

Article

“The Hour of Woman” and Edith Stein: Catholic New Feminist Responses to Essentialism

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Received: 5 February 2020; Accepted: 25 May 2020; Published: 29 May 2020



Abstract: This article examines how Edith Stein’s philosophical and theological anthropology is foundational to the “new feminism” that both Paul VI and John Paul II called for in the wake of the Second Vatican Council. In particular, this article shows how Stein helps to respond to Simone de Beauvoir’s argument that taking women’s biology into consideration leads to essentialism with political implications. This article outlines main themes in the new feminism, and gives a brief overview of the ideas about the “hour of woman” and the “feminine genius” pronounced by popes Paul VI and John Paul II. This article then describes and analyzes Stein’s psycho-physical theory of the human person. Finally, this article considers the importance of Stein’s thought for feminist theology, with brief application to the issue of the ordination of women to the priesthood.

Keywords: new feminism; feminine genius; psycho-physical personhood; Second Vatican Council; Edith Stein; Paul VI; John Paul II; essentialism; Simone de Beauvoir; critical essentialism; female ordination

1. Introduction

This article examines Edith Stein’s contribution to theological anthropology in light of the philosophical and theological problem of essentialism. In particular, this article explores Stein’s theory that each human person has an intrinsic, unique and gendered personality, as a way to understand new feminism. The new feminists depend on a theory of complementarity between genders, which they claim is liberating rather than deterministic. Stein’s thought is significant to this movement. The new feminists draw on her work to respond to the challenges for Catholic women in the era following the Second Vatican Council. In doing so, they are also inspired by John Paul II. Not only did John Paul call for new feminism. He also shaped its major anthropological principles by drawing on some of Stein’s insights concerning gender complementarity.

At first it might seem puzzling that John Paul II was so inspired by Stein’s work in this area. How could a German nun have such influence on a Polish pope? It turns out that the two have much in common. John Paul II learned about Stein’s work from her friend Roman Ingarden, who had studied with Stein (Allen 2016; Hellman 1981). Both John Paul II and Stein were phenomenologists who emphasized the unity of physical and psychological aspects of being human. That is, they worked with psycho-physical theories of personhood. Each was also a personalist, drawing philosophical and theological inspiration from firm commitment to the importance of the human person. Perhaps most importantly, John Paul II finds in Stein a model of what he calls the “feminine genius.” Stein lived out her philosophy of gender, by demonstrating that women have a unique contribution to make to the intellectual life of society and of the Church.

There are other reasons why he draws upon Stein’s thought. The young man who once studied secretly for the priesthood, reading Thomistic manuals by night at his factory job, recognized in Stein a common passion for truth. The academy in Germany never fully accepted Stein, because of

her gender and her Jewish heritage. Nonetheless, she continued to research, to teach, and to write. Both thinkers, furthermore, were phenomenological personalists who spoke publicly about the social problems of their time. Finally, Stein and the pope share a spiritual father. Each studied and wrote about the Carmelite St. John of the Cross—at separate points in their lives. The pope had earlier written a doctoral thesis on St. John of the Cross's mystical writings. Stein's final work, before being taken to Auschwitz, is entitled *The Science of the Cross: A Study of St. John of the Cross*. In many ways, Stein and John Paul II are from the same philosophical, religious, and theological family. It is perhaps less mystifying, then, that John Paul II's understanding of humanity and gender intersects with Stein's at several key points.

Stein's influence on new feminism is twofold. She inspired the pope who called for it, and new feminists continue to draw on her philosophical work concerning gender. Stein gives new feminists a way to address some of the challenges from those prominent feminist theologians who contend that the Catholic Church's teachings about women reduce "woman" to an essence that is determined by female biology. For instance, Susan Rakoczy interprets the Church to say, particularly in *Gaudium et Spes*, that "women [have] a different 'nature' than men" (Rakoczy 2008). In other words, she thinks that Magisterial teaching is guilty of the kind of essentialism formulated and condemned by Simone de Beauvoir. Beauvoir argued that women are enslaved to the view that they are determined by their biology. Unlike men, women are then incapable of freedom. A woman's identity is only as "wife" and "mother" (De Beauvoir 2010). Extending this point theologically, Elizabeth Johnson's classic *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* argues that Catholic theology consistently adopts for women "debilitating reality models and social roles" (Johnson 1992). Johnson contends that such roles promote censorship of women's existential experience and wisdom. Similarly, Elisabeth Gössman argues that a "negative anthropology of the female sex" within the Catholic Church consistently impedes female ordination to the priesthood (Gössman 1998). These critiques avoid the concept of complementarity that John Paul II and the Catholic new feminists employ. Complementarity entails that men and women are equal, entirely human, and significantly different from each other. The concept underlines that these differences are significant but should not impede women's and men's freedom. Further, masculinity and femininity together constitute the fullness of humanity as *imago Dei*. However, some discussions of complementarity can seem to relegate women to a lesser status, with the danger of reducing their identity only to a capacity for biological motherhood. Stein and John Paul II strive to avoid such reduction. They argue that gender, in both of its forms, concerns the unity of the physical and the psychological. Physicality and the psychological constantly condition each other. Nonetheless, this theory can make it difficult not to stereotype according to gender.

This article first outlines three main themes of new feminism, outlining John Paul II's and Stein's influence. It then presents some of the Church's key teaching moments about the importance of women in society, both during and after the Second Vatican Council. Finally, this article argues that Stein is what Nancy A. Dallavalle calls a "critical essentialist" (Dallavalle 1998). Namely, Stein acknowledges the theological significance of gendered biology. At the same time, she accepts that any view of reality, including that of gender, will be to some extent culturally constructed. She thinks that femininity and masculinity together express what it means to be made in God's image. Humans experience greater freedom and fulfillment when they acknowledge both difference and complementarity. This article ends with a brief reflection on the implications of Stein's theory for female ordination. This issue is not the primary focus here. However, reflecting on what Stein says about the question of ordination helps to elucidate her thought and provides just one way of seeing how her theory might impact on the contemporary Catholic Church. Throughout this article, "gender" denotes the ways in which an individual is formed, physically and psychically, as male or female, such that they are capable of engendering human life (Allen 1985). That engendering has both physical and cultural dimensions.

