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Review

Being Unfolded: Edith Stein on the Meaning of Being

Thomas Gricoski. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2020. 304pp.

Robert McNamara*

What is the meaning of being? More concretely, “What do human beings and quarks, ideal geometrical shapes and possible worlds, ‘sickness’ and ‘health’, the number three and gravity all have in common that allows us to say that each of them *is*?” (xvii). In *Being Unfolded*, Thomas Gricoski attempts to get to the bottom of this perennially valid question by exploring the question of the meaning of being in one of Edith Stein’s later philosophical works, the phenomenological and Scholastic study, *Finite and Eternal Being: An Attempt to Ascend to the Meaning of Being* [*Endliches und ewiges Sein: Versuch eines Aufstiegs zum Sinn des Seins*]. Gricoski takes Stein’s proposition of the idea of “unfolding,” more precisely, the “unfolding of meaning,” as that which unites the various senses of being and

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provides an interpretive key to its meaning across all modes of being—all actual, essential, and mental modes of being detailed by Stein.

Stein herself indicates the centrality of this idea in *Finite and Eternal Being* when she says “the common element of meaning in all (finite) being... is the unfolding of meaning” (284), but neither Stein herself nor her interpreters provide a detailed exposition of what this notion means in its general applicability to being. Gricoski begins to fill this lacuna in Stein’s thought and subsequent Steinian scholarship by first providing an exposition of her understanding of the various modes of being— actual, essential, and mental—while highlighting the interconnectivity of the various modes with one another via the notion of unfolding, before proposing an experimental reading of Stein’s thought by presenting the unfolding of meaning as the point of departure for a fundamentally relational ontology. The work is divided into ten chapters, each devoted to different themes of Stein’s ontology and centered around her understanding of essences and essentialities, precisely since these represent the intelligible ground of any and all meaning whatsoever, whether it be found in actual, essential, or mental modes of being.

In detailing Stein’s understanding of the different modes of being Gricoski is clear and instructive, and is especially insightful when examining Stein’s complex ontology of essences and essentialities, both of which possess essential being, but which are also differently realized in actual and mental being. Such clarity and insight is particularly helpful given the elusive character of essential being and the numerous difficulties related to properly accounting for this particular mode of being. In setting key concepts of Stein’s mature ontology before us in this way, Gricoski provides a valuable service to any future scholarship that would examine Stein’s contributions to phenomenology and metaphysics. Moreover, by placing relation on the ground level of ontology—in terms of finite being’s inner self-relationality—Gricoski presents an innovative extension of Stein’s thought that illustrates how the idea of unfolding secures her mature thought against the either-or dichotomy of essentialism and existentialism, while also to some degree situating her thought with reference to certain contemporary trends in fundamental ontology.

Gricoski provides a somewhat greater portion of analysis to the phenomenological dimension of Stein’s mature thought in contrast to the Scholastic or Thomistic, though the study itself is metaphysical in its progression and conclusions, and ultimately provides a rounded metaphysical sketch of being through the lens of the idea of unfolding. Although Gricoski often analyzes positions of Aquinas assimilated by Stein, I would like to have

seen more frequent attention to and/or more refined analysis of some of these Thomistic positions—namely, the real distinction of essence and act of being, and the distinction of both from the being itself, as well as the distinction of active and passive potencies, and the distinction of both from possibility, and (especially) the intellectual activity involved in cognition; precisely inasmuch as all these bear reference to essence—as this would exhibit even more clearly the subtlety of Stein’s mature position in its alignment with and contrast to the comparably subtle presentation of Aquinas.

The presentation of the text by The Catholic University of America Press is elegant and attractive, with a pleasing typesetting and appealing cover design, and was evidently edited with professionalism and care. Coupled with Gricoski’s clear exposition of Stein’s mature thought in a classical style of prose, an approach that does not sacrifice scholarly rigor for the sake of clarity and readability, the book is a thoroughly enjoyable and informative read. This book will be important reading for Stein scholars into the future, especially those examining ontological themes in her mature thought, as well as for those more broadly interested in related themes in phenomenology and metaphysics. Moreover, the engaged layperson curious to explore this foundational philosophical question, that of the meaning of being, will find in Gricoski’s study much intellectual stimulation and fruit for further reflection.