

Stenian Empathy in the Context of Philippine Experience of Suffrage: An Ethical Reckoning

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We are now living in a nation wherein politics, most specifically in the most focused-event election, is devoured by monstrosity that actually preponderates. By that, I don't simply speak of the monsters as predators but also monsters as prey. I'm actually pointing to both politician and citizens in general, respectively. This assertion is something that is not enveloped with biases and presupposition I take as an ordinary citizen experiencing problems, rather I am speaking here as a person who perceives and grasps what manifest that which manifest before me. It is inevitable to see and translucent in our eyes how politics works, particularly in the Philippines. As I focus on voting in the Philippine context, albeit I want to get into it in the most positive way, I cannot but also point out a critique as I look at its ethical dimension. Without citing anything, the distortions and errors in the Philippine context of voting can easily be seen. We cannot deny it. The lived experience of each person stands as witness vis-à-vis this judgement.

To deal with this, I will be using Edith Stein's ethics. Ineluctably speaking, that could be seen by the very comprehension of her empathy as explicated in her celebrated dissertation, *On the Problem of Empathy*.¹ Basically, Stenian empathy averts from the empathy as envisaged conventionally in Stein's time. It is primarily experience of another subject's experience. Stenian empathy, to completely operate, ought to traverse its three-step process which in this paper will be delineated rigorously.

I have not yet encountered any touch of politics in the lexicon of Stein, nevertheless, putting Steinian ethics in the context of Philippine voting, we can still put it in. This serves as way in to

¹Edith Stein, "Life in a Jewish Family," in *The Collected Works of Edith Stein* vo. 1, ed. L. Gelber and Romaeus Leuven (Washington: ICS Publications, 1986), 376-7.

our human encounter banishing the fear and dread to open wide the door towards achieving mutual and reciprocal understanding with all. Minuscule though my contribution would be, this would still help in clearing the path towards harmony, peace and solidarity—particularly in the context of voting. Thus, more than a philosophic enterprise, this is *via vitae*—a traversing guide to human relationships and other human encounters.

I. Stenian Ethics

a. *Stenian Empathy*

To understand Stenian empathy, it is good to go back to the *Ich* as expressed by Stein. The *Ich* is holistically experienced, no matter how many simultaneous acts are there grasped by the consciousness—“it is the same ‘I’ that thinks, perceives, wills, etc.”² To see *Ich* in the way Stein deciphered it, it can already be said that this is that which actually governs the body.³ It is that which guides the body and intellectually conscious of that motion. This ‘I’ is said to be in the body because of the fact that it is the body that senses.

Stein would also put nuance with living and physical body—*Leib* and *Korper* respectively.⁴ The prior accentuates the vivacity of the body. By that, the body is perceived as alive distinguishing the person from other beings. It is that which is actually given to the *Ich*—making the *Ich* enjoy calling it “own body.”⁵ The latter, on the other hand, spotlights the material aspect of the body. It

² Edith Stein, *Act and Potency*, trans. and ed. Dr. L. Gelber and Romaeus Leuven (Washington: ICS Publication, 2009), 96.

³ Edith Stein, “Potency and Act,” in *The Collected Works of Edith Stein* vo. 11, trans. Walter Redmond (Washington: ICS Publications, 2009), 9.

⁴ Edith Stein, “On the Problem of Empathy,” 3rd ed. in *The Collected Works of Edith Stein*, vol. 3, trans. Waltraut Stein (Washington: ICS Publications, 1989), xx. Henceforth, this will be abbreviated as *OPE*.

⁵ Dermot Moran, “Edith Stein’s Encounter with Edmund Husserl and Her Phenomenology of the Person,” in *Empathy, Sociality, and Personhood* eds. Elisa Magri and Dermot Moran (Dublin: Springer, 2017), 40.

is that which we actually perceive empirically. It can be said therefore to have been given once in acts of outer perception.

Also, we have to note that for Stein, there are two ways of experiencing or givenness of the phenomenon—primordial and non-primordial experiencing. With primordial experiencing, Stein would mean that the person himself is the one who is experiencing the lived experience. On the other hand, the one who receives the non-primordial experience is the one who receives the experience on account of what has been announced by the primordial experience.⁶

Now, it must be understood that empathy is dealing with an act that is primordial as present experience and yet received to be non-primordial in content.

The first step towards empathy is the emergence of the experience.⁷ In this step the object of empathy faces the one empathizing as an object. The one empathizing just look at it as it is grasped by the perception. Of course, there is already value that is being placed in it, may it be in large or small degree.⁸ In other words, the primordial experience of the other *Ich* here is presented in its mere givenness.

