

Disentangling Codependency from Empathy: A Steinian Trinitarian Account of the Healing of Personhood

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Abstract

By retrieving Edith Stein's thought, this paper seeks to propose a spirituality of personhood conducive to healing the psychological root of codependency. In using the broad word codependency, this paper relies upon Charles L. Whitfield's definition, which understands it as "a disease of lost selfhood."¹ This paper is working within the intersections of philosophical phenomenology, psychology, and spirituality, and Stein herself is thoroughly immersed in these disciplines.² I will begin by delineating what psychologists have labeled codependency as a relational behavior scheme (rather than a diagnosed mental health disorder) and its pervasiveness within those who identify themselves as religious or spiritual using both a clinical and a phenomenological method. Next, by using Edith Stein's philosophical phenomenological insights regarding the essence of empathy, this paper seeks to disentangle the Gordian knot of empathy and codependency (which I believe to be the core connection between a codependent psyche and those who hold religious and spiritual values). Finally, from Stein's later works, I will propose a theological trinitarian anthropology that can help heal the lost sense of selfhood that is at the root of codependent ways of relating.

¹ Charles L. Whitfield, *Co-Dependence Healing the Human Condition* (Deerfield Beach: Health Communications, Incorporated, 1991).

² Edith Stein studied psychology for four semesters at the University of Breslau (1911-1913). However, she was drawn to the philosophical study of phenomenology, and she consequently transferred to Göttingen to work with Edmund Husserl (1913-15). She converted to Catholicism in 1922. In 1931 she obtained a teaching position at the German Institute for Scientific Pedagogy in Münster, but given Nazi regulation against Jews, she was terminated from her post two years later. After this event and having longed for religious life since her baptism, she entered into the Cologne Carmel in 1933 and took up the name Sr. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross. For biography information, see the introduction to *Edith Stein: Selected Writings*, trans. Susanne M. Batzdorff (Springfield, IL: Templegate Publishers, 1990).

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Delineating Codependency as “A Disease of Lost Selfhood” by Employing a Clinical and Phenomenological Methodology

Charles L. Whitfield defined codependency as “a disease of lost selfhood.”³ In the 1940s,

Karen Horney began describing the orientation of a person who would later be termed codependent as someone who:

Tries automatically to live up to the expectations of others, or to what she believes to be their expectations, often to the extent of losing sight of her feelings. She becomes ‘unselfish,’ self-sacrificing, undemanding—except for her unbounded desire for affection. She becomes compliant, over considerate—within limits possible for her— over appreciative, over grateful, generous.⁴

Empirical research has found that people who identify as religious or spiritual tend to gravitate toward this personality structure.⁵ The real core issue is not just that a codependent person gives up oneself (i.e., wants, needs, desires, vocation, etc.) in a relationship, but that there was never a deep foundation of this self initially. Whitfield states, “When we focus so much outside of ourselves we lose touch with what is inside of us: our beliefs, thoughts, feelings, decisions, choices, experiences, wants, needs, sensations, intuitions, unconscious experiences, and even indicators of our physical functioning, such as heart rate and respiratory rate.”⁶ The person's true self comes from the source of her own internal experience, but for the codependent psyche it has

³ Charles L. Whitfield, *Co-Dependence Healing the Human Condition* (Deerfield Beach: Health Communications, Incorporated, 1991).

⁴ Frederick Walborn in his work *Religion in Personality Theory*, delineates Karen Horney’s three different orientations that people might use in the pursuit of the idealized self. The idealized self is in contrast to the real self. The latter Horney holds as the truth that all people strive toward self-realization. Conditions such as compassion and healthy friction will allow the real self to naturally and gradually unfold. However, if children are not given a warm, compassionate environment that allows them to express both positive and negative emotions, then they will adapt by having a basic underlying anxiety which will make them create an idealized self that utilizes three possible orientations in relation to others. The three orientations are moving against people, moving away from people, and moving toward people. Frederick Walborn, “Chapter 5 - Karen Horney,” In *Religion in Personality Theory*, 83–107 Elsevier Inc, 2014, 52. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-407864-2.00005-9>.

