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Empathy by Edith Stein and the Heart from *Dilexit Nos* by Pope Francis

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Abstract

This paper explores the epistemic foundations of empathy and intersubjectivity in Edith Stein's analysis, placing it in dialogue with Pope Francis's reflections on the heart in his last encyclical, *Dilexit Nos*. Beginning with Stein's development of empathy, the author examines how empathy grants us an awareness of the other's inner experience, which is non-primordially present and foreign to the empathizing subject. While this structure reveals a fundamental asymmetry between self and other, it also leads Stein's account of empathy to an epistemic insufficiency: it can describe the givenness of the other, but not the depth of relational life. At this insufficiency, I turn to Pope Francis' notion of the heart as a lived space of spiritual life. The heart, in this vision, is where contradictions and polar tensions between self and other are not solved but held – a space of receptivity, affectivity, and interior openness. Drawing on the image of bamboo that survives precisely through its emptiness, I suggest that a spiritually receptive heart allows us to live in the asymmetrical experiences between self and without collapsing the other into abstraction.

Keywords: Edith Stein; empathy; heart; intersubjectivity; Pope Francis

1. Introduction

Thanks to modern technology, we can now talk to friends across the globe with a tap on a screen. Technical innovations bring us easy ways to build up relationships. However, these modern comforts attract us into relationships without embodied presence and recognizing the interiority of others. Without these elements, a genuine interpersonal relationship is hardly possible. This concern leads to the concern of empathy and the relationship with others that Edith Stein (1891–1942) examined in her doctoral dissertation, entitled *On the Problem of Empathy*.¹ Stein's choice of examining empathy (*Einfühlung*) traces back to her early studies in psychology at Breslau and her observation of Edmund Husserl's work:

¹Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, 3rd rev. ed, The Collected Works of Edith Stein, v. 3 (ICS Publications, 1989).

In his course on nature and [intellect] (*Geist*), Husserl had said that an objective outer world could only be experienced intersubjectively, i.e., through a plurality of perceiving individuals who relate in a mutual exchange of information. Accordingly, an experience of other individuals is a prerequisite. To the experience, an application of the work of Theodore Lipps, Husserl gave the name *Einfühlung*. What it consists of, however, he nowhere detailed. Here was a lacuna to be filled; therefore, I wished to examine what empathy might be. The Master found this suggestion not bad at all.²

From Stein's words and later critiques, we know that the question of empathy deeply connects to the epistemic aspect of knowing the experiences of other individuals. Marianne Sawicki, a prominent Steinian scholar, already acknowledged the inaccessibility of one's ownmost subjectivity to others.³

While the extensive debates surrounding Stein's critique of Husserl's investigation of otherness, as Husserl discussed in the Fifth Meditation in *Cartesian Meditation* and *Ideas II*,⁴ in this paper, this author does not seek to re-argue these well-established claims. Instead, this paper takes Stein's phenomenological standpoint as its background for her account of empathy and asks whether empathy, even when understood in Stein's strongest sense, is sufficient to account for the fullness of the intersubjective relationship as it is affectively and spiritually experienced. The concern of this paper is not to claim that Stein's account of empathy fails but to examine its sufficiency, namely, the way in which the irreducible difference between self-experience and other-experience, which Stein herself carefully identified, must be lived rather than merely described. In this context, the author proposes a dialogue grounded in Pope Francis's reflections on the heart and seeks to determine whether the notion of the heart can possibly complement what empathy lacks in establishing a genuine, intersubjective relationship.

This paper will examine this possibility by first demonstrating three key concepts, empathy, intersubjectivity, and the heart. Though each originates in different intellectual contexts, they intersect meaningfully when put in dialogue through the thought of Stein and Pope Francis. Then I argue that a fully human intersubjective relationship requires not only empathetic awareness of the other's experience, as Stein presented, but also an interior listening of the heart, as proposed by Pope Francis,

²Edith Stein, *Life in a Jewish Family Edith Stein: An Autobiography*, The Collected Works of Edith Stein 1 (ICS Publications, 1999), 269.

³By 'Inaccessibility', Sawicki means the inexhaustible depth of one's primordial experience that is only given to the subject himself. The author decides to use 'inexhaustibility' to address the same reality; Marianne Sawicki, *Body, Text, and Science: The Literacy of Investigative Practices and the Phenomenology of Edith Stein*, *Phenomenologica*, v. 144 (Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1997), 103.

⁴Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology* (Kluwer, 1999), <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-90-247-0068-4>; Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy Second Book Study in the Phenomenology of Constitution*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and Andre Schuwer (Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1980), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-009-2233-4>. Also see the Preface of the first edition of *On the Problem of Empathy*, 3rd rev. ed, The Collected Works of Edith Stein, v. 3 (ICS Publications, 1989), xiv, Waltraut Stein noted the difference approach of empathy between Husserl and Stein seen in Husserl's book of *Cartesian Meditations*.

which recalibrates the spiritual and affective dimensions of the self-other relationship often absent in phenomenological accounts of empathy and intersubjectivity.

2. Phenomenological foundations of empathy

Stein's account of empathy focuses on 'the experience of foreign consciousness', which is non-primordial to the empathizing subject but leads to the primordially that appears only to the foreign subject.⁵ Because of that, the object of the empathetic phenomenon is presupposed upon the interiority or the givenness of the foreign subject. One's awareness of that is a genuine kind of inner awareness *sui generis*.

