


Article

# Care Ethics and the Feminist Personalism of Edith Stein

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**Abstract:** The personalist ethics of Edith Stein and her feminist thought are intrinsically interrelated. This unique connection constitutes perhaps the main novelty of Stein's ethical thought that makes her a forerunner of some recent developments in feminist ethics, particularly ethics of care. A few scholars have noticed the resemblance between Stein's feminist personalism and care ethics, yet none of them have properly explored it. This paper offers an in-depth discussion of the overlaps and differences between Stein's ethical insights and the core ideas of care ethics. It argues that both Stein and care ethicists relocate a certain set of practices, values and attitudes from the periphery to the center of ethical reflection. This includes relationality, emotionality and care. The paper finally argues that it is plausible and fruitful to read Stein's advocacy of 'woman's values and attitudes' in a critical feminist way, rather than as an instance of essentialist difference feminism.

**Keywords:** Edith Stein; care ethics; personalism; feminism; empathy; emotions; caring; phenomenology

## 1. Introduction

Since its first formulation in the early 1980s, care ethics has developed into a burgeoning field of ethical inquiry that has spread worldwide as a viable alternative to the mainstream currents in moral and political philosophy. Care ethicists are rightly credited with refocusing ethical reflections on the relational nature of the human condition and revaluing care as a fundamental human practice that was historically marginalized and devalued as a matter of private life and family relationships. It has been widely acknowledged, though, that some seminal care ethical insights draw on the ideas of care ethics' predecessors or at least have striking parallels in the history of philosophy. A few scholars have noticed remarkable similarities between care ethics and the ideas of the German philosopher Edith Stein, who developed her phenomenological anthropology and social philosophy between the 1910s and the late 1930s [1–5]. Yet, most of the previous contributions to the question of the relationship between Stein's philosophy and care ethics are rather cursory or suffer from a disproportionate emphasis on one of the sides of the relationship, approaching it either from the perspective of Stein's thought or the one of care ethics. In this paper, I provide a more balanced and thorough account of this relationship. I start with a presentation of care ethics focusing mainly on its development in the work of Sara Ruddick, Carol Gilligan and Joan Tronto. In the next section, I explore the core ideas of Stein's phenomenological personalism and her feminist thought. Finally, I conclude by reflecting on the overlaps and differences between the two ethical approaches. This reflection can help us to arrive at a more adequate and relational understanding of the place of care ethics within the diverse landscape of traditional moral and political philosophy. It also provides an impulse to a more vivid dialogue between care ethicists and the current proponents of personalist ethics who often take Stein's philosophical work as a source of inspiration.

## 2. Care Ethics

In most general terms, care ethics can be described as an approach to ethics that foregrounds caring as a core human practice and conceives of the goals and values of this practice as fundamental for achieving good life at both individual and collective levels.



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The idea of rehabilitating care as a critical human practice and value arose from the historical, intellectual and socio-political context of the 1970s in North America and Europe—in particular, from second-wave feminism and its critique of the dominant ‘hegemonic masculinity’ manifested in the image of the human person as an autonomous independent individual. In the early 1980s, the shift to the description and revaluation of care and caring relationality was reinforced by numerous works across many academic disciplines, such as epistemology [6], sociology [7–9], social policy [10–12], political economy [13], philosophy of education [14], social philosophy [15] and developmental psychology [16]. It was the field of developmental psychology where Carol Gilligan coined the term ‘an ethic of care’. Yet, two years before the term ‘an ethic of care’ would appear in Gilligan’s widely known book *In a Different Voice*, an American philosopher Sara Ruddick published an essay “Maternal Thinking” (1980) [17], in which she put forth several key ideas that have proven of central importance for the subsequent forty years of the development of care ethics. I start this section with a discussion of Ruddick’s 1980 paper, followed by a brief introduction to the formation of care ethics in the 1980s and the early 1990s.

### 2.1. Revaluing Care as a Core Human Practice

Ruddick builds her reflections on the observation that our “working and caring with others” and the corresponding way of thinking plays a crucial role in human life. Her main point is that, although caring practices form the core of human existence, they have historically been marginalized, devalued and portrayed in a sentimental and romantic way. Ruddick seeks to provide an adequate philosophical description of this practice, point out its distinctiveness and explain its value as an important source of an alternative moral, social and political theory.

Though Ruddick links her central concept of ‘maternal practice’ primarily to the activity of taking care of and raising a child, she concedes that maternal thinking expresses itself “in various kinds of working and caring with others” [17] (p. 346). Maternal practice that gives rise to maternal thinking, Ruddick argues, is a response to three basic interests or demands of a child, namely for preservation, growth and acceptability. Ruddick defines ‘maternal thinking’ as a distinctive style of reflecting, judging and feeling that is guided by distinctive goals and interests of ‘maternal practice’.

Ruddick distinguishes between degenerative and non-degenerative forms of maternal practice. The actor of the non-generative form of maternal practice would typically feature attention, love, humility, understanding, respect for the other, sense of complexity, the capacity to change (alongside with or in response to the changing reality), explore, create and insist upon one’s own values and the ability to see and name existing forms of oppression and domination. In contrast, the actor of the degenerative form of maternal practice is characterized by rigid and excessive control over the other, self-refusal and uncritical acceptance of the values of the dominant culture or obedience—a sense of wanting to ‘be good’ in the ‘eyes’ of the dominant culture and society [17] (p. 354–55.).

