

Dark Light: The Mystical Theology of St. Edith Stein

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Abstract: In this article, I will examine St. Edith Stein's theory of religious language. Stein, who was both a professional philosopher and a mystic, and deeply rooted both in the tradition of negative theology and early phenomenology, held a peculiar version of univocity with regard to religious language. On the one hand, our concepts have something objectively in common with the thing they signify. On the other hand, our concepts are merely representations of the real. Therefore, when mystics say that God can be addressed "without words or images," this does not entail anti-realism or non-cognitivism. Instead, according to Stein, this only means that words are not needed when the thing itself is present without mediation in the mystical experience.

1. Introduction

This article examines how St. Edith Stein (1891–1942) explains mystical experience and our ways of speaking about God. Stein's solution is of particular interest as she combines negative theology and Husserlian phenomenology.¹ Moreover, her thought is particularly stimulating as she approaches mysticism both as a mystic and as an academic philosopher who writes in a modern context.

Edith Stein was born into a Jewish family but in her youth she embraced atheism.² As an exceptionally intelligent young woman she decided to pursue a career in philosophy, which eventually led her to become Edmund Husserl's assistant and the editor of his major works. During her studies, she converted to Catholicism and later joined the Carmelite order, where she became known as St. Teresa Benedict of the Cross. Stein was executed in Auschwitz due to her Jewish origins. In 1998, pope John Paul II canonized her and made her the patron saint of Europe.

Stein produced a number of works that are the subject of continued interest. Her most well-known works are her dissertation, *On the Problem of Empathy* [2000b], a substantial study on the metaphysics of being, (*Finite and Eternal Being*) [2002], and

¹ Generally, Stein approves Edmund Husserl's early work on phenomenology as it is expressed in his *Logische Untersuchungen*. She was critical towards the Kantian and idealistic overtones in the later works of Husserl (especially in *Ideen* 1). See Stein (2010). On the development and various forms of phenomenology, see, e.g., Bernet, Kern and Marbach (1993); Dan Zahavi (2003).

² For an account of Stein's early life, see MacIntyre (2005).

an exposition of theology of St. John of the Cross (*The Science of the Cross*) [2003]. One of Stein's lesser known works is her short commentary to Pseudo-Dionysios the Areiopagite's (hereafter Denys) theology, "Ways to Know God" [2000a], which will be the main focus of this article.³

2. The modern problem of God-talk

Let me begin with some common claims about religious language.

Claim 1 (*Untranslatability*): Atheists and theists cannot reasonably converse because their forms of life are so different.⁴

Claim 2 (*Ineffability*): Because God is ineffable, nothing true can be said of God.⁵

Furthermore, it is possible to formulate the following argument, which argues from the mystical experience of mystics to the impossibility of literal God-talk.

Argument for ineffability from mystical experience

1. Mystical experience instantiates the highest point of spiritual life.
2. The mystic understands that his or her concepts are not capable of describing God; God is absolutely ineffable.
3. Therefore, the most advanced forms of Christian practice demonstrate how God cannot be referenced by the means of human language.

A further practical conclusion can be drawn from 1-3:

4. We should not be too interested in how we speak about God. Instead, we should see our God-talk in a non-cognitive fashion. Thus, it remains possible to use other, non-realist, options for God-talk. Furthermore, typical debates between theists and atheists are vacuous because they falsely interpret God-talk in a realistic way, that is, as referring to a factual state of affairs.

³ I will use the introductory section of *Finite and Eternal Being* to shed more light on Stein's stance on the relation of philosophy and theology. I will also refer to works about and by Denys to offer a view from that angle as well.

⁴ Thus, e.g., (Phillips 2002).

⁵ Knepper (2014, xi–xv) offers two different lines of interpretation of the Dionysian corpus that in different ways subscribe to this thesis. Either you claim that linguistic formulations of God are literally false but still useful for attaining a salvific goal (e.g., John Hick, the early work of Denys Turner) or you acknowledge that divine names refer to the realm of beings, that is, to the things that God causes while God remains essentially ineffable (e.g., Paul Rorem, Andrew Louth). In effect, Denys is often used in postmodern theology and philosophy to further the cause of religious pluralism and anti-ontotheology.