For Stein, the concern of empathy is not how one explicates the awareness of the first-person experience of others because it is inexhaustible from a third-person vantage point. This inexhaustibility is due to the experience being primordial only to the first-person's side and the problem of the living body of the other (*Leib*).⁶

To explain these problems in empathy, Stein clarified the distinction between direct and indirect experiences or primordial or non-primordial givenness by drawing an analogy with memory and perception: a perception of an object began primordially as it was, and in the act of memory of that object, what was at first perceived, now becomes no longer primordial; it is mediated through memory. My relationship with my own perception and memory analogously describes how I move from my limited awareness of the other's own experience to the other first-person awareness, and finally to my third-person observation. 'I am aware that he can feel', 'he feels his own grief' and 'I feel that he is grieving' have different characteristics: the first is the primordial object of empathy, which is immediately given but indirect to me; the second is the other's own primordial experience, which is direct to the other and that which is never given to me; and the third is my mediated experience.⁷ I do not infer the grief of the other at the first moment that I see the other, but I directly have an empathetic awareness that he feels it independently from me in the first place. Before I see your tears and then infer that you are grieving, I first encounter a grieving 'you' as a unified being. Even though empathy as an inner awareness can't reach the primordial givenness of one's experience, it can lead the observer to someone's grief by the non-primordial givenness through bodily presence without submerging oneself in the foreign experience.⁸

Stein recognized what the awareness of the insufficiency of empathy to oneself is.⁹ Stein investigated this concept by seeing what is presented or given to the empathizing subject in an empathetic awareness of the thoughts and feelings of others. By contrast, to experience others' thoughts and feelings, in John Stuart Mill's notable notion of analogical inference, is to infer their inner state.¹⁰ Since I can be aware of my own

⁵Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, 10–11, 16–17.

⁶Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, 6–7, 16; Timothy A. Burns, *Edith Stein's 'On the Problem of Empathy': A Companion*, *Edith Stein Studies* (Lexington Books, 2024), 39, 105.

⁷Alasdair MacIntyre, *Edith Stein: A Philosophical Prologue* (Continuum, 2007), 77, 81.

⁸Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, 23.

⁹Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, 6.

¹⁰Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, 26–7; John Stuart Mill, *An Examination of Sir W. Hamilton's Philosophy and of the Principal Questions Discussed in His Writings*, ed. J. M. Robinson, vol. 9, *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill* (Toronto, Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1979), 191.

feelings and thoughts, and I also can be aware that feelings and thoughts expressed in my bodily movements, by analogy with my case, I can infer, by the bodily movements of another that I am aware of one's feelings and thoughts. Stein accepted the validity of that knowledge of someone's inner state but discarded the way of that knowledge being attained by inference. That is because, in Stein's account, we do not face others presented by mere bodily movements alone. Thus, an individual, in Stein's view, 'is not given as a physical body (*Körper* [*corpus*]), but as a sensitive living body (*Leib*) belonging to an "I", an "I" that senses, thinks, feels, and wills'.¹¹

Stein's rejection of the analogical inference aims to give a sense of distinction between knowledge and empathic awareness, a physical body and living body. Such inferred knowledge results from speculations in one's own mind, whereas the primordial, empathic experience is located in the other.¹² I could know about someone's feelings and thoughts by mediating as what I infer in my mind, but that presupposes a possibility of 'feeling into' the feelings and thoughts of that person by primordial empathic awareness in the first place. The speculative knowledge of foreign experience always points back to the lived experience (*Erlebnis*) of consciousness which Stein understood as the content of empathy.¹³ Thus, Stein stated that 'knowledge is blind, empty, and restless, always pointing back to some kind of experienced, seen act'.¹⁴ In other words, I could think of what a person is as in various types, but what I think will never determine what that person is. What I encounter is a person who is a being and one who presents this being in the world. I can have inferred knowledge of others because I first have an empathic awareness of others who are beings in the world, more than beings in my mind.¹⁵

In light of this phenomenological foundation of empathy, we come to know the epistemic foundation and the meaning of inexhaustible in empathetic awareness of how the foreign experience appears to us. That is, while, however rich or similar, one can examine one's empathetic awareness of another, there is an ever-greater incommunicable reality that another processes. As Ales Bello noted, this is a kind of structural limitation that both Stein and Husserl recognized in the issue of the givenness of the

¹¹Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, 5; MacIntyre, *Edith Stein*, 77.

¹²Dan Zahavi, *Phenomenology: The Basics*, Original edition, *The Basics* (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 92.

¹³Angela Ales Bello, *Edith Stein and Edmund Husserl: Philosophical Exchanges*, trans. Antonio Calcagno, *Edith Stein Studies* (Lexington Books, 2025), 52.

¹⁴Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, 19; 'act' (*Akt*, in German) means the episode of consciousness in this phenomenological context.

