Cuadernos de pensamiento 38
Publicación del Seminario «Ángel González Álvarez»
de la Fundación Universitaria Española
Número monográfico sobre Edith Stein:
Filosofía de la educación
Año 2025

Education and inquiry: reframing essential being

Educación e investigación: replanteando el ser esencial

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Recibido: 22/01/2024| Revisado:03/01/2025
Aceptado: 03/01/2025 | Publicado: 30/12/2025
DOI: https://doi.org/10.51743/cpe.453

Abstract: Stein's theory of essential being provides a clarifying metaphysical foundation for her views of education and the nature and end of philosophical inquiry. Her treatment of education in Chapter 7 of *Finite and Eternal Being* focuses on the soul's transformation of meaningful content. Her descriptions of philosophical inquiry emphasize a common search for the underlying grounds of meaning. Stein's theory of essential being provides an account of the ontological status of meaning itself. In this way, it facilitates a non-relativistic understanding of a personal dimension underlying both education and inquiry: namely, the individual subject's reception and integration of meaning into a thought-world.

Keywords: essential being, formation, home, language, meaning, relativism, thought-world.

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RESUMEN: La teoría del ser esencial de Stein proporciona una base metafísica clarificadora para sus ideas sobre la educación y sobre la naturaleza y el fin de la investigación filosófica. Su tratamiento de la educación en el capítulo 7 de *Ser finito y ser eterno* se centra en la transformación del contenido significativo por parte del alma. Sus descripciones de la investigación filosófica destacan una búsqueda compartida de los fundamentos subyacentes del significado. La teoría del ser esencial de Stein ofrece una explicación del estatus ontológico del propio significado. De este modo, facilita una comprensión no relativista de la dimensión personal que subyace tanto a la educación como a la investigación: es decir, la recepción e integración del significado en el mundo del pensamiento del sujeto individual.

PALABRAS CLAVE: formación, hogar, lenguaje, mundo del pensamiento, relativismo, ser esencial, significado.

1. INTRODUCTION

Grappling with Stein's theory of essential being is well-worth the effort. Though the theory itself is densely complex and in some ways elusive, it lays out foundational principles that prove indispensable to the more well-known aspects of Stein's writings, such as her work on education. This paper aims to contextualize essential being within Stein's philosophical work as a whole, not just within her metaphysics or phenomenological logic. In other words, it seeks to answer the question, "Why does essential being matter?" What "work" is it doing for Stein's philosophical paradigm? Investigating these questions can provide a broader perspective that illuminates the theory in a warmer, more personal light.

Throughout *Finite and Eternal Being,* Stein develops her account of essential being as the finite, atemporal, non-material, objective being of meaning that stands as the precondition for and intelligibility of the realm of actual finite being. This account deals with the intersection of logic and metaphysics, which is a territory that has been treated throughout the history of philosophy with various category theories, including that of Husserl.[2] But, it also reckons

[2] See, for example, Chapter 1 of Husserl's *Ideas Pertaining To A Pure Phenomenology And To A Phenomenological Philosophy* (1982).

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with questions about formal and final causality, and in some ways bears a resemblance to preceding theories, including those of Plato's forms and Aquinas's divine ideas. Although Stein recognizes the relevance of these preceding theories, her inquiry is motivated by a distinct set of questions and concerns, the most significant of which is her persistent interest in the structure, formation, and individual distinctness of the human person. More specifically, Stein's theory of essential being provides an objective grounding for her account of the individual interiorization and transformation of meaning. Without this objective grounding, Stein's writings on education and philosophical inquiry could raise concerns of subjectivism and relativism.

My main claim is that Stein's theory of essential being defines the content of education and philosophical inquiry, thereby accounting for the personal (or subjective) reception of objective meaning in a way that avoids relativism. I am guided to this thesis by a pattern of interrelated images, or metaphors, that weaves throughout Stein's later writings, and that I will trace out in my argument. Before continuing, then, I think it wise to take a moment to defend my method. Though it is certainly misleading to focus philosophical analysis too heavily upon writers' rhetorical and stylistic choices, it is also wasteful to ignore such choices completely. For some thinkers, the literary details of their works provide crucial information for unraveling their philosophical insight. Although most of Stein's writings contain comparatively little of the dramatic flair found in those of Plato, for instance, she nevertheless employs certain rhetorical elements with regularity. Moreover, we know from her letters that she had a love for literature, music and drama. Her early philosophical works as well as her later writings on education manifest a keen awareness of the cultural dimensions of community life and learning, and *Finite and Eternal Being* contains insightful reflections on the subjects of aesthetics and literary creation. Given Stein's artistic fluency alongside her philosophical dexterity, it would do her a disservice not to take the stylistic choices she makes in her writings seriously, especially her use of metaphor and imagery.[3] By approach-

[3] One could argue that the rhetorical devices of metaphor and imagery correspond to the philosophical "tool" of analogical reasoning. This would suggest that the object of inquiry and the entity to which it is compared share something in common, and are not merely likened for

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ing Stein's interrelated metaphors as conceptual aids, rather than as mere linguistic ornamentation, we find a sort of breadcrumb trail leading to a new perspective of essential being.

My argument unfolds in three main parts. First, I present the account of education in Chapter 7 of *Finite and Eternal Being,* paying close attention to the metaphors Stein chooses and suggesting that they present us with a view of education as "homemaking" of the soul. I suggest that this view generates questions concerning the content and subjective dimensions of education. Next, I examine common threads in Stein's reflections on the nature and end of philosophical inquiry. There, I point out that Stein's discussion of "thought-worlds" implies a relativistic framework unless it is supplemented by an account of an objective ground of meaning. Third, I show how her theory of essential being resolves this concern of relativism and stands as a clarifying background to Stein's work on education and philosophical inquiry. Essential being comprises the totality of meaning that is independent of the human mind yet is received and transformed into personal "thought-worlds" or "thought-homes" that reflect an incomplete integration of objective essences and essentialities. Essences and essentialities thus constitute the content of education, and philosophical inquiry continually strives after a fuller comprehension of essential being as a whole.