In order to situate this argument, a few words must be said about it. First, the argument aims to argue for absolute ineffability using reasons that are internal to Christian theology and practice.⁶ The force in this case lies in Premise 1, which refers to the “best of us.” If such ones believe God is ineffable, we (the normal ones) should adopt anti-realism as well.

Who is then making this kind of argument? William Alston (1989, 17) has quipped, “the impossibility of literal talk about God has become almost an article of faith for theology in this century.” In his essay, Alston has in mind especially the mid-20th century debates on religious language, where God-talk was argued to be philosophically problematic. The proposed solution was expressed through a metaphorical understanding of religious language, which tried to save the religious form of life while letting go the realistic reference of God-talk. This topic has since been, for the most part, side-lined in contemporary philosophical theology; I do not intend to address it here.

The contemporary challenge comes in the form of “ontotheological error” (Adams 2014). If the earlier phase of the debate focused on particular *philosophical* problems in God-talk, the current emphasis sees literal God-talk as *theologically* problematic: Are we trying to take God captive by way of our words? Furthermore, isn’t the God we talk about using our fallible words necessarily an idol? God-talk thus leads to both ethical and spiritual failure, the critics claim (Westphal 2011; Tillich 1957).

In the following, I will analyse these claims in light of Stein’s account of theological language and mystical experience. How does a person who is both a mystic and a well-known philosopher approach these problems? Our *initerarium* begins with natural theology.

3. On the possibility of natural theology

Given that it is symptomatic for mystics to try to move away from images and words, one would expect that mysticism and natural theology do not square well. Stein, however, offers a peculiar defence of natural theology in her writings.⁷ Generally, Stein recognizes three ways that people may come to God: natural knowledge of God through reason, ordinary supernatural knowledge (faith), and extraordinary supernatural religious experience.

Stein believes, in Thomistic fashion, that natural knowledge and faith are separate, but that they are not completely unrelated to each other. For Stein, natural knowledge and faith are in complementary relation. Through natural reason, human beings cannot attain the highest truths, but it is possible, for example, “to reject

⁶ It is, of course, possible to argue for it using other kinds of reasons but these are not discussed here.

⁷ However, Stein struggles with what this actually amounts to. In *The Science of the Cross*, she comes very close to denying natural knowledge of God, although she tries to argue that St. John of the Cross allows the possibility of it. Here, Stein is likely trying to satisfy the anti-fideist clauses of Vatican I. See, e.g., (2003, 65–66). See also Stein’s thoughts about Denys’s negative view of natural theology, in (2000a, 142, n. 47).

certain errors of judgment and recognize the accord between the naturally demonstrable truths of reason and the truths of faith" (2002, 13).

Stein's phenomenological background comes immediately to the fore when she explains what it is in our natural knowledge about the everyday world that makes natural theology possible, and how it differs from, for example, more evidentialist versions of the analytic philosophy of religion. Stein takes her cue from actual lived human experience, where the source of all knowledge is perception and intuition, which includes knowledge about non-physical reality. For example, we can know things like "causation" even if causation as such is not available to our senses. Natural knowledge about the world concerns "how the World gives itself," and there is something peculiar in this giving: things in the world are *about* something.

According to Stein, the world's "*Aufbau*," "life" and "soul," can be seen, or intuited, in our perception of various events, but not grasped with the means of natural science. This is so, as Stein puts it, because "the real world" is "inexhaustible for any analytical or discursive cognitive reasoning"; no human enquiry can reach "definitive totality that exhaust all the possibilities of its object" (2000a, 98; 2002, 18-19).

However, Stein emphasizes that not knowing the world in totality does not mean that we know nothing about the world (2002, 15).⁸ Instead, the gist of her claim is that we perceive the world as intentional, and this intentionality adds something to the physical world, which can never be exhausted by our use of language. This intentionality pertains also (or perhaps, especially) to religious images and words. Stein regards the world as the image of God in the sense that it constantly refers beyond itself; there is a special kind of relationality in the world. "Image leads to the knowledge of what is still unknown," Stein claims (2000a, 100).⁹ Looking at an image reveals something about the thing that is pictured in the image. Ultimately, this is the metaphysical ground for natural theology: images have the ability to *refer*.¹⁰ Because God is the Original Theologian (*ur-Theologe*), we are able to theologize in the world of God.