In the second step, one tries to go plunge deeper. In this step the fulfilling explication is being done.⁹ In this step the one who empathizes attempts to analyze and develop the experience being given. In this event, the mood of the other is being brought already to a clear givenness. What is being seen is not any more the object perceived in the first step. It is not any more the

⁶ Marianne Sawicki, *Body, Text and Science: The Literacy of Investigative Practices and the Phenomenology of Edith Stein* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publisher, 1997), 101.

⁷*Ibid.*, 10.

⁸ Ingrid Vendrell Ferran, “Intentionality, Disclosure, and Constitution: Stein’s Model,” in *Empathy, Sociality, and Personhood* eds. Elisa Magri and Dermot Moran (Dublin: Springer, 2017), 65.

⁹*OPE*, 10.

content. It is already the object of it. What is being seen is the subject of the content in original subject's locus

In the third and final step, Stein would propose the comprehensive objectification of the experience.¹⁰ In this way, after clarification faces the empathizing one, the content changes back into the object again. In this way the primordial experience of the foreign *Ich* is being announced to the *Ich* in a non-primordial way.¹¹ In this way, the empathizing already get into the other.

In empathizing, the empathizing *Ich* lives in other's experience in non-primordial way which is being announced by the primordial experience of the foreign *Ich*. That is why, the empathizing *Ich* feel "as it were" manifesting non-primordially. Hence, empathy is always perceiving *sui generis*.¹²

b. Ethical Dimension of Empathy

Now that we are able to emerge towards the experience of the empathy as understood in Stenian phenomenology. We are now prepared to understand where in the point of her empathy could we find its ethical dimension.

At first glance, we cannot but look at empathy as ethical because of the intersubjectivity that makes the process possible, however may it be implicitly put by Stein. That obligates us to consider that it really is encapsulated in an ethical dimension. And such is phenomenologically verifiable by empathy needing an encounter with other.¹³ Thereby, we'll see that the world is actually a shared world that always follows shared experiences. We cannot get rid of the ethical implication

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹ Timothy Burns, "From I to You to We: Empathy and Community in Edith Stein's Phenomenology," in *Empathy, Sociality, and Personhood* eds. Elisa Magri and Dermot Moran (Dublin: Springer, 2017), 132.

¹²By *sui generis*, Stein would mean expounding peculiarity before all else.

¹³Donald Wallenfang, *Human and Divine Being: A Study on the Theological Anthropology of Edith Stein* (Oregon: Cascade Books, 2017), 415.

of her understanding of empathy. It also basically calls on a human encounter that hopes of achieving mutual and reciprocal understanding. It must lead to a way of life more than a philosophic project for empathic life comes to us in the very course of our daily lives.

As we tend towards the three-step process of empathy, we can find that throughout its stages, ethical dimension is never left. It is always constituted. In the emergence of experience, the giving of attention that the empathizing provides so as to receive in turn the givenness of that which being empathized, already constitutes ethical dimension. It is insofar as it involves the axiology as proposed by Stein as well. She said that even in that very moment, we already put value to that which we put attention to—may it be little or vast in degree. The point is that there is already valuation that is given and that leads to an ethical perspective towards the object of seeing.

In the second step which is the fulfilling explication, as we tend toward the content of the object, valuation adds all the more that makes the way of deciphering deeper. The value that was given at first is not already the way it is right in the explication. It is deeper.

In the third step, on the other hand, the valuation, in its objectively comprehended sense, is already there. We can now say how we value the object of our empathy in degree. In it manifests the ethical dimension insofar as the other is being encounter.

Deciphering the depths of empathy, it is inevitable to associate it as ingredient towards a meaningful ethical thinking. Its valuation and operative notion in the horizon of ethics is also translucent even in the Kantian prohibition against using others as means, possibility of knowing the other, the Levinasian encounter with the other's face, the Sartrean ethical way of dealing with existentialism and the like. It also evinces the heart of persons-relation in the very process of giving

eo ipso [by itself]. Empathy overcomes the separation between subjects.¹⁴ It can be grasped in the very process of disclosing the other in his affective states, motivations and temporality.

For me, empathy must be seen as pre-doing.¹⁵ I mean that the phenomenological seeing that is actually empathizing could lead to seeing as well the moral dimension of what will be done. With this, it is also possible that rational sympathy must be seen as next step to empathy rather than a term in nuance with empathy. It must be because it is impossible to arrive in genuine feeling of compassion unless one is aware of whatever acts upon one and way the other experience such event. As persons living in community, we cannot get rid of serving it as our participation in one way or another. And empathy has a significant role in it. A person cannot serve it if he is lacking of others perspective on the world. And empathy answers that inasmuch as it is actually sharing of private meanings in which one can reach the fusion of values and horizon and so coming into the shared values and shared horizon.