⁵ Walborn, “Karen Horney,” 98-99.

⁶ Whitfield, *Co-Dependence*, 3.

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been chiefly suppressed and hidden since childhood. This inner child or true self still exists inside a codependent individual, but it has learned to hide away, and profound experiences of emptiness result from its hiding.⁷ The codependent fills this emptiness by the fullness she receives through helping or self-sacrificing for others or in turn being helped by them.⁸ This act of self-sacrifice is normally rationalized as empathy, and can look deceptively similar to an empathetic disposition of relating from the outside point of view as well.

A study was done examining participants' lived experiences of codependency.⁹ The three shared experiences included a "lack of a clear sense of self, a pattern of extreme emotional, relational, and occupational imbalance, and attribution of current problems in terms" of simultaneous "parental abandonment and control in childhood."¹⁰ When asked about their experiences, the participants emphasized how their relationship difficulties stemmed from their self-concept.¹¹ One of the participants said her personality in relationships makes "me modify myself in a chameleon-like fashion to fit in, losing a sense of constancy around my values, my

⁷ Whitfield, *Co-Dependence*, 33.

⁸ Researchers found out that many people in caring professions such as pastoral work, psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, and social workers "had not only been affected by growing up in alcoholic households [i.e. dysfunctional households] but also that her choice of the profession had been shaped by the need to be helpers." In a relationship, the codependent unconsciously is convinced that she will somehow find herself if she can help others find and fulfill her wants, needs, and desires. Having examined a clinical understanding of codependency, we will now look to understand this phenomenon through the eyes of those who struggle from this lost sense of self. Rebecca J. Frey, Ph.D, "Codependency," in *The Gale Encyclopedia of Mental Health*, 4th ed., edited by Brigham Narins, 371-376. Vol. 1 (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale, 2019) *Gale Health and Wellness* (accessed December 2, 2020).

⁹ Ingrid Bacon, Elizabeth McKay, Frances Reynolds, and Anne McIntyre, "The Lived Experience of Codependency: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis," *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction* 18, no. 3 (2018): 754–71. https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX2491200114/HWRC?u=mlyn_m_bostcoll&sid=HWRC&xid=f43fba80.

¹⁰ Bacon, McKay, Reynolds, McIntyre, "The Lived Experience of Codependency," abstract.

¹¹ Bacon, McKay, Reynolds, McIntyre, "The Lived Experience of Codependency," 761.

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needs.”¹² This corresponds to the clinical understanding of the hiding child unable to express itself in settings, but instead molds into the environment or mirrors the person to which they relate. This disappearance creates a hole in the soul where the true self is not entirely gone but is only hiding. The profound ability to be in touch with another is a gift. However, one must also be attuned to oneself for a transparent act of empathy to occur. Codependency ends up being disguised as empathy especially within religious constituents. This relational structure may also be disguised in Christianity as a virtuous one of self-sacrifice mirroring a christocentric anthropology. In order to disentangle empathy from codependency one must uncover what a true act of empathy consists of. To discover the best definition of empathy, this paper delves into Edith Stein’s conclusions in her dissertation *On the Problem of Empathy*.

Disentangling Codependency from Empathy using Edith Stein’s Work On Empathy

Edith Stein studied under Edmund Husserl, the father of phenomenology, and uses the science of phenomenology to clarify the primordial or essential experience upon which all proceeding forms of knowledge are structured.¹³ Edith Stein uses this method to get a satisfying description of empathy. *She is ultimately interested in what kind of awareness is aware of another’s pain or experience*, which she would term empathy. What is complicated and unique in trying to get to the essence of empathy compared to other phenomenological inquiries is that the empathizer cannot attend to the pain, joy, sadness, lethargy, anger on another’s countenance as the thing being perceived for it is not pain *per se*, but the empathized person’s experience of the

¹² Bacon, McKay, Reynolds, McIntyre, “The Lived Experience of Codependency,” 761.

