

Chapter 3

Women in Society: The Critical Potential of Stein's Feminism for Our Understanding of the State

Mette Lebech

Abstract In this paper I intend to place Stein's philosophy of woman in the context of, on one hand, her (earlier) work on society and the state and, on the other hand, her (later) work on philosophical and theological anthropology. I want to do this in order to assess Stein's understanding of the role of women in society (as a special case of the relationship of human beings with society) and in order to evaluate the critical potential of Stein's thought for the organization of the state. First, I briefly discuss the nature and context of Stein's works on women, society and the human being. Second, I then focus on three key terms: vocation, power and state in order to bring out their relationship to one other. Finally, I address the question of whether Stein's thought on woman and the state can be summed up by the idea that a significant part of the vocation of the human being is to manage power in and of the state.

Stein's Works on Woman, the Human Being, Society and the State

Edith Stein lectured in the late 1920s and early 1930s on women throughout Germany, mainly to women engaged in the teaching professions and often to Catholics. Those lectures made her well known in her time, and have often since overshadowed her more philosophical work, probably because they are about a topic of interest to many who would otherwise find philosophical considerations too laborious and time consuming.

Stein's lectures on women (a 11 of which are printed in Volume 13 of Herder's critical edition of Steins collected works)¹ form part of the middle period of her work, which date from her baptism into the Catholic Church on New Years Day

¹Stein [1].

M. Lebech (✉)

Department of Philosophy, University of Maynooth, Kildare, Ireland

e-mail: mette.lebech@nuim.ie

1922 to her entrance into Carmel on 15 October 1933. The bulk of the lectures are contemporaneous with her lectures given at the Marianum (1932–1933), a teacher training college in Münster. These later lectures are now published as *Der Aufbau der menschlichen Person* and *Was ist der Mensch? (Structure of the Human Person and What is the Human Being?)*². These two works consisting of a philosophical and a theological anthropology were intended as a contribution to the foundation of a Roman Catholic educational theory. They form the immediate background to the lectures on women and women's education and serve as their philosophical and theological anchor. In these volumes we find Stein's later philosophy of the human being most fully explored.

To understand Stein's view of society, however, we must turn to her early phenomenological work, undertaken while she was still editing Husserl's *Ideas II* and *III* (1919–1920). Her *Beiträge zur philosophischen Begründung der Psychologie und der Geisteswissenschaften* (translated as *Philosophy of Psychology and the Humanities*) and *Eine Untersuchung über den Staat (An Investigation Concerning the State)*, although published respectively in 1922 and 1925, were written earlier and both grew from concerns with Husserl's attempt to ground the sciences, in particular, the human and social sciences. Together they provide a comprehensive and subtle social philosophy.

Key Terms

Stein referred to these early treatises on several occasions in her later work in order to clarify her position on various issues. We have, therefore, no reason to think that she would have repudiated any of their insights, and thus we can read and explain the later works and their key terms in the light of the earlier works.

Vocation

Sophie Bingeli mentions that Stein's understanding of vocation (*Beruf*), understood as "a means to actualize human strengths and to fulfil the personality, sheds a new light on the relationship between occupation (*Beruf*) and the family."³ The translation of this quotation illustrates how the German term *Beruf/Berufung*, here translated as vocation as well as occupation, has a wider application than the English term, although some of this wider application is picked up in expressions such as vocational training. Both vocation and *Beruf* expresses the idea of a calling, i.e., something one is called to do (by others or by God), as well as the idea of a profession or occupation by which one earns one's living.

²These works are not yet translated into English. Translations of cited texts are my own.

³See the Introduction to *Die Frau*, xxi.

Vocation (*Beruf/Berufung*) is used by Stein in conjunction with terms like task (*Aufgabe*), education (*Bildung*), specificity (*Bestimmung, Eigenart*) and unfolding (*Entfaltung*).⁴ It applies to individuals as well as to communities. It has a different meaning than destiny insofar as vocation implies a teleology; it is not a (mere) happening (planned) from the outside (by fate) that may or may not correspond to our deepest desires. Vocation has its roots and explanation in who we are. It stands in connection with education insofar as it is the task of education to bring out the specificity of a being or a community. Education is thus at the service of the unfolding of the personal individual and of the cultural community.