But what does natural theology give to those who practice it? Stein claims that it is not meant for the "simple faithful" because it requires mastering the skills of abstract thinking. Natural theology as a salutary undertaking is thus salutary only for a select few (2000a, 128). Even if faith recognizes nature as revelation, nature as such seldom leads to the true knowledge of God. The possibility of natural knowledge depends on individual characteristics (some people are more trained in perception, and some people are more able to see with the help of natural theology, Stein claims). Even in the case of the best natural theologians, however, natural knowledge is "not absolutely clear and ambiguous." It is more an "incentive to seek" (2000a, 114).

⁸ For a Kantian view of religious language (implicitly criticized by Stein) and its implications, see White (2010, 105–136).

⁹ Here Stein draws from Husserl's idea of "intentional horizon". All intentional objects refer outside themselves to other objects and to the world (*die Welt*). As a result, every object receives its meaning when it is made part of this larger whole. See (Husserl 2012).

¹⁰ Again, Stein employs here Husserl's theories of pictures, imagination and fantasy. See (Husserl 1980).

Natural knowledge raises *questions* that are answered by supernatural revelation.¹¹ In Stein's treatment of natural theology, one sees a "yes, but" attitude. Fragmentary natural knowledge of God is possible, but one should not be completely satisfied by it. Stein juxtaposes "deductions" and "rational considerations" with "personal encounter," which points toward higher forms of knowledge provided by the revelation (2000a, 105).

Stein's account of natural theology allows us to give answer to the objection of *Untranslatability*, at least to some extent. Stein argues that atheists and Christians can (in principle) use the word "God" to refer to the same "thing" (2000a, 126-128; 2002, 28-29). Thus, based on natural knowledge, it is possible for theists and atheists to engage in reasonable discussion. They are not enclosed in their own linguistic worlds or life forms. Nevertheless, if the Bible is read without faith, the person does not meet God, Stein argues, but he or she can still get a glimpse of how people have interacted with God.

Moreover, it is possible for atheists to understand the claims of Christians and use them as a hypothesis for interpreting the world. While Stein acknowledges that an atheist will not accept the Christian claims as true, he or she can still act as if they were true and use this hypothetical attitude as a way of testing their truth-value. Of course, the experience of an atheist and Christian (especially the Christian mystic) will be very different, but this is something that phenomenologists would say about *all* first-person experiences. This does not, however, prevent people from discussing their experiences in a public, reasonable manner. Even if there is no complete overlap of meaning, there is enough overlap for meaningful discussion. Thus, Stein would consider *Untranslatability* false. She does not give an extended argument for her view; she simply takes this view to be obvious—likely based on her own experiences as a former atheist.

4. The dialectic of positive and negative theology

According to Stein, revealed, or symbolic, theology consists of two dialectical opposites: *via negativa*, which denies what God is not, and *via positiva*, which affirms those things in creation that resemble God the most (such as "life," "goodness," cf. "stone," "air"). In the end, neither denial nor affirmation reaches its object perfectly; thus also *via negativa* is imperfect and should be moved aside in the last stage: *theologia mystica* (2000a, 116).

Positive and negative theologies form a dialectical process where negations and affirmations cut through our concepts and reveal the analogical nature of religious language. As Stein explains: "Thus upon completing the ascent, positive and negative theology give way to mystical theology which in utter stillness enters into union with the Ineffable. The previous theologies represent stages leading up to the

¹¹ The same applies with regard to the relation of secular philosophy and Christian special revelation. Secular philosophy by itself comes with problems that it cannot solve, and which are solved by higher forms of knowledge provided by revelation (2002, 12-29). This was a typical claim at the time. For another work that suggests a similar view, see (Przywara 2014).

summit... although opposed, they do not exclude each other; they complement each other at all stages" (2000a, 89).¹²

