

WHAT IS LIFE? THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF HEDWIG CONRAD- MARTIUS AND EDITH STEIN

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*The phenomenological movement originates with Edmund Husserl, and two of his young students and collaborators, Edith Stein and Hedwig Conrad-Martius, made a notable contribution to the very delineation of the phenomenological method, which pushed phenomenology in a “realistic” direction. This essay seeks to examine the decisive influence that these two thinkers had on two specific areas: the value of the sciences and certain metaphysical questions. Concerning the former, I maintain that Stein, departing from a philosophical, phenomenological analysis of the human being, is interested particularly in the formation of the cognitive value of the human sciences. Regarding the latter, Conrad-Martius, given her knowledge of biology, tackled the question of the role and meaning of the sciences of nature. The second question, related to metaphysical themes, became a specific and relevant object of research for both women phenomenologists. It will be investigated by comparing two works, one by each thinker, namely, the *Metaphysische Gespräche* by Conrad-Martius and *Potenz und Akt* by Edith Stein.*

The theme of life entered into Western philosophical and scientific discussions in a pre-eminent way at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, and it continues to attract the attention of philosophers and scientists. In particular, the biological sciences have found a special place, in some cases surpassing the physical sciences, because physical phenomena do not draw as much attention as those phenomena linked with living organisms and, hence, phenomena that appear to be more interpretable in a determinable and finite way.

In the first part of the twentieth century, philosophers belonging to the German school of phenomenology, following their teacher Edmund Husserl, made a theoretical contribution to the exploration of the above-mentioned theme. With great determination, Husserl tackled the question of the epistemological value of the sciences, seeking to

comprehend them in their formation and in relation to other forms of knowledge, above all, philosophical and phenomenological ones.

My intent here is to present the results of certain phenomenological investigations by examining the contributions of two philosophers belonging to the said school, namely, Edith Stein and Hedwig Conrad-Martius. Until recently, these two women philosophers have not been well known because they have been overshadowed by male-dominated thought. Nonetheless, these women philosophers need to be remembered. In fact, their reflections on the theme of life show great acuity and are very relevant. The results of their investigations can lead to clarifications concerning questions that are sources of debate today. Their theoretical capacities permit us to consider them as strong interlocutors, even if they are more than half a century removed.

1. The Theme of Life: Biology and Phenomenology in Hedwig Conrad-Martius

A scholar of contemporary sciences and an expert in biology, Conrad-Martius (1888–1966) was a thinker who succeeded in joining epistemology and philosophy by particularly focussing on the life of nature. In one of her numerous books dedicated to this undertaking, *Naturwissenschaftlich-metaphysische Perspektiven (Natural Scientific-Metaphysical Perspectives)*¹, she maintained that one must consider scientific research as a precious source of information, but science that this undertaking must not be reduced to a positivist framework whereby scientific knowledge has the last word. In her view, it was precisely contemporary scientists that began to doubt the certainty claimed by modern physicists for their own work; contemporary scientists maintained that they had to renounce any pretext of possessing the essential and real explanation of the world.

This thesis is confirmed in Conrad-Martius' most important work dedicated to the study of nature, *Der Selbstaufbau der Natur—Entelechien und Energien (The Auto-Construction of Nature—Entelechies and Energies)*², which was republished in a more amplified form in 1961. This book is the synthesis of a long research trajectory carried out not only in relation to the study of nature but also to a

¹ Hedwig Conrad-Martius, *Naturwissenschaftlich-metaphysische Perspektiven* (Heidelberg: Kerle Verlag, 1949).

² Hedwig Conrad-Martius, *Der Selbstaufbau der Natur—Entelechien und Energien* (Munich: Kösel Verlag, 1961).

metaphysical investigation of reality. Conrad-Martius maintained that her work was ontological, understood in the traditional sense of an analysis of the structures of existence, and phenomenological. Phenomenology, according to her, is the only method that can yield an essential analysis while employing intuition. With this method in hand, she took her lead from Hans Driesch's 1891 studies of embryology that focussed on sea urchins. From these studies, Conrad-Martius drew valid, general conclusions on a larger metaphysical scale, ultimately tackling the questions of the origin and becoming of life.