¹⁵In *Empathy*, page 37, Stein noted that the analysis of empathy leads to the account to the structure of experience and the understanding of the psycho-physical individual. She fully examined this topic in *Philosophy of Psychology and the Humanities* – later, the account of the human person in *Finite and Eternal Being & The Structure of the Human Person*. Edith Stein, *Philosophy of Psychology and the Humanities*, trans. by Marianne Sawicki (ICS Publications, 2000); Edith Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being: An Attempt to Ascent to the Meaning of Being*, trans. Walter Redmond, *The Complete Works*, vol. 12 (ICS Publications, Institute of Carmelite Studies, 2024); The English translation of *The Structure of the Human Person* is not available. To know more about this work, see Mette Lebech, 'Edith Stein's Philosophy of Education in The Structure of the Human Person', *Maynooth Philosophical Papers* 3, no. 9999 (2006): 163–77, <https://doi.org/10.5840/mpp20063Supplement26>; the German edition, see Edith Stein, *Der Aufbau Der Menschlichen Person: Vorlesung Zur Philosophischen Anthropologie*, ed. Beate Beckmann-Zöller, *Edith Stein Gesamtausgabe* 14 (Herder, 2004).

other.¹⁶ That leads us to a fundamental problem of interiority that is irreducible to the mere subject-acts-object relationship. Instead, it is an intersubjective relationship in which both subjects' presences could be mutually recognized as the primordial experience of empathy. It would not be surprising that when Stein accounted for individuation in *Finite and Eternal Being*, she analysed the interiority of the soul. That is because, different from the Thomistic account of individuation, it is the soul, as the individual form or the form of the essence (*Wesenform*), that makes one an individual person and shapes one's interiority dynamically related to the 'I' and the spiritual life.¹⁷

For Stein, individuation links with interiority. On one hand, it makes the primordial experience of each human person is irreducible. On the other hand, it may cause a boundary from establishing a relationship that it is a development from 'I' and 'you' arising the 'We'.

3. Intersubjectivity and the insufficiency of empathy

Stein attempted to go beyond the wall of one's subjectivity that forms 'the world as it appears to me' and further justify the possibility of an existing world that is constituted together by self and other, in which empathy becomes the basis of intersubjective experience.¹⁸ The concepts of empathy and intersubjectivity are underpinned in the idea of co-givenness or appresentation in Husserl's terminology.¹⁹ When looking at a person, I don't see their consciousness directly – I see a body. But this body is not merely physical: I immediately experience it as the body of another subject, one who, like me, is experiencing the same world, and who also relates to themselves and to others as I do. Even though the inner experience of this subject is not directly given to me, I can still experience it as having an inner life. This indirect yet immediate givenness or presentation of the other's inner life is what Husserl calls appresentation.²⁰ We often see the front side of ourselves when facing the mirror, but we still can be aware of the entire person in our own first-person perspective despite the hidden sides, for example, our back, are absent in the reflection in the mirror. They are then 'appresented' or co-given in the whole phenomenon of the person. In a phenomenon of others, the other's first-person experience is the co-givenness on which empathy focuses.

¹⁶Ales Bello, *Edith Stein and Edmund Husserl*, 50–51.

¹⁷Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being Appendices The Interior Castle*, 147, 158, 343, 373; Sarah Borden Sharkey, *Edith Stein's Finite and Eternal Being: A Companion*, Edith Stein Studies (Lexington Books, 2023), 17, 130–32; Francesco Alfieri, *The Presence of Duns Scotus in the Thought of Edith Stein: The Question of Individuality*, trans. by George Metcalf (Springer Berlin Heidelberg, 2015), 105.

¹⁸Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, 64.

¹⁹Dan Zahavi, *Self and Other: Exploring Subjectivity, Empathy, and Shame*, First edition (Oxford University Press, 2014), 128–29, 138; Husserl's Phenomenology of Intersubjectivity', Iso Kern, in Frode Kjosavik et al., eds., *Husserl's Phenomenology of Intersubjectivity: Historical Interpretations and Contemporary Applications*, 1 [edition], Routledge Research in Phenomenology (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 11–90.

²⁰Dan Zahavi, *Husserl's Phenomenology*, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2003), 113; Dan Zahavi, *Phenomenology: The Basics*, Original edition, The Basics (London; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 92–92; See the entries of 'appresentation', 'givenness', and 'empathy' in Dermot Moran and Joseph D. Cohen, *The Husserl Dictionary*, Continuum Philosophy Dictionaries (London; New York, NY: Continuum, 2012).

Husserl's idea of co-giveness and Stein's empathy situate a position that many 'I's' sense and experience the world and others. Unlike perception, we can fulfill the absent intention by further perception: one corrects another. The primordial givenness in empathetic awareness is exhaustively unfilled by more feeling into others, even though Stein mentioned the correction of empathetic acts.²¹ In this context, how could we justify that the existence of others, other egos, or other consciousnesses can be given or known in a meaningful way if we begin with only the I, the sphere of one's inner state?

In the empathetic awareness, other subjects, which are already part of the world, unlike an object, are never fully given in my consciousness due to their interiority.²² As an empathizer, I am aware of the limits of accessing the self-giveness of the other's subjectivity. This awareness is the original focus of empathy, yet it has already constituted and remains transcendent to me as another as a self. Husserl, while emphasizing the constituting power of subjectivity, also acknowledged that even though the meaning of the world is constituted within my consciousness, this very constitution already includes a sense of a world that is passively shared with others.²³ Husserl recognized that the meaning of a thing can be objectively constituted only if it is possible to be experienced by others, who are empathizers as well.²⁴ Thus, this objectivity of otherness requires more than one subjectivity, and, so, the world is intersubjectively constituted rather than reduced to an 'I'. What Husserl referred to as naïveté is an understanding of 'objectivity without ever considering subjectivity as experiencing, knowing, and actually accomplishing'.²⁵ Phenomenology as a transcendent philosophy for Husserl can then offer an account of the apodictic correlation between subjectivity and objectivity.²⁶

For Dan Zahavi, the analysis of intersubjectivity is the interconnection between self, other, and world.²⁷ As he explains, the awareness of an intersubjective world arises when we recognize how little a single subjectivity can fully reach to the objectivity of an object *qua* appearing and be aware that other subjectivities also reach the same object with dynamic appearing.²⁸ That is, we need to recognize the insufficiency of our own subjectivity in grasping the full objectivity of what appears.