¹³ Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy* (3rd rev. ed.. Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1989), 1.

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pain which one is giving her consciousness to comprehend in the act of empathetic relating.

Therefore, outer perception or an act of perceiving that someone is in a specific emotion is not the same as an act of empathy.

Edith Stein in her dissertation brings an important critique to definitions of empathy that blur the line between the empathizer and the empathized. First, she delineates between true empathy and self-forgetfulness, which is defined as “an inner participation in foreign experience.”¹⁴ Empathy is not when “there is no distinction between our own and the foreign ‘I,’ that they are one.”¹⁵ For a true act of empathy to occur, two consciousnesses must be distinct from one another. Empathy must also be distinct from imitation or the transference of feeling being aroused from one subject to another.¹⁶ Transference occurs when one’s own feelings arise within them in the presence of somebody embodying the same feeling. Being saturated in one’s feeling “prevents our turning toward and submerging ourselves in the foreign experience, which is the attitude characteristic of empathy,” according to Stein.¹⁷ Finally, Stein distinguishes between an association or similar experience and an act of empathy. Seeing someone brokenhearted can stir feelings of remembering a time when one was brokenhearted and, therefore, a person could conclude based on the retrieved feelings that sprung up within her soul that she understands how that person feels. However, this ‘broken-heartedness’ is not given to the empathizer, but “her existence is inferred.”¹⁸ As such this cannot be an act of empathy because

¹⁴ Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, 12.

¹⁵ Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, 16.

¹⁶ Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, 23.

¹⁷ Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, 23.

¹⁸ Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, 24.

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no other is given to the empathizer. Self-forgetfulness, transference, and association all blur the line between two conscious subjects.

Stein will argue that a true act of empathy must have two distinct centers of consciousness. An essential distinction between the previous examples and genuine empathy is that the experience can never derive from the empathizer; it must come from the one being empathized with.¹⁹ Even though the one empathizing lives into another's joy, the joy itself does not belong to her. Stein concludes from this her definition of empathy as a kind of unique act of perceiving.²⁰ An act of empathy is then one subjective "I" or pure consciousness perceiving another "I's" experience. Empathy is not an experience of another's pain or joy, but another in her pain or joy.²¹ Therefore, it is human centered.

This brings us to the defining factor in any act of empathy – the human person – or anthropology for "only he who experiences himself as a person, as a meaningful whole, can understand other persons."²² Therefore, in order to give empathy, you must be a self and hold your own gravity point without blurring lines between yourself and another. Stein argues that a transparent act of empathy is only possible for a self that understands herself as spiritual. Stein defines being spiritual as a human whose personality unfolds through the psychosomatic reality in the natural world. The very meaning of life is the unfolding of this personhood. Unfortunately,

¹⁹ Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, 10.

²⁰ "eine art erfahrender akte sui generis," Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, 11.

²¹ "An act of empathy has three modes of accomplishment: becoming aware of another's experience, feeling into the other's experience, after having come through it giving a detailed interpretation or understanding of the person's experience back to them. Therefore, empathy is an intuiting act, "and the experience back to which knowledge of foreign experience points is called empathy." Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, 11.

²² Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, 116.

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it is possible for the personality not to unfold at all; this happens if one “does not feel or value himself but acquires all feelings only through contagion from others,” this person “cannot experience ‘himself.’ He can become, not a personality, but at most a phantom of one”²³ or an “unfinished sketch.”²⁴ According to Stein, when one is a phantom (i.e. the hiding self) she can no longer be understood as a spiritual person.

In light of getting to the essence of empathy, one can now clearly and scientifically delineate between codependency and empathy. In this inquiry, one finds rather than a similarity between codependency and empathy that they are opposite of one another. Receiving true empathy is the cure for healing a codependent relational scheme and one who is codependent cannot be truly empathetic toward another. This truth unfolds in several ways. First, in codependency, the lack of a sense of self is the foundational reason for helping others or self-sacrificing for them. However, the prerequisite for true empathy is a self and, the more one becomes a self, the greater capacity that person has to comprehend other selves. Secondly, in codependency the true self hides away, afraid to express herself in fear that she will not be accepted. The unfolding of personhood, not the hiding of personhood, is essential for any act of transparent empathy to occur.²⁵ Further, codependency is essentially the blurring of boundaries with another. Empathy is not the feeling of oneness with another person. Self-forgetfulness or

²³ Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, 111.

