EDITH STEIN AND JEAN PAUL SARTRE: A POSSIBLE COMPARISON?

ABSTRACT

*Edith Stein and Jean Paul Sartre: a possibile compariso?* takes into account three possible areas of investigation: their respective visions of the human being or their philosophical anthropology, relation with others, and the problem of God.

The Leitfaden of Stein’s speculations are her anthropological investigations, which run throughout her work. And when Stein discusses human beings, she notes that they are a composite of body, soul, and spirit.

The Sartrean vision of the human being is profoundly different vis-à-vis the Steinian point of view. Privileging the relation consciousness-world, Sartre empties out the I, throwing it into existence and rendering it a thrown project. With this move, Sartre distances himself from Husserl and draws closer to Heidegger.

Stein admits that one cannot speak of an individual human being without thinking of that being as being raised and formed within a community. One is born first as a communal being and then one recognises oneself as an individual. One can choose to isolate oneself or to exit such community, but one can never eliminate this moment insofar as it is that which renders the human being a human being. It is only in the interior of communities that other persons can invite us to become men and women in the true sense of the word. Without the other we would not have the possibility to recognise one another, to grow, understand one another, to become that which we are.

Even here the difference with Sartre is quite clear. Others are not hell, as Sartre proclaims at the end of *No Exit*. In the relations of others for themselves, toward which the I directs itself in order to fill the part that is lacking in itself, the subject continues to discover a nothingness. The other objectifies me, reducing me to a mere thing and negating my transcendence. The gaze of the other, from which there is no escape, is the most atrocious punishment that one can experience. One always feels surprised when one looks in the keyhole.

Sartre’s position with respect to the problem of God is articulated and developed over the years. He considers himself an atheist, maintaining that religious sentiment is a useless passion insofar as it is merely the desire of human beings...
to see themselves as a totality. For Stein, God represents that lighthouse that allows one to make choices that are always responsible and individual, choices that even God cannot enter into.

This question is pertinent insofar as both intellectuals never encountered one another and the paths they chose were very different. In any case, and this is a typical aspect of philosophy, it is possible to compare their differing thought and personalities while maintaining that there is a connection that brings them together, namely, the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl. We can say, therefore, that there is a shared domain of questions, but the solutions to these very questions greatly differ.

We all know the theoretical, existential path of Edith Stein: A student of Husserl, she distances herself from her teacher; she teaches at Speyer and then at the Pedagogical Institute at Münster, finally entering the Discalced Carmelite monastery after the promulgation of racial laws in Germany. She died at Auschwitz in 1942.

Sartre, after completing his studies at the École Normale, travels to Berlin to deepen his understanding of phenomenology, which he became better acquainted with during his university studies. After the outbreak of World War II he was taken prisoner and once liberated aided the resistance. He is known for his political and intellectual engagement.

We face here very different life experiences, but still a comparison is possible by taking into account three possible areas of investigation: their respective visions of the human being or their philosophical anthropology, relations with others, and the problem of God.

Phenomenology is a philosophy that grounds itself in the analysis of the phenomenon essence, whereas existentialism gives priority to existence rather than essence. Despite this distance one cannot remain silent about the fact that existentialism was conceived within the womb of phenomenology. Heidegger’s *Being and Time* signals the turn that later will be followed by others, including Jaspers, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre and Gabriel Marcel.

The two leanings lead to two very different *Weltanschauungen* insofar as they derive from two different anthropological visions, which ground the difference between the philosophy of existence and phenomenology. In fact, it is not unimportant that Simone de Beauvoir considers *Being and Nothingness* more of a philosophical anthropology than ontology.

Concerning Stein, we find ourselves dealing with a philosophy of essence that totally reflects her anthropological vision, which does not negate for human beings possibility, project, freedom and responsibility, all aspects that are normally attributed to the philosophies of existence.