Empathy is not necessarily reciprocal. It could rather be reflexive because even others won't return anything, by the announcement non-primordially something is given back to the one empathizing. Nevertheless, if mutual empathy could take place, mutual receptivity could also be attained. There give-take takes place. In turn, the construction of the harmonious world wherein person is never seen as object having been granted of the meaning "that it is." At this point we can understand that all communication and human encounter necessitate at least a minimal empathic

¹⁴Kathleen M. Haney, "Empathy and Ethics" (57-65) posted in Academia.edu (University of Houston-Downtown), 58.

¹⁵This assertion can be rooted with the claim that Phenomenology is actually pre-philosophical in the viewpoint of Husserl. Napoleon M. Mabaquiao, "Of Essences and Being: A Look at the Two Faces of Phenomenology," (105-123) in *Exploring the Philosophical Terrain*, ed. Elenita Garcia (Quezon City: C&E Publishing, Inc., 2013), 107. At this point, Husserl said so to speak of knowing the world prior to subjection of our belief to a philosophical reflection. There is also the same view of that with Stein but she did not come up to the point of bracketing.

understanding. By these we can see that empathy is nothing but precondition towards ethical responsibility.

In the end to conglomerate this ethical dimension of empathy, the words of Kathleen Haney are exact in saying that: “The essential grasp of human nature, for which empathy provides experience, suggests further ramifications for ethical theory. Empathy is a means to knowledge of the human nature; knowledge of the human nature enlivens and encourages empathy. On such a basis, ethics is possible.”¹⁶ It reechoes the Latin *cliché*, *nemo dat quod non habet*. One cannot act upon, when one knows nothing which he can give in order to do the acting upon.

II. Philippine Experience of Suffrage

Voting, entails a sacrosanct position in governing a democracy and republic. Montesquieu would say that it reverses the pyramid wherein the citizens become the sovereign, masters selecting their servants.¹⁷ The right of suffrage tend, in this sense, to be the most visible and vital exercise of democracy. And this also allows citizens to look others in the eyes equally.¹⁸

When we do vote, we can make the government, either better or worse that could affect us vehemently. Jason Brennan would say, when we make bad choices we could fail the materializing of opportunities, inflict and perpetuate injustice, wage drug wars that ghettoize inner towns, leave poor behind and the like. And the opposite, if we vote rightly.¹⁹ He also claimed that voting is aa collective decision, hence, how *we* vote has consequence and *you* vote has not.²⁰ And so, one’s

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁷Baron de Montesquieu and Charles de Secondat, *The Spirit of Laws*, trans. Thomas Nugent (Kitchener: Batoche Books, 2001), 25-29.

¹⁸ Jason Brennan, “Voting as an Ethical Issue,” in *The Ethics of Voting* (Princeton Scholarship Online, October 2017), DOI:10.23943/princeton/9780691154442.001.0001.,6.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 2.

vote has vanishingly small importance, if it will be seen in the most specific sense. In voting, we judge the candidates in the first instance by how they are, “by how well they well us lead our lives together in peace and prosperity.”²¹ In this sense, we can say that voting is not actually an attempt to change how effective the politician would be but to change the kind of mandate the politician could enjoy.²² We have the power of it equally. Explicating it, we could find that we are not all equal in voting. Some know the candidates’ real intention, propaganda and all and some are not.

In the thinking of the Filipino folk, this civic sacrament ought to be done because of its obligatory character, but more than that it must be done in good faith promoting common good, having it morally and epistemically justified. And that is more significant. In this sense, vote buying could be morally permissible, if and only if, it does not violate the previous point.

“[Electing, and therefore voting], is when friends turn to enemies and relatives into insignificant all in the name of the candidate they supported.”²³ It echoes the custom in the Philippines when the awaited event called, “election” approach. It disregards, apparently, the way voting *ought* to be which Filipinos actually knew based on surveys presented in the 2020 statistics provided by Velmonte.²⁴ It resounds both agreeing and disagreeing voices. But in an overpowering sense, voting in the Philippines are oftentimes marred by ferocity, fraud and irregularities. John Harden would even say that “[e]lections in the Philippines are personality-driven, a kind of national soap opera which distinctions between infamy and celebrity tend to blur over time.”²⁵ There is always a touch of social prestige in order to win, in other words. It seems to cause

²¹*Ibid.*, 8.

²²Alexander Guerrero, “The Paradox of Voting and the Ethics of Political Representation,” in *Philosophy and Public Affairs*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1088-4963.2010.01188.x>.

²³Glenn L. Velmonte, “Voters Practices in the Philippine Election,” in *Journal of Critical Reviews* vol. 7, is. 8 (2020) June 28, 2020, accessed July 9, 2021. <https://dx.doi.org/10.31838/jcr.07.08,200.,951>.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 953-4.