The first point to be noted here is that negative theology is another side of the same coin. Negative and positive theology, or apophatic and kataphatic theology, cannot be thought of disjunctively, so that one chooses the one and forgets the other. Instead, they are each other's correctives; both are needed. Second, the "utter stillness" waits at the *end* of the journey, after this dialectical thinking has been practised for some time. Pure negative theology cannot be the starting point of Christian spirituality, as some forms of popular mysticism suggest; neither can one reduce theology to mere negative theology.¹³

Turning to *via positiva*, Stein makes an interesting point about religious language: "There is likeness, something objectively common, between the inexpressible thing that happened to him (Moses) and consuming fire" (2000a, 97). Thus, when Moses says, "God is a consuming fire," he says something that is univocally true: God has certain similar properties with consuming fire, even if God's nature is not exhausted by that which "consuming fire" is.¹⁴ Consequently, there is in principle nothing wrong with speaking of God using traditional concepts; they are neither misleading nor deficient. In fact, God has chosen to use this mode of communication that suits human cognition: "Revelation speaks in a language accessible to natural human reason [...]," Stein argues (2000a, 23).

At several junctions, Stein mentions the importance of getting the doctrine of analogy of being (*analogia entis*) right. Namely, if the analogical relation of God and creation is not understood correctly, atheism is a logical conclusion. Stein even insists that faith means understanding the nature of *analogia entis* (2000a, 112; 2002, xxix-xxx). The analogy of being is for Stein a fundamental Christian notion that sets our language of God in its proper place: whatever we say about God, it is always subject to the rule "God is always ever greater" (*semper maior dissimilitudo*).¹⁵ If this is not borne in mind, one lapses into Gnosticism (equivocity without theology of creation) and paganism (univocity without Creator-creation distinctions) (2000a, 119).¹⁶

¹² This reminds one of "eidetic intuition," employed in phenomenological analysis. See (Sokolowski, 2000, 177–184).

¹³ Stein underlines the notion of practice and length of the process especially in (2003, 68).

¹⁴ For a helpful treatment that explains why analogous versions of religious language are still univocal, see (Williams 2005, 575–585). Erich Przywara (2014, 606) argues that Stein's (whom he knew well) view is in fact closer to the univocity than equivocity.

¹⁵ This the formulation of Fourth Lateran Council: "for between the Creator and the creature there can be noted no similarity so great that a greater dissimilarity cannot be seen between them." St. Thomas uses the concept of analogy in his treatise on divine names (ST I q13a5) to chart a middle road between univocal and equivocal predication. In this question, Thomas lays out the problems of these two false ways of speaking, or remaining from speaking, about God (univocal predication leads to inadequate speech about God since the terms are not applied in similar ways to God and created beings; equivocal predication leads to an inability to say anything about God, and it is also performatively self-contradictory). In general terms, the theological understanding of analogy of being fits this vague formulation, and it attempts to capture the idea according to the world as we perceive it (as constantly changing) is real, while still pointing toward something that is changeless and therefore more real. However, the difference between our world and God cannot be thought of in a qualitative sense.

¹⁶ For a similar claim, see (Long 2009, 55). *Semper maior dissimilitudo* refers to *individual concepts* as they refer univocally to a particular feature, like goodness.

Because God can be known only through analogy, this requires introducing the aforementioned dialectical process, which aims to make a distinction between likeness and unlikeness by using *via negativa* and *via positiva*. In other words, this process seeks to demonstrate to the soul how God is not merely a being among other beings.

But the fact that God is not ontologically on the same level with beings does not rule out, for Stein, that God is *to a certain extent* comprehensible.

“Reason would turn into unreason if it would stubbornly content itself with what it is able to discover with its own light, barring out everything which is made visible to it by a brighter and more sublime light. For it ought to be emphasized that what is communicated to us by revelation is not something simply unintelligible but rather something with an intelligible meaning – a meaning, to be sure, which cannot be comprehended and demonstrated. What is communicated to us by revelation cannot be comprehended at all (that is, it cannot be exhaustively described by means of concepts) because it is in itself immeasurable and inexhaustible and at any time reveals only so much of its contents as it wants us to comprehend.” (2002, 22)