2. The New Catholic Feminists: Finding the Feminine Inner Disposition

The term “new feminism” comes from John Paul II’s encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, where he stated that: “In transforming culture so that it supports life, *women* occupy a place, in thought and action, which is unique and decisive. It depends on them to promote a ‘new feminism’ which rejects the temptation of imitating models of ‘male domination,’ in order to acknowledge and affirm the true genius of women in every aspect of the life of society, and overcome all discrimination, violence, and exploitation” (Pope 1995b). The new feminist movement responds to this call. With Beauvoir, who articulated and critiqued essentialism, new feminists denounce male domination. In rejecting male domination, new feminism agrees with Beauvoir’s refutation of what she calls essentialism. With Beauvoir also, the new feminists reject the idea that women belong only in the private sphere. Instead, they agree with John Paul II that women need to enter into public life, bringing with them their distinctively feminine psycho-physical gifts.

However, new feminists accept that there are essential differences between men and women (McAlister 1993). Women uniquely contribute to forming a “culture of life” in ways that reach to the core of femininity. Society does not simply construct such modes. In the English-speaking world, new feminists have together attempted to articulate their understanding of these points. Key volumes include *Women in Christ: Toward a New Feminism, Breaking Through: Catholic Women Speak for Themselves*, and *Promise and Challenge: Catholic Women Reflect on Feminism, Complementarity, and the Church* (Schumacher 2004c; Alvaré 2012a; Hasson 2015). This article will now briefly identify and explain three of the main themes in these works in order to indicate where Stein’s ideas serve as inspiration. Notably, the majority of these articles are descriptive rather than analytic, drawing on the individual experiences of women living out their Catholic faith.

The first main theme pertains to the relationship between new feminism and feminist theology. Instead of accepting a liberal feminist narrative that the Church is simply too patriarchal, conservative, and slow to accept and promote women, new feminists listen and faithfully respond to Magisterial teaching (Gerl-Falkovitz 2004; Fox-Genovese 2004). Accepting that biology is theologically relevant often puts them at odds with postmodern philosophers (such as Judith Butler). They also do not fit into the category of those Catholic theologians who concentrate on the idea that gender is constructed, such as Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza (Fox-Genovese 2004; Schussler Fiorenza 1983). Still, new feminism is like other forms of feminist theology in that it is “a style of theological discourse that appreciatively and critically analyses and employs the theological tradition by placing it in dialogue with the multiplicity of religious experience” (Nussberger 2016). Thus, *qua* feminist theology, new feminism explores the relationship between “revelation” and “experience” (Nussberger 2016). As Elizabeth Fox-Genovese argues, new feminism builds on other forms of feminism, by insisting on equality in the social order. However, it goes further, by incorporating a specifically Catholic focus on the significance of embodiment. Fox-Genovese further explains: “. . . Catholicism views body and soul as indissolubly linked, hence the insistence upon the resurrection of the body. This aspect of Catholic theology opens the door to an understanding of equal but different, but it does not begin to solve the difficulties and contradictions of women’s position in the modern-or postmodern-world” (Fox-Genovese 2004). Catholics cannot ignore the body, and its gendered attributes are significant. Simply knowing that gender is important is not enough. New feminism responds to John Paul II’s request to work out, in theory and in practice, the importance of the feminine dimensions of humanity. This is a different approach to feminist questions and concerns.

After all, any feminism must respond to and strive to influence social realities. Like other feminists, new feminists constantly interrogate their lives in Church and world. New feminists aim for meaningful involvement in all spheres of life. They argue for Catholic women to seek personal fulfillment in light of divine revelation and to bring their feminine gifts into the world. What this means in theory and practice remains an ongoing resource for reflection. Stein developed a theoretical basis for practical responses to how women contribute to society. In her essay “The Separate Vocations of Man and Woman According to Nature and Grace,” she considers the “vocations” of men and women

both before and after the Fall. In particular, she argues that gender helps to consider professional life. Stein argues that God immediately affirmed the difference between men and women at the moment of their creation. At the same time, Scripture expresses the shared human vocation: “to be the image of God, bring forth posterity, and be masters over the earth” (Stein 1987b, p. 61). The Fall, though, damages the relationship between the sexes. Rendered “concupiscent,” they seek mutual domination (Stein 1987b, p. 69). Through grace, the common human vocation can be re-established, and men and women can cooperate in private and in public life. Stein argues that humans are “destined to live one life with one another like a single being” (Stein 1987b, p. 65). In the original order, “a common creativity in all areas was assigned . . . even if this was with a differing allocation of roles.” After the Fall, gendered division of roles became over-emphasised. To counter this, Stein states, “certain positions” should not be “reserved for only men, others for only women, and perhaps a few open for both.” Instead, “The strong individual differences existing within both sexes must be taken into account. Many women have masculine characteristics just as many men share feminine ones. Consequently, every so-called ‘masculine’ occupation may be exercised by many women as well as many ‘feminine’ occupations by certain men” (Stein 1987b, p. 81). One might think of the male midwife or the female construction worker. Biological sex, then, should not be the primary principle when understanding personal vocation. Instead, each person’s individual character is paramount. Still, it would be foolish to overlook male and female biology: in general, men have greater physical strength and so they are in that way more suited to certain tasks. More significantly, men engender life in an exterior and women in an interior fashion. Persons need to consider these biological facts along with personal qualities, as well as social circumstances. Balancing these factors, ideally each person could then choose for roles in private and public life, working with others to achieve the fullness of humanity.