For Ruddick “‘maternal’ is a social category” [17] (p. 346), which entails that her account focuses on the practice itself and by “concentrating on what mothers do” rather than on what they are suspends any question about the ‘essence’ of this practice. Ruddick rejects “the ideology of womanhood” and argues that it was invented by men and caused the oppression of women [17] (p. 345). Moreover, any identification of maternal practice with biological or adoptive motherhood is false, Ruddick argues, since it “obscures the many kinds of mothering performed by those who do not parent particular children in families” [17] (p. 363). Together with ‘the ideology of womanhood’, Ruddick rejects “all accounts of gender difference or maternal nature which would claim an essential and ineradicable difference between female and male parents” [17] (p. 346).<sup>1</sup> In sum, Ruddick describes maternal practice as a fundamental human practice that has been historically associated with women (and other marginalized groups), but in fact has no essential relation to any sex or gender identity.<sup>2</sup>

Ruddick finally borrows the notion of ‘feminist consciousness’ from Sandra Bartky [20] and concludes her essay by envisioning ‘maternal thought transformed by feminist consciousness’. It is a task of ‘feminist consciousness’ to critique the current economic, social and political structures that perpetuate the marginalization and devaluation of the practice of ‘working and caring with others’ and that foster the dominant association of this practice with women and other oppressed groups. When shaped by ‘feminist consciousness’, maternal thinking reveals “the damaging effects of the prevailing sexual arrangements and social hierarchies on maternal lives” [17] (p. 356) and raises a voice “affirming its own criteria of acceptability, insisting that the dominant values are unacceptable and need not to be accepted” [17] (p. 357). In order to create a society based on the values and rationality of this practice, Ruddick argues we must “work to bring transformed maternal thought into the public realm” and to make it “a work of public conscience and legislation” [17] (p. 361). This would require, on the practical level, a transformation of politics and “moral reforms of economic life” [17] (p. 360) and, on the theoretical level, “articulating a theory of justice shaped by and incorporating maternal thinking” [17] (p. 361).

To summarize, the four key elements that are present in Ruddick’s early essay and that prefigure what will constitute the core of the subsequent development of moral and political theory of care are: (1) The focus on caring as a human practice that, though fundamental to the human condition, was historically marginalized, devalued and kept outside the scope of the dominant Western moral, social and political thought; (2) the aim to provide an adequate analysis of this practice, which would replace the widespread sentimentalizing and romanticizing distortions that go often hand-in-hand with the sociocultural and political devaluating of the practice and the focus on the practice itself, which entails a rejection of its naturalistic and essentialist accounts;<sup>3</sup> (3) the emphasis on the transformative potential of such an analysis, which inspires a critique of the social, economic and political structures that hinder realization of the nondegenerative forms of the practice and (4) the insight that the relational values and ideals inherent in caring practice are connected with the values and ideals of justice and that promoting both requires a transformation of our social and political institutions.

## 2.2. Identifying a Different Voice in Ethics

As described above, the notion of an ‘ethic of care’ was coined by the American developmental psychologist Carol Gilligan in her widely acclaimed book *In a Different Voice* [16]. Gilligan famously characterizes an ethic of care as a distinctive style of moral judging and way of constructing moral problems which centers around the responsibility for human relationships, builds moral judgment on concrete knowledge of a particular situation and context, emphasizes the priority of connection and starts from the insight that there is no contradiction in acting responsibly towards oneself and others. As Gilligan puts it, “the ideal of care is thus an activity of relationship, of seeing and responding to need, taking care of the world by sustaining the web of connection that no one is left alone” [16] (p. 62).

It is noteworthy that Gilligan, in contrast to Ruddick, formulates the idea of an ethic of care within a fundamentally dualistic framework. In her view, an ethic of care is a ‘different voice’, which differs from the voice of an ethic of justice (or rights). In contrast to an ethic of care, an ethic of justice emphasizes the priority of the individual, derives moral judgement from formal and abstract rules, foregrounds the ideal of equality and impartiality and considers the struggle for individual rights as the fundamental dynamics of social relations. Despite the numerous harsh contrasts in her exposition of an ethic of care and an ethic of justice, Gilligan ultimately contends that the “two views of morality . . . are complementary rather than sequential or opposed” [16] (p. 33) and that “to understand how the tension between responsibilities and rights sustains the dialectic of human development is to see the integrity of two disparate modes of experiences that are in the end connected” [16] (p. 174). Yet, perhaps due to the fact that she expresses this view with restraint, or due to her failure to provide an account of how the two views of morality should be connected in the real

life of individuals and communities, many of the critics as well as admirers of Gilligan's work have one-sidedly focused on the opposition of the "two different constructions of the moral domain" [16] (p. 69).<sup>4</sup>