²¹Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, 84–85; Burns, *Edith Stein's 'On the Problem of Empathy'*, 105.

²²In her later writings, Stein explained why the givenness of others can never be fully given in one's consciousness by demonstrating the nature of a human person upon the account of Thomistic metaphysics. That is, the soul, which is unique to each individual, as an individual form, informs the matter, the body, to be a unique human person. See Christof Betschart OCD, 'Quid and Quale: Reflections on a Possible Complementarity Between Metaphysical and Phenomenological Approaches to Personal Individuality in Edith Stein's *Potenz und Akt*' in Lebeck, Mette, and John Haydn Gurmin, eds. *Intersubjectivity, Humanity, Being*. Peter Lang UK, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.3726/978-3-0353-0759-7>; Sarah Borden, 'What Makes you you?' in Berkman, *Contemplating Edith Stein*, 287.

²³To know more about the concept of passive constitution, see Dan Zahavi, *Phenomenology: The Basics*, Original edition, *The Basics* (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 72–77.

²⁴Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, sections 55–56, 58.

²⁵Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. David Carr (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 96 (Hereafter *The Crisis*).

²⁶*The Crisis*, section, 46 and p. 166 n.

²⁷Zahavi, *Phenomenology*, 88.

²⁸Dan Zahavi, *Husserl's Phenomenology*, *Cultural Memory in the Present* (Stanford University Press, 2003), 111.

The insufficiency of our empathetic awareness can explain why Stein noted ‘empathy becomes the basis of intersubjective experience’, and so we acknowledge that empathy as a unique awareness presupposes the ‘asymmetry between self-experience and other-experience’ in establishment of an intersubjective relationship.²⁹ This means that the goal of living in an intersubjective world is not to live in a world where everyone perfectly understands one another but to live empathetically with others despite the impossibility of such perfect understanding. The asymmetry between the experiences of self and others inherent in our intersubjective experience is not incidental event but constitutive of our intersubjective relationship.

But here we encounter a threshold. In Stein’s account of empathy, we are granted a mediated access to the inner life of others – what Husserl called co-givenness – which becomes the foundation to *know about* others. Yet we do not possess their interiority; we receive and describe it indirectly. This foundation provides the epistemological account for us to describe the non-primordial experience of another, but is that enough to form intersubjective relationships? At this phenomenological threshold, we find not only that the other’s interiority is inexhaustible, but that even our own is never fully transparent to us. That means, we are not even able to describe our own interiority fully.

This suggests that empathy can describe but by itself *alone* lacks a dimension to account for and receive the spiritual and affective reality of being with others. That is, as stated above, the crisis of the reduction that turns the primordial object of empathy into my mediated experience. And it is here that the language of philosophy must give way to a different vocabulary – a spiritual one. We are brought to the threshold of the heart: a space that must be lived rather than speculated about.

4. Pope Francis on the heart

In his last encyclical of 2025, *Dilexit Nos*, Pope Francis recalibrated the Sacred Heart devotion. However, in his four Messages for the World Day of Social Communications from 2021 to 2024, the pope has constantly spoken about the matter of heart in the act of listening and communication. In the Message of 2022, he remarked that the communication of heart ‘is not a theory or a technique’ but ‘openness of heart which makes closeness possible’.³⁰ What does he mean by the ‘openness of heart?’ In the same Message, he further claimed that the first object of the listening is nothing else but one’s own self, listening and being open to one’s truest needs, those inscribed in each person’s inmost being. This type of listening requires words received not outwardly through the ears but spiritually through the heart, which St. Augustine used to encourage to listen – *corde audire*, to listen with the heart—and which echoes what St. John Henry Newman took in his motto ‘*cor ad cor loquitur*, heart speaks to heart’.³¹ The openness of the heart begins from hearing oneself inwardly, hearing one’s truest needs, and

²⁹Zahavi, *Phenomenology*, 93.

³⁰LVI World Communications Day, 2022—Listening with the Ear of the Heart | Francis’, accessed 19 April 2025, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/communications/documents/20220124-messaggio-comunicazioni-sociali.html>; cf. Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 171.

³¹Francis quoted ‘Do not have your heart in your ears, but your ears in your heart’ from St. Augustine (*Nolite habere cor in auribus, sed aures in corde*) (Sermo 380, 1: Nuova Biblioteca Agostiniana 34, 568). He also quoted St John Henry Newman’s motto *cor ad cor loquitur* in *Dilexit Nos*. In choosing it, Newman had thought that he was quoting a phrase from Sacred Scripture or, perhaps, from Thomas à Kempis. [C.S

leads us to listen to others and to the Other. These writings of the heart reveal the necessary view of one's interiority in interpersonal relationships. Thereafter the heart opened, the closeness and communications with others can be built upon the mutual participation in the joys, fears, hopes and suffering of each other.³²

Beyond its biological function, the heart is unique to human beings. It is a space, in which we encounter the presences of ourselves and others. Then why is this space important to us?