This leads to the second theme for new feminism, which is complementarity between the sexes. Complementarity establishes that humans are gendered both physically and psychologically, and that this has implications for how women and men live in relationship to God and to each other. In his *Theology of the Body*, John Paul uses the term “complementarity” when speaking of the sexes (John Paul II 2006). While Stein does not use the term, she articulates its foundations. Thus she argues that: “There is a difference, not only in body structure and in particular physiological functions, but also in the entire corporeal life. The relationship of soul and body is different in man and woman; the relationship of soul to body differs in their psychic life as well as that of the spiritual faculties to each other. The feminine species expresses a unity and wholeness of the total psychosomatic personality and a harmonious development of faculties. The masculine species strives to enhance individual abilities in order that they may attain their higher achievements . . . Man and woman are destined to beget and to raise up posterity. However, woman is bound more intensely to a child both physically and spiritually, and the entire arrangement of her life is committed to this union; she finds in this her first duty. Man is placed by her side as helper and protector” (Stein 1987c, pp. 177–78). In this passage, Stein does several things. First, she spells out how the physical and spiritual mutually condition one another. Secondly, she articulates some of the differences between men and women. Thirdly though, she shifts away from the emphasis that is usually placed on the narrative in Genesis, where Eve is Adam’s helper. In insisting that men also serve women, she underscores mutual service and gift, giving a theory of community rather than domination. Thinking through gender, Stein does not concentrate on the language of power prevalent in old feminism. Instead, she makes way for a discourse about interpersonal giving. This is her way of speaking about complementarity, even though she does not use this term.

Such complementarity finds its most systematic articulation in Sr. Mary Prudence Allen’s trilogy of works on *The Concept of Woman* (Allen 1985, 2001, 2016). Allen argues that complementarity does not work with oppositions between male and female. Instead, complementarity integrates masculinity and femininity. Furthermore, complementarity does not entail that one gender is simply missing a part, or a piece, without the other. This is not as simple as taking two halves (one male and one female) and putting them together in order to make a whole. Instead, there is “synergy” between the genders.

When the genders do not vie for power but instead cooperate, striving to serve together in a Christ-like way, generative powers of creativity emerge (Allen 2006). Allen argues for “integral complementarity,” by which every human person is complete, “in an ontologically important sense.” That is, men and women do not need each other to become persons. However, “when they enter into interpersonal relations,” this causes a “synergetic effect” (Allen 2006). The capacities of the genders are different. When they work together, in communities, women and men achieve the fullness of humanity. If either femininity or masculinity were absent, this would be impossible. It follows that if either men or women are missing from institutional or public life, a society is deficient.

Allen identifies Hildegard of Bingen, Stein, and John Paul II as key theorists of complementarity. She criticizes Stein for making too sharp a distinction between the masculine and feminine, and thinks that John Paul II corrects this imbalance. According to Allen, Stein speaks of male and female as two different “species,” as though they are completely differently human. The passage Allen seems to have in mind is where Stein says: “I am convinced that the species *humanity* embraces the double species *man* and *woman*; that the essence of the complete *human* being is characterized by this duality; and that the entire structure of the essence demonstrates the specific character” (Stein 1987c, p. 177). However, “species” in Stein’s thought does not seem to mean two different races of humans. Nor are we dealing with two constructed “essences.” If we were, then Stein would agree with Beauvoir entirely. Stein uses such terminology to underline the significance of particular ways in which humans experience gender. She does not think that there are two human natures, but instead two ways of being human. Male and female are the two specific ways that humans engender life, both biologically and culturally (in society). However, gender does not equate with particular societal roles. Gender does not constrain, and individuals fulfill their inner dispositions when society recognizes this point. This claim is important for the new feminists, if they are to avoid essentialism.

Namely, the new feminists need to eschew the claim that their biology forces them only into a very small set of pre-defined roles within society. Full human freedom is far more expansive than this. It is important to consider here that whereas “old” feminism may claim to make way for freedom by eradicating gender differences, the opposite is true. Schumacher argues that “old” feminism effectively defaults to a patriarchal view of freedom, which is radically individualistic. In contrast, new feminism argues that humans are primarily relational, and that freedom is a gift *for* others. In other words, freedom that begins with a gift of self generates creativity. Schumacher argues that “The authentically liberated woman is . . . one who experiences herself as eternally loved and forgiven, and thus authentically free” (Schumacher 2004a). This is her identity as a human, as a Christian, and as a woman who has unique ways of expressing what it means to be communal or relational.

The final theme draws on the previous two. New feminists are aware of challenges for women who want to remain faithful to Church teaching while realizing their freedom of choice in professional and political life (FioRito 2015). At the same time, they want to work out in practice what such complementarity can achieve. Taking up the “challenge” posed by the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council, they reflect on their experiences as women who accept Catholic teaching. They discuss how they live as wives, mothers, members of religious orders and movements, and as faithful single Catholics. At the same time, they explore whether women bring a different dimension to professional and public life. In these ways, the new feminists continue the work of feminist theologians who reflect on the nexus between religion and personal experience.

Some brief examples can help to show what new feminists tend to emphasize. Helen Alvaré has been particularly vocal in countering the narrative that no woman can be faithful to Church teaching and at the same be free to enter fully into public and professional life. She describes how her growing acceptance of the Church’s teachings about sexual morality constituted a journey of personal conversion (Alvaré 2012b). Marie Anderson writes similarly, about how she struggled with the Church’s prohibition of artificial contraception. Only when Anderson accepted this teaching did she come to appreciate it. Anderson was previously an atheist feminist. She describes how accepting Church teaching gave her a different perspective: “. . . God knew I existed and cared about me . . . ”

(Alvaré 2012a). More recently, Abigail Favale shares a similar narrative. She became who she was by navigating away from traditional feminism and toward new feminism (Favale 2018). Contributions to *Breaking Through: Catholic Women Speak for Themselves* extend these ideas by concentrating on the experience of living as faithful Catholic women. In that volume, the authors strive to build on the theory of complementarity, by extending even more into the personal and political.

In all of these works, Stein is a constant presence. Authors draw from and expand on her thoughts, particularly where she focuses on how women have a unique contribution to make to society. Sibylle von Streng devotes an entire chapter to Stein (Streng 2004). Others refer to her thought to support the claim that, for Stein and the new feminists, simply striving to have the same approach to life as men is insufficient. As Stein argues, a woman's freedom must come from who she is, as human, gendered, unique, and positioned to act freely. These points are particularly pertinent for faithful Catholic women who want to transform culture by realizing what it means to be feminine and free. This is their response to the declaration of the "hour of woman" at the end of the Second Vatican Council.