Another notable duality that marks Gilligan's initial presentation of an ethic of care is the duality of the female and male 'voices', the female and male ways of telling the story of what it means to be oneself, to be an adult human being. The author of *In a Different Voice* contends that the male voice typically speaks "of the role of separation as it defines and empowers the self", whereas the female voice typically speaks "of the ongoing process of attachment that creates and sustains the human community" [16] (p. 156). Gilligan conceives of the dual way of defining the self and its relationships to other selves and the world as rooted in the difference between the psychology of men and "the psychology of women that has constantly been described as distinctive" [16] (p. 22). Yet, on the opening pages of her book, Gilligan assures her reader that an ethic of care "is characterized not by gender but theme". She maintains that "the contrasts between male and female voices are presented here to highlight a distinction between two modes of thought and to focus a problem of interpretation rather than to represent a generalization about either sex" [16] (p. 2). I agree with Tronto's remark that "the equation of Gilligan's work with women's morality is a cultural phenomenon, and not of Gilligan's making" [21] (p. 646).<sup>5</sup> However, I think that the conceptual ambiguity of Gilligan's early work opened the way for the formation of this cultural phenomenon, as well as the related misunderstanding as regards the nature of care ethics.

### 2.3. Care as a Political Concept

The American moral and political philosopher Joan Tronto was among the first care theorists who clearly showed that confusing care ethics with private life-oriented women's morality not only leads to an easy dismissal of the feminist 'different voice' in the context of dominant moral and political theories but also jeopardizes care ethics' feminists goals and may result in harmful consequences for women, such as sidestepping structural problems of domination, exploitation, oppression and marginalization (cf. [21]). To address this issue, Fisher and Tronto [23] took up the task of constructing a full moral and political theory of care by offering a broader definition and analysis of caring that enables the inclusion of the whole range of human activities and allows for taking into account the political dimensions of power and conflict entailed in all caring activities.<sup>6</sup>

Fisher and Tronto famously define caring as "a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web" [23] (p. 40). This definition, which emphasizes the processual dimension of care and implies that the caring process may be directed not only toward people but also other living being and things, has been widely influential in further development of a moral and political theory of care and has served as a starting point for numerous applications of a care ethical perspective (which I discuss later on). The same holds true for Fisher and Tronto's related distinction and analysis of four intertwining phases or components of the caring process: (1) caring about—paying attention to something with a focus on continuity, maintenance and repair; (2) taking care of—taking responsibility for activities responding to the facts noticed in caring about; (3) care giving—the concrete tasks and the hands-on care work and (4) care-receiving—the responses of those toward whom caring is directed [23] (p. 40).

In a way similar to Ruddick's reflection on degenerative forms of 'maternal practice', Fisher and Tronto describe ineffective and destructive patterns in caring activities. They think of them as characterized by fragmentation and alienation in the caring process, as opposed to the integrity of caring where the four phases of the care process fit together into a whole. Such ineffective patterns in caring occur, for example, when caregivers suffer a shortage of time and/or other resources necessary for caring or when care-receivers have little control over how their needs are defined in the caring process. Against the

background of the insight that how we think about care is deeply affected by existing social and political structures of power and inequality, Fisher and Tronto conclude that the patterns of fragmentation and imbalance of the caring process are mainly created by deficient social and political arrangements. Hence, a full-fledged moral theory of care needs to be developed hand in hand with a political theory of care that scrutinizes the workings of our social and political institutions (e.g., the household, the market and the state) from a critical perspective inspired by the ideal of good caring.

While an ethic of care envisions “a different world, one where the daily caring of people for each other is a valued premise of human existence, . . . an alternative vision of life, one centred on human care and interdependence” [27] (p. x), a political theory of care reveals that “what this vision requires is that individuals and groups be frankly assessed in terms of the extent to which they are permitted to be care demanders and required to be care providers” [27] (p. 168). In her path-breaking book *Moral Boundaries* [27], Tronto lays ground for a full-fledged political theory of care that aims to explicate what “a just distribution of caring tasks and benefits” [27] (p. 169) entails and which social and political arrangements facilitate caring and contribute to creating “a more just world that embodies good caring” [27] (p. xii). A political theory of care sheds light on the close relationship between care and justice. On the one hand, to address the problems of care and to conceptualize the prerequisites of good caring requires concepts of justice, equality and democracy, since caring is always deeply affected by unequal power and access to material conditions and resources necessary for caring. Thus, Tronto argues, “only in a just, pluralistic, democratic society can care flourish” [27] (p. 162). On the other hand, “care as a practice can inform the practices of democratic citizenship” [27] (p. 177), since it describes “the qualities necessary for democratic citizens to live together well in a pluralistic society” [27] (p. 161–62). Reflection on the mutually enabling relationship, foregrounded by Tronto [27], between good caring and democratic citizenship in a just society is a thread that connects most subsequent developments in a political theory of care.

The exploration of a close relationship between caring, democracy, citizenship and equality inspired Tronto’s more recent reflection on the practice of ‘caring with’ as constitutive for a ‘caring democracy’ [28]. To be a citizen in a democracy means, Tronto argues, “to care for citizens and to care for democracy itself” [28] (p. x). This requires that citizens take seriously the collective responsibility for ‘caring with’ each other and that democratic politics recognizes the centrality of “assigning responsibilities for care, and for ensuring that democratic citizens are as capable as possible of participating in this assignment of responsibilities” [28] (p. 30). Tronto expands the original distinction of the four phases of caring [23] by adding ‘caring with’ as the final fifth phase of the care process and identifying plurality, communication, trust, respect and solidarity as the key moral qualities that ‘caring with’ requires [28] (p. 35–36).