²⁴ Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, 111.

²⁵ Rather, if the hiding child begins to display empathy and affection toward her inner child rather than upon another person, then she might be able to begin to get out of hiding. Another possible avenue for healing is to be in a non-helping relationship with an empathetic concern, such as a therapist. The codependent can begin to bring the hiding, needy, broken child out in the open and have the therapist mirror the patient's experiences to strengthen the self's structure. This relationship would mirror the parental relationship that was not able to develop fully. The child's underdevelopment came from parents' lack of being able to empathize with her. Therefore, a therapist can come and reflect the person back to herself. The therapist does not need the patient to be anything to or for them, and, in this way, the hiding child cannot find its identity in "helping" or being there for the therapist.

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lack of boundaries is a main component codependents experience in relationships.²⁶ Further, self-knowledge is essential for comprehending another person and is primarily given to another through empathy. In codependency, one's motivations are not clear to her in her act of "helping" in interpersonal relationships or professional vocations. Finally, genuine empathy can heal codependency regarding the schematic structure of the self.

Now that the Gordian knot of empathy and codependency has been disentangled, I argue that one needs to begin to reimagine a Christian anthropology that would be helpful and conducive to the healing of codependency rather than further the justification of it. One must begin to reimagine a Christian anthropology that is not christocentric in its emphasis on self-sacrifice.²⁷ Rather one should retrieve an anthropology that is more conducive to the healing of personhood which puts emphasis on the fullness of personhood, which I argue would be Trinitarian in nature.

Proposing A Steinian Theological Trinitarian Anthropology

In Edith Stein's later work *Finite and Eternal Being* she offers a comprehensive trinitarian vision of the human being which would be conducive to the healing of the self who

²⁶ Self-forgetfulness or lack of boundaries seem to be what co-dependents experience regularly. Larkin and Meneses picks this up in their essay "Edith Stein and the Contemporary Psychological Study of Empathy," and states that in a clinical sense, this degree of fusion is usually seen as either infantile or pathological, and empathy involves "self-object connection, not a self-object fusion." They further this point by quoting Hart stating that infants experience the world in a pre-egoic state and are thus fused with his or her primary caregiver. "There may be similar empathetic fusion in adults who have unusually permeable boundaries. . . . in conventional diagnostic formulations, this may occur with some regularity in Borderline or Dependent personality disorders. . . . [in this state someone] may know the other by introjecting, or swallowing whole, the other's experience without digesting the experience so as to understand or appreciate it as the others." Rita W. Meneses, and Michael Larkin, "Edith Stein and the Contemporary Psychological Study of Empathy," *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology* 43, no. 2 (2012): 164; quoting Hart, 1999, p. 113 and 114; 176.

²⁷ In reality and tradition Christ was the fullest person that ever lived and his sacrifice was therefore valid only because of the depth of his personhood. However, many people with religious inclinations and codependent relational schemas take this value of compassion and self-sacrifice and use it to justify their acts of self-sacrifice. A Christological oriented anthropology will not help someone on their road to healing their codependency rather an anthropology that is centered on becoming a self will greatly aid to the healing.

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lives through a codependent relational scheme. I want to retrieve two of her insights from her trinitarian anthropology. The first relates the whole human being: soul, body, and spirit as mirroring the nature of the Trinity. According to Stein, each person must find itself in a dual sense: “it must learn to know itself, and it must come to be what it is destined to be.”²⁸ The soul is a “dark ground which tends toward being formed.”²⁹ The soul has a threefold vocation: to unfold its own essence, to inform the body, and to ascend above itself into union with God.³⁰ For Stein, the soul mirrors the Father³