2. An Account of Education

In Chapter 7 of *Finite and Eternal Being,* Stein offers an account of education as the formation that occurs through one's free response to meaningful content (Stein, 2002, 436).[4] Her account mainly addresses the formation of older stu-

the sake of effect. I think this is often the case with Stein's writing. But, since this paper's primary purpose does not require making fine-grained distinctions between literary and philosophical uses of analogy and metaphor, I think it sufficient to use the terms "metaphor" and "image" in a general way.

[4] I follow Stein's terminology here with the phrase "meaningful content." I believe Stein intentionally employs a term with a somewhat vague or open meaning, since she uses it to encompass a wide variety of things. She gives some examples of this variety then refers to it gene-

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dents, as well as the continual formation of the soul that can occur throughout adult life.[5] The account alternates between two images: the soul as a home, and the soul as a living organism that develops and requires nourishment. For Stein, the human soul is the principle of growth that informs the matter of the body, yet also transcends itself since it is spiritual.[6] Stein begins by describing the "ultimate meaning" of the soul:

> The soul is the "space" in the center of the body-soul-spirit totality. As sentient soul it abides in the body, in all its members and parts, receiving impulses and influences from it and working upon it formatively and with a view to its preservation. As spiritual soul it rises above itself, gaining insight into a world that lies beyond its own self—a world of things, persons, and events—communicating with this world and receiving its influences. As *soul* in the strictest sense, however, it abides in its own self, since in the soul the personal I is in its very home. In this abode there accumulates everything that enters from the world of sense and from the world of spirit. Here in this inwardness of the soul everything that enters from these worlds is weighed and judged, and here there takes place the appropriation of that which becomes the most personal property and a constituent part of the self (Stein, 2002, 373).

Here, Stein uses the image of a home to describe how the soul relates to the whole of the person and to the world around them. She describes the soul

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rally as "meaningful content" on page 436 of *Finite and Eternal Being* (Stein 2002). The third section of this paper will provide a more fleshed-out understanding of the phrase.

[5] In *Essays on Woman,* Stein describes this as a sort of self-education: "The small child is put into the hands of human educators, but the maturing person awakening to spiritual freedom is given into his own hand. He himself can work for his growth through the faculty of *free will*: he can discover and develop his faculties; he can open himself up to the formative influences or cut himself off from them" (Stein, 2017, 131).

[6] Stein's notion of soul is distinct from the Aristotelian-Thomistic notion of soul; one significant difference between these notions stems from Stein's distinction between soul and spirit. Sarah Borden Sharkey (2023) offers a helpful gloss of this intriguing distinction: "For Aristotle, the primary contrast is between *soul* and *body* (or *form* and *matter*). For Stein, the primary contrast is between *spirit* and *body* (or *spirit* and *matter*). Humans only have souls because we have bodies. 'Soul' is just a spirit going out of itself but with, through, and in terms of bodily life. Thus, she will claim that human souls are, at root, spiritual. That is, our soul just *is* spirit that is (and meant to be) embodied" (21). See also Borden Sharkey, 2023, 54-55, 170-175.

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both as dwelling in a home, and as providing a home to the *I*.[7] This home is constituted by that which the soul receives from the sensible and spiritual world. Through interacting with–specifically, seeing and understanding–the world beyond its own self, the soul receives content (or, to extend the metaphor, "furnishings") that develops it as a home. In the same section, Stein also refers to the home of the soul as a castle. This imagery hearkens back to St. Teresa of Avila's *The Interior Castle*, which Stein reflects upon in an appendix to *Finite and Eternal Being*. This more explicitly theological image of the soul as an interior castle amplifies Stein's emphasis on the importance of religious education.[8] In this way, education can be understood as cultivating the soul as a home for the individual person as well as for God's indwelling.[9]

In the next paragraph, Stein describes the development of the soul in organic terms: "The soul cannot live without receiving. It nourishes itself with those contents which it makes its own in an experiential spiritual manner—as the body nourishes itself with those structural material elements which it absorbs" (Stein, 2002, 373). Stein likens the soul to the body to clarify that the soul does not receive content in the way that an empty pitcher receives water, but instead receives content according to its essence, "[appropriating] to itself what it needs in order to become what it is destined to be" (Stein, 2002, 374). The soul is not a blind receptacle, but instead an active receiver that discriminates among things, responding to take in that which supports its essential nature. Note that, for Stein, one's essential nature entails both the universal essence of humanness as well as an individual form that is distinct for each person.[10] As a body transforms food and water into energy, so the soul transforms that which it receives in order to sustain the particular development of the individual person. Education, then, is conceptualized here as a continual

[7] Stein gives careful attention to the phenomenological distinctions regarding the terms "self," "ego," and "I." See, for instance, Stein, 2002, Ch. 1, §6, as well as Ch. 7, §3.

[8] This is articulated most strongly in her *Essays on Woman,* where she also refers to the soul as both a home and a castle. See, for instance, Stein, 2017, 133-135.

[9] "Mystical infused graces impart to the soul an experience of what faith teaches on the indwelling of God in the soul" (Stein, 2002, 444).

[10] For an excellent treatment of Stein's theory of individual human forms, see Borden Sharkey, 2010, Ch. 5 and Ch. 6.

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formation of the soul through the nourishing reception of that which is necessary for its full development.