Stein's work is an important unifying factor for new feminism in another way. New feminists not only read and draw from her work, Stein also inspired John Paul II, who called for new feminism in the first instance. Stein's work thus offers a way to analyze the pope's request, as well as a vocabulary to understand the tensions that Catholic women need to explore in order to understand what it means to live out their Christian vocations in private and public life. Stein does not offer readymade answers. On the one hand, she asserts that a woman's biology is important for understanding her psychology and her relationships with others. On the other hand, she does not think that biology determines every choice a woman makes. Most crucially, Stein insists that there is no template for a woman's life. Each woman is unique, and her individual attributes may not coincide with what others usually think of as "feminine." Stein maintains that each person needs to have the freedom to explore his or her personal attributes. Pre-conditioned by gendered physicality and psychology, each person still should move beyond gender stereotypes. This space of freedom is present only when society moves beyond gendered domination. Nature *and* grace must cooperate for each person to realize the fullness of their individual humanity. This means that societal structures cannot solve the problems of every woman. Even when a democratic society guarantees women the freedoms due to every human being in society, each individual woman must still cooperate with God's love.

3. New Feminism, the Second Vatican Council, and the Magisterium

Stein's philosophical work is in some respects prophetic. Writing at least two decades before the Second Vatican Council, she anticipates how women now contribute even more to public life in feminine ways. These are feminine because of the woman's body—soul relationship, which relates to fostering life. This point becomes central to discussions of the "hour of woman" during and after the Council. As Danielle Nussberger discusses, the Second Vatican Council was "the impetus behind the surge of feminist theological dialogue . . . in the 1960s and 1970s." In particular, the Council's "awareness of women's situation in the world and its encouragement of the laity in their crucial vocation in the Church . . . fostered the expansion of women's theological involvement in the Church's watchfulness for the 'signs of the times'" (Nussberger 2016). Nussberger singles out *Gaudium et Spes: The Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World* as the document that best articulates these aspects of the Council (Second Vatican Council 1965). Specifically, *Gaudium et Spes* declares that the Church longs for women to be liberated from injustice. The Council Fathers encourage: "Where they have not yet won it, women claim for themselves an equity with men before the law and in fact" (§9). However, some feminist theologians claim that The Pastoral Constitution is yet another instance of male domination. Susan Rakoczy writes that when the Vatican translation states, in §60, that women "ought to be permitted to play their part fully according to their own particular nature," this implies that women [have] a different 'nature' than men" (Rakoczy 2008). It is unfortunate that this translation lends itself to such an interpretation. If *Gaudium et Spes* did claim that there are two natures—male and female—rather than one human nature with gendered attributes, then an untenable form of

essentialism would be present. (Schumacher 2004b) However, returning to the original meaning of the terms used here enables a more nuanced, richer interpretation of this statement in the document. Stein is particularly helpful here. She maintains the differences between men and women while insisting that masculinity and femininity cooperate to reach the fullness of human nature.

It is important to consider the lines of *Gaudium et Spes* in question. The Council Fathers state: “Women now work in almost all spheres. It is fitting that they are able to assume their proper role in accordance with *their own nature*. It will belong to all to acknowledge and favor the proper and necessary participation of women in the cultural life” (§60; emphasis added). This is a translation of the Latin, where the phrase translated as “their own nature” is “*propriam indolem*”. The official phrase “their own nature” does not capture the nuance of the words, which mean something more like “inner disposition.” *Natura*, or *nature*, is a commonly accepted philosophical term in Catholic thought, and so it is telling that the Council Fathers opted not to use it. Stein’s understanding of femininity is quite helpful here. Stein thinks that every individual person has “an inner form”, which is his or her personal character. That form cannot be reduced to gender. However, gender conditions individual inner form. All that emerges into the world from that inner disposition will be masculine or feminine, according to the particular character of the person who acts. That character brings together gendered physical and psychological dimensions.

Notably, *Gaudium et Spes* does not spell out the ways that women are called to bring their gifts into the world. The Council Fathers draw attention to something emerging—to a work in progress. Stein’s work offers a similar sense. She does not dictate what masculinity and femininity must bring about. Instead, she waits to see what will happen when humans cooperate with grace. This is in keeping with the idea of an “inner disposition” rather than a nature, as present in *Gaudium et Spes*. A nature has more definite purpose, whereas a disposition names a tendency toward something. In this case, it is a feminine tendency toward the world. A disposition may or may not develop. There may be impediments to development—and this is what the various popes during and after the Council seem to have in mind. *Gaudium et Spes* calls women to become as involved as possible in the world, particularly in professions. This suggests that feminine gifts can emerge only when professions are more accessible to women. Thus, the authors of *Gaudium et Spes* propose that relegating women to the realm of the private does a disservice to humanity.

According to the Council’s view, which incorporates the Church’s consistent teaching about the importance of human freedom and responsibility, the inner disposition of a person is intrinsically linked to that person’s freedom. When humans choose well, according to human nature and more particular personal dispositions (which include the capacity to engender life), they actualize and reveal more of who they are. Again though, *Gaudium et Spes* does not clearly elaborate what, precisely, constitutes the capacity to be women in the world. Nor does it explain how such potentiality differs from masculinity. Pope John Paul II strives to carry on the work of the Second Vatican Council and refers to the difference that women can make in the world as their “feminine genius” (Pope 1995a). New feminism accepts the challenge of communicating how women can be faithful to the Magisterium and at the same time become more fully themselves. Again, Stein’s thought sheds light. She articulates that only when women have the freedom to choose to be in public life can society better appreciate how the professions represent the fullness of gendered humanity.

The urgency of bringing “feminine genius” to fruition is increasingly evident in the thought of Paul VI, John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis. Theory, though, is not enough. “Feminine genius” needs fleshing out in practice. According to John Paul II, Mary the Mother of God does precisely this. She is the archetypal figure of feminine genius, and at the same time for all of humanity (Pope 1995a). John Paul II’s phenomenological understanding of what it means to be “woman” has been especially formative for the work of new feminism. Paul VI’s declaration at the end of the Second Vatican Council provides a framework for John Paul II’s elaboration. Pope Paul stated: “The hour is coming, in fact has come, when the vocation of woman is being achieved in its fullness, the hour in which woman acquires in the world an influence, an effect and a power never hitherto achieved.” He goes on to describe that

“women impregnated with the spirit of the Gospel” are essential to stop “mankind” from “falling,” at a time when so much change is present in the world (Pope 1965). This change refers to various forms of potentially dehumanizing technology, particularly technology that can adversely affect human life to the point of destruction.