In the 1930s, Driesch argued for the presence of entelechies in organisms, which could be understood as a typical plan or project, capable of intervening and correcting the organism in the course of its development—a sort of structure that can be reduced to neither a psychic activity nor a spiritual activity. He also introduced a new concept, namely, the “psychoïd.” Inspired by this concept, Conrad-Martius added that entelechy is not only the causal factor that preserves the identity typical of a living organism, but is also that which constitutes the organic body according to a typical essential mode, and that which regenerates it. In this sense, entelechy is that which characterises the organism from the perspective of its essence and type. Essence is more important than type, even according to Stein's definition, which distinguishes type as a concrete singularity, a type in the expressive modalities of a group, and essence as that which constitutes the profound structure of things, ensuring that they have sense. It is clear that the search for sense is more important than the purely empirical, sense-based and experimental search. Organisms are understood, therefore, not only through a scientific description that focusses largely on the external, but also by recognising in them a deep “meta-physical structure” capable of grouping together a consistent number of individuals, which allows one to establish typologies. In fact, essence is dynamic, and entelechy, understood as essence, constitutes the ideal plan of the development of individuals. Here, one can also understand Conrad-Martius' view of entelechy as the plan of development indicated by Driesch because entelechy does not need an ideal plan to follow; rather, it is itself the ideal plan. It is clear, however, that we now have moved on to a metaphysical consideration of essence.

In all cases, the question of how an essence can be understood to reside in a physical-material composite still remains and, therefore, it is necessary to distinguish two diverse types of entelechy: first, one that presides over the formation of the development of the organism (*Bildungsentelechie*) and, second, an entelechy that characterises typical, individual identity, that is, the true and proper essence (*We-*

sensentelechie), in its mode of actuality. The former is a model that informs the organism, accompanying it through its stages of development, and it can be defined as trans-physical; it also presents itself as an instrument of the realisation of the latter form of entelechy, which properly constitutes the ultimate causal factor of development.

To understand the origin of life, it is necessary to treat the question of morphogenesis. From an ontological point of view, one has to maintain the dependence of essential entelechy on material conditions. This is the case because every material constellation possesses a mechanism that controls the possibility of its union with a determined, essential entelechy that is individuated through its passing-through into a determined “part” of living material. The material configures itself as an *ovulum* capable of developing itself.

The dependence of entelechial essence on structural conditions does not present a materialist solution because, in the last analysis, we discover that it is essential entelechy that constitutes the foundation of all organisation. Conrad-Martius offers a comparison to clarify the relationship between material conditions and entelechy: these conditions can be viewed as the framing of the first floor of a house that needs a stronger foundation, namely, brick walls, in order for the building to be completed. If no obligatory passage existed for the entry of entelechy, there would be a struggle between all kinds of entelechy, resulting in chaos and not cosmos.

The struggle against materialism, however, does not signify the acceptance of vitalism. In fact, Conrad-Martius maintains that it is understandable for scientists operating within a framework that views the sciences either as mechanistic or exact to also be hostile to vitalism, but not for the reasons they propose. When one speaks of vitalism, as does Driesch, who is seen as a vitalist, it is necessary to delve more deeply and to anchor this intuition on the plane of being because it has sense; otherwise one remains, in effect, “in the air” and no plausible justification is given. Here, one must not merely observe insufficiency with respect to certain scientific criteria of a mathematical sort; rather, one must delineate an ontological background, which the concept of entelechy requires. Entelechy, then, takes on a position contrary to a largely positivistic conceptual framework or one that is organicist or anti-positivistic and vitalist.