Stein offers a more granular account of the way in which things are "taken in" to the soul. First, they can be "received, [and] inwardly retained" through the work of memory (Stein, 2002, 436). Although one is not always consciously thinking of that which he has received in memory, he nevertheless holds it as a stratified store of meaningful content. Through memory, meaningful content is retained at various depths; the more deeply it was initially received, the longer the content will be retained (Stein, 2002, 437). Stein is careful to point out that *deep,* in this context, does not simply mean *repeated,* nor does it pertain exclusively to information that has been analyzed intellectually. She uses the example of learning of a single historical event, specifically the assassination of Franz Ferdinand (Stein, 2002, 437). While such news may immediately strike one person to the core, it may be received by another person merely as an unfortunate fact. Here, we see again Stein's attention to individual personal differences and their relevance to education. Students learn in different ways because the soul receives things according to its individual nature.

Second, memory is transformed into second nature. This occurs when meaningful content is not merely retained and remembered, but is as it were "processed" into "flesh and blood" and "a vitalizing source of strength in the soul" (Stein, 2002, 438). The soul has not only received this content, but has transformed it into something that it can take up into its own life. Think, for example, of a student who reads Homer for the first time. First, she receives the story enough to follow it, and certain details will strike her more strongly than others. Through this, she transforms it into a part of her imaginative life that then subtly adds new shades to her perception of literature, virtues, and so on. This transformation of content can occur for better or worse. In some cases, that which has been received and transformed does not enliven the soul, but instead has a parasitic effect on it.[11] The process by which a memory is

[11] "It is equally possible, on the other hand, that elements enter that are foreign to the essence of the soul, elements that devour the soul's life and that may become a deadly peril unless the soul eliminates them by using all its collected strength" (Stein, 2002, 438).

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transformed into second nature is therefore not wholly conscious, since things that we would rather not have affect us nevertheless do so.

In contrast, the third aspect[12] of the soul's process of "taking in" involves conscious attention, since it depends upon the soul's intellectual freedom.

> Everything that penetrates into the interiority of the soul is an appeal or a call to the *person,* an appeal to the person's *intellect,* i.e., to that power which "understands" what is happening; an appeal also to *reflection,* i.e., to that power which searches for the *meaning* of that which approaches the soul; and an appeal to *freedom,* since even the intellectual search for meaning is already free activity (Stein, 2002, 438-439).

The epistemological paradigm described here by Stein is not mechanical: although she recognizes that some things affect the soul without its initiation, she does not ultimately conceive of the formation of the soul as an automatic process that begins in the senses and proceeds to the intellect like a Rube Goldberg machine. Rather, her epistemological (and educational) paradigm is personalistic in the sense that it is attuned to personal individuality, freedom, and development. Although the soul can receive passively, it maintains the freedom to respond in different ways, for example by remaining closed, affirming, seeking clarification, rejecting, and so on. In this way, the soul's receptive power is not wholly passive; it is also active, not only in its ability to respond to what has been presented, but also to seek out things beyond what have been presented.

The following passage describes the ideal to be achieved through this formative process:

> From the innermost center of the soul there issues also that *radiation* of the personal essence or nature which is an involuntary spiritual emanation of the personal self. This radiation, which issues from the person and captivates others, is the stronger the more collectedly a human being lives in the inner-

[12] I use "aspect" rather than "step" because it seems to me that the three aspects of the soul's process of receiving do not necessarily follow a reliable chronological order. Something may be received that was and immediately transformed before being stored passively in memory, or vice versa, for instance.

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> most center of the soul. And the more this is the case, the more strongly marked are all the free spiritual manifestations of a person's individuality, since this individuality is ultimately domiciled in the soul's interiority (Stein, 2002, 441).

A person who is highly-attuned to the active-receptive power of his soul lives "collectedly in the depth of [his personality]" and is "most truly at home in the innermost being of the soul" (Stein, 2002, 439-440). Such recollected groundedness is ultimately a sign of the person's flourishing, that is, of his fulfilling his individual *telos*.[13] The goal of this continued active-receptive formation of the soul is for the person to unfold fully according to his individual essence and so become what he is. Such an unfolding of one's nature may fail to occur for several reasons. A person may remain closed-off to meaningful content,[14] may live in a less recollected way and neglect to transform that content,[15] or may live in an environment that is lacking in the meaningful content necessary for his development.[16] When a person succeeds in cultivating the home of the soul, though, his groundedness "radiates" out in his actions and has an effect on those around him.

This account of education might be summarized by combining its two primary metaphors–the soul as a home, and the soul as a developing organism–into a paradigm of education as "homemaking" of the soul.[17] Just as a

[13] "As the body can fall short of its *telos* and diverge from it for want of the matter it needs for its construction, so too the soul. . . . It may also happen that the spiritual environment wherein a man comes into existence and spends his life does not offer him what his original power and openness would allow him to take into himself, and so he falls short of his *telos*" (Stein, 2009, 402).

[14] "The soul can only take into itself what it is originally open to" (Stein, 2009, 550).

[15] "In those who only occasionally enter into the depth of the soul and who habitually abide on the surface the depth remains inarticulate and cannot mold the outer layers with its forming power" (Stein, 2002, 440).

[16] "But it may also happen that the spiritual environment wherein a man comes into existence and spends his life does not offer him what his original power and openness would allow him to take into himself, and so he falls short of his *telos*" (Stein, 2009, 402).