In the Gospel, the archetypal moment for such impregnation is the moment of the Annunciation, when Mary became the Mother of God. All humans can imitate Mary when they live according to the Gospel. However, as Stein also argues, women can imitate her in a very special way, when they foster and protect life. Women have gifts that will enable them to hold back the destruction of the whole of “human civilization,” which is at risk of falling prey to “inhuman” technological developments. In this short address, Pope Paul does not name these technologies. Instead, he urges women: “Reconcile men with life and above all, we beseech you, watch carefully over the future of our race” (Pope 1965). He then speaks of “all women in trial,” who in all states of life are like Mary at the foot of the cross—courageous and patient, with “an esteem for humble beginnings.” He claims that the peace of the world depends on women being able to transmit their knowledge that the fragility of life constitutes life’s intrinsic worth. Much depends, then, on a woman’s ability to see the truth and to foster life in a feminine way. Interestingly, Paul VI mentions several specific domains where women might be particularly influential: “make it your task to bring the spirit of this council into institutions, schools, homes and daily life.”

At first glance, it seems that Pope Paul is only referring to the fact that women can become biological mothers. He speaks to women as wives, as mothers of sons and daughters, and as the first educators within their families. However, this overlooks that he speaks first of the public sphere: of “institutions” and “schools.” He broadens his scope of maternity to argue that women have a unique way of responding to the Gospel, and of nurturing it in their own lives. In many distinctive ways, they bring the Gospel into the world. Like Mary, women can conceive of the Holy Spirit in a way that is particular to their femininity, so that Christ becomes a living presence in the world. Women have specifically feminine spiritual resources to do so. These inner dispositions are available to men also, but not as immediately. Paul VI and his successors claim that Christ’s presence in the world is impossible without the genius of woman. This Marian capacity of women to create a space for Christ is not only historical (at the one moment of the Incarnation). Nor is it solely biological. Nonetheless, there are strong links between women’s biological capacities to be bearers of life and their spiritual vocation to give birth to the Gospel of Christ in the world.

John Paul II takes up the task to articulate the “inner disposition” of woman in his Wednesday audiences, later collected together as *Theology of the Body*, where he elaborates a theory of complementarity (Pope 2006). His most explicit elaboration is in his Letter to Women, *Mulieris Dignitatem: On the Dignity and Vocation of Woman* (Pope 1988). John Paul speaks about how in Genesis man and woman existed in an original unity that was untainted by sin. Stein had earlier claimed that before the Fall, the first man and woman experienced “the most intimate community of love” (Stein 1987c, p. 61) Like Stein again, he argues that with sin came the lust and domination that can characterize relationships between people. However, Stein and John Paul II claim that through Christ humans can attain the original unity once more. Thus, John Paul II reasons that men and women are equal, and that each needs to submit to the other—women to men *and* men to women—out of love for Christ. In Christ’s love, they attain true equality; and lust and domination, which are results of original sin, are overturned (Pope 1988; McCarthy 2010).

Significantly, as Lawrence Porter discusses, John Paul II adopts the language and hermeneutical framework of existential phenomenology when describing what it means to be “man and woman” (Porter 1996). However, Porter’s analysis of the implications of that phenomenology are highly problematic. They would be even more disturbing if they accurately conveyed John Paul II’s arguments. Porter argues that when men fulfill their masculinity, they act out of freedom, willingly choosing the life of virtue (Porter 1996). Women, on the other hand, are so naturally feminine that they do not need to choose to act well. It is as though women blindly and naturally do the right thing always—they

do not need freedom. The contrast between what Porter says and the way Stein and John Paul II argue is striking. Stein and John Paul contend that men and women alike need to choose for a virtuous life in order to cooperate with the grace of Christ. Only then can they achieve the fullness of their humanity. No woman, one might say, is naturally *fully* feminine. She must choose for her femininity. Again, nature and grace must both cooperate for any person to be fully free.

This is clearer when one considers how the argument of *Mulieris Dignitatem* depends on John Paul II's concept of a female psycho-physical structure. Like Stein, John Paul refuses to dissociate the biological from the spiritual dispositions of woman. John Paul II identifies women's responsiveness to the world as a kind of "sensitivity," which is crucial in the "hour" that Paul VI identified. Paul VI had earlier maintained that the world needs women, so as not to lose its humanity. John Paul now argues that women are "entrusted" with the human being in a way that is unique to them as feminine. Like Paul VI, he thinks that, in the face of great progress in "science and technology," humanity is at risk of losing its sensitivity, particularly to the love that comes to and through humans from Christ. When women manifest their "genius," such sensitivity will not be lost. Crucially, the genius of women is not only for women. It is for all humankind. The feminine genius is a human disposition, or capacity, which women uniquely embody and enact. Stein's philosophy again helps better to see what this point entails. This claim is the substance of the next section, where it becomes evident that individual women define femininity through freely choosing to cooperate with God's grace. When this happens, they realize the capacities of "feminine genius."

4. Understanding Woman: The Contribution of Edith Stein

The concept of "feminine genius" is difficult to define. To locate and define its meaning in experience and practice is an ongoing task. New feminists need to develop a working understanding of "feminine genius" without falling into the trap of subjugating women by insisting too much on points of difference. They need to avoid essentialism. Stein's theory of what it means to be a woman aids in this respect. To reiterate, Stein insists that biology is significant. Masculinity and femininity have physical dimensions. Biology, though, should never be an excuse to force men and women into specific public and private roles. Society needs to assess and overcome inequalities that disadvantage women. Stein develops a theory of complementarity that speaks of humanity as male and female, and emphasizes mutual service while rejecting domination. Finally, her phenomenological approach offers a way for Catholic women to analyze their experience in order to find its significance for new feminism. This section further defines the foundation for these points in Stein's thought.