The considerations discussed until now lead Conrad-Martius to deal with the comprehensive question concerning the origin of life. This is why she focusses on texts dealing with evolution, which she cannot and does not wish to avoid. At many points in her work, but

above all in her *Ursprung und Aufbau des lebendigen Kosmos* (*The Origin and Structure of the Living Cosmos*)³, she takes a stand concerning evolution, proposing an original response. She contrasts more traditional forms of evolutionary theory with a new form, which presupposes the presence of powers that can be defined as trans-physical. In fact, if one examines the whole sense of an organism, one notes not only a spatial relation but also temporal succession that presupposes a foundation of sense, a *logos of the species*, which is the ultimate trans-physical determination. In this way, Conrad-Martius maintains that she is able to respond not only to Darwinism but also to the creative evolution of Bergson. She does so in her work *Bios und Psyche* (*Life and Psyche*)⁴, which consists of two lectures given at Salzburg in 1948. She argues there that she does not wish to propose a vague notion of a life force; were one to do so, one might begin to think of the development of life in an absolute fashion. The fluidity of life cannot be understood as an auto-creative entity: only substances that live or bear life in themselves exist. In this sense, God creates not “life,” but something that exists.

The evolutionary theory here proposed is different in many respects from the more classic theory. The very study of paleontology, according to Conrad-Martius, rejects the idea of a unique root from which all genera and species stem. In order to understand discontinuity, leaps and changes of nature, this image of a single tree must be replaced by a terrain in which one finds roots that are close to one another and from which diverse families develop. This requires overcoming the purely natural plane by means of a trans-physical dimension. Echoing Revelation, she also proposes a new way of understanding *creatio ex nihilo* as a following-forward of creative acts or, if nothing else, of new forms that presuppose preceding ones.

Conrad-Martius is the leading exponent of the philosophy of nature in the whole school of phenomenology. As noted, she held that scientific research cannot but refer back to philosophy for support. However, according to Conrad-Martius, scientific research must resist absolutisation of its interpretative criteria; it must resist scientism and a certain philosophical vision in which objects of investigation are objects of “science,” thus generating only a philosophy of science and excluding a philosophical investigation of nature. In fact, Conrad-Martius carries out a reflection not only on the sciences but also on the object of science, namely, nature. Her work can, therefore, be seen as

both a philosophy of science and a philosophy of nature because, notwithstanding her recognition of the importance of mathematical physics and biology, the ultimate sense of reality can be discovered in a philosophical dimension and, in particular, in a philosophico-phenomenological manner, by referring to a Living-Being that transcends all genera. In this way, Conrad-Martius’ investigations lead, in the end, to an analysis carried out on a religious and teleological plane. The ultimate levels of consideration do not exclude the other levels, including the scientific and philosophical ones; rather, they can help us understand existence and life through the Being that lives and gives life.⁵

2. The Theme of Life: Psychology and Phenomenology in Edith Stein

In the second volume of the *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*⁶, transcribed and prepared for publication by Edith Stein, who was in 1918 Edmund Husserl’s assistant, Husserl writes that the I is the subject of life proper. He also notes that the I is not originally because of experience, but because of life; it is in life that the I shapes natural objects and is active. Through reflection, the I understands itself as possessing certain structural characteristics, which permit one to speak of a pure I and lived experiences seized in their essentiality. It is not an accident that the term “lived experience” (*Erlebnis*) contains in itself the root of the verb “to live”; this refers to that which is lived by us throughout the course of our experiences. Furthermore, it is through the analysis of our lived experience, about which we are conscious, that we justify and clarify the sense or meaning of life. This particular analysis refers to the structure of the I that is present in all human beings: the pure I, the centre of all lived experiences seized in their essentiality. The personal I that lives must not be confused with the pure I, even if it is the case that we understand the person and life through it.

Edith Stein, who, in her doctoral dissertation, had already analysed the meaning of a lived experience’s importance for our intersubjectivity, namely, the *Erlebnis* of empathy, had already begun to examine

³ Hedwig Conrad-Martius, *Ursprung und Aufbau des lebendigen Kosmos* (Salzburg-Leipzig: Otto Müller, 1938).

⁴ Hedwig Conrad-Martius, *Bios und Psyche* (Munich: Kösel Verlag, 1960).

⁵ Hedwig Conrad-Martius, *Metaphysische Gespräche* (Halle: Niemeyer Verlag, 1921).

⁶ Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, (tr.) Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1989).

in great depth in the early 1920s the human being. Following the directions of her teacher, she did so in order to weigh that which the philosophical tradition suggests, that is, that we are formed by body and soul. She wanted to see whether this could be confirmed by an investigation that did not prejudicially base itself on this affirmation; rather, she submitted it to a rigorous critique in order to reclaim it on other grounds.