In *Dilexit Nos*, Francis first demonstrated the account of the heart from Greek philosophical anthropology to the modern depreciation of the heart caused by the overhype of a rational-technocratic environment. When the pope concluded this demonstration upon a philosophical prolegomenon, he wrote, 'All that we have said has implications for the spiritual life'.³³ One of the emphases of this encyclical, also the key idea I adapt, is the role of spiritual life as the foundation of the relationship between self and others.

It is necessary to clarify the difference between 'spiritual life' and 'spirituality'. Spirituality is formulated upon spiritual life, just as theories are built upon empirical realities. Spiritual life refers to what is concretely lived – the choices a person makes in time and space that are deeply tied to faith or belief. In contrast, spirituality is abstract; it is a systematization and synthesis of spiritual life, articulated through categories, causes, and effects. Spirituality is thus a result of study and reflection, whereas spiritual life remains grounded in lived experience.

Then what is the role of the heart in spiritual life? Pope Francis reminded us that the heart is where 'the naked truth about ourselves' is revealed. It could not be 'of what we show or hide from others, but of who we truly are'.³⁴ However, the heart has been viewed as a foreign concept, when considered under the category of the question of self-understanding, because it is unlikely treated as a 'clear and distinct idea' that Descartes and our technocratic-dominated environment prefer. Under the depreciation of the heart in self-understanding, we misconceive that the mind alone can communicate. We assume that reason, knowledge, and data analysis can grant us certainty in the relationships between humans and nature, between humans, and even between humans and God. But in doing so, we overlook a paradox at the centre of Francis' insight: that the naked truth about ourselves is not built upon certainty in abstraction, but, counterintuitively, upon our openness to uncertainty. For Francis, the heart, unlike the *cogito*, is not a domain of speculation or binary decisions, but a space

Dessain et al. (eds.), *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, 32 vols. (London and Oxford, 1961–2008), LD, vol. xxix, p.108.]. In fact, the expression, in the form *cor cordi loquitur*, comes from St. Francis de Sales, who wrote, 'Truly the chief exercise in mystical theology is to speak to God and to hear God speak in the bottom of the heart; and because this discourse passes in most secret aspirations and inspirations, we term it a silent conversing. Eyes speak to eyes, and heart to heart, and none understand what passes save the sacred lovers who speak'. [Francis de Sales, *Treatise on the Love of God*, trans. Henry Benedict Mackey (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2003), 235.] In the Message for the 57th World Day of Communications, the Pope by reference to Francis de Sales spoke about the heart.

³²LXVII World Communications Day, 2023—Speaking with the Heart. "The Truth in Love" (Eph 4:15) | Francis', accessed 29 July 2025, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/communications/documents/20230124-messaggio-comunicazioni-sociali.html#_ftnref2

³³Francis, 'Dilexit Nos (24 October 2024)', 24, accessed 3 February 2025, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/20241024-enciclica-dilexit-nos.html>

³⁴Francis, 'Dilexit Nos (24 October 2024)', 5–6.

of spiritual discernment shaped by receptivity and listening. In the heart of discernment, we do not eliminate the uncertainty embedded in lived experience – we listen to it. Through this act of listening, we allow our experience to show how we consent to the full range of our affective and embodied life. In doing so, we come to know ourselves within the ineliminable uncertainty in life and beyond the limited co-givenness that empathy alone can offer.

This receptivity of affective uncertainty in the heart, I propose, could be referred to the idea of ‘polar oppositions’ that the pope adapted from Romano Guardini (1885–1968), a German Jesuit, and that was the central notion rooted in the PhD project that Francis never finished.³⁵

‘I love oppositions’, said the pope recorded in the biography written by Massimo Borghesi – In that, ‘the two opposites are not annulled’.³⁶ These two polar oppositions remain not in contradiction or identity but in a dynamic tension. Unlike good and evil, these oppositions are a matter of contradiction requiring a choice of negation. When facing justice and mercy, unity and conflict, one and many, the primary attitude for Francis is not to make choices but to contemplate how these pairs of notions are revealed as tensions in one’s heart rather than resolved in abstraction. Because they are not just concepts, and we are not like a CPU in a computer that receives binary codes as receive them in life and displays them to a screen without any accidental affections. These tensions affect us embodiedly and spiritually in both external and internal life beyond abstraction.

This way of understanding the naked truth of us is a spiritual realism, examining the reality of affection in the presentation of the spiritual life, as lived. The heart in it is a living and unique space, in which we can observe how the tensions as lived experiences oscillate.

I use the word ‘oscillate’ in light of Erich Przywara’s (1889–1972) reiteration of the principle of *analogia entis*, which developed into the ontological relationship between God and creature as ‘similarity-in-ultimate-dissimilarity’.³⁷ Przywara described this relationship between similarity and dissimilarity as an oscillation, a dynamic movement rather than a static balance. This notion calls to mind a striking image I encountered at the Atomic Bomb Museum in Nagasaki: amidst the ruins of destroyed metal structures, the bamboo had survived.