God’s transcendent nature is not therefore an *a priori* hindrance for divine knowledge. On the other hand, the knowledge of the world is dependent on the world’s givenness, and in the case of God, revelation as God’s self-giving.¹⁷ But even this revelation, which only the faith sees, cannot capture the essence of God. Hence the faith is called “dark light”: something that sees in the darkness.¹⁸

“Whatever derives from the synthesis of theological and philosophical truth bears the imprint of this dual source of knowledge, and faith, as we are told, is a “dark light.” Faith helps us to understand something, but only in order to point to something that remains for us incomprehensible. Since the ultimate ground of all existence [*alles*

¹⁷ “Even finite reality can never be exhaustively understood by means of conceptual knowledge, and much less the infinite reality of God” (2002, 26).

¹⁸ “...we cannot accept the truths of faith as evident in themselves as we do in the case of the necessary truths of reason or of the data of sense perception; nor can we deduce them logically from certain self-evident truths. This is one reason why faith is called “dark light” (2002, 27). Moreover, faith as a *credere Deum* and a *credere in Deum* always aspires beyond all revealed truth, that is, beyond all truth which God has confined in concepts and judgments, in words and sentences, in order to make it commensurate with the mode of cognition. Faith asks of God more than individually separated truths: it desires God himself, all of him, who is truth, and it seizes him in darkness and blindness (although it is night).” The expression “dark light” is of Dionysian origin. Knepper (2014, 125) argues that Denys uses the concept of ‘darkness’ to signify the excess of light, not inability to see. See also (2002, 1): “There is indeed only one Truth but it unfolds itself to our human perspective in a manifold of individual truths which must be conquered step by step. If we succeed in penetrating to a certain depth in one particular direction, a larger horizon will be opened up, and with this enlarged vista a new depth will reveal itself at the point of departure.”

Seienden] is unfathomable, everything which is seen in this ultimate perspective moves into that “dark light” of faith, and everything intelligible is placed in a setting with an incomprehensible background.” (2002, 25)

6. On mystical theology

But is something lost when one moves beyond negative and positive theologies and receives a mystical experience? Here Stein uses Denys’s words to describe what takes place in this level. Now God is experienced “inwardly without word and image” (2000a, 108).

What does this mean? I will approach this question by formulating two theses that relate to Claim 2, and assess their respective strengths.

Strong thesis: *theologia mystica* confirms absolute ineffability.

Weak thesis: *theologia mystica* confirms that God is to some extent ineffable but expressions like “without words and images” refers to the lack of mediating representation, not to the falsity or inaptitude of our language.

The strong thesis would be in line with Claim 2 (*Ineffability*), and it would also be the conclusion of the aforementioned *Argument for ineffability from mystical experience*. Now, some of Stein’s claims could be used to support Premises 1 and 2 of the *Argument*. However, Stein does in fact follow the weak thesis. Stein uses apophatic language, which she inherits from Denys and which consequently allows well-known radical interpretations. However, Stein’s analysis of Denys clearly makes her, and Denys as well, supporters of the weak thesis.¹⁹

This is best explained by Stein’s distinction between representations and the thing itself. The “inwardly without word and image” formulation does not mean that the words lose their meaning, but that they are not needed anymore (as representations) because the thing that has been referred to is itself present and gives itself to us without mediation. The difference between symbolic and mystical theology is in the role of representation. Symbolic theology is based on representations whereas mystical theology involves the consummation of symbolic theology (2000a, 95).

To offer an example: a teacher can speak about the Queen by pointing to the picture hanging on the wall. However, if the Queen enters the room, she does not need the picture to refer to the Queen who is now present in person. In fact, the teacher’s behaviour will be markedly different in all respects in the latter case.²⁰

¹⁹ For Denys, see (Knepper 2004, 119). For an explanation, how our contemporary uses of “ineffability” differ from the uses in ancient philosophy, see (Knepper 2011, 263–276).

²⁰ Sokolowski (2000, 86, 107) argues that we may intend an object in differing ways (he mentions perception, signification, picturing and indication), but this simply means that the same thing is given to us in new ways, which effectively increases and intensifies its identity. In the beginning the objects are always vague, but if continuously intended they should become more distinct.

