

*'It is not often that such an
extraordinary life is illuminated
by the thoughts of such an
outstanding philosopher.'*

THE TABLET

ALASDAIR MACINTYRE

EDITH STEIN

a philosophical prologue

Edith Stein

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A Philosophical Prologue

Alasdair MacIntyre



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To the Reader

This book is an attempt both to give some account of Edith Stein's beginnings as a philosopher and to understand her life—or at least the part of it treated in this book—as one kind of philosophical life possible in the twentieth century. The need for the first of these tasks arises from the general neglect of her philosophical work in the English-speaking world. There is no entry for Edith Stein in the *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, the *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, the *Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, or the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. In the *Blackwell Companion to Continental Philosophy* her name is nowhere mentioned. So is her work as devoid of philosophical interest as this would suggest?

One reason why her work has been undervalued may be that its significance can only be adequately understood, when it is viewed in its philosophical contexts, first as a set of contributions first to phenomenological enquiry and later to Thomistic and other Neoscholastic enquiries, and secondly as one particular kind of response to the condition of German philosophy in the first four decades of the twentieth century. But to view it in this light it is necessary also to understand something of the course of German philosophy from the late nineteenth century onwards and the responses to its condition by Edith Stein's predecessors and contemporaries. So in order to explain and situate her work I have had to tell a somewhat larger and longer tale. This narrative serves an additional purpose. It enables us, I hope, to acquire some sense of the relationship of Edith Stein's philosophy to her life, by considering not only the philosophical context of her own and her contemporaries' work, but also the social context within which she worked.

Where contemporary American and European academic philosophers are concerned, Edith Stein suffers from another marked disadvantage. She has been canonized. And among the prejudices of most such philosophers is a belief not only that what makes a philosopher a good philosopher is one thing and what makes someone a saint in the judgment of the Catholic church quite another—which is true—but also that saintliness, unless you have been dead for a very, very long time, precludes philosophical merit. It would have been difficult enough to convince such philosophers to take an interest in Edith Stein. But to convince them to take an interest in St. Teresa Benedicta a Cruce, Discalced Carmelite, will be a good deal more difficult.

Yet there are of course also readers, not professional philosophers, some but not all of them Catholics, who will be interested in the philosophy just because it was *her* philosophy. And I have therefore tried, so far as possible, to make my narrative intelligible to them. The result may have been to fall between two stools, to have written in too simple and introductory a way for those with established philosophical interests, while at the same time making matters too complex and inaccessible for lay readers. Yet it seems worthwhile to make this attempt to address the educated common reader.

What I have written is not a scholarly work. My references are almost all to texts available to English readers, not to the German originals, and I have relied on the translations of others, rather than making my own. My account of Edith Stein's life is drawn from standard biographical sources and those who are primarily or exclusively interested in having a full and detailed account of that life will do well to go to those sources rather than to read this book. I am deeply indebted to a number of previous writers about Edith Stein, including Dr. Waltraut Stein, Sister Waltraud Herbstrith, O.C.D., Sister Teresia de Spirito Sanctu, O.C.D., and Sister Maria Amata Neyer, O.C.D. I am especially grateful to Dr. Marianne Sawicki whose remarkable work of scholarship and translation has become an indispensable aid for anyone writing about Edith Stein. To her I have a more particular debt, since she read an earlier version of this book and saved me from a number of errors. Her generosity is all the greater, in that she and I disagree on some key matters. I am similarly grateful to my colleague, Karl Ameriks, for correction and commentary, once again from a different perspective from my own. And I am also very much in debt to Robert Sokolowski, who read this book in typescript for my publisher and whose comments and criticisms were quite unusually valuable. My greatest debt of all is to the late Sister Mary Catharine Baseheart of the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, Professor of Philosophy at Spalding University, and founder of its Edith Stein Center for Study and Research.

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Alasdair MacIntyre

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Why Take an Interest in Edith Stein as a Philosopher?

When in the third century of the Christian era Diogenes Laertius wrote his ten books on the lives of famous philosophers, beginning with Thales and ending with Epicurus, he did so from a conviction, shared with his intended readers, that the salient facts about philosophical enquiry and philosophical conclusions concern the difference that philosophy makes to the lives of those engaged in its practice. What is important about philosophy is the way in which a life informed by the activities of philosophical enquiry and guided by its conclusions will be significantly different from the life of someone in other respects like the philosopher, but untouched by philosophy. The disagreements between rival philosophies are in this view, commonly held in the ancient Greco-Roman world, differences not only in theoretical, but in practical commitment, concerning the nature of the human good. So that the lives of philosophers are of philosophical interest.