In the *Structure of the Human Person* Stein makes it clear that knowledge of the beginning and end of the human being lies beyond what a philosophical investigation, and hence what a philosophical anthropology, can yield. Philosophical anthropology relies on experience, on our experience, as human beings, and of what we can learn from it about who and what we are. We have, however, no direct experience of our beginning and of our end: to experience the beginning of experience and experience its end is impossible. We make up for this inherent limitation of finite experience by extrapolating from our experience of others' beginning and end, by forming theories about them and holding these in faith. Insofar as the theoretical account of the beginning and end of human experience faces the question 'why?' in order to complete the understanding of the human being, it must be supported by a theological anthropology. Stein's theological anthropology, *What is the Human Being?*, attempts to illuminate the question by discussing dogmatic declarations about the nature of the human being made over two millennia.

When Stein speaks of vocation, she presupposes not only the compatibility of philosophical and theological approaches, but also the necessity of completing the philosophical approach by a theological one.⁵ She did not think, however, that the lived experience of values was directly altered by faith (although such experiences may be ordered by faith in a specific way). Thus a non-believer (as much as a believer) normally experiences the harmonious development of his or her own predispositions (talents) as valuable and may experience the sacrifice of other values as necessary. Most non-believers have a sense of vocation in the sense that they believe certain occupations to be more desirable than others, not only in general but also for them in particular.

For a woman (and it is women who are the focus of Stein's specific reflections on vocation), the unfolding called for by the vocation involves three dimensions: the unfolding of humanity, the unfolding of womanhood, and the unfolding of individuality.⁶ For a man, likewise, the unfolding comports three dimensions, that of humanity, that of manhood and that of individuality. For Stein, men and women are concrete individuals with concrete dimensions that resist arbitrary social control and any attempt at social engineering. Human beings are, in other words, real, not

⁴See *Die Frau* and Edith Stein, *Bildung und Entfaltung der Individualität*, in *Edith Stein Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 16 (Freiburg: Herder, 2001).

⁵*Die Frau*, 172. This approach is explained in FEB 12–30.

⁶*Die Frau*, 171.

mere social constructions of a state in need of labourers, subjects and reproducers. Education must work with the given, and must take its cue from what is given: the vocation discovered and fostered in the process of education takes its concrete shape as a social reality in an occupation that, in turn, needs to respect the concreteness and multidimensionality of the individual. Since the vocation of the individual and the vocation of the community of individuals ultimately support one other (our social roles are at the service of others and of the common good, incorporating us into the whole Christ) (FEB 510–528), no ultimate conflict can exist between vocations. Nor are social roles rigidly tied to gender or to any other natural feature, as no one is only a woman or a man: everyone is also a human being like all other human beings as well as an individual with his or her specific traits and powers. All of these dimensions have meaning for the completion of humanity as a whole.

Power

The term “power” has a twofold meaning, which can be seen in its etymology in the Latin word *potentia*. Power refers generally to the ability to do things, whether this ability is conceived as habitual (powers as faculties or capacities) or exercised (power as displayed) or whether this ability is possessed by individuals or by groups.

Stein, like many before her, compares the economy of forces or powers of the individual with that of the community in order to bring out their respective specificities. For Stein, power or force (*Kraft, Lebenskraft*) is a phenomenon we observe in our acts; it allows us to identify the psyche as the economy of energy of the individual person (we shall come back to power in the sense of *Macht*, understood here as political power, later, as we shall see that it relies on this first sense of power as force). The human being, like other animals, gets tired. It experiences depletion and replenishment from both physical and spiritual sources. Mental and physical activity seems to use energy from our reservoir, whereas rest and the taking of nourishment seem to build this reservoir up again (PPH I, I, § 4). Negative experiences drain us under the influence of negative values while positive experiences revitalize us through the influence of positive values. “The feelings don’t just feed on the life sphere by being experienced, as all other experiences do; they also affect the life sphere by their contents, which as such either supply power or consume it” (PPH 217). There are also the deceptive energies that, like waves at the beach, invade and then withdraw, sucking away all and even more than they brought. We learn over a lifetime to manage our powers, in particular in relation to food, rest, activity, drugs, sex, money and recognition, which all can create dependencies when we abuse our ability to re-establish an equilibrium through habituation.