Stein had already investigated the human being in her or his bodily constitution and psychic dimensions in her first work, thus opening the path for a consideration of the spiritual (*geistlich*). If we read in a parallel fashion the analyses contained in Husserl's second volume of the *Ideas* and Edith Stein's *Philosophy of Psychology and the Humanities*⁷, we find notable similarities in the way the investigations proceed, similarities highlighted by Stein in her introduction, where she maintains that it is hard to distinguish that which she absorbed from her teacher and that which she autonomously arrived at through her own research. In fact, in her second work, Stein draws attention to the psyche and its mechanisms, and it is there that she completed and integrated the research of her teacher, demonstrating an extraordinary analytic capacity and justifying the notion of intuition that Husserl had discussed in the *Ideas*. The centrality of life appears directly in the psychic dimension, which together with the physical, corporeal element, allows phenomenologists to say that we possess a lived-body (*Leib*). Stein dedicates her most intense pages of work to the study of the phenomenon of the psyche.

She begins with a question that recurs in the history of philosophy, and which had particularly come to the fore in the speculation of the positivists, which investigates whether and to what degree the human being can be subjected to the same causal relations as one finds in nature. Given that various determinist and non-determinist positions can be found around this question and, hence, the insistence on either necessity or liberty or on that which is physical and that which is psychic, Edith Stein executes a systematic analysis of psychic causality. She assumes the phenomenological attitude that moves to the "things themselves," that is, to phenomena as they present themselves; she therefore examines the phenomena of "psyche" and "causality."

The analysis begins with a common experience: I feel cold, but I can be deceived with regard to the content of this sensation; I can indicate that I am feeling cold and be deceived by my consciousness of this lived experience. Certainly, I feel when I am conscious of the sensation

and I feel cold and nothing else when I have this sensation. But it is possible that I feel cold without some condition that produces the cold actually existing, and I can realise this later. An external condition announces itself either in relation to my own feeling (*Gefühle*)—for example, the cold—or in relation to the properties of some external thing (*Empfindungen*)—for example, the sensation of colour in relation to some coloured thing. The cold presents itself as an external condition as well as a property or an internal capacity, which can be defined as a "life force" (*Lebenskraft*), but this must not be confused with the structure of consciousness, the pure I and its lived experiences.

It is here that the distinction between psychology and phenomenology, as well as the relation between psyche and consciousness, becomes clear. If one is seeking the causes that determine psychic life, one finds them in the "modes" in which the life force manifests itself as they present themselves in life feelings (*Lebensgefühle*).

The changes in the conditions of life indicate a minor or major life force; this means that causality does not concern the sphere of lived experiences: no pure lived experience can enter into a causal event. The changes properly concern the life force. Psychic causality, however, distinguishes itself from physical causality, and the psyche of the individual is a world apart, as is material nature. Force also manifests itself in the two cases in diverse manners: whereas in physical nature force happens through events, in the psyche, force is seized through its lived modes.

Edith Stein insists on the difference between the sphere of consciousness and the flowing of its lived experiences, and the flow of its life feelings. The former lacks life feelings—we are dealing with a flow of data of diverse kinds, quality and intensity. With life feelings we are dealing with the "coloration" and tension of the life sphere. In fact, one must observe the presence of life feelings from the perspective of their having their own characteristics, but they also "colour" every given of the flow of consciousness, and this flow is unstoppable.

