa*⁵³, dispersion that leads to the falling apart of the life and the personality⁵⁴, but certainly reinforces it especially in its paradigmatically new, inauthentic way of purporting liquid identities, i.e. the free variations of one's own self⁵⁵.

Byung-Chul Han observed that the most important factor thanks to which the self is completely exposed to the market is the *depersonalization of the other*. The other person does not completely disappear, rather becomes structurally an extension of one's own self, a function of the self-referential desire and narcissistic self-aggrandizement⁵⁶. When production and consume are not any more understood as exchanges in a complex space⁵⁷ between persons with a unique language, tradition and history, they become depersonalized and therefore simple transactions naturally unbound, unlimited accelerated and unmeasurable. Empathy, the foundation of social relations as well of mystical experiences⁵⁸ that Stein elaborated on in her doctoral thesis⁵⁹, when fully exercised, i.e. when the subject is able to perceive and affirm the unique dignity of the other, is the very act through which a community can hold on to the other person, and resist tendencies of depersonalization and virtualization of social transactions⁶⁰.

The rich heritage of Edith Stein' oeuvre suggests that the liberation of the human person cannot only be pursued through political or even cultural changes. However important these

⁵³ Cf. Martin Heidegger, *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*, (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2010).

⁵⁴ Cf. Chad Engelland, «Augustinian Elements in Heidegger's Philosophical Anthropology: A Study of the Early Lecture Course on Augustine», *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*. Vol. 78. (2004): 263-275.

⁵⁵ Erasing the binary categories is inducing an economically very lucrative game that, however, shatters the human self in pieces. Changing the social roles and social categories might be regarded as playful activity as long as the subject that is playing is somehow acknowledged as such. Yet it is fully destructive if there is no point of returning and the consumer as such is pushed from one inauthentic role to another.

⁵⁶ A critical summary of this point was offered by Picchione. En Picchione, «Byung-Chul Han: Digital Technologies».

⁵⁷ Adrian Pabst y John Milbank, «The Anglican polity and the politics of the common good», *Crucible: the Christian journal of social ethics* (2014): 7-15.

⁵⁸ Cf. the conclusion of Olli Pekka Vainio, «Dark Light: The Mystical Theology of St. Edith Stein», *Journal of Analytic Theology* 4 (2016): 362-372.

⁵⁹ Cf. Edith Stein, «Zum Problem der Einfühlung», en Edith Stein Gesamtausgabe, Bd. 5, (Freiburg: Herder Verlag, 2008).

⁶⁰ Cf. Akmal Sharofovich Shukurov, «Virtualization of economy is the main mechanism of virtualization of social life», *American Journal Of Social Sciences And Humanity Research*, 2(12), (2022): 62-68. <https://doi.org/10.37547/ajsshr/Volume02Issue12-10>.

dimensions of the personal life might be, real liberation is achieved primordially by the reaffirmation and reinstatement of the relationship to the other's utmost transcendence, to the divine selves. For the ultimate source of freedom is the Holy Trinity.

Overcoming the actual crisis of European sciences and culture, generally speaking through the radical re-foundation of sciences – as suggested by Husserl – needs to be complemented by a personal re-appropriation of what Stein termed the 'science of the Cross'. Philosophy's contribution to the renewal of the Church and thereby our diverse communities ultimately speaking consists in careful reflections on what is revealed. That includes certainly mystical experiences. Phenomenological reflection on mystical experiences is truly liberating, especially if it is a vocational endeavor leading to a new praxis. Stein invites us to devote our attention to an object of study, which not only captivates the soul but is also disclosed to consciousness. Such investigation, if authentically carried out goes beyond mere professional interest or curiosity; rather it is an existential path to become the radically free, liberated from economic, social and cultural repressions in order to be fully available to God's will. Reflecting on one's most intimate and most constitutive experience, i.e. of one's true calling is necessary to be what we each consciously awakened person is called to be. Understanding the divine call, even if it remains a limited human understanding, is ineluctable in order to be able to decipher the unique mission in the concrete life-world and in the given social relations of one's own communities. In short: one's own vocation is disclosed in the depth of the heart, in liberating mystical experiences⁶¹.

In the words of Stein: "Es ist kein bloßes Annehmen der gehörten Glaubensbotschaft, kein bloßes Sichzuwenden zu dem Gott, den man nur vom Hörensagen kennt, sondern ein inneres Berührtwerden und ein Erfahren Gottes, das die Kraft hat, von allen geschaffenen Dingen loszulösen und emporzuheben und zugleich in eine Liebe zu versenken, die ihren Gegenstand nicht kennt"⁶².

7. THE SUBJECT OF VOCATION - THE CORE OF THE SUBJECT

But who is the subject of vocation? One can hardly answer this question without taking into account the historical perspective, i.e. transformation of identity as a cultural product.