Bamboo’s survival was not due to strength in the conventional sense, but precisely due to its structure – hollow, flexible, open to bending without breaking. The hollow structure with nodes grants itself strong endurance because it does not resist violently as metals, but gives way, absorbing impacts into the hollow interior. This hollow character analogously denotes the power of interior emptiness of the heart containing the affections from external life and displaying them in spiritual life.

³⁵Massimo Borghesi, *The Mind of Pope Francis: Jorge Mario Bergoglio’s Intellectual Journey*, trans. by Barry Hudock (Liturgical Press Academic, 2018), 107–9; original idea of ‘opposites’ found in Romano Guardini, *Der Gegensatz: Versuche zu einer Philosophie des Lebendig-Konkreten* (Matthias-Grünwald-Verlag, 1955).

³⁶Borghesi, *The Mind of Pope Francis*, 105.

³⁷Erich Przywara, *Analogia Entis: Metaphysics: Original Structure and Universal Rhythm* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Company, 2014), 63–66; Przywara is the contemporary Jesuit philosopher of Guardini.

A heart with this power, like bamboo, does not reduce affections into certainty as in the form of abstraction, but moves with winds, taking them as what it is as tension.³⁸ One of the polar oppositions that we assumed could be resolved into certainty is the asymmetry of the self-experience and the other-experience. The inexhaustible nature of the first-person experience of the other, which we observe from empathy, prevents us from considering it as certainty by way of abstraction. That is the phenomenological threshold that I proposed earlier. In the light of the power of the emptiness of the heart, we learn to receive it as uncertainty in the discernment of our spiritual life. The uncertain reality of the gap between self and other is neither resolved nor denied but is received as dynamic tensions oscillating in spiritual life. It is also an objectified 'I-other' event – an encounter that moves within one's spiritual life as a lived tension.

However, if we never nourish the emptiness in the heart, we won't have a space for receiving others – the dead end remains a barrier between the self and the other. Or as Sartre claimed, 'Hell is other people'.³⁹ A heartfelt person does not approach others as objects of knowledge to be grasped with certainty, but as persons to be received in relationship – as spiritual tasks carried in uncertainty. The inexhaustible reality of the other's experience does not become a barrier in the space of the heart. In Pope Francis' thought, the heart is not merely a place of emotional sensitivity but an inner space where we accept the unveiling, un-concealment and unfolding of reality and others, of ultimately the Reality and the Other, God.

5. Returning through the heart

This paper has so far demonstrated the notions of empathy, intersubjectivity, and the heart. With this as our vantage point, we return to empathy and intersubjectivity through the heart and offer three open reflections. These reflections aim to show that the spiritual and affective dimensions of the self-other relationship, presented through the notion of the heart, can complement the phenomenological accounts of empathy and intersubjectivity.

The first reflection addresses the insufficiency that Stein uncovered in the epistemic foundation of empathetic awareness: the asymmetry between self and other. This asymmetry is not merely an epistemic limitation – as if we simply fail to 'know' the other completely. Rather, it reflects an ontological structure of human existence. Empathy can only reveal the other's subjectivity as co-given, yet always descriptive. In daily experience, this co-givenness is deeply affective – we are touched, moved, and disturbed by others – but the nature of this affectivity remains obscure if we reduce empathy to a matter of knowledge alone.

When reoriented through spiritual life, this insufficiency does not mark a failure; it becomes a contemplative reality. Here, I propose that the asymmetry that empathy leads to is what I call an ontological space. By 'ontological space', I do not mean

³⁸The terms 'certainty' and 'abstraction' I adopt from Thomistic epistemology. The human intellect establishes knowledge from material data by senses to the stage of phantasms, which ultimately are extracted by the intellect called abstraction. The certainty in the form of abstraction is in contrast to Pope Francis' notion of the heart.

³⁹*L'enfer, c'est les autres* in Jean-Paul Sartre, *'Huis Clos' de Jean-Paul Sartre*, ed. Thomas Bishop, Lire Aujourd'hui (Hachette, 1975), 31.

a metaphorical sphere, but a mode of being-with (*Mitsein*).⁴⁰ It's a kind of structural openness built into our subjectivity, where we're not trying to resolve or reduce the other, but where relationship can be nourished. Being-with is not something we construct, yet it is the way that our existence is already exposed to others, even in the unbridgeable gap caused by the asymmetrical experience between self and other.

The heart is thus the evidential structure within which this space becomes lived. It does not negate the insufficiency of empathy; rather, it receives them as the condition for a more authentic communion. In fact, this 'insufficiency' may be what protects the other's alterity. The heart as an innermost region, and unlike rational cognition, has the capacity to dwell in this unresolved tension with spiritual humility.⁴¹ When we return to the heart, we come to see that it is precisely because we can feel for others, and yet also be mistaken or deceived, and so we truly exist as human beings rather than as a mixture of rational mind and bodily organism. We do not simply think of others but are affected by others and spiritually find meaning and value in the encounter with others. The heart is the missing part in the intentional structure of empathy: the place where affectivity, embodied encounter and interiority converge and oscillate as a tension.

This ontological space does not seek to close the asymmetry between self and other, but to hold it open as the very ground of intersubjectivity. The heart enables us to join external awareness with interior contemplation – that is a practice of spiritual life in the view of spiritual realism, which I claimed earlier. It allows us to receive the other not as a problem to solve, but as a subject to be encountered, listened to, and carried. In the heart, we confront the presence of another as truly other, without the desire to absorb or control.