### 3. Edith Stein’s Feminist Personalism

Edith Stein (1891–1942), a patron saint of Europe, was a German philosopher and religious thinker. She was a pupil and follower of the founder of phenomenological philosophy, Edmund Husserl. Stein was born in a German Jewish family, but she later converted to Catholicism and became a Carmelite nun. Nazis murdered her in Auschwitz in 1942. Stein has left an extensive philosophical and theological corpus of work. The following exposition of her thought focuses in particular on her personalist and feminist views in relation to ethics.

#### 3.1. Stein’s Personalist Ethics

In spite of the fact that Stein has never wrote any systematic work on ethics per se, it is plausible to argue that her entire philosophical corpus “implicitly entails a consciously developing ethical vision entering into conversation with ethical philosophy’s major representatives” [29] (p. 73–74) and “ethical concern is deeply and thematically woven into the fabric of her studies in anthropology, community, and political existence” [29] (p. 86).

In the phenomenological phase of her philosophical work, from the late 1910s to the early 1930s, Stein's ethical views draw heavily on the personalist ethics developed by Edmund Husserl and Max Scheler.<sup>7</sup> Yet, as we will see in a moment, Stein enriches the personalist perspective of her phenomenological companions by a unique feminist tweak. Stein's latest thought shifts towards the Aristotelian-Thomist tradition, attempting to link the Christian perspective with the phenomenological position of her earlier works (see, e.g., [30]). For the purpose of this paper, I want to narrow my focus down to the phenomenological phase of Stein's ethical thought, which offers enough material for a comparison with care ethics.

Following the methods of her teacher, Husserl, Stein devotes a great deal of her philosophical project to answering the questions of what it means to be a self and how the self relates to the world. The question of how the world can be given to us as an objective world appears for Stein, as well as for Husserl, as inseparably connected with the question of how we can know and understand others as subjects who relate to the same shared world as we do. Stein conceives of the act of understanding or knowing the other subject as an act of empathy (*Einfühlung*) and characterizes it as a unique type of perception that differs from all other forms of perceiving. In empathy, Stein argues, I grasp the other person as a person who has her own perspective and experiences, whereas, in nonempathic perceptions, I perceive things and external objects in the world. Stein notes that there is a fundamental difference between the way in which I grasp my own inner life and the way in which I grasp the other's inner life: the content of empathy is never fully present for the empathizer, as long as it belongs to someone else, to a different person. Empathy is an other-oriented type of consciousness; the aspect of otherness is constitutive for empathy. However, this self-other distinction in empathy also entails that the empathizer is connected with her own experiences too. As Hamington puts it, for Stein, "empathy does not negate the self but actually strengthens self-concept" [31] (p. 80). Hence, in Stein's view, empathy plays an important double role in that it both constitutes the other self for me, and it constitutes my own self as different from the other.

Stein's investigations in the constitution of the human person led her to her study of the human person's relations and intersubjective links, which resulted in a fundamentally relational view of the human person. As Fuentes stresses, "it is through empathy that the individual, human person (psychophysical individual), becomes constructed as such—and I cannot be formed without a you—the possibility of knowing oneself in the other and knowing the other is inseparable—one cannot be oneself, build oneself as a self, or form one's own identity, without the reference of the other" [32] (p. 206). Human persons are referred from themselves to the other in order to be what they are and to become what they can be.

This deeply relational perspective on the human person becomes manifest in Stein's ethical reflections that start from the notion of the person. As she argues already in her dissertation, "one's own moral life and moral character is constituted alongside the moral encounter with the other and in one's own response to her moral character" [29] (p. 81). In the ethics derived from the relational perspective, "the other, the good of the other, is not only something tolerable or acceptable, but it is indispensable for the same comprehension and realization of one's own good—one's own good cannot be carried out without the other's own good and vice versa" [32] (p. 206).

Stein shares and further develops the view of other early phenomenologists that it is through emotions that a person grasps "the meaning of another being in relation to its own being, and then the significance of the inherent value of exterior things, of other persons, and impersonal things" [33] (p. 96). Emotions are the "essential organ for comprehension of the existent in its totality and its peculiarity" [33] (p. 96), and through emotions, we open ourselves to the world of values that Stein takes to be present in the world of persons. It is important to stress that by 'emotions' Stein does not mean fluctuating states of sentiment, although emotions may include sentiment. Stein relates the primordial recognition of others to the emotions as a peculiar spiritual capacity, present both in self-knowledge and empathy (Haney 458). What we ought to be and do shows itself to us through the feelings

we develop in encountering the experiences and actions of other persons [34] (p. 757). In line with the emotional value realism of Scheler, Stein claims that the structure of personal depth and periphery is mapped out in response to a range of values and that the person ought to be affected in the deepest way by the highest values [29] (p. 74). On the top of the hierarchy of values resides the absolute value of the human person: “the human person is more precious than all objective values” [33] (p. 256—cited in [35]).