[17] This language of "homemaking," alongside Stein's emphasis on receptivity, may strike readers as especially feminine in the typical sense. While it is true that Stein's writings on women investigate femininity and the pedagogical responses best-suited to it, it would be incorrect to extrapolate from this to assert that the account of education given in Chapter 7 of

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homemaker seeks to cultivate a home that sustains the life of those within, so an educator, whether this is a teacher or one's own self, strives to form the soul in such a way that it sustains its individual life. A home stands in a specific place and reflects both the environment around it (for instance, in its building materials or design style) as well as the personality and lifestyle of the persons within it. Likewise, the soul develops in a way that reflects both the innate, individual nature of the person *and* the environment within which that person is formed. And, just as a person's public actions can reflect the qualities of his home life to a greater or lesser degree, so too do a person's actions reflect the way in which his soul is formed. Certain homes manifest a particularly intentional beauty, sensibility, and order that sustains a distinct rhythm of life; these homes tend to be striking and make an impression on those who visit them. Similarly, people who live in an especially recollected way–who actively seek out, respond to, and integrate meaningful content within themselves–tend to have a "radiating" or "spell-like" effect on others. Stein writes, "When the soul is affected by the distinctiveness of another man, it can take this distinctiveness into itself in a certain way and grow in so doing […] [it] receives the other's *quale* in its *own* way" (Stein, 2009, 402-403). In the next section, we will see how this account of personal influence applies to philosophical inquiry.

For now, we will close this section by reviewing what has been established and identifying the questions generated so far. Stein offers us an account of education that keenly attends to the way in which individuals receive and respond to content differently. Each soul takes in and stores content in memory, transforming it so as to develop its individual nature more fully. I suggested that we can think of this interiorization and integration of meaning as a type of homemaking wherein the cultivation of the soul sustains the life of the person and reflects the broader context in which he or she lives. But, this account is not yet fully clear. First, what exactly is the "meaningful content" that *furnishes* or *nourishes* the soul? In what way does this content change when it is

Finite and Eternal Being applies only to the education of women. Rather, Stein's description of the receptive and home-like qualities of the soul apply to all human souls, not just those of women.

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taken up and transformed by the soul? Furthermore, the account seems to afford a type of relativism wherein meaning is only ever received subjectively and is only relevant insofar as it sustains an individual way of life. Objectors may challenge this view by pointing out that it fails to adequately address the worthiness of pursuing truth for its own sake, and not just for the sake of one's own development. Is it possible to justify the homemaking paradigm of education without advancing a relativist conception of truth and meaning? We will not answer these questions here, but instead carry them with us as we turn to the next aspect of Stein's thought that frames essential being.

3. Stein's View of Philosophical Inquiry

Stein's goal to chart the intersection of phenomenology and Thomistic metaphysics rests on the presupposition that certain constant objects of inquiry underlie the diverse range of contributions to the history of philosophy. Her two longest works, *Potency and Act* and *Finite and Eternal Being,* are guided in their content and method by her view of philosophical inquiry. Stein begins both works by describing her project and its method, often using personal language and images in addition to technical terminology. One such key passage falls at the beginning of *Finite and Eternal Being*. I will first quote it in full, then analyze it piece by piece.

> Wherever basic ideas of scholastic thought form the point of departure, they will first be presented in scholastic terminology. To assure ourselves, however, that we have understood their true meaning and are not using verbal clichés, we shall try to find in our own language expressions which correspond as closely as possible to the particular Latin phrasing. In this endeavor the search for the origins of scholastic concepts must come to our aid: We shall look for the *historical* origins and more eagerly still for those *factual* origins which are only revealed to us when we inquire once again into the repeatedly posed and never resolved problem relating to the nature of that which is, and to the nature of *ousia* itself.
>
> We shall earnestly strive to join our thinking to that of the ancient masters, and yet not only to these but also to those others who in our time have in their own manner and method resumed the identical inquiry. This latter

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> procedure appears fully justified in view of the fact that these modern thinkers have out of an inner necessity–not under the influence of any traditional intellectual ties–penetrated anew to the depths of the problem of being. They are living in closest proximity to its reality and can therefore help us to understand the original intentions and motives of the old masters.
>
> This procedure seems especially appropriate in the case of the author of this book: Her philosophic home is the school of Edmund Husserl, and her philosophic mother tongue is the language of the phenomenological thinkers. She therefore uses phenomenology as a starting point to find her way into the majestic temple of scholastic thought. She believes that her awareness of this ultimate goal suffices to permit her to choose it as her guide. (Stein, 2002, 11-12)

First, notice that this passage returns to the image of a home, this time referring to the Husserlian school of phenomenology as a "home." This is not the only instance in which Stein describes a particular philosophical school or paradigm as a home: in *Potency and Act*, for example, she describes herself as having also "found a home in Aquinas's thought world" (Stein, 2009, 3).[18] Stein describes herself as coming from (we might say, being "raised in" or "formed by") the home of Husserl's philosophy and speaking its phenomenological language as her "mother tongue."

Stein's description of phenomenology as a language can be better understood in reference to her remarks on languages as a reflection of their people: "Languages grow out of the spirit of different peoples and are thus a fruit and formal expression of their lives; their languages mirror both their individuality and their diversity" (Stein, 2002, 7-8). Stein points to this as the reason why it is difficult to translate a philosophical work without losing a good deal of its meaning. The only person who can do this is a translator who not only has "a sure command of both languages–his mother tongue and the foreign idiom," but also "[is] at home in the intellectual world of the foreign work and its author" (Stein, 2002, 9). Every language reflects its people, and every author's use of language reflects the particular texture of his life and thought. So, by referring to Husserlian phenomenology as a language, Stein draws attention to

[18] We will soon return to the concept of a "thought world" introduced in this brief quote.

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a personal dimension of philosophical inquiry: one's historical context, formal education, and personal experience affect one's approach to philosophy. This language metaphor is particularly apt because language is only operative if it maintains some objective significance. The precondition for any translation is the existence of some constant meaning that can be articulated by significant words in multiple languages.[19] Once again, then, we see Stein grappling with the hinge between subjectivity and objectivity–a hinge that manifests itself particularly clearly when considering students' varied responses to the same content and philosophers' varied approaches to similar questions.