Communities also possess a life power. Here also

every stirring of life costs an expenditure of power, and every time there is any great exertion, it is followed by a slackening, a subsiding of power....Without a doubt, we have here the same “mechanism” as with the individual psyche: one power reservoir that has a range of functionings to maintain, and can’t be tapped too heavily by any [of them] lest the others

be put off line; a power reservoir that blows off its surpluses in an impulsive doing, just as it automatically replenishes itself when it threatens to fail. (PPH 202)

Stein adds,

The life power of a community doesn't exist independently and alongside of its components, but rather coalesces from the power of the single [members]. However the individuals don't contribute their full, undivided power into the community, but [contribute] only in so far as they are living as members of the community. Each one retains "reserves" for his or her own individual living. (PPH 203)

Furthermore,

So inside of any community—and measured provisionally only by the influxes that the power of the whole gets from them—there are very different kinds of components: some that give mighty impulses to the community, others that enrich it only a little, and finally participants who draw off more than they contribute to it. (PPH 204)

Beyond contagion, power transfer is possible within the community when there is openness. The power shared with others "can help the individual along not only during a temporary failure of her power, but may even make her capable of achievements that she wouldn't be able to pull off on her own even with her life power at optimal status" (PPH 205). Stein continues,

Thus, the level of life power of a community depends upon these two factors: the life power that its components can draw upon, and the amount of the power at their disposal that they devote to the community. Therefore the power of a community can be increased in two ways: by receiving new powerful individuals, and by demanding more from those who already belong to it. Accordingly, it can be weakened in two ways: if its components drift off, and if the individuals belonging to it slacken in their accomplishments for the community. (PPH 205–206)

As openness is the precondition of the sharing of life power, the attitudes we take to each other contribute to or diminish the life power of the community.

The contents [of the attitudes]—deploy a specific efficacy within the human beings whom they befall. The love which I meet with strengthens and invigorates me and grants me the power for unexpected achievements. The distrust I run into disables my creative power. Other peoples' attitudes encroach directly upon my inner life and control its course—unless I "lock myself up" against them, which is possible here as with all causal influences. (PPH 212)

Stein also notes that

...the solidarity of individuals, which becomes visible in the influence of the attitudes of one upon the life of the others, is formative of community in the highest degree.... Where... the attitudes of one don't bounce off of the other but rather penetrate him and deploy their efficacy, there a communal life subsists, there the two are members of one whole; and without such a reciprocal relationship community isn't possible. If we imagine a behaviour in which one individual takes the other purely as an object whose "ways of reacting" he must take precautions against, then the unity of life that makes up community is sliced apart.... Neither infection by someone else's life states, nor influence by someone else's attitudes, nor shared motivation, is possible [then].... The attitudes that the components of the community implement with respect to it therefore are of the utmost importance as factors upon which its power and its life depend. (PPH 214–215)

Life power is thus not only experienced in the individual, but it is also experienced as a characteristic of communities, as their vitality. “Inasmuch as values “induce” attitudes in us whose contents convey new propellant powers to our mental life, we have regarded them themselves as “life-contributing”” (PPH 213). Stein observes, “. . .the experienced values are not only motives that prescribe the direction of my deed, but at the same time they furnish the propellant powers that it requires” (PPH 216). Life power thus takes two forms: it motivates or *is* motivation (as spiritual) and it is felt (as psychic) as having a causal influence on us; furnishing us with “propellant powers” for action. By its free circulation, life power is life enhancing and community creating. It is the natural energy resource of human beings and thus the raw material of political power, what political power or *Macht* attempts to steer and master.

State

Let us turn to our third key word. A state means the way things are, as in the expressions the state of affairs or the state of the housing market. I interpret Stein as understanding the political state as the way things are in relation to the legislating subjectivity of a community constituting itself as sovereign. Power, in the sense of *Macht*, manifests itself in relation to such sovereignty, either by being sovereign or relating to sovereignty. Power relies on people thinking that it is incontrovertible (i.e., capable of forcing) or legitimate (i.e., beneficial to the functioning of the community) such that people accept the claims and obligations of power either for some reason (e.g., to be left in peace) or because of the perceived intrinsic value for the community of these claims and obligations. Thus power channels or directs powers—psychic and communal—in the sense of *Kraft*. Political power must integrate all powers or succumb to other powers.