Modern readers by contrast are apt to see in much—although certainly not all—that Diogenes Laertius wrote little more than gossip tangential to philosophy, perhaps because their own dominant assumption, unlike his, is that, generally speaking, the lives of philosophers are one thing, philosophy itself quite another, and that the incidental and accidental connections between the two are of little importance. So, for example, in Bertrand Russell's *History of Western Philosophy*, each chapter begins with a brisk account of some particular philosopher's life and times, an account which is almost always irrelevant to the exposition and critique of that philosopher's enquiries and conclusions, which follows it. Excise the biography and the history from Russell's book and little or nothing of what he took to be philosophical substance would have been lost.

It is scarcely surprising that the vast majority of contemporary European and North American readers should share the attitudes of Russell rather than those of Diogenes Laertius. For 'philosophy' in our culture has become the name of a specialized, professionalized, academic discipline, and the role of the professional philosopher is socially defined and circumscribed, so that almost, even if not quite universally it is not the highly specific activities of philosophical enquiry or the particular philosophical conclusions which some philosopher defends, but rather the status-bearing and role-playing that are characteristic of *any* professionalized academic which determine the overall shape of a professional philosopher's life. Philosophers, like other professionalized academics, become licensed, through competing successfully in those tests that lead to the *Agrégation* and its sequels, or to the doctorate and the *Habilitationsschrift*, or to the Ph.D., and that success is achieved by performing a series of demanding tasks designed to render one obedient and conformable to the specializations and compartmentalizations of the professional life. Moreover, the evident expectations of one's senior colleagues are that one will respectfully conform in private life to the general norms of the professional classes, in a way that makes one's particular academic discipline, let alone one's own particular enquiries, irrelevant to one's everyday life. Correspondingly, one's students will generally have learned that the tasks required of them in philosophy courses are something soon to be left behind, part of an educational routine leading towards the achievement of career goals, already determined for them and by them, very likely before they had ever entered upon the study of philosophy, and not liable to be changed by that study. The norms of both teachers and students are well designed for the purpose of defending everyday social life from invasion by philosophy.

There are of course exceptions, contemporary or recent philosophers who are notable for violating these socially constraining norms, philosophers whose conclusions and modes of argument inform their activities in areas outside philosophy. Lukács in his earlier life provided one type of example, Sartre and de Beauvoir another. But notice how the work of these exceptional cases is usually treated within academic philosophy. Characteristically and generally, in a manner reminiscent of Russell's *History*, their philosophical thought, insofar as it enters the curriculum, is abstracted from its context in their lives and presented as matter for purely academic examination, as thought which can be appropriated by us without any question of the consequences of that thought for their lives and therefore for ours ever arising.

Yet at the same time contemporary philosophy, even when most constrained by its academic, professionalized, specialized norms, nonetheless also sustains within itself a very different conception of its relationship to the actions of those who engage in it in any systematic way, and it does so just because it is philosophy. For philosophy, if it is to be recognizable as phi-

losophy, must always be understood as a continuation of Plato's enterprise. And Plato's conclusion that engagement in the life of philosophy necessarily involves a radical critique of the everyday social life of political societies, and a consequent withdrawal from that life into a particular type of philosophical community, remains one with which, explicitly or implicitly, everyone who engages in philosophy has somehow or other to come to terms. One way of coming to terms with it is of course to endorse by making explicit the dominant contemporary view and so denying the relevance of philosophy to everyday practical activity. But this has a clear initial implausibility. How so?