The phrase "thought-world" is not explicitly mentioned in the key passage above, but has been introduced by supporting passages. In the previous two paragraphs, we saw it referenced twice. Both instances spoke of a thought-world, or intellectual world, as a home, and one explicitly connected it to language (Stein, 2009, 3; Stein, 2002, 9).[20] However, other examples of this image's use abound. When describing her project of interweaving phenomenology and Scholastic metaphysics, Stein describes her own reason, or mind, as "the meeting place of two philosophic worlds" (Stein, 2002, xxvii). This imagery is also found in both editions of "Husserl and Aquinas: A Comparison," where she writes that, "For someone coming from the thought world of Edmund Husserl, it is not at all easy to find a way into that of St. Thomas" (Stein, 2000, 7). The notion of a thought-world is perhaps most fully fleshed-out in Stein's distinction between the method of the humanities scholar and that of the student of philosophy:

> The humanities scholar may rest content when he has uncovered the inner connections of a self-contained thought world and can trace the links from cellar to gable. Such is the "understanding" we ask of him.
>
> Philosophical understanding is different. The philosopher must not only be able to see and show the *fact* that someone else went about it in such and

[19] We will return to the topic of translatability later in our treatment of essential being, since it turns out that Stein views essential being as the foundation for significant language.

[20] It is important to note that, while Stein's use of this term is unique, she does not pioneer the notion of a conceptual "world." Dilthey and Husserl dealt with the concept of *Weltanschauung,* and Heidegger developed his notion of *Welt* in *Being and Time.* Stein's idea of a "thought-world" can thus be understood as a contribution to this thread of inquiry.

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> such a way; his insight must not only extend to the connections between other's grounds [*Grund*] and consequences. The philosopher must also *grasp why* his predecessor went about it like this. He must get down into the grounds themselves and grasp *them.* And this means that the grounds must grip *him* and best him in the sense that he decides to accept them and retraces *within himself* the path the other followed from grounds to conclusions, perhaps even going beyond them (Stein, 2009, 2-3).

Here, Stein uses "thought world" to refer to the inner connections of a given thinker's body of work. For example, the thought world of Aquinas or Husserl refers to the methods, terms, principles, and arguments that are characteristic of Aquinas or Husserl, respectively. By describing them as "worlds" instead of just "theories" or "schools of thought," Stein indicates a more personal mode of interaction with these thinkers' works. One can comprehend theories by analysis alone, but one cannot come to know a "world" (such as the "world" of Southern Gothic literature, for instance) without reflective, extended immersion. Through immersion, one gains the ability to articulate the significance of a thinker's work *in that thinker's own terms*. However, immersion is just a first step toward philosophical understanding. While a humanities scholar can stop at this first step, a student of philosophy must press on to uncover the grounds of significance. The student of philosophy does not seek to understand another's thought-world for its own sake, but rather for the sake of gaining a fuller comprehension of the question he shares with that author. In other words, the student searches for the objective reality, or of the foundational "grounds" of meaning, that underlie the work of a predecessor. When this second step is successfully achieved, there is the possibility of translating the work of one philosopher into the language of another's thought-world: this is what Stein attempts in her endeavor to fuse phenomenology with metaphysics.

Finally, the key passage describes philosophical inquiry as a communal exploration or pursuit of a common object. Stein writes that, in true philosophical inquiry, we strive to join our thinking to that of the ancient masters, actively reasoning along with them as well as with our contemporaries who share our same questions (Stein, 2002, 11). This notion of a shared activity is related to a passage in "Husserl and Aquinas: A Comparison" wherein Stein

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paints the picture of the history of philosophy as an extended series of teacher-student (or master-apprentice) relationships, unconstrained by time:

> *Philosophia perennis* also means something else: the spirit of genuine philosophy alive in every true philosopher, in anyone who cannot resist an inner need to search out the λόγος [*logos,* mind, reason] of this world, its *ratio* (as Thomas translated the word). The born philosopher brings this spirit with him into the world–as *potency,* in Thomistic terminology. The potency becomes actualized when he meets a mature philosopher, a "teacher." This is the way true philosophers reach out to one another over the bounds of space and time. *This* is how Plato, Aristotle, and St. Augustine were St. Thomas's teachers […] Husserl, too, had teachers in this sense, despite his intellectual independence. Some he mentioned explicitly; his method, for example, he worked out in conscious exchange with Descartes and Hume (Stein, 2000, 7).

Philosophical inquiry is described here as a common pursuit of the *logos* of the world.[21] It is "common" in a very rich sense, since it is shared by all who pursue such understanding: Plato, Aristotle, St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, Husserl, and so on, all are united in the search for the world's *logos*, even though they are separated by time. Our predecessors are both guides and compatriots in the search for truth, i.e. the underlying meaning of the world we experience.

It is now more clear how personal influence applies to philosophical inquiry. Philosophers are explicitly concerned with seeking out, evaluating, and responding to meaningful content–in other words, with cultivating a home or thought-world. Their writings reflect these thought-worlds and influence others with their distinctiveness even centuries after they were written. In this way, a philosophical predecessor can act as a teacher. However, philosophical predecessors are also compatriots in a common exploration of that which is most fundamental. They are only teachers in a limited sense, then, since they teach what is not yet fully known. In this way, it is perhaps more proper to

[21] Here, Stein refers to *logos,* but later she also refers to *the Logos* identified in the Holy Trinity. We will treat one such passage briefly below. In this instance, Stein uses *logos* in the general sense to refer to understanding, reason, or intelligibility.