⁶¹ Vocation has two constitutive parts: the call and the mission. Cf. Balthasar, «Berufung», 175–203.

⁶² Cf. Stein, *Kreuzeswissenschaft*, 78.

Stuart Hall⁶³ distinguishes in this sense three concepts: the subject of Illustration, the sociological subject and the postmodern subject. The subject of Illustration has a clearly defined center and is a unified individual and a rational being. The idea of social identity represents the complexity of the modern world and is based on the recognition that the core of the subject is not autonomous but rather constituted in relation to others that transmit the values of the life world the subject is rooted in (values, meanings, symbols). Identity is constructed in and through interaction between the subject and society and bridges the inside and the outside of the private and public worlds. In the postmodern area however, the personal identity is fragmented, it consists of not one but rather several and even contradictory identities that are not fully defined. Those identities built by the external social environment increasingly weakened because of the structural and institutional changes such as the development of the technocratic society⁶⁴; it is this tendency that gives birth to the postmodern subject that does not have a definite, closed and essential identity rather changes identities coping with the circumstances⁶⁵.

I think this threefold distinction by Hall is correct as far as it concerns the sociological and cultural transformation throughout Western history. It would be however, a lamentable methodological mistake to derive from this insight into a historical tendency an ontological claim according to which the human subject does not have any core, and therefore cannot conceive his or her identity otherwise than in a liquid and fragmented form. Would that not be accepting without any criteria whatever the current culture offers? Extraordinary human achievements, human greatness that contributes to the constant re-foundation of culture is often based on resilience if not on resistance to actual cultural tendencies. Despite the evident decadency, high culture is restituted through questioning the fundament of what is accepted by the masses. Such questioning is not necessarily destructive and is not groundless if based on concrete existential experiences that cannot be accounted for with the current categories.

In her introduction to *The Structure of the Human Person*, Edith Stein critiques the controversial and, according to her judgement, nihilistic anthropology of Heidegger and suggests to reevaluate the classical Christian vision of the human person by insisting on the

⁶³ Stuart Hall, «A kulturális identitásról», *Multikulturalizmus*, ed. por Margit Feischmidt (Budapest: Osiris, 1997), 60-68.

⁶⁴ Theodore Roszak, US-American sociologist describes Western society as technocracy, in which industrial society reaches its highest point of its integrational development: in this world of experts nothing exists that would be self-evident. Everything (let it be politics, economics or cultural issues) is beyond everyday people horizon for these questions must be dealt with by professionals. Cf. Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture. Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1969), 1-17.

⁶⁵ Tamás Barcsi, *A kultúrától az ellenkultúráig*, (Budapest: Publicon Kiadó, 2012), 118.

Trinitarian *imago Dei* and the distinction between an interior and the exterior man: “Noli foras ire, in te redi, in interiore homini habitat veritas⁶⁶.”

Stein not only upholds the disciplinary relation between these two poles – that would still fall into the category of the modernist paradigm – but she also claims that the person’s whole existence is structured around the experience and vivid participation in the transcendence of the Other, the Divine. The anthropology purported by Stein sustains that there is a *core of the subject*. This core does exist independently of our will it is encountered by self-awakened person rather than produced by his or her consciousness. It is this core that freely responds to the divine call and mission whereas freedom is not interpreted merely in terms of ‘from or for something’ but primordially as freedom ‘in relation to a Divine and human person’.

Although any conscious self-gift points to this core of the subject and reinforces the desire to further developing one’s own true self, it is the religious experiences through which the core of the subject becomes thematically present. Nothing else but the total gift of the divine self is what allows for the total person and the core of the subject to step in front of the curtain; it is the loving appeal of the eternally present divine person that calls us to be fully present as well. Therefore, the ‘core of the subject’ can primordially be consciously reaffirmed in the context of vocation, i.e. in the dimension of the radical inner freedom established by the call and mission. Since it is love what awakens the core of the subject, it the responsive act of self-donation through and in which the core of the subject becomes both self-conscious and therefore ready to get transformed in all dimensions of the self: memory, will and intellect – a process that is phenomenologically analyzed by Stein in her *Scientia Crucis*⁶⁷.

On the sound basis of the Christian teaching on the originally good but also fallible human nature, Stein certainly recognizes that this personal center can lose its effectiveness inasmuch as the person loses the self-possession and gives in to passions. One paradox way of doing so is rather typical in our contemporary society that in his already classic work (*The Culture of Narcissism* from 1979) Christopher Lasch called becoming ‘narcissistic’. According to his definition, elaborated in an intense dialogue with Marx and Freud:

⁶⁶ Edith Stein observes that there is unity between the interior and the exterior man that sometimes becomes invisible because one abandons the struggle for it. This unity is never dissolved, not even in its invisible status for it exists because God created us to be one and this oneness is called to immortality. If one loses oneself will be certainly responsible for it but in all moments of life, there is a possibility to go deep inside oneself and to encounter with oneself again. Cf. Stein, *Der Aufbau der menschlichen Person*, 34.