To be responsive to the highest value, to the absolute value of the person as person requires, in Stein’s view, love. In love, the person opens herself to the value of other persons, as well as to the value of one’s own person. Thus, love, Stein argues, is vital for the individual and community alike. By contrast, hate is a vital disvalue both for the individual and community: “love operates within the one who loves as an invigorating force that might even develop more powers within him than experiencing it costs him. And hate depletes his powers far more severely as a content than as an experiencing of hate. Thus, love and positive attitudes in general don’t feed upon themselves; rather, they are a font from which I can nourish others without impoverishing myself” [36] (p. 212). Attitudes such as love, trust and gratitude have the effect of ‘enlivening’ the person who receives them, inasmuch as there is a real community among persons who are evaluatively ‘affirmed’ in and through them. The opposite acts of “distrust, aversion, hatred—in short, the whole set of ‘rejecting’ manner of behavior” [36] (p. 211) are devitalizing, because in them the person is evaluatively negated [29] (p. 78).

However, even the ‘personal attitude’ and ‘love’, in Stein’s view, can become devitalizing and destructive if it takes on excessive forms, such an excess of interest in the other person, the urge to lose oneself completely in the other. Stein states that, in a passion of wanting to confiscate the other [33] (p. 257), one does justice neither to one’s self nor to the humanity of another [33] (p. 257): “The woman who hovers anxiously over her children as if they were her own possessions will try to bind them to her in every way . . . She will try to curtail their freedom of development; she will check their development and destroy their happiness” [33] (p. 75). In contrast, the true capacity to love is the capacity to ‘go out to the other’ without losing oneself.

Along this trajectory, Stein arrives at a normative ideal of community (*Gemeinschaft* as opposed to *Gesellschaft*) as “the union of purely free persons who are united with their innermost ‘personal’ life, or the life of the soul, and each of whom feels for himself or herself and for the community” [36] (p. 273). This ideal of community—of love freely given and received—is oriented around the consciousness of collective and individual responsibility for one another [29] (pp. 81–82). The authentic community orders persons towards “not separated living but common living, fed from common sources and stirred by common motives” [36] (p. 215). In her *Investigation Concerning the State*, Stein conceives of political community as a major stage upon which social-ethical responsibility is born [29] (p. 82). Since real communities and polities deviate—to a greater or lesser extent—from the ideal patterns of the forms of freedom, love and co-responsibility, such deviations must be navigated ethically and addressed through a never completed process of moral reform and renovation (*Erneuerung*). Stein contends that, although the process of morality’s reform must originate in the souls of those who are capable of intuiting the right order of values, the state can be utilized as the specific ‘tool’ of social reformation by transforming the prevailing morality through legal regulation, as well as through the development of institutions that facilitate desirable forms of moral and social life [29] (p. 84).

### 3.2. Stein’s Feminism

As described above, Stein’s ethical personalism has a unique character mainly due to a remarkable feminist element that is increasingly present in the development of her thought.<sup>8</sup> The ‘question of woman’ is one of the questions that occupy Stein throughout her life and writing. Already as a young university student, Stein was a “radical fighter for women’s rights” [37] (p. 185); she advocated women’s suffrage and engaged in vocational counselling for female students. In the 1930s, after she had given a series of public lectures

and radio addresses on women's issues in Germany, Austria and Switzerland, Stein gained a reputation as an international spokesperson for the catholic women's movement and a leading figure of the educational reform. Stein's theoretical reflections on the 'question of woman' appeared in the volume *Essays on Woman* [33], which serves as the primary source for our present interpretation.<sup>9</sup>

In her 1928 lecture "The significance of woman's intrinsic value in national life", Stein describes the situation of the European women's movement in the 1920s as follows: "We women have become aware once again of our peculiarity. [ . . . ] And this 'self-awareness' could also develop the conviction that an intrinsic value resides in the peculiarity" [33] (p. 254). Even if Stein approaches the idea of the revaluation of 'woman's peculiarity' with caution—indeed, she resists painting a shining ideal of feminine nature with the hope that a realization of this ideal will be the cure for all contemporary problems—she defends the view that "the purely developed feminine nature does include a sublime vital value" as well as "ethical value" [33] (p. 46). Thus, in her lectures on woman, Stein aims not only to provide an account of 'woman's distinctive personality' but also to reveal the quality and significance of the value that is, in her view, inherent in woman's peculiar style of being a person.

The phenomenological method, which Stein uses to reveal the sense of 'woman's peculiarity' [33] (p. 255), requires her to focus on the form and structure of the intentional life as it is lived through by the person. It is on this experiential, phenomenal level that she finds the core differences between man and woman. Stein obviously does not think of 'woman's peculiarity' in terms of exclusive traits and faculties. The personal traits in question are primarily human ones, and all faculties that are present in woman's personality are also present in man's personality. Nonetheless, Stein argues, the human traits may generally appear in different degrees and relationships in man and woman [3] (p. 72). When it comes to the question of equality between the sexes, an attentive reading of Stein's lectures reveals that she insists on genuine equality between men and women. Thus, Stein consistently affirms her commitment to a distinctive feminine personality without thereby undermining the equality of the sexes [3] (p. 67f.).