One can encapsulate Stein's significance to feminist Catholic thought according to two of her anthropological claims. She does not succumb to biological determinism and essentialism. Nor, however, does she dismiss the relevance of humans' gendered psycho-physical reality. Situating Stein vis-à-vis Beauvoir highlights the importance of her work. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir claimed that: "woman is not born, but made." This was Beauvoir's proposal that gender is constructed, rather than "essential." The idea of the "feminine", along with the concept of "woman" was for Beauvoir nothing but a useful cluster of ideas that men fabricate in order to subjugate women. Beauvoir argues that when women accept such construction, they give up all responsibility for self-making; they passively accept definitions and roles from others, particularly those of being a wife and a mother (De Beauvoir 2010). Enslaved to the wills of others, such women can never realize their freedom and accept personal responsibility. In other words, Beauvoir identifies essentialism as a lie wielded by the patriarchy to wrest and retain control. Women acquiesce to this falsehood whenever they accept roles assigned to them, particularly those of wife and mother. One can contrast Beauvoir's critique of essentialism with feminist liberation theologian Mary Daly's promotion of essentialism. Again in the name of feminism, Daly promotes a radical split into two genders, and claims that women are superior (Daly 1993). In contrast, Stein's Catholic new feminists affirm that there are two genders, but do not claim superiority for one over the other. Instead, the genders are complementary, and written into all of creation. Edith Stein accepts and elaborates the claim in Genesis that God created humanity

as male and female. She also articulates how men and women can see the narrative of creation, fall, and redemption in their daily lives, distinctively as men and women. Edith Stein's elaboration of these points is important to John Paul II and via him to the contemporary "new feminists".

Like John Paul II, Edith Stein thinks of each person as a psycho-physical or psychosomatic individual substance (Wojtyła 1979). Stein thinks that each person can only strive for fulfillment in response to God's grace. Thereby, the person acts freely and flourishes in every dimension of personhood. John Paul II and Stein share more than their Catholic faith. As seen above, both were philosophers in the school of phenomenology, which emphasizes the importance of embodied conscious experience for understanding reality. Each also emphasizes the importance of love and freedom for achieving human fulfillment in relationship to others. They both resist the modern individualistic concept of freedom. Stein's experience of what these principles entail for women influences her philosophy, and by extension John Paul's call for new feminism. Recalling some salient moments in Stein's life clarifies how this is the case. Stein (1891–1942) was the youngest of eleven children born to Jewish parents. When she was a child, her father died. Instead of selling the family's lumber business, her mother successfully managed it. From an early age, Stein witnessed that a woman could thrive in a profession that society considered masculine, without losing her femininity. Stein became one of the first women to attend a university in Germany. Along with Roman Ingarden, she studied under and was a research and teaching assistant to Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology. As a woman and Jew, Stein suffered discrimination and could not become a professor in the university system. As an adult, she became an atheist, and then converted to Catholicism. She then became a Carmelite nun, taking the name Teresa Benedicta of the Cross. Stein was eventually killed in the Auschwitz concentration camp. Her major philosophical works are: *On the Problem of Empathy, Philosophy of Psychology and the Humanities, Finite and Eternal Being* (Stein 1989; Stein 2000; Stein 2002). Her major theological work is *The Science of the Cross* (Stein 2003). Most pertinent to this discussion are her essays published under the title *Essays on Woman* (Stein 1987a). These address social issues in Germany, by applying her philosophical and theological anthropology.

John Paul II's awareness of Stein's work is evident in several places. He first learned about her philosophy from Roman Ingarden—a fact that he writes about in later years (Pope 2004). In *Fides et Ratio*, the encyclical that describes the complementary relationship between faith and reason, he identifies Stein as one of several modern thinkers who experienced and express the "fruitful relationship between philosophy and the word of God in . . . courageous research" (Pope 1998a). In 1998, the Church canonized Stein, under her religious name of Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross. During his homily at the mass of canonization, John Paul II observed that "St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross was able to understand that the love of Christ and human freedom are intertwined, because love and truth have an intrinsic relationship" (Pope 1998b). The following year, he declared her one of three patronesses of Europe (along with St. Bridget of Sweden and St. Catherine of Siena). Each of these women, he argued, embodies the "full spiritual dignity of women" that the Church has recognized throughout the ages. Each "express[es] the synthesis of contemplation and action" (Pope 1999). For John Paul II, Stein represents a triple complementarity: between faith and reason, contemplation and action, love and freedom.

Stein's influence on how John Paul II understands the importance of women in every sphere of society becomes more evident when one delves into her philosophical anthropology. Like John Paul II, Stein focuses on the uniqueness and developing integrity of each human person. Stein argues that each person is an individual substance who shares humanity with other persons. A fundamental aspect of that humanity is gender: God has created each person male or female, and calls each individual to integrate as many of the masculine and feminine virtues as they increasingly imitate Christ. This has implications for the person as a whole, because Stein thinks that body and soul are mutually constitutive. Every aspect of physicality is at the same time spiritual, and vice versa. In other words, a person's masculinity or femininity is not only physical, but also deep-seated within the "core" or "soul." Gender is both biological and psycho-spiritual. Above all, it is deeply personal (Sharkey 2010).

Stein argues that, while every object in nature has a “core”, “In the case of the particular nature of a human being, the presence of a *core of nature* is very conspicuous. Here more than any other nature we look for some basic constituent element by virtue of which all the other elements become intelligible” (Stein 2002, p. 86). Stein refers to this core as the “soul” or “character” of the person, which can develop through free and virtuous action. Stein states: “The *person herself* appears to confront us in that which we term character—in its most authentic sense—while the other properties are somewhat more [like] external attachments to her” (Stein 2000, p. 227). Core, character, and inner disposition can refer to the same concept here. Significantly, the personal core is gendered.

A passage in the essay “Problems of Women’s Education,” partially quoted earlier, would indicate that gender is an integral component of personal character. Stein states: “I am convinced that the species *humanity* embraces the double species *man* and *woman*; that the essence of the complete *human* being is characterized by this duality; and that the entire structure of the essence demonstrates the specific character. There is a difference, not only in body structure and in particular physiological functions, but also in the entire corporeal life. The relationship of soul and body is different in man and woman; the relationship of soul to body differs in their psychic life as well as that of the spiritual faculties to each other” (Stein 1987c, p. 177). In general, Stein argues, women tend toward the inner life of emotions and of relationships. More importantly, they emphasize the interpersonal. Generally speaking, men focus on the abstract and the rational, and they tend to separate issues and problems from their social contexts. Men tend to dwell more on what is external. Stein thinks that men and women need to learn human strengths from each other, so as to become more Christ-like—and thus more fully human. Men can become more empathetic, and women more objective. In each case, and individual experiences integration, with inner core and relationships with world and others forming a greater whole.