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speak of predecessors as guides in a common exploration *for* (and not *of*) that which ultimately underlies all philosophical homes, languages, and worlds.

At this point, we must pause and take stock. In the first section, we examined an account of education and traced out the metaphors of home and organic development, combining these into a paradigm of education as homemaking. This left us with questions about the nature of the "meaningful content" that nourishes the soul, as well as the possibly relativist consequences of Stein's account of the individual reception and transformation of meaning. We then examined Stein's view of philosophical inquiry and presented the interrelated metaphors of home, world, language, and exploration. Yet again, we are left with questions. What really constitutes a thought-world, or a thought-home, and how do different such "worlds" relate to each other? Is it ever possible to fully understand another's thought-world, or to translate it into objective terms? If so, what is the underlying ground of meaning that affords the possibility of translation from one philosophical language to another? Finally, what, in more precise terms, is the object of common pursuit that underlies philosophical inquiry? Without an answer to these questions, Stein's account would seem to leave space for a relativistic framework, which would run counter to the Thomistic philosophical tradition she seeks to integrate with phenomenology. We find clarification to these questions in her theory of essential being.

4. A New Framing for Essential Being

Stein begins her presentation of essential being by distinguishing between three terms: essentiality, concept, and essence.[22] It is only fitting that we follow her as we begin our outline of the answers essential being can provide for

[22] Stein follows Hering's distinction between essence (*Wesen*) and essentiality (*Wesenheit*). Kurt Reinhart translates *Wesenheit* as "essence," and *Wesen* as "nature." However, Sarah Borden Sharkey notes that Walter Redmond's forthcoming translation, along with most secondary literature, renders *Wesenheit* as "essentiality." I follow Sharkey and Redmond's lead. In the passages quoted here, I have thus replaced Reinhart's use of "essence" [*Wesenheit*] for "essentiality," and "nature" [*Wesen*] for "essence." See Borden Sharkey, 2023, Ch. 3 ff. 1 and 106.

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the questions above. For Stein, the distinction between concepts and essentialities is revealed by intellectual experience:

> We *form* concepts by bringing into relief certain characteristic *marks* of an object. We thus have a certain amount of freedom in the formation of concepts. [Essentialities,] on the other hand, are not formed by us but rather *found* or *discovered.* Here we have no freedom whatsoever. We are free, of course, to seek but the finding, i.e., the found [essentialities], does not depend on us. And because the ultimate [essentialities] are simple, there is nothing in them that could be brought into relief. For the same reason [essentialities] cannot be *defined* in the manner we can define concepts. The words we are using to find our way to them have, as Max Scheler used to say, only the significance of a pointer. They tell us: Look for yourself, then you will understand what I mean. I myself, life, joy—who can understand the meaning of those words unless they have experienced this meaning within their own selves? (Stein, 2002, 66).

Concepts are formed within the mind and are therefore subject to variation, both between individuals and within a single individual over time. For example, a child learns to identify circles from triangles at a very early age, then only years later learns about these shapes' geometric definitions and qualities. As she learns, she forms a more and more complex concept for "circle." In contrast, essentialities have a reality beyond the mind and are not formed within the intellect. Instead, they are discovered, or encountered, through various experiences.[23] In this way, our concepts are dependent upon essentialities, and are in fact refined through encountering essentialities.[24] Whereas

[23] Stein recognizes that this experience is not commonplace—or, at least, is not frequently registered: "It remains for the meditating thinker to discover that there are [essentialities], and such a thinker makes this discovery while pursuing paths that are far removed from the highways of everyday life; and after having made the discovery, this thinker has a hard time trying to explain to others why he or she means by [essentialities]" (Stein, 2002, 79).

[24] In many ways, Stein's distinction between concepts and essentialities maps onto Newman's distinction between notional and real assent in Chapter IV of *The Grammar of Assent.* "In its notional assents as well as in its inferences, the mind contemplates its own creations instead of things; in real, it is directed towards things, represented by the impressions which they have left on the imaginations. These images, when assented-to, have an influence both on the individual and on society, which mere notions cannot exert" (Newman, 1979, 76).

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concepts are formed in the mind and have mental being, essentialities have essential being, which is changeless, timeless, and ineffective, or non-causal (Stein, 2002, 67). Essences, too, have essential being. But, whereas essentialities are self-dependent, essences belong to their objects.[25] Essences therefore have a dual (we might say "amphibious") mode of being, corresponding "to the mediating function which they exercise with respect to the [essentialities], on the one hand, and the 'real world,' on the other" (Stein, 2002, 84). We are led to essentialities by the essences found in objects we encounter: "The *concept* is *formed* in order to make possible the determination of the object. The [*essence*] is *found or discovered* in or on the object" (Stein, 2002, 72). We can summarize this threefold distinction: the concepts we form are modeled after the essences of the objects we encounter, and these essences are themselves modeled after essentialities, which we come to recognize through reflection.

What is essential being? The answer has already been partially given: it is the changeless, timeless, and ineffective being of essentialities. Essential being constitutes the intelligibility of real being and can be understood as the condition for the possibility of actual being (Stein, 2002, 68). Stein summarizes her initial presentation of essential being in the following passage with an accompanying footnote:

> The world of essential being must be conceived as a hierarchically ordered realm in which the [*essentialities*] represent the simple *prototypes* of the highest stage.* *Fashioned* in the image and likeness of the [essentialities] are the essential features of those composite structures which we have designated as the [essence] quid (Stein, 2002, 89).
>
> *This world of essential being may be regarded as the one which Plato had in mind when he spoke of the *realm of ideas.* Only a further investigation could show how this realm of ideas is related to the scholastic *intelligibile,* i.e., to that which is *intelligible* or accessible to the knowing mind (Stein, 2002, Ch. III ff 41, 562).