Let us take a closer look at Stein's views of the peculiarity of woman's intentional life. With woman, Stein believes there is a more intense and complete unity of the living body and soul, which includes that women are more capable of being affected by that which they encounter as concrete persons living in and through the body. Stein also claims that "the strength of the woman lies in the emotional life" [33] (p. 96).<sup>10</sup> Due to the centrality of "understanding of the things of value" [33] (p. 73), a woman seems also more capable of feeling a "joy in creatures", which makes her "sensitive and attentive to all that lives, grows and strives for development" [33] (p. 73). Stein characterizes women's prevalent attitude as 'personal', which means several things: "in one instance she is happily involved with her total person in what she does; then, she has particular interest in the living, concrete person, and, indeed, as much for her own personal life as for other persons and their personal affairs" [33] (p. 255). Finally, Stein argues, "in woman, there lives a natural drive towards wholeness and completeness. And, again, this drive has a twofold direction: she herself would like to become a complete human being, one who is fully developed in every way; and she would like to help others to become so, and by all means, she would like to do justice to the complete human being whenever she has to deal with human beings" [33] (p. 255).

Women's personal attitude and tendency to completeness go, in Stein's view, hand in hand with two major existential tasks: being a mother and being a companion. Stein claims that "the innermost formative principle of woman's soul is the love" [33] (p. 57) and "the deepest feminine yearning is to achieve a loving union which, in its development, validates her maturation and simultaneously stimulates and furthers the desire for perfection in others" [33] (p. 94). Stein sees an intimate link between woman's task of being a mother and her yearning to embrace that what is living, personal and whole to cherish, guard, protect, nourish and advance growth [33] (p. 45). Women's peculiar orientation toward the



personal, the concrete and living and toward the full development of each being comes to a special, intense expression in her motherhood. A similar set of values becomes manifest in a woman's task of being a companion: "where a human being is alone, especially one in bodily or psychological need, she stands lovingly participating and understanding, advising and helping; she is the companion of life who helps so that 'man is not alone'" [39] (p. 50).

A critical feminist reader may object that this view of Stein "reads as if she is trying to rehabilitate the patriarchy [40] (p. 214). Yet, it is Stein's firm contention that patriarchal society in its many destructive manifestations is abnormal and morally unacceptable and that "only subjective delusion could deny that women are capable of practicing vocations other than that of spouse and mother" [33] (p. 49). It needs to be stressed that what Stein means by motherhood and companionship is by no means mere physical motherhood and marital companionship. For Stein, to be a mother is to nourish and protect what is alive and bring it to development, to be a companion is to provide support and be a mainstay [33] (p. 256). Hence, any woman, regardless of her actual state in life, can take up the tasks of companionship and motherhood. Stein also emphasizes the possibility of spiritual companionship and motherhood that "extend to all people with whom woman comes into contact" [33] (p. 132), and stresses that the motherhood she has in mind "must be that which does not remain within the narrow circle of blood relations or of personal friends" [33] (p. 264)

Stein's idea of motherhood also has a deeper ontological meaning that reflects her fundamentally relational view of the human person. In her mature work, *Finite and Eternal Being*, Stein meditates our existence as something that is constantly given to us moment to moment anew. She describes human persisting in being as 'ontological security'. As Calcagno rightly notes, "the image she employs to give resonance to this insight is the image of a child being held in the arms of her mother, certain and comfortable that no danger will come to him or her while sleeping". This image, Calcagno concludes, "also shows how Stein conceives of being not as a solitary enterprise of an ego or a Dasein, but as a communal enterprise, the living of one in the security of the other" [5] (p. 74).

Drawing on her philosophy of the human person and authentic community, Stein contends that woman's peculiar attitudes and values can and should help us in transforming social and moral life of our communities [33] (p. 262). For example, Stein explains potential transformation of health care profession by stressing that in a still increasing medical specialization we should not forget that often it is not only the organ but the entire person who is sick along with the organ. Women, in Stein's view, have insight into diverse human situations and get to see clearly material and moral needs of others [33] (pp. 262–263). Counteracting abstract medical procedures, a woman's attitude is oriented towards the concrete and whole person. Stein recommends the healthcare professional to exercise courage in following her intuition and to liberate herself whenever necessary from methods learned and practiced according to formal rules. Yet, the intent must be to understand correctly the whole human situation, and to intervene helpfully not only by medical means but also as a mother or a sister [33] (pp. 111–112).

Finally, Stein stresses the significance of woman's unique attitudes and values in political life. In legislation, she observes, there is always danger that a resolution will be based on elaboration of the most perfect paragraphs without consideration of actual needs in practical life. Women, Stein argues, are suited to act in accordance with the concrete human needs, and so they are able to serve as redress here [33] (pp. 263–264). Stein refers to a particular historical example when in the deliberation of youth laws there was the danger that the project would end in failure by party opposition. At that time, the women of the differing parties worked together and reached an agreement [33] (p. 264). Women's attitudes and values can also work beneficially in the application of the law, provided it does not lead to abstract validation of the letter of the law but to the accomplishment of justice for humanity. Stein eventually does not restrict her account to the level of individual states and nations but maintains that "there is a connection between success and adversity in both private and national life; just so are the individual nations and states connected

one with the other. . . . woman's sphere of action has been extended from the home to the world" [33] (p. 154).

#### 4. Conclusions: Overlaps and Differences

There are obvious overlaps, as well as differences, between care ethics and Stein's feminist personalism. Let us first focus on some overlaps between the two approaches.