The similarity here to Bergson's investigations is undeniable. Edith Stein maintains that the psyche is a qualitative continuum, and this is why she agrees with the French thinker with respect to the valuing of moments of the psychic life that refer to differences of intensity, but, *contra* Bergson, she holds that it is possible to individuate the parts of this continuum and the places they occupy. This is the case because, if it is difficult to distinguish shades of red, it is still possible, however, to distinguish blue from red, thereby demonstrating the life feeling of each quality. In this distinction between qualities, there resides the possibility of tracing a causal law. Here, too, Stein distances herself from Bergson. In any case, the type of causality that is individuated

⁷ Edith Stein, *Philosophy of Psychology and the Humanities*, (tr.) M. C. Baseheart and M. Sawicki (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 2000).

here is very different from the one drawn upon in scientific research. We are not dealing with the “exact” causality that is at the heart of the physical sciences, but a “pre-scientific” causality that presents itself in experience. Examples of causal connection within psychic life and related to the experience of events of nature include: “I am so tired that I am unable to read a book that engages me intellectually”; “It is so clear today that it is possible to have excellent visibility.” These determinations are not certainly determinable in a rigid fashion; rather, they are vague and have purely empirical value, but this does not mean that they do not express some sort of “necessity.”

According to Edith Stein, no determinism exists, therefore, in psychic life, even if we discover causal connections and relations. Furthermore, every quantitative determination of psychic states is unsustainable because we are confronted with a flow of qualitative states, and these are individuating according to their essential structure. This point helps us discriminate between the phenomenological reading and that of Bergson.

I have focussed on the interpretation of Edith Stein’s view of psychic life because her contribution is original, even with respect to Husserl’s contribution. She concentrates on the individuation of the life force as the propelling centre of the human being. She does not confine herself to the psychic dimension, but astutely analyses the life of the spirit as characterised by motivation and freedom.⁸ Rather than lingering on this specific aspect, however, I would like to consider it at work in a new philosophical way in Stein’s important work, *Finite and Eternal Being*, completed between 1935 and 1936 at the Carmel of Cologne.

Stein thoroughly clarifies Husserl’s analysis of the subject in relation to our experience, and the subject’s openness to the other as well as to others, the world and God. Let us briefly examine her considerations that take the life of the I as their starting point. We have already noted how Stein, following in her teacher’s footsteps, distinguished corporeality and psyche from the sphere of consciousness, which is the terrain in which one has immediate awareness of living. Husserl designated this terrain as the pure I. This expression, so Stein explains, means that the I lives in every lived experience and, therefore, cannot be eliminated. Not only is the life force traceable at the psychic level, but life also characterises the whole of the I. Concretely, “this means, then, that the I is alive in every such statement as ‘I perceive,’ ‘I think,’ ‘I draw conclusions,’ ‘I experience joy,’ ‘I desire,’ and, further-

more, that the pure ego in one way or another tends toward what is perceived, thought, desired, etc.”⁹ It is inseparable from every content of lived experience in the sense that every content belongs to it: “This ego is *alive*, and its life is its *being*. It lives perhaps right now in the experience of joy, a little while later in longing, and again a little later in thoughtful reflection, but most of the time in several such experiential units simultaneously. But while joy fades away, longing dies, and reflection ceases, the ego does not fade or pass away: It is alive in every now.”¹⁰

Hence, the I lives and life is its being, but how ought one to interpret metaphysically this observation? What is the relation between life and being? Stein is explicit in her answer. She is aware that her arguments are close to those of Saint Augustine, Descartes and Husserl, and she draws her most direct inspiration from this last figure. In her view, that which is concealed in their reflections is the fact that *I am*. The certainty of one’s own being is not obtained or deduced, and this is the critique made against Descartes; rather, following the line of thought of Augustine and Husserl, it is the most originary consciousness. It is not the first in a temporal sense, because the natural attitude of the human being is turned, above all, to the external world, and much time is required before the human being finds herself or himself. But this originary consciousness is closest to and inseparable from being, and it posits itself before any reflection.

When reflection intervenes, that is, when spirit emerges to consider itself, it realises its own inseparability from time, but this does not mean pure flow and dispersion. In this regard, Stein draws upon certain suggestions of her colleague and friend, Hedwig Conrad-Martius, related to time¹¹, individuating actuality in the contact with being at one point and, therefore, sustaining the existence of a continual flow of points of contact. The solid pivot, then, is the present that flows.

These affirmations lead Stein to consider the opposition between actuality and potentiality in the life of our Is. In fact, our actuality is not pure, because I am not the same in all that I am in this instant. But in order to understand this, we must compare an entity in which being and potentiality are united in this way with another entity in which these oppositions are removed, as is the case when we consider God as *actus purus*. Only infinite being exists in a purely actual way.