Essential being is similar to Plato's realm of ideas insofar as it corresponds to a hierarchical structure of meaning upon which the intelligibility of the

[25] "[The essence] is also distinct from the [essentiality] in that the [essence] belongs to the object, while the [essentiality] is independent with respect to the object. Thus we speak of the [essentiality] "joy," but of the [essence] *of* joy" (Stein, 2002, 73).

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world we experience is grounded. However, there is a crucial difference between the two: whereas Plato's forms are causally effective, essential being does not have any causal power. Objects do not "participate" in essentialities, nor are essentialities, properly speaking, "actualized" in real objects (Stein, 2002, 67-68). Though it is helpful to think of essential being as a realm, and Stein refers to it as such, it should not be understood as a literal realm. A later passage helpfully clarifies this:

> [Essential being] is not a particular species of being, but an integral constitutive part of the meaning of all being. Just as every something has a meaning, so there is implicit in all being the particular kind of being that pertains to meaning.[26]

Essential being might be better understood as a *profile* of being in the phenomenological sense: it is distinct but not wholly separate from the other aspects of finite being. What is crucially important for Stein, though, is that essential being is different from mental being. The full meaning of an entity abides in essential being, not in the individual mind.[27]

With these distinctions established, we can better understand Stein's notion of a "thought-world." The mind forms concepts patterned after objects and their corresponding essences and essentialities. The interrelated collection of these concepts can be described as a thought-world:

> The ideally perfect concept would be congruent with the [essence] quid without, however, being identical with it. And the concept which is formed by an individual being aims at this ideal concept (provided that what is aimed at is really the concept of the [essence] and not merely some "universal determination"), but the formed concept lags more or less behind this ideal goal, either owing to its incompleteness or owing to its inadequacy. Every human being possesses his or her own "conceptual world" which may coincide more or less not only with the *real world* but also with the *world of ideal concepts* and with the conceptual worlds of other human beings (Stein, 2002, 326).

[26] Stein, 2002, 326.

[27] For a helpful treatment of how Stein's position on this point relates to those of Thomas Aquinas, John Duns Scotus, and Henry of Ghent, see Salas (2011, 323-340).

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Here, Stein juxtaposes the "real world" to the "conceptual world," or thought world, as well as to the "world of ideal concepts" after which our concepts strive. The concepts we form can be refined through experience, but they will always "lag behind" their corresponding ideals, or essences and essentialities. Likewise, the webs of concepts formed in the mind imperfectly reflect the full contexture of meaning that is essential being. Since no two people have an identical history of experience, no two people will have an identical collection of concepts—or, as Stein says, an identical "conceptual world." However, *every conceptual world is nevertheless grounded in the "real world" of actual being and in essential being, i.e. "world of ideal concepts" that constitutes the meaning of being.* This is no constructionist account of meaning: all meaning in the mind is *received,* more or less perfectly, and can (in theory, but not in human practice) be *measured against* its corresponding reality in actual and essential being. This satisfactorily resolves the above-mentioned challenge concerning relativism.

Now, we can identify the "meaningful content" discussed earlier in terms of essential being. The soul "takes in" the meaning constituted by essences and essentialities, but always receives it in its own way, "transforming" that meaning into concepts that lag behind but nevertheless correspond to essentialities. This identification of meaningful content is further supported by the similarity between the different levels of essentialities and of that which nourishes the soul.

> [Essentialities] are manifold. There are derived [essentialities] which are related to simpler ones and which can be made intelligible by referring them back to the latter (e.g., the [essentiality] "bittersweet"). The ultimate simple [essentialities], however, can no longer be derived from one another. Within the sphere of consciousness such simple [essentialities] are designated by the names of different experiential content, such as mourning, joy, grief, lust (Stein, 2002, 66).

Any given entity can correspond to a set of interrelated essentialities, ranging from complex or "derived" essentialities such as *bittersweet,* to simple essentialities such as *joy.* Essential being, to borrow a phrase from Gricoski, is therefore "populated" by a great variety of essences and essentialities that

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range from hyper-specific (the red of this particular rose) to sweepingly broad (joy).[28] The soul is formed, or nourished, by this whole range of meaningful content. It is more intuitive to recognize how the soul is nourished by taking in the simple, universal essentialities more and more fully. For example, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is often selected as a text for freshmen to study at least in part because reflecting upon the nature of friendship and happiness can help students recognize those overarching realities in real life. However, Stein points out that the soul is also formed by very specific meaningful content:

> The bright sunshine and the radiance of the azure sky, a serene landscape, the gay laughter of a child, or some consoling word of encouragement—all of these may serve to awaken new life in the soul. What strikes the senses in all these experiences is a spiritual reality which asks to be admitted into the soul, so that this reality may gain life in it (Stein, 2002, 435).

Even the most particular aspects of entities we encounter, like a specific landscape or conversation, correspond to something in essential being and therefore offer meaningful content for the soul to receive and transform. Stein's attentiveness to this aspect of education that is less intellectual in the traditional sense but no less formative reflects a holistic conception of the human person as body, soul, and spirit.

Finally, we see that essential being represents the foundational "meaning of being" toward which all philosophical inquiry strives and upon which is grounded the intelligibility of philosophical languages and thought-worlds. Our concepts are modeled after essences, which are patterned after essentialities, which in turn stand as the most fully-intelligible created realities:[29]

> We previously stated with respect to [essentialities] that they represent the ultimate meaning and are the truly intelligible. If this is the case, then it must

[28] Fr. Thomas Gricoski writes, "Qualities and experiences also have an essence […] The notion that even essences have essences indicates how the essential realm of meaning is more 'populated' than the sphere of actual being. Assigning an essence to every object results in an ontology with more essences than the moderate realism of Thomas and Aristotle, for whom there are only essences of actual things" (Gricoski, 2020, 102).