Various communities can be included in the state, and states can split particular communities: the nation state is the type of state that integrates a nation (and may or may not include minorities from other ethnic backgrounds). A state may be ruled in different ways, and particular models of the state have specific impact on the functioning of the state, much like people’s behavior have on the community. A state may also be ruled by groups of people that are different from those elected or nominated to legislate. In this way, the real power to legislate may be in the hands, say, of multinational corporations, international organizations or financial systems.

Stein’s understanding of the state relies on a distinction between different kinds of social relationships: common experiential structuration, mass (*Masse*), society (*Gesellschaft*) and community (*Gemeinschaft*), which Stein elaborates from elements found in contemporary sociological theory, particularly in the work of Tönnies. These forms of sociality correspond to different aspects of the nature of human beings: through common experiential structuration (e.g., shared psychic structure and logic) the possibility for sharing impressions gives rise to experience of different types (e.g., science, art), which corresponds to the human being having

a specific physical and spiritual form (PPH 239). In the mass of people life power is shared through sentient contagion: fear breeds fear, laughter makes people laugh. It relies on human beings having a sentient or psychic dimension that can receive and transmit energy directly from network to network without necessarily involving awareness, decision or personal responsibility (PPH 241). “Associations [societies] are social federations that are founded voluntarily. Free persons enter into them by virtue of an act of willing, and they may withdraw from them again in the same manner” (S 107). They rely on the human being having free will and the ability to choose even against her or his own inmost motivations (PPH 255). Life power is shared in society in a deliberate, i.e., not naïve, way, for certain reasons and with a purpose. Community, finally, involves openness and sharing of life power through solidarity. It is possible because the human being is a person and is capable of being spontaneously motivated in particular by the value of other people (S 2–6, PPH 261ff.).

Stein does consider the state to rest essentially on a community, since “the state is not called into existence through an act of willing by individuals—as an association is” (S 107).⁷ But its emergence is very much prepared by associational structures, by social organization affirming power, thus creating the ‘state’ of power, where sovereignty is affirmed through those structures and that organization (S 108). But insofar as the state consists in sovereignty affirmed through acts of law-making, the state cannot lose sovereignty and still remain a state: when a state is conquered and annexed to another, for example, the cultural community constitutive of the previous state may be integrated into the new one, not *as* state but as a historical community. This, of course, is not the case if one state is indebted to another. The existence of the state is required for the debt to actually exist.

Power lies in the state and in its political functions⁸: political functions operate in relation to the sovereignty of the state (they are exercised in the name of the state) and receive their meaning from it. Since the essence of the state is sovereignty, it only indirectly, i.e., through its members, has a relationship with values. The state, then, is not essentially linked to the common good (or any good or evil for that matter). If the sovereignty of the state is threatened, it means that all its political functions might fall back onto a self-organizing community. One might say that the closer one is to threatening and/or maintaining the sovereignty of the state, the more “power” one wields, understood in the sense of holding the key to the power and political functioning of state community members.

The whole community can be held captive by power (because the state employs power to organize itself), but it must be stressed that community may exist without the state and without sovereignty, i.e., without the power to command and execute the functions of the state. Community, in fact, does not rely on function (although it may be facilitated by it); community rather enables associational functionality. The community lives by naïve sharing of life power and is thus essentially distributing

⁷This claim, Stein says, is true, despite the analogy contractarians create that purports to reflect the natural state of things.

⁸All the “political functions are inseparably bound to the state” (S 124).

power rather than concentrating it in the hands of a few for the sake of political functionality. In the same way as the state relies on community for the sovereignty it wields, naïve sharing of life power is a prerequisite for association. All associational forms of sociality fall apart if a basic sharing of purpose, language and meaning is impossible: for Stein, a state community is necessary for the meaningfulness of political functions.

Is a Significant Part of the Vocation of the Human Being to Manage Power in and of the State?