Furthermore, there is a direct continuum from the image to the original. A person who has been involved in symbolic theology, looking at the representation, will recognize the one represented to him through the images. “He alone can recognize *his* God, the God whom he knows personally, in the ‘portraits’” (2000a, 109, see also 96-97; emphasis in original). Thus “the images and words” are not considered ultimately false or misleading but they are *fulfilled*. If the movement from symbolic theology to mystical theology is an act of consummation, the movement from mystical theology to symbolic theology is an act of reduction that maintains the precarious link between these two worlds, without complete reduction of mystical theology to symbolic language (absolute univocity) and without claiming that nothing gets translated (absolute equivocity). As Stein writes, “What the prophet hears and sees is as it were the great school of symbolic theology where images and words become available to the sacred writer so that he may say the unsayable and make the invisible visible” (2000a, 108).²¹

It is therefore possible to translate mystical experience into ordinary language so that it remains referentially true. However, Stein hurries to emphasize that it is even more important to have this experience than to hear the prophets’ words about it. If one receives this experience, she is able to “shape the image according to the original” and experience the consummation of the image.

Finally, let me offer a perspective through Stein’s early work on empathy, where she explains the meaning of empathy as follows (2000b, 10). When we perceive “sadness,” we first perceive certain facial expressions, but we move away from those to perceive the mental state that supervenes those facial expressions. Empathy, then, is a way of perceiving the world through the eyes of the suffering person and sharing her perspective, emotions and experiences. The person is not empathetic if she concentrates on the facial movements and does not perceive the suffering that supervenes them. However, the observer would not be able to know that the other person is sad without those external signs. The external facial expression is not futile or misleading, though it is not the same thing as sadness.

The same applies *mutatis mutandis* to mystical experience. Symbolic theology, both in negative and positive form, is this external sign, which points toward something deeper. This does not make human language somehow deficient or misleading. Symbolic theology is the authoritative pointer that leads its practitioners closer to the things themselves.²² Staying at the level of natural or symbolic theology is, according to Stein, a sign of not understanding the role of symbols properly. It is like looking at the tears of a suffering person while forgetting the person.

²¹ Stein uses concepts such as “picture-fulfilment” and “likeness-type” (*Abbild-Urbild*) to explain the relation between mediate and immediate knowledge. See also (Benz 1974, 476).

²² How do we know what kind of language (or what kind of symbol) is proper, then? Stein’s answer is traditional: through the combination of natural knowledge (reason) and Scripture (revelation), which leads one to pay attention to the words or things named, events narrated (parables) and acts performed by the Prophets (“theologians” in Denys’s sense), and which are re-enacted in liturgy. See also, (Denys, *Divine Names* 1.2, 588C). It must be noted that Stein’s solution is not traditionalistic in the relativist sense. She believes that philosophical analysis of the world leads one to Christian faith in general and Roman Catholicism in particular. The connection of phenomenology and Christian philosophy is examined more thoroughly by (Duran 2007, 707–712); (MacIntyre 2005).

7. Conclusion

Stein would consider both our claims, *Untranslatability* and *Ineffability*, as false. Our shared world of experience offers enough overlap between different worldviews for a reasonable discussion to take place.²³ Even if we cannot translate everything that we experience, we can translate enough for our communicative purposes. This is so because Stein thinks that God is not distant from the world but present within the created order and thereby a possible object of our language. Moreover, God is not absolutely ineffable but only ineffable to a certain extent. That is to say, our language can never offer a total definition of God, but it does get something right. She would also consider the *Argument* as fallacious because ineffability and “utter silence” do not mean that religious language is not referential. According to Stein, nothing in the tradition of mystical theology or in contemporary philosophy forces such a conclusion.²⁴

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²³ It might be worth mentioning that Husserl abandons relativism entailed by *Untranslatability* as well. See, e.g., (Kusch 1989, 116).

²⁴ I would like to thank Mikko Sammalkivi, Panu-Matti Pöykkö, the participants of The Spirit and the church workshop at the Fuller Theological Seminary, Riihimäki Being Summer Seminar and Helsinki Analytic Theology Workshop for critical comments.

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