First, both care ethicists and Stein start from a fundamentally relational view of human beings. Human existence is inevitably marked by interdependence. Human persons are referred from themselves to the other in order to be what they are and to become what they can be. Thus, ethical reflections on what does it mean to live a good life and what we ought to do—both at individual and collective level—should refocus on the ways in which we relate to each other and examine the social and political structures that frame our relationships.

Second, both approaches relocate certain sets of practices, values and attitudes from the periphery to the center of ethics. The dominant currents of Western ethical and political thought typically devalue care and love as matters of intimate relationships and biological ties that belong to the narrow sphere of private life and, thus, do not constitute a proper subject of ethics and politics. In contrast, Stein and care ethicists share the view that the historically marginalized practices and attitudes of care and love build the core of our human existence and are of ultimate importance for any normative moral and political theory that aims to adequately respond to the true nature and complexity of human life. Yet, in both approaches, a key normative task concerns distinguishing the 'empowering' and 'enlivening' patterns of care and love from the 'degenerative' ones.

Third, the refocusing of ethics on the practices, values and attitudes of care and love goes hand-in-hand in both care ethics and Stein's philosophy, with revaluing the experiences of the members of certain marginalized groups, typically women, who historically bore the burden of excessive caring responsibilities. Both approaches emphasize the need for a more just attribution of these responsibilities and see a transformative potential of the realization of the corresponding values and attitudes in the everyday life of our communities and polities.

Finally, in contrast to the emphasis on abstract moral reasoning and rule following, both care ethics and Stein promote "concrete thinking" (in Sara Ruddick's phrase) based on practical experience of situated persons. They offer a counterbalance to the perspective which focuses one-sidedly on the cognitive and rational dimension of what is to be a human, by stressing that we are essentially embodied and emotional beings to who affects and emotions say important things about what is of value and how the life can be made better.

Let us turn to the differences between Stein's feminist personalism and care ethics. The most obvious difference seems to lie in Stein's embracing emotional value realism and the idea of the absolute value of the human person. Scheler's idea that there is an objective hierarchy of values that can be grasped in correct or incorrect ways by human persons in specific acts of value-feeling (emotions) is part and parcel of Stein's ethical personalism. Most care ethicists, however, emphasize the context-related and situated nature of all moral knowledge, as well as the importance, of particularity and singularity in the practice of caring. This is not to say that there is no place for particularity and singularity in Stein's ethical thought. Stein, as we have seen, conceives of empathy and personal attitude as inherently linked to the capacity of understanding the meaning and value of the concrete and particular. Yet, her insistence on the existence of a universal hierarchy of values and the distinction between rightness and wrongness of value-intuitions clearly restricts her appreciation of the relevance of context and situation in moral knowledge.

Stein's ethical personalism, as we could see, revolves around the idea that the value of the human person is the most precious of all values. Only a few care ethicists would embrace this view. Although some (mainly early) formulations of care ethics start with the image of a person-to-person relationship which implies the ethical centrality of the human being and her relationships, most recent developments in care ethics show a broader

understanding of caring as a process which “includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible.” That world includes not only human persons, but also our environment “all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web” [23] (p. 40). Drawing on this broader concept of caring, care ethicists have laid ground for non-anthropocentric environmental ethics which is hard to incorporate in the personalist perspective of Stein.

Finally, an important and tricky question concerns the difference between Stein’s philosophy and care ethics as regards the feminist dimension of the two approaches. In the first section, I argued that the effort to dissociate care ethics from the idea of women’s morality growing from ‘woman’s nature’ was of a great importance for further development of care ethics towards a full-blown moral and political theory of care. Now, Stein’s feminist personalism depends on an account of the sexual difference which seems to rely on some essentialist presuppositions. It is precisely an essentialist view of ‘woman’s capacities’ that, for some scholars, provides the very grounds for calling Stein’s ethics ‘feminist’: “Stein’s ethics are correctly called feminist . . . because they include a capacity for which woman is especially well suited” [1] (p. 473). Other interpretations, on the contrary, take an issue with Stein’s apparently essentialist view of womanhood and consider it as a weakness of her account. For example, Calcagno points out several ambiguities in Stein’s description of ‘the female essence’ and argues: “one wonders whether the essence of woman as mother cannot also apply to men, especially to men who find themselves in situations where they are constrained to be both mother and father to a child. This brings to light the possibility that the female essence may be shared by both men and women, and need not be tied exclusively to the gender of the person” [5] (p. 73).

It is beyond any doubt that Stein adopts what Ales Bello [41] aptly calls ‘dual anthropology’, namely a view that woman and man differ in their specific natures and capacities. There is plenty of textual evidence for this claim across Stein’s philosophical work. In her lectures on woman Stein makes a crystal-clear statement: “I am convinced that the species ‘human’ is actualized as a double species—‘man’ and ‘woman’; that the essence of human being, whose features cannot be lacking in either one, becomes expressed in a binate way; that the entire essential structure demonstrates the specific stamp” [33] (p. 187f.). Yet, I do believe that it is possible and even correct not to interpret Stein as an advocate of a feminism characterized by essentialist difference. Elsewhere [42], I provided a detailed argument in favor of a phenomenological reading of Stein’s ‘dual anthropology’ by stressing that Stein conceives of the sexual difference as a difference between two related styles of intentional life rather than a difference between two separate essences (regardless of if it is ontologically or biologically defined). From the phenomenological perspective it seems plausible to read Stein’s descriptions of woman’s specific capacities and attitudes as describing a particular life form that can be shared by women and men alike. Hence, the alternative options suggested by Calcagno in the quote above seem to me not only right but also compatible with Stein’s own perspective.