⁹ Edith Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being*, (tr.) Kurt F. Reinhardt (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 2002), 48.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Hedwig Conrad-Martius, *Die Zeit* (Munich: Kösel Verlag, 1954).

⁸ See my article, “Causality and Motivation in Edith Stein,” in *Causality and Motivation*, (ed.) Robert Poli (Frankfurt: Ontos Verlag, 2010), 135–50.

The reflection on life refers to being, to the being that is participated in and actual pure Being. This also allows one to give a new sense to the relation between the I and the contents of consciousness—the contents are incapable of reaching their own being; they only participate through the I into whose life and being they enter. Hence, the I is an *entity in the greatest sense of the word*. The I, therefore, is, but it cannot be unless it is a living being.

At this point, Stein raises an objection to her own thinking, which enables her to overcome a purely vitalist vision, that is, an absolutisation of life. If the I is a source of life, could life have being from the very same I? The experience of being proper leads one to affirm that this being finds itself in something living and existing in the present, but coming from the past and extending toward a future. It is, to borrow an expression from Heidegger, truly “thrown into its Dasein or being-there”; this means that this being discovers itself as a being that is not of itself. “It cannot be quiescent because it is restlessly in flight. It thus never attains true self-possession.”¹² One has to conclude, then, that we are constrained to define the being of the I as *received*. “It has been placed into existence and is sustained in existence from moment to moment.”¹³

The metaphysical conclusions that Stein draws from Heidegger’s intuition concerning the thrownness of our Dasein distance her from her colleague, allowing her to retrace the paths of ancient and medieval philosophy and to reach the *first* Being through rational reflection. Even prime Being, the divine Spirit, is life and fully alive, and this is why God as “pure act” is immutable vitality. This opens the path to a philosophical and teleological consideration of creation.

As stated earlier, we can see the proximity of the trajectories of Hedwig Conrad-Martius and Edith Stein: together, in fact, they oppose vitalism and justify life with categories intrinsic to life itself that are, according to them, insufficient to respond to the demand for an account of the origin of life. The two thinkers nevertheless theorise about an opening onto Transcendence, that is, a principal creator who justifies life.

3. Life, Sciences, Phenomenology: Toward a Phenomenology of Life

Based on the investigations of these two phenomenologists, we can draw the following conclusions:

- (1) The sciences, be they biological or psychological, are not sufficient for clarifying the meaning of life;
- (2) This meaning must be sought on the philosophical plane;
- (3) The best philosophical method capable of yielding a meaning for the term life is phenomenology.

In reality, these three points are interconnected. Edmund Husserl had left an indelible impression on his followers, underlining the limits of the scientific vision of the world so exalted by positivism. The great objection that moved him to take this position was linked to the theoretical value assigned to the sciences, as if they were born in the modern period. This attitude is present throughout Husserl’s research, but it concretises itself in very evident fashion in his last two lectures, namely, those of Prague and Vienna, which form his *Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*.¹⁴ Here, Husserl examined the way we interpret the phenomena of nature that present themselves to human beings. He considered the mathematisation of nature to be an un-investigated presupposition, a fruit of the process of idealisation proper to mathematics, which, in the modern age, through the works of Galileo, presents itself as a “theoretical suit” dropped upon physical reality. Natural phenomena, on the contrary, present themselves as *plena* that are not reducible to such a process.¹⁵ What is really at stake here is the theme of life, which cannot be reduced to mechanical processes, but always exceeds these processes and their finalistic configurations. It is not by chance, then, that Husserl individuates the wide and deep dimension of the life-world as the ultimate ground upon which cultural formations justify themselves.

The sciences, through the “ideal suit” of mathematics, tend to quantify phenomena, ultimately rendering them measurable. It is useful here to make a distinction between the sciences of nature and those of spirit, a distinction maintained by thinkers such as Dilthey at the turn of the twentieth century. Husserl agrees with this distinction, which attempts to subtract the human being, with her psyche and spirit, from the cognitive process that is proper to nature. This, however, is not sufficient; in fact, research must be more radical: the objects proper to

¹² Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being*, 54.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Edmund Husserl, *Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, (tr.) David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970).