Pope Francis' understanding of the heart within spiritual life invites us to cross what I earlier called the insufficiency of the epistemic aspect of empathy. At the insufficiency where empathy reveals its own incompleteness, the heart opens a threshold: a deeper, more receptive form of being. The heart thus becomes an ontological space – not because it adds more content to our awareness, but because it constitutes a realistic way of being with others. It is the spiritual and affective dimensions through which we are drawn into communion with others not by clarity, but by being receptive.

If the heart is the space where a person becomes aware of the spiritual and affective depth of being-with others, then we can now turn to a deeper question: Can we move beyond being locked in our own minds and unite with others, while still keeping the uniqueness and integrity of each subjectivity? That's where this second reflection begins.

⁴⁰The notion of *Mitsein* derives from Martin Heidegger: cf. Heidegger, Martin. *History of the Concept of Time: Prolegomena*. Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy. Bloomington (Ind.): Indiana University Press, 1992, 243; Zahavi, *Phenomenology: The Basics*, 95. Zahavi has demonstrated Heidegger's criticism of empathy in that there is no gap between each *Dasein*, whereas Zahavi, by taking the criticisms of Aron Gurwitsch and Sartre insisted on the irreducible difference between self and other, and called for respecting the transcendence of the other, see Zahavi, *Self and Other*, 190–93.

⁴¹Stein has affirmed that the inmost region of spiritual life is where God dwells within the soul. She also used the term 'thoughts of the heart' to contrast with the thoughts formed by the faculty of the intellect. See chapter 13, part 2, sections a-b Edith Stein, *The Science of the Cross*, trans. Josephine Koeppel, The Collected Works of Edith Stein, v. 6 (ICS Publications, 2002).

Stein began with empathy as the foundation of intersubjective awareness. But in her later writings, she turned more fully to the spiritual dimension of the person. In her body–soul–spirit anthropology, the soul does not merely form the body, but informs the person to value, meaning, and the capacity for self-examination – features that form one’s individuality in spiritual life.⁴²

Even in spiritual life, however, the ‘I’ can remain enclosed and unclear to itself. Husserl acknowledged this challenge. In *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, he wrote that the primal matter-of-fact of the ‘I’ – that is, what the ‘I’ is conscious of – must not be disregarded. He continued: ‘For children in philosophy, this may be the dark corner haunted by the specters of solipsism and, perhaps, of psychologism, of relativism. The true philosopher, instead of running away, will prefer to fill the dark corner with light’.⁴³ This encapsulates Husserl’s honest recognition of the difficulty: the self is never fully transparent to itself and always remains partially hidden – yet it is precisely this darkness that we must learn to return to and dwell within.

In response, Pope Francis offered a vision of the heart not as a solution in theory, but as a space in which that darkness is received and lived. I would argue that what makes people fear this darkness and resist entering their own subjectivity is the lack of spiritual emptiness of the heart. By spiritual emptiness, I do not mean a void of meaning, but a heart made ready for receiving the uncertainty that the ‘I’ alone cannot resolve as like the metal cannot resist the impact from the atomic bomb but the bamboo with hollow interior does.

If the heart makes us more receptive, then we must also learn to consent to another kind of asymmetry: the tension between the ideological image that the ‘I’ holds of ourselves and the lived, dynamic reality of who we are.⁴⁴ The former is static and gives ‘comfortable’ certainty because it is ‘clear’ for oneself; the latter always unfolding. A heart of stone cannot receive either the unfolding self or other, because it makes no space for uncertainty. We prefer the certainty offered by abstraction and ideology, and we lack the courage to meet our becoming selves in real time.

When the heart is empty, like bamboo, it becomes truly receptive. This emptiness is not passive, but a form of spiritual humility and an interior principle that provides a space where alterity can enter and be received.

Here, Pope Francis’ vision of the heart becomes a spiritual response to the problem of solipsism and intersubjectivity. The heart holds ideology and reality, self and other, not as contradictions to be resolved, but as tensions to be lived because they are truly affective in spiritual life. It welcomes these asymmetries without collapsing difference into sameness. This openness to tension enables communion without fusion.

⁴²The term ‘spiritual life’ is easy to confuse with the idea of ‘the life of spirit’ (*Geistesleben*) that Stein used and is the openness to all kinds of meaning, cf. Stein, Edith. *Finite and Eternal Being*, 242–43. Here the term ‘spiritual life’ is particular to the content of one recognizing oneself as a lived reality.

⁴³Edmond Husserl, *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, trans. Dorion Cairns (The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969), 237.

⁴⁴Mirosław Mróz, ‘Romano Guardini, Virtue Ethics and Resilience’ in John Anthony Berry, ed., *Resilience in a Troubled World* (Kite Group, 2023), 87–88, see footnote 2. Holding a tension is a realistic way to look at life for Guardini. It prevents us from being over solipsistic or abstracting reality accounting to the self’s understanding.