This brings us back to the initial question concerning the difference between Stein’s philosophy and care ethics. It is challenging to come up with a clear-cut answer. On the one hand, Stein’s account of woman’s specific capacities, attitudes and values and their importance for a renewal of the moral life of individuals and communities has some resemblances to the currents in care ethics that aim to promote a ‘feminine approach to ethics’ and advocate an essentialist difference feminism (e.g., [14]). This entails that Stein’s feminist personalism is vulnerable when faced with some of the forms of criticisms that many raised against the ‘feminine approach’ in care ethics. On the other hand, Stein’s feminist personalism, when detached from its essentialist interpretation—which is something that can and perhaps should be done—shares some seminal feminist insights with those care ethicists who reject gender essentialism and adopt a critical feminist perspective on various social and political issues.

The confrontation, or rather the encounter, between care ethics and Stein’s philosophy that I explored in this article helps us better see and appreciate how several ‘mainstream

philosophers' anticipated some key care ethical insights. A deeper understanding of the alternative contexts of the birth of similar ethical insights can broaden the dominant self-concept of care ethics. A more relational understanding of the place of care ethics within the diverse landscape of traditional moral and political philosophy would certainly fit well in care ethics' relational perspective. Moreover, this encounter provides an impulse to a more vivid dialogue between care ethicists and the current proponents of personalist ethics who often take Stein's philosophical work as a source of inspiration. The awareness of shared core ideas can help the personalist ethicists to better appreciate the way in which care ethics decenters the human and allows for the relationality of all things, which makes a non-anthropocentric relational environmental ethics possible. The critical feminist emphasis on the analysis and normative assessment of our social and political arrangements of caring can also enrich the perspective of personalist ethics which tends to underestimate the salience of wider social and political contexts for the lives of individual persons and communities. Finally, the non-essentialist and non-differentialist understanding of feminism in contemporary care ethics can foster further development of non-essentialist variants of feminist personalism that follow some of the paths foreshadowed in Edith Stein's thought.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Ruddick quotes in an affirmative tone Chodorow's claim that "we cannot know what children would make of their bodies in a nongender or nonsexually organized social world. . . . It is not obvious that there would be major significance to biological sex differences, to gender difference or to different sexualities" [18] (p. 66, cited in [17] p. 364).
- <sup>2</sup> Robinson [19] similarly concludes that "contrary to the arguments of some critics, Ruddick's work neither upholds gender roles nor idealizes the values and activities of mothering. On the contrary, Ruddick's philosophy politicizes motherhood and draws our attention to the ambivalent relationship that mothers have with the societies in which they live" [19] (p. 106).
- <sup>3</sup> I certainly do not suggest that care ethicists in general refused to view care as an *essentially* feminine practice. There can be no doubt that several care theorists have proposed accounts of caring built on an essentialist account of sexual difference and defined care ethics as a distinctive "feminine approach to ethics" [14]. Yet, most of the feminist care theorists, including those of the first generation, have opposed such a view and sought to dissociate care ethics from any essentialism, cf. [21–23]. I think it's plausible to argue that the latter approach has been decisive for further formation and development of feminist ethics of care.
- <sup>4</sup> It is fair to note that in her later work Gilligan did elaborate on how care and justice may be connected in the real life of individuals and communities. See in particular her studies on patriarchy and democracy [24] and African-American young women [25].
- <sup>5</sup> Soon after she had published her 1982 book, Gilligan herself made it clear that this was a very limited interpretation of her research—cf. [26].
- <sup>6</sup> Virginia Held's valuable work represents a parallel attempt to construct a full-blown feminist moral theory as an alternative to dominant moral and social theories. Held's approach, in contrast to Tronto and Fisher [23], foregrounds mothering as the paradigm caring practice.
- <sup>7</sup> Personalism emphasizes the centrality of the person as the primary locus of inquiry for philosophical, theological, and humanistic investigation. Humans are considered the ultimate explanatory epistemological and ontological principle of reality. Personalism has a variety of manifestations but phenomenology is closely associated with it.
- <sup>8</sup> Haney speaks of Stein's "gradual identification of her early personalism with feminism" [1] (p. 451).

- <sup>9</sup> In this paper, I mostly offer a thorough modification of the available English translation. For an apt comment on the inaccuracy of Oben's translation of *Die Frau*, see [38] (p. 326; 335, fn. 16 and 17).
- <sup>10</sup> Cf. "her [woman's] strength lies in her intuitive grasp of the concrete and the living, especially of the personal. She has the gift of adapting herself to the inner life of others, to their goal orientation and working methods. Feelings are central to her as the faculty which grasps concrete being in its unique nature and specific value; and it is through feeling that she expresses her attitude. She desires to bring humanity in its specific and individual character in herself and in others to the most perfect development possible" [33] (p. 188).

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