²⁵John Harden, “This is Manila,” in *Washington Post*, 2010. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/newssearch/?query=john%20harden&sort=Relevance&datefilter=All%20Since%202005&spellcheck&startat=700#top>

harmony, however, deciphering it, we could find that it defeats democracy as a way of giving people control and making them freer. We become wired to avoid truth and justice to be in touch of the consensus caused by social pressure.

Comprehending the aforementioned, we behold the suffrage and itself and the lived experiences that defines this civic sacrament in the Philippine context.

III. Applied Stenian Ethics in Philippine Suffrage

Voting is supposedly one of the most refined event wherein human encounter could be manifested. It's inasmuch as it would speak of the importance of the 'we' and not simply of the 'I' or 'you.' Therefore, it is also a way to speak of empathy and in turn, Stenian ethics. It necessitates an objective comprehension of the content of the lived experience of the people around an *Ich* and the persons to be voted to make the obligation fulfilled, insofar as suffrage don't only constitutes voting but in the most particular way, voting well.

As it is seen in the previous discussion, empathy is quite obscured in the Filipino setting when it comes to 'voting well'. Filipinos don't even bother of taking the second step of empathy. It is given that the first step is achieved insofar as it would be inevitable to emerge to other's experience. We will always, even accidentally, perceive that which manifesting themselves to us. We will immediately, with that, put value. However, in the second step, a higher degree of intentionality is already emerging. And that's what Filipinos doesn't want to enter into. Consequently, most of them, if not all, would tend into a selfish perspective of voting—and that is what is being delineated in the prior discussion. As we are also considering the particular way of voting in Philippines as it is delineated to be a soap opera by Brennan, it would result on the same obscurity of empathy. It

is done for the sake of consensus. That is why, *Ich* does not really vote but just appeal to the convention as it falls to consensus sharpened by social pressure.

On the other hand, if we'll look to 'voting' in a general sense, we can find empathic experience. In choosing a servant, at least in Montesquieu's parlance, one searches for an assuage—the ones who can help them and alleviate their poverty, economic problems and the like. And it necessitates empathy. Empathic act here could be in a way of memories and expectations. The prior can operate when one is looking on how that person was. Therein, one seeks for the competence and abilities of the person. Of course, it could only be applicable if one has the memory of that person—a personal encounter, most possible. One could also be on the latter part, by the same act of comprehension. These two will lead the empathizing voter towards a certain valuation of the person empathized. Therein vote will possible. But would that be voting well? It would depend on the intention the voter has to act upon it. It is clear in this way that empathy and therefore Stenian ethics is a 'pre-doing.' Thus, Stenian ethics leads the *Ich* to do the thing *Ich* has to do based on the valuation that appears to him after the empathic process.

The inequality in voting in the Philippine context that is said in the previous discussion, expresses the need of empathy so as to arrive to real equality in both power and information. By this, every one could know the most appropriate person to be voted. Thus, Stenian ethics could be seen as equalizing agent as well, but of course its efficacy can only come from the persons themselves—from the foreign *Ich* who's allowing himself to manifest to my *Ich* and from the *Ich* who intends to objectively comprehend the foreign *Ich* that announces his primordial experience in a non-primordial way.

In the previous discussion, voting ethics were presented. Empathy works on those and actually helps to exercise those. In epistemic understanding of the people that surround us and our duties upon suffrage, empathy is of great importance. It clears the way towards voting well.

It was previously stated that vote buying could, in a way, be permissible. Now, could empathy emerge there? Explicating it, it cannot be. First, one sells his vote, may it be for good faith or not, because of the monetary amount that will be given. In that sense, it would be selfish. This very thing defeats human encounter and in turn the possible use of Stenian ethics. It seems to reveal also voting as for 'self' and not actually for the 'we' as it should be. Moreover, empathy cannot be at work in it, because after selling, one also sold his freedom to choose in the voting proper. One becomes a robot that shades or writes the name of the candidate to whom he sold his dignity in the republic and democracy. It is said that vote buying could also be done in good faith, but having Stenian ethics, it cannot. It is because, even if one explicates it, it would end up of why to sell it, if it is really worth voting, mere information would do. Thus, we could "regard unequal voting rights [i.e., most apparent in the Philippine context of suffrage, especially in vote buying], as evidence of corruption or electoral manipulation."²⁶

In the end, Stenian ethics, could be both applied in the Philippine suffrage custom, may it be in 'voting' in general or in 'voting well.' It speaks, as empathy is also concerned, in leading the *Ich* towards the content expressed non-primordially to look at the value it manifests necessary in voting or in voting well. Nevertheless, valuation depends on the person. It may concern the self or that 'with' the others. However, if the prior is considered, it can be that it may not even reach empathy because, it merely involves the 'self' devoid of intersubjectivity.

²⁶T. Christiano, *The Constitution of Authority* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 34-45.