That implausibility derives from the fact that our everyday activities, including our political activities, often presuppose and give expression to beliefs which already have an evidently philosophical character. Characteristically and generally the rules which tacitly or explicitly guide each of us in inferring from past experience to the legitimacy of future expectations, the grounds upon which we rely in ascribing to others those thoughts and feelings to which we respond in our own cooperative or uncooperative actions, the frameworks in terms of which we order our experiences, the type and degree of authority which we concede or deny to particular moral standpoints, the patterns of the reasoning which supports our evaluations of a variety of religious and political claims, and the relationships between all of these are such as either to accord with or to be at odds with theses and arguments debated within philosophy. Partly this is because the very language that we cannot avoid speaking, our everyday vocabulary and idiom, is itself not philosophically innocent, but to a significant degree inherited from and still informed by past philosophical theories whose presence in our modes of speech, belief and action is no longer recognized. What, for example, are taken to be prosaic maxims of mere common sense are often enough fragments of past philosophies, still carrying with them some of the presuppositions of the contexts from which they were abstracted. But it is also because our everyday idioms, beliefs and assumptions, even when not informed by past philosophies, are, to an extent that is not always remarked, theory-laden, committing us thereby to unrecognized philosophical allegiances. So that someone who avails her or himself of some opportunity to participate in systematic institutionalized philosophical enquiry is always apt to find some degree of tension and incoherence between the beliefs and modes of reasoning which she or he has brought with her or him to that participation and those conclusions and arguments to which she or he has come to give her or his allegiance in the course of philosophical enquiry. Such tensions and incoherencies can of course always be disregarded by resolutely turning away from philosophical enquiry.

Yet even without the initial stimulus afforded by engagement with philosophical enquiry, tensions and incoherencies within our own beliefs or radical disagreements between others and us may prompt reflections about our

everyday judgments and activities that in time become philosophical. For we may well discover that, when incoherences identified in our own beliefs or issues uncovered through disagreement with others compel us to ask whether we do indeed have sufficiently good reasons for asserting what we have hitherto asserted, we may not be able to respond adequately except without posing such questions as 'What in relation to this subject-matter is a good rather than a bad reason?' and 'How are we to evaluate rival arguments?' If we do pose such questions persistently, we will already have begun, even if tentatively, to engage in philosophical enquiry, enquiry which may in the end require of us conclusions mandating more or less drastic changes in our everyday beliefs and activities. So that whether the problems of the relationship of our everyday beliefs and activities to philosophical enquiry initially arise from encounter with some form of already ongoing philosophical activity—as for some in fourth century Athens, second century Nalanda, ninth century Baghdad and nineteenth century Berlin—or instead is generated from within reflections occasioned by everyday life, it may be that such problems cannot be rationally resolved without some degree of transformation of our previously held beliefs, activities and relationships.

That philosophy may have this transforming and perhaps disruptive effect receives its most signal recognition in the sentences of death or exile occasionally imposed on philosophers and the condemnations of philosophical books sometimes issued by those with a responsibility for sustaining the established order of belief and action in this or that society. What is thereby acknowledged is that philosophy may put in question not only the beliefs of individuals, but also those shared beliefs, embodied in or presupposed by a variety of institutions and practices, a high degree of assent to which is required if the established social and political order is to be sustained. Those beliefs too may be vulnerable to philosophical enquiry, with the result that from time to time it may seem necessary to the guardians of order to resort to drastic measures. Such sentences and condemnations are of course not the only or even the most effective ways of preventing philosophy from having a transforming and disruptive influence. Imprisoning philosophy within the professionalizations and specializations of an institutionalized curriculum, after the manner of our own contemporary European and North American culture, is arguably a good deal more effective in neutralizing its effects than either religious censorship or political terror. But because in our case the outcome thus contrived, the neutralization of the influence of philosophy, is largely unintended, it involves no explicit tribute to the social power of philosophy of the kind offered by such very different regimes as that of the Athenian *polis* in its treatment of Anaxagoras and Socrates, of the members of the English parliament who condemned *Leviathan*, and that of the authorities who used to enforce the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*.

Modern totalitarian rulers who prescribe ideological conformity and punish dissent savagely, such as those of the Soviet Union under Stalin, Khrushchev and Brezhnev, or those of Nazi Germany, or those of the contemporary regimes of China and Saudi Arabia, may seem to provide equally clear examples of conflicts between established power and philosophy. But it can be and has been argued that in fact what they exemplify is something rather different. For such regimes consider themselves threatened by free enquiry of any kind, so that their dealings with philosophy may have little or nothing to do with the specific character of philosophical enquiry, but are rather a matter of the nature of intellectual life in general. Such tyrannies have the effect of encouraging in some individuals a rigid separation between their public, official utterances and their private thoughts, so that a philosopher, like any other intellectual, may in public pay the minimum deference required to whatever happens to be the official ideological standpoint, while in her or his private reflections pursuing lines of thought free from this ideological contamination. Such self-imposed compartmentalization, although importantly different from the curricular compartmentalization of North American academic life, resembles it in encouraging the belief that philosophical thought and enquiry are one thing, the vicissitudes of everyday activity quite another and that any connections between them are incidental and accidental. And it is on the basis of such a belief that some intellectuals later constructed a narrative of their lives during the Nazi period in Germany: how they acted in public was one thing, so they tell us, how they reflected in private quite another.