⁶⁷ Cf. Stein, *Kreuzeswissenschaft*, 37-71.

the new narcissist is haunted not by guilt but by anxiety. He seeks not to inflict his own certainties on others but to find a meaning in life. Liberated from the superstitions of the past, he doubts even the reality of his own existence. Superficially relaxed and tolerant, he finds little use for dogmas of racial and ethnic purity, but at the same time forfeits the security of group loyalties and regards everyone as a rival for the favors conferred by a paternalistic state. His sexual attitudes are permissive rather than puritanical, even though his emancipation from ancient sexual taboos brings him no sexual peace. Fiercely competitive in his demand for approval and acclaim he distrusts competition because he associates it with an unbridled urge to destroy. ... He extols cooperation and teamwork while harboring deeply antisocial impulses. He praises respect for rules and regulations in the secret belief that they do not apply to himself. Acquisitive in the sense that his cravings have no limits, he does not accumulate goods and provisions against the future, in the manner of the acquisitive individualist of the nineteenth-century political economy, but demands immediate gratifications and lives in a state of restless, perpetually unsatisfied desire⁶⁸.

One of the striking features of this personality is the radical poverty of inner life, the destructive dependence on the positive appreciation of others. Edith Stein offers a real counter-cultural account, a path of liberation when she phenomenologically describes how the inner person enters into a dialogue with the divine self. The inner dialogue becomes especially pertinent when it discovers that the main force behind the susceptibility of the external factors completely taking over is the narcissistic personality's lack of an inner core that is loved and approved.

The feeling of being loved unconditionally is the pre-requisite for being capable of loving and therefore of the free self-gift. What constitutes the core of the human subject is according to Stein not simply a natural property of human nature but rather the essence discovered in any authentic mystical experience: the unconditional divine affirmation of one's unique personhood. It is in this experience that the natural potency of the human person is actualized through the encounter with the divine call and mission.

In the chapter, "The Glory of Resurrection" of the *Kreuzwissenschaft*⁶⁹ Stein describes the way the core is actualized at the bottom of the soul by the most dramatic transformation

⁶⁸ Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism. American Social Character*, (London: Routledge, 2019), 241-267.

⁶⁹ Cf. Stein, *Kreuzwissenschaft*, 119-141.

through the divine love. The soul's new life is born from the death. It is the end of all narcissist and ego-centric tendencies. This process is entirely due to grace to the effect of which the human self cannot add anything but a positive response of accepting its help.

Precisely by saying 'amen' to it one reaches a radically new level of self-possession without which self-donation is impossible. Thus, self-possession cannot be achieved by holding on to one's own self or mastering self-discipline, even less by self-optimization; the real way consists in abandoning oneself to divine grace and surrendering oneself to the divine will.

8. SUMMARY: VOCATION AS THE REAL REVOLUTION

Byung-Chul Han's analysis of the postmodern subject with liquid identities is pertinent for it shows some of the controversies of this project. He shows that while promises not only an autonomous self but also playful self-realization it leaves us with self-exploitation and a narcissism leading to depression and burn out. The Korean thinker offers a detailed diagnosis and argues for a radical transformation of one's fundamental attitude: instead of hyperactivity, he argues for inactivity and contemplation⁷⁰.

Contrary to the modernist understanding of human emancipation through a constant fight against both divine and created human nature (one could include here the postmodern version of the consumer subject's self-exploitation), Stein claims that making oneself available for divine will in a vigilant and even kenotic way is the proper way of discovering one's own self. It is in the depth of the heart where all true liberation starts and culminates. Abandonment leads to the discovery of the core of the subject that is transformed and perfected in communion and become the vocational self. In order to fully developing one's unique personhood, one needs a human communion (*Gemeinschaft*) as well that teaches us how to participate in the Trinitarian drama.

Political resistance and the cultivation of the tradition are important for Stein yet real liberation requires not just an external struggle but also that which is the hardest task for man: abandonment to divine will. The essential transformation of the self (*Wesensverwandlung*) and thus real liberation happens only when encountering and affirming the ultimate source of freedom. While the apparent liberation of the self – as critically argued by Byung-Chul Han – leads to self-exploitation and narcissism, obedience to divine will promises more than cultural

⁷⁰ Cf. Byung-Chul Han, *Vita Contemplativa: In Praise of Inactivity*, trad. por Daniel Steuer, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2023).



and social resilience: the discovery of one's own vocation (Berufung). Vocation with its proper dynamic of call and mission engages the self to respond to the divine love within one's concrete circumstances and human communities. Independently in which form, whether in marriage or through celibacy those who are living their vocation and thus the praxis of self-gift revolutionize social, political and cultural life through their radical freedom.