Taken together, these passages yield that each person has a gendered personal core. Additionally, that inner character can either flourish or thrive in response to external circumstances and, more importantly, freely chosen actions. This means that women can flourish when not forced to accept male norms of work. Instead, women should have the freedom to bring to their tasks a specifically feminine mode of being. At the same time, no woman should have to choose a feminine profession, and every woman should be free to act as herself, to develop as an individual woman both privately and professionally. This seems to be what Paul VI and John Paul II have in mind when they state that women need to enter into every sphere or life in order for the “feminine genius” to come into its own.

In summary then, Stein understands gender to be an “inner disposition,” comparable to the understanding found in *Gaudium et Spes*. A human must freely enact such an inner disposition in order to develop *as* a human. This underscores John Paul’s observation that Stein brings together contemplation with action. Significantly, both men and women have the capacity to develop an inner gendered disposition. Stein points to a female and a male “species.” As discussed, Allen has difficulty with language that implies such huge differences. Sibylle Von Streng chooses to discuss Stein’s analysis in terms of different “types,” in order to make sense of the term “species.” Indeed, in the original text, Stein herself seems to struggle to find language for what she wants to express. In any case, the term “species” that Stein uses does not denote that men and women are different natures, or races (Streng 2004). Instead, there is one humanity, with two biological/spiritual variations.

In other words, Stein is not the kind of essentialist that Beauvoir criticizes. Instead, like Beauvoir, she argues that women should be free consciously to choose what they want from life. Also like Beauvoir, Stein thinks that women are responsible for defining themselves as individuals within society. She also argues that women discover more about themselves, as women, through involvement in public, professional life. In 1928, Stein made this point in an address on “The Significance of Woman’s Intrinsic Value in National Life.” At the time of delivering the address, Stein observes that women in Germany have become more integrated into professional life and that this has opened up new possibilities of self-discovery. She even argues that when a woman’s “*nature* is strong enough” and she “one of the traditionally masculine professions . . . if she is strong enough, she has perhaps succeeded in converting the *masculine* profession into a *feminine* one. And this *self-awareness* could also develop

the conviction that an *intrinsic feminine value* resides in the singularity" (Stein 1987d, pp. 247–48). In other words, this woman can bring a greater awareness of the importance of the person, and the personal, into that profession. It follows that genuine femininity develops where individuals enter into relationships with others in a variety of roles. Society can either thwart or foster the feminine inner disposition, by closing off or opening up possibilities for women to work in the public sphere.

These observations are rooted in Stein's understanding of the psycho-physical unity of the human person. Stein is not a proponent of biological determinism. However, she does think that there are psycho-physical tendencies within men and women. This does not mean that because someone is a woman she will automatically choose and act in particular ways. Instead, Stein thinks more about how an individual woman can integrate all dimensions of her person, including her femininity. A woman who works toward this wholeness will bring the fullness of her unique person into everything that she does, and at the same time will express what it means to be feminine. Stein describes how this works, saying that a woman "seems more capable than man of feeling a more reverent joy in creatures; moreover, such joy requires a particular kind of perception of the good, different from rational perception in begin an inherent spiritual function and a singularly feminine one. Evidently, this quality is related to a woman's mission as a mother which involves an understanding of the total being and of specific values. It enables her to understand and foster organic development, the special, individual destiny of every living being. This awareness of the needs of the living being benefits not only her posterity but all creatures as well" (Stein 1987b, pp. 72–73). For Stein, a woman is particularly capable of fostering life. She is attuned to how creation offers itself as a gift to persons. The capacity for biological motherhood is a powerful component of understanding what it means to be a woman. However, femininity is not reducible to biological motherhood. Instead, the fact that a woman can be a mother shapes everything that the woman does or can do. As has been said, femininity involves a certain disposition toward being, which is deeply personal and defined by dimensions of interiority. One way to understand this point is better to compare the way that men and women engender life. Men are directed toward life from the exterior, and need to learn from women what it means to foster life in its intimate dimensions. That is, women more intuitively understand what it means to care for another person in both physical and psychological dimensions.

A woman's physical capacity to foster and nurture life within her womb is directly related to her other feminine dispositions. Whether or not she physically becomes a mother, as a woman she directs her actions toward personal wholeness. A poignant example of this is evident in Stein's own life. Witnesses who travelled with her to Auschwitz noted that she took care of those children whose mothers had become distraught and incapable of doing so themselves (Herbstrith 1985). Stein was not the biological mother here, but cared for others in a material way, enacting her spiritual motherhood. Unlike Beauvoir, Stein does not think that society entirely makes the woman. But she does maintain that if women can be involved in society, human capacities for integration will be more fully realized. Stein's description provides a key to understanding how John Paul II thinks of women's roles in the world. Namely, *what* women do may not be as important to their fulfillment as *how* they do it. Stein's explanation brings us closer to knowing the character of "feminine genius" that inspires the new feminists.

Stein's *Essays on Woman* emphasize these points, and they are a touchstone for the new feminists. In "Problems of Women's Education," Stein argues that women, more than men, are oriented toward the "personal" and they tend to keep always before them a vision of the "whole" (Stein 1987c). In "The Separate Vocations of Man and Woman According to Nature and Grace," she claims that humans have three tasks, which are revealed in Genesis. They are to know and to enjoy the world, and to form it creatively (Stein 1987b, p. 69; Streng 2004). Women, she claims, are particularly called toward the third of these. Stein says that women love and cherish all living things, and desire their full development. This is how women respond to reality. The education of women, she argues, needs to be attentive to this point. Like every other individual, a woman needs an education directed to her "concrete wholeness." However, women or girls especially need "faith in one's own being and courage regarding

it, as well as faith in one's individual calling to definite personal activities and a ready willingness to follow this call" (Stein 1987c, p. 193). God provides the way for each individual, and so for each woman, to respond to this call (Lebech 2015).