Insofar as the vocation of the individual human being, according to Stein, is finalized by the flowering of humanity as a whole, individual vocations find their purposefulness in service to humanity as a whole. Insofar as the state (whose goal is not the service of humanity, but the maintenance of sovereignty) is an intermediate social reality that exists in the world where vocations are lived out, the human being may, as part of his or her vocation to serve the common good, engage in political activity and thus contribute to manage political power and manage the power of the state. The human being does not have to do this however for the sake of its own unfolding, except if its specific vocation is to be involved in politics. The state is not, according to Stein, necessary for human unfolding. A state and the management of its power *may* serve this unfolding, but it may also hinder it, as is the case in for example totalitarian regimes.

However, a significant part of the vocation of every human being is to manage his or her own power (*Kraft*), understand and channel it in relation to the community and in the community. It may happen that this cannot be done in practice without taking up a political role and participate in society as a network of associational organization. This depends on the organization of the state in which one lives.

We are now ready to address the issues we set out to discuss: the role of women in society and the critical potential of Stein's understanding of vocation in relation to the concrete organization of the state.

Arguably women have been, traditionally, more engaged in community life than men: their roles as caregivers for children, husbands, the elderly, and the ill, in domestic settings, have exposed them to the sufferings and joys of human beings as they are. Men, in their roles as providers and defenders of the domestic community, have traditionally been engaged in associational organization, where functions and agreements structured legal arrangements and military operations. For the unfolding of the human being, however, the first of these social relationships is essential, the other useful, and if lived without its foundation in community, positively alienating. Association, in so far as its aim is the functioning of the community it serves, takes its ideal structure from the unfolding of the human being in community and should therefore be a medium through which this unfolding is protected, promoted and realized.

One could argue that a deformation of the sphere of society obtains when its basis in community is disregarded and it detaches itself in the pursuit of power for its own sake. Men and women can be caught in the two sides of this divide: they can be caught unrecognized, providing the communal basis for a society turned to the pursuit of power. And they can be caught in the pursuit of power, not recognizing their own personal dimension unfolding only in community. The latter misrecognition is the one that is the most detrimental to the human person and the more deforming of the human vocation to personhood and community, according to Stein. It is not the fact that the vocation of women belongs 'more' to community than that of men. It is the *person* who finds his or her fulfillment in community, whether man or woman. Nor is it the case that the vocation of men is 'more' to associational life. Associational life finds its purpose in the protection and promotion of the unfolding of the human person, whether man or woman. Women may have, as Stein remarks, a tendency to overemphasize the personal. She advises them for this reason to engage more in 'thoroughly objective work'.⁹ Correspondingly, men may have a tendency to identify with power. One might think that such tendency could best be counteracted by paying attention to vulnerability and to naïve communication as community creating.

That the state, its political functions and the power occasioned by these functions, is finalized by the unfolding of human persons in community is the critical edge of Stein's understanding of vocation. It was voiced at a time, where power had detached itself from its end in organizing and thereby sustaining community. Stein's philosophy of woman was designed to vindicate the concrete individuality of human persons, whether women or men, unfolding in a community supported by the state. Such a state is possible, she thought, only because and insofar as its representatives respect the values of the individual human being and of community. In this form of state, power never detaches itself from service: sovereignty has a purpose.

Reference

1. Edith Stein, *Die Frau. Fragestellungen und Reflexionen*, in Edith Stein Gesamtausgabe, vol. 13 (Freiburg: Herder, 2000)

Mette Lebeck has been a Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Maynooth, Ireland, since 1998. She holds degrees in philosophy from the Universities of Copenhagen, Louvain-la-neuve and Leuven. She has lectured and published widely on human dignity, friendship, various topics in bioethics and the philosophy of Edith Stein. Her publications include *On the Problem of Human Dignity: A Hermeneutical and Phenomenological Investigation*, Königshausen und Neumann, 2009, which employs Stein's phenomenology to explore the experiential necessity of the idea of human dignity, and *The Philosophy of Edith Stein. From Phenomenology to Metaphysics*, Peter Lang, 2015. She is the founding President of the International Association for the Study of the Philosophy of Edith Stein (IASPES). Her current research interest is in phenomenological value theory.

⁹Stein, *Die Frau*, 5; W 257.