¹⁵ *Ibid.* See Part II, § 9, “The Problem of the Mathematizability of the Plena.”

nature and the human being cannot be entrusted to a “scientific” description, but must be submitted to an autonomous investigation that is philosophy, which ultimately comprehends the essential moment. This is the task of phenomenology. Insofar as it studies phenomena, it has the objective of understanding them in their “sense.”

Following the line of research indicated by Husserl, the two women considered herein treat, on the basis of their own areas of competency, the domains of science and, in particular, biology (Conrad-Martius) and the sciences of spirit (Stein). With respect to the latter, today we would say the human sciences and, in particular, psychology. Stein’s and Conrad-Martius’ knowledge of these domains is deep and their interest in these types of investigations is perhaps even stronger than that of their teacher, but the fundamental focus is the same for all three phenomenologists.

Nature and the human being, understood as part of nature but also as the being that cannot reduce its particularity to natural phenomena, go beyond that which the sciences can reveal. In the case here, we are dealing with the question of sense or essence.

The insistence of Conrad-Martius on the trans-physical dimension and the *Wesensentelechie* denotes a stratification of reality that cannot be reduced to a machine, unlike the physics of the early 1900s, which emphasised quantitative analysis. One could say the same thing with respect to Edith Stein and her view of psychology. The distinction between a scientific psychology, namely, that which employs the method of the natural sciences, and a qualitative psychology, as maintained, for example, by Brentano, is clear for Stein, but despite this distinction, even qualitative psychology does not recognise the human being, who presents herself or himself as a unified and complex phenomenon.

What contemporary trends can one find here with respect to the themes being investigated in this article? It is difficult to schematise today’s various positions and views, but it is still possible to individuate certain tendencies. For example, there are naturalistic ones, which deny the distinction between the human being and nature and, hence, tend to analyse both according to scientific criteria; these tendencies are very strong today. These are often counter-distinguished from completely alternative philosophical investigations that establish no real link between the two. The merit of phenomenology, and the possibility of its making a contribution to contemporary debates, resides in its timely analysis of the sciences in order to establish their limits. Phenomenology deals with a reflection from “within,” which leads one to make evident the demand for an opening onto philosophical investigation.

The objection according to which the sciences claim to “have made” progress with respect to results obtained in the first half of the twentieth century, with which traditional phenomenologists, including Edith Stein and Hedwig Conrad-Martius, were not familiar, is not valid. This is so because their critiques were not aimed at the “results” of science, but at the theoretical imposition of the scientific procedure, which fundamentally remains the same today, even if there are diverse methods of theorisation. In fact, today, we can reverse matters and appreciate, as does Conrad-Martius with respect to a quantitative form of physics, the openings and discoveries that the sciences are uncovering today—all of which reveal the demand for them to go beyond their own models.

This is happening today in the neurosciences, in which there is a recognised need to go beyond the limits of scientific investigation and open a dialogue with phenomenology. Certainly, from a phenomenological perspective, one cannot accept the programme that is expressed as “a naturalisation of consciousness.” Moreover, the attempt to seek the neural bases of empathy, as carried out, for example, by Vittorio Gallese¹⁶, indicates that classical phenomenological themes such as knowledge of the other are considered to be important, and this importance recognises the necessity to engage in a dialogue with, rather than ignore, the domain of philosophy. It is clear, then, that the solution sought by a neurophysiologist such as Gallese, who, in his specific field of research of connections in the brain, runs the risk of reductionism without an appeal to philosophy.

Without pausing to examine this particular theme at length, one can note, however, that the question of the structure of the human being and that of the relation between science and philosophy, especially in relation to life, seems to be able to point to the fields of research proposed by our two phenomenologists, who can serve as useful guides for dealing with contemporary problems.

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¹⁶ Maksim J. Stamenov and Vittorio Gallese, eds., *Mirror, Neurons and the Evolution of Brain and Language* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2002); see also Gallese, “Mirror Neurons: Embodied Simulation and the Neural Basis of Social Identification,” *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, vol. 19, no. 5 (2009), 519–36.