Stein insists on the latter point because she has known first-hand the lack of support for women in her own time to receive education and training, and to pursue professional life. Importantly, when they respond to grace, men and women can encourage and enable each other to realize their full humanity. The communal and political dimensions of considering gender are crucial to Stein's thought (MacIntyre 2006). Realizing that femininity and masculinity are complementary, Christians can avoid the temptations to dominate and manipulate each other. Stein articulates the importance of a fully communal life for the development of the individual human person in the Second Treatise of *Philosophy of Psychology and the Humanities* (Stein 2000). Complementary relationships between men and women can only be fully realized when all are equally free to pursue fulfillment of their personal inner cores.

One might then assume that Stein would advocate for women's ordination. For, if every public role should be available to both men and women, then barring women from the priesthood must be unjust. Stein notes that, along with the increasing public presence of women in other domains, the roles of women within the Church have become more prominent in her time. Stein thinks that the Church seems to realize more and more how much she needs women. Together with men, women can work to make the Church a richer social reality. In particular, when women live and work with men, they realize the vocation "to carry the spirit of faith and love to souls in the most diverse spheres of activity and to help form with this spirit private as well as public life" (Stein 1987c, p. 149). According to Stein, women are indispensable to the Church precisely because they have different ways of communicating Christ to the world. She declares: "Catholic women have a strong support in the Church; it needs their strength. The Church needs us. That means the *Lord* needs us; not that He could not manage without us but He has granted us grace, forming us as members of His Mystical Body and employing us as His living members. Did the Lord at any time make a distinction between men and women? Perhaps when He delegated the priesthood to His apostles but not to the women serving Him. (That is exactly why I maintain that the exclusion of women from the priesthood is not simply a question of temporal contingency.) But in His love He knew and knows no distinction" (Stein 1987c, p. 149). The mystery of Christ's love is the answer to how women can find and respond genuinely to the call to build the Church in their own distinctively feminine ways.

The curious fact that "old" feminist Oliva M. Espín interprets this essay as a rally call for female ordination perhaps emphasizes just how radical Stein's views about gender complementarity are, as well as how far we have to sojourn, as Church, toward full complementarity. Espín focuses only on isolated statements from Stein, without placing them in their broader context. For instance, Espín interprets Stein as saying that "there is no theological reason that women should not become priests . . ." (Espín 2008, p. 129). This appropriation of Stein does no justice to the way that Stein challenges us to think through the theological implications of human biology. Only in taking Stein on her own terms can women in the Church break away from "old" feminisms that emphasize power structures, and move toward the "new" feminism that confronts how men and women are equally loved by Christ, while differently capable of bringing Christ-like love into the world. A subtler and more provocative question is this: in refusing to listen to Stein on her own terms, are we overlooking other injustices? Perhaps by focusing on female ordination, we are forcing women to think that the vocations of wife and mother are inconsequential for the life of the Church. When this happens, we neglect Mary the Mother of God. Overlooking Mary, we deny a fundamental dimension of humanity.

A final passage in Stein's essay "The Separate Vocations of Man and Woman According to Nature and Grace" emphasizes the theological significance of gender. Stein says that more important than the fact that, traditionally and according to dogma and canon law, only men have been priests, is "the mysterious fact . . . that Christ came to earth as the *Son* of Man. The first creature on earth fashioned in an unrivaled sense as God's image was therefore a man; that seems to indicate to me that He wished to institute only men as His official representatives of earth" (Stein 1987b, p. 84). However, Christ

did not thereby exclude women from the mission of the Church. Instead, Christ “bound Himself so intimately to *one* woman as to no other on earth: He formed her so closely after His own image as no other human being before or after; He gave her a place in the Church for all eternity such as has been given to no other human being” (p. 84). Ultimately, the great puzzle of how gender complementarity can come to fruition in the life of the Church must be Christo-centric. After all, as Stein argues, “Christ embodies the ideal of human perfection: in Him all bias and defects are removed, and the masculine and feminine virtues are united and their weaknesses redeemed . . . That is why we see in holy men a womanly tenderness and a truly maternal solicitude for the souls entrusted to them while in holy women there is manly boldness, proficiency, and determination” (Stein 1987b, p. 84). Persons become whole when they, as individuals, integrate every human virtue, and thereby their gendered capacities. Stein does not support gender stereotypes. Looking to Christ and to Mary, she breaches settled notions of what it looks like to be male and female. At the same time, she underscores the importance of biology. Male and female virtues exist because of the psycho-physical reality of how we are, and how we continue to become, fully human.

5. Conclusions

Stein’s work, then, contributes to Catholic feminist theology in several important ways. Her articulation of femininity helps to think through the Second Vatican Council’s identification of male and female “inner dispositions.” At the same time, Stein argues that femininity is not a constraint. Women can become free when they can act according to their femininity in every aspect of their lives. This femininity does not need to remain at home. Instead, women should be able to bring their own form of vibrancy into the world. John Paul II articulates this further when he calls for a greater appreciation of the “feminine genius.” Through him and on her own terms, Stein’s thought remains a crucial resource for the new feminists, because it constitutes “critical essentialism,” according to Dallavalle’s definition. Stein understands and challenges forms of construction and domination, while accepting that biology is theologically significant. She offers ways for the Church to think beyond “old” feminist discourse, and reminds her readers of Christ’s call to respond to grace, and to become more like God.

Finally, Stein’s thought helps to form a basis both for critique and for deepened awareness of what it means to be made male and female. The new feminists develop ideas that were present in the thought of Edith Stein, in light of post-Second Vatican Council. In particular, they want to explore as faithful Catholics what it means to realize one’s personal core of freedom through human action. New feminists do not concentrate on the particular social roles that a woman needs to fill in order to live as authentic women. Nor do they argue that women should avoid marriage and motherhood. Like Stein, they are willing to accept the Church’s teaching that Mary’s motherhood is revolutionary for all of humanity. That is, everyone can learn from Mary what it is to be human, just as all persons can turn to Christ to understand personal integrity—in body and soul, thought and action. The more both women and men are involved in public, professional life, the better humans will understand what it is to be made in the image of God.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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