Just this has been claimed on behalf of Martin Heidegger by others. The history of Heidegger's philosophical development is one thing, so these apologists say, the history of his political commitments and activities quite another. This suggests a deep rift within Heidegger himself, a bifurcation of the personality, so that one set of character traits was exhibited in that part of his life given over to philosophy, but a very different set in his public and political life. Such a rift, such a bifurcation would itself have been a remarkable phenomenon, one inviting close psychological scrutiny. But in fact the story of this division within Heidegger is a piece of mythology, mythology that enables those who teach Heidegger's philosophy in the classrooms of today to domesticate it and render it innocuous, while at the same time projecting onto Heidegger the type of compartmentalization that they take for granted in their own academic lives.

Heidegger himself in the later part of his life cooperated generously with those who were laying the basis for this later myth. But even Heidegger's role as coauthor of the myth is something for which the myth itself can find no place. For Heidegger's postwar activities in constructing a mythological screen behind which much of the truth about his earlier activities could be concealed was itself a continuation of those activities, activities in which

questions about the relationship of everyday life to philosophy recurrently arose and were answered both in theory and in practice.

Heidegger's is an extreme case, both in the degree of his political involvement and in the complexity of his attempt to appear to have distanced himself from that involvement. As such, it poses the question: what would it have been in that period of German history in which Heidegger grew up, served his philosophical apprenticeship, and became the most influential of twentieth century German philosophers to have lived quite otherwise as a philosopher, to have consistently taken seriously both the implications for one's life outside philosophy of one's philosophical enquiries and the implications for one's philosophy of one's other activities? One answer to that question is supplied by the life of Edith Stein, a phenomenologist who, unlike Heidegger, moved towards rather than away from the ontology characteristic of Thomism.

Yet it is not just that the history of Stein's philosophical development from her earliest studies to the work on which she was engaged in her years as a Carmelite nun cannot be intelligibly narrated, if it is abstracted from the history of her life as a whole, and that much that is crucial to her life outside philosophy can only be adequately understood in the light of her philosophical development. It is also that she deliberately and intentionally brought her philosophical thinking to bear on the practices of her everyday life and drew upon the experiences afforded by those practices in formulating philosophical problems and arriving at philosophical conclusions. In the years 1913–1922 with which this book is mostly concerned this is perhaps less immediately evident and less striking than it is in Stein's later life. But even in that earlier period the direction of Stein's life beyond a certain point becomes intelligible only in the light of her philosophy, and even before this her philosophical stances are in significant ways informed by her life experiences. So that even at this stage the contrast between her history and Heidegger's is philosophically instructive.

The interest of Edith Stein's philosophical thought is not of course exhausted by considering its relationship to the rest of her life. For, so I shall argue, her enquiries raised crucial and still inadequately answered questions for what were then or were to become influential philosophical movements and positions both in Germany and elsewhere: Husserl's phenomenology, the positions taken by Heidegger in *Sein and Zeit*, and the Thomism of the 1920s and 1930s. Stein was certainly not the only philosopher to pose such questions and the significance of her work perhaps only becomes clear, when both her enquiries and her life are compared with those of some of her philosophical contemporaries, including thinkers as different as Franz Rosenzweig, Gyorgy Lukács, Roman Ingarden and Hans Lipps. Stein's philosophical progress can be partially mapped by contrasting the conclusions that she reached at each stage of her enquiries with the often very different conclu-

sions of such contemporaries. This is a task too ambitious to be undertaken here. But a necessary first step towards understanding it is to write the history of the stages through which her thought and her life passed. What emerged in the end from her life as a philosopher was an incomplete project, incomplete not only because of her murder at the age of fifty in Auschwitz-Birkenau, but more importantly because what she left us was not so much a set of answers as a set of philosophical and theological questions. Her questions of course, like all such questions, presuppose positions taken, conclusions at which she had arrived. But the point of those conclusions is to make us aware of the inescapable character of the questions.

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