[29] Stein, of course, identifies God as the most fully-intelligible reality. Essentialities are created by Him.

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> be the [essentialities] from which the meaning of words ultimately derives. As a matter of fact, that which is the ultimate ground of all intelligibility also makes possible all linguistic understanding and all linguistic communication. We therefore now conclude *that all names are actually and ultimately expressions of [essentialities]* (Stein, 2002, 79).

Earlier, we pointed out that the possibility of translation relies upon the reality of some objective meaning that can be fastened upon by various words in various languages. Here, we see that this objective meaning corresponds to the essentialities abiding in essential being. Essential being is the ground of meaning that affords the possibility of translating languages, including the philosophical languages that correspond to particular thought-worlds. Each thought-world constitutes a particular, limited reception of the full contexture of meaning that is essential being. Through studying the words of philosophical predecessors, we gain access to their thought-world and receive meaningful content that can deepen our own particular, limited reception of the meaning of being. Since all concepts lag behind their corresponding essences, no thought-world is complete, and so philosophical inquiry continues throughout history as a search for the full meaning of being. In this sense, the "common object of exploration" is nothing other than essential being itself. However, in another sense, essential being is not the *ultimate* ground for the meaning of being, nor is it truly the common object of pursuit. Rather, the ultimate end is God, from whom all meaning ultimately comes.

> The actual quidditative determinateness [*Wesenbestimmtheit*] of things point beyond itself to *what* they should be, i.e., to that archetypal reality which is their measure and model. However, the riddles which are posed by the being and intelligibility of these archetypes, pure forms, or [essentialities]–we seize them without really holding them, because it is only with their aid that we grasp whatever we seize of things–makes us seek an answer which a philosophy of purely natural reasoning cannot give […] The divine Logos, by whom and in whose image everything was created, is for us the archetypal existent who comprises in himself all finite archetypes. These latter do not thereby become more intelligible for us, but we begin to see the reason for their non-intelligibility. They are enveloped in the very same veil of mystery

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> which hides from us and simultaneously reveals to us in certain general contours everything that is divine (Stein, 2002, 243)[30].

Our concepts point toward essences, which point toward archetypal yet finite essentialities, which in turn point toward the *infinite and creatively effective archetypes of the Divine Ideas* contained within the Logos, the second person of the Trinity.[31] It is in this sense that Stein's famous statement can be better understood: "God is truth. All who seek truth seek God, whether this is clear to them or not" (Stein, 1993, 272). Careful philosophical and theological study would be required to fully unravel the significance of Stein's statements here and to reckon with the metaphysical status of essential being in relation to actual being and God's eternal divine being. For our purposes, though, it is sufficient to close with a simple observation: Stein's position that education should lead the soul toward closeness with God reflects her metaphysical framework wherein the meaning of being points ultimately to the divine *Logos*.

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[30] Antoine Levy connects this notion of creation as a veiled picture of the divine, or as broken mirror, as distinctively Jewish: "In Stein's universe, two distinct spheres of causality, one immanent and one transcendent, continuously intertwine without ever harmoniously merging into one. In contrast to Aquinas' fundamental insight, the boundaries of the first of the two spheres are no longer an opportunity to celebrate the goodness and beauty of creation as the best possible way to honor that of the Creator. This immanent boundary is a veil which, on the one hand, mercilessly hides the Creator from sight, leaving the created world in the throes of some inscrutable evil, and, on the other hand, lets a dim ray of light shine through ("*der Grund ihrer Unbegreiflichkeit leuchtet auf*"), a ray barely sufficient to guide the fragile steps of human beings towards the fulfillment of their most idiosyncratic and personal truth. To put it in a single sentence, the world that emerges from the Scotist inflection of Aquinas' metaphysics is the world of Jewish exile. It is the world of Esther, in which miracles happen and yet only the one who has faith can discern the hand of God in the texture of events. It is a universe where the affirmation of meaning must ceaselessly prevail over the denial of meaning and its abyss" (Levy, 2022, 363). Although I am not familiar enough with the Jewish intellectual tradition to support or challenge Levy's interpretation, I find his perspective interesting, especially considering Stein's recorded self-identification with the figure of Esther.

[31] The question of to what degree Stein's essentialities correspond to Aquinas's understanding of the divine ideas is an ongoing subject of scholarly debate. For evidence in favor of identifying Stein's essentialities with the divine ideas, see Borden Sharkey, 2001 (58 and 104-105). For an argument against, see Salas (2011, 335). See also Gricoski (2020, 111-121).

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5. CONCLUSION

We set out to contextualize Stein's account of essential being within her philosophical paradigm as a whole and to show how it reflects her concern for the human person and human experience. What we found is that essential being stands as the grounds for intelligibility for finite being and underlies all experience.

Although one can navigate daily life without reckoning with essential being, reflecting upon the nature of education and philosophical inquiry generates questions that, for Stein, cannot be answered without recourse to essential being. Her theory of essential being deals with many of the same metaphysical issues treated in preceding theories yet is motivated by a set of concerns that is distinct to Stein and, I would argue, representative of the cultural and philosophical context in which she was writing.

In closing, I would like to suggest that reading Stein well may not necessarily require but is certainly helped by paying close attention to the images, analogies, and metaphors she uses. Stein was, after all, a teacher–and, we can reason, a very good one. She uses such elements as teaching tools in her philosophical writings, thereby teaching her readers as she simultaneously joins us as a learner among learners on the hunt for the meaning of being.

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