To embrace the other in their irreducible self is not to master their experience, but to trust that their presence is real – and worthy of being received. This is the foundation of what St. John Paul II called *communio personarum*: a communion between persons grounded not in clarity, but in mutual self-gift and total trust.⁴⁵

Thus, the desire to overcome solipsism is not answered by theoretical clarity, but by spiritual practice. As Pope Francis quoted in *Dilexit Nos*, ‘What theology did not resolve in theory, spirituality resolved in practices’. So too, a fully human intersubjectivity is not proved but lived. It is to live in a reality that both subject’s interiority are inexhaustible and irreducible and yet revealing. This irreducibility causes uncertainty and the darkness that Husserl described and that ‘children in philosophy’ are afraid to get in. But this darkness can be enlightened by an empty and open heart because the heart with emptiness enables us to take the self and the other and other ideas that have been mistakenly polarized or dualistically divided as a tension to dwell in rather than to be dialectically resolved. A fully human intersubjectivity requires not only the awareness of the presence of the other but also the receptivity of other in our own life.

The devotion to the Sacred Heart of Christ, for the pope, is a response to the form of disembodied spirituality and a manifestation of incarnation because the heart is the embodied place where human suffering is felt and divine love is given. Through that heart, Christ feels and accepts our limitations and truly wants to be with us in communion. So, for our human heart, we come to imitate this way of communion with others. To live in communion but remaining one’s own subjectivity, we also learn to be more humble in feeling what others feel, to receive what cannot be solved, and to carry not only the mystery of the other, but also the mystery of the self – ever unfolding, never fully grasped.

Now we come to the final reflection which is the concern of embodiment in technology. While technological advancements offer us unprecedented forms of connection that depreciate the embodied presence of others, empathy paves a way to genuine connections with others. Whether the presence of others is totally absent in disembodied meetings is still in question, the need to return to the heart, to the spiritual realistic view of the reality of others, is necessary. If the development of technology in history shows the changes of the relationship between humans and nature, the technological world we now inhabit promotes a way of life without embodied feelings of the world, of others and of ourselves. That is because this way of communication gives us certainties that are given by reductionism. This certainty is not just comfortable, which I called earlier in the context of the ideological image of oneself, but also ‘false’ in the sense that it does not grant us to view the dynamism of humanity. If that becomes the regular form of life, we are likely to tend to live a robotic life in that we only need data to communicate. Is that a life we want to live?

Together with the asymmetry in empathetic awareness and the receptivity of the heart, this series of questions invites us to consider the role of contingency, uncertainty, and finitude in our humanity. When the world praises feedback, recursivity,

⁴⁵Cf. John Paul II, *Original Unity of Man and Woman: Catechesis on the Book of Genesis* (Boston, Mass: St. Paul Editions, 1981), 82; Jarosław Kupczak, *Gift & Communion: John Paul II’s Theology of the Body* (Washington, D.C: The Catholic University of America Press, 2014), 116; “Gaudete et Exsultate”: Apostolic Exhortation on the Call to Holiness in Today’s World (19 March 2018) | Francis’, accessed 20 February 2025, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20180319_gaudete-et-exsultate.html, 24:3.

and self-regulation, the ineliminable and incommunicable depth of one's interiority would be a place where we can find a resistance to the computed world as a cyber grid digitalizing our understanding of the world. Empathy recalls us to a distinctive ability of acknowledging the primordial feeling of the other, in which we build an inter-subjective relationship upon receptivity but not absolute certainty. The heart like the empty interior of a bamboo encourages us to receive the unknown of the other as other. The tendency of the manipulation of the sources of the world begins to extend to the manipulation in relationships. Technology seems to grant us this unprecedented power. Back to the spiritual life, we come to confront what technology can't invade, that is our interiority in which we encounter oneself, others, and God.⁴⁶

6. Conclusion

This paper demonstrated that empathy, as Stein affirmed, reveals the inner awareness of the other's interior life precisely as non-primordial, in which I do not construct the other; I receive them through appresentation. I know their interiority exists, but it remains non-primordial to me in principle. We cannot exhaustively describe it because we can never live in the experience as the subject, the author of the experience does. This paper gives value to this 'inexhaustibility' and argues that we build intersubjective relationships by receiving this inexhaustible experience as the heart receives one's own reality. This structural asymmetry between the self and the other experiences is an insufficiency of empathy, but it is also a constitutive condition for an intersubjective relationship.

When intersubjective life is considered not only descriptively but as something that subjects must live in, this asymmetrical reality discloses a further question – namely, how such a difference can be inhabited as communion rather than merely acknowledged as structure. It is at this point that Pope Francis's reflections on the heart become a complementary articulation of intersubjective life. The heart names the interior space in which asymmetry is not overcome but received, carried, and transformed affectively and spiritually. Through the analogy of bamboo, whose hollow interior absorbs external force without resistance, I suggest that a fully human intersubjectivity is born when exterior awareness and interior receptivity are joined – when empathy and the heart converge, not as theory but as lived response. Perhaps it is only there, in that space of affection and uncertainty, that true communion becomes possible.⁴⁷

⁴⁶To know more about the connect between technology and human relationships, see Yuk Hui, *On the Existence of Digital Objects*, Electronic Mediations 48 (University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 55–58; Gilbert Simondon, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*, First University of Minnesota Press Edition 2017, trans. Cécile Malaspina and John Rogove, with Univocal Publishing (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2017); Bernard Stiegler, *What Makes Life Worth Living: On Pharmacology* (Polity Press, 2013), 2–5; Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus* (Stanford Univ. Pr, 1998), 9–10.

⁴⁷The topic of this paper was presented at the conference 'Edith Stein in Dialogue: Phenomenology, Metaphysics, Theology', held on 11 July 2025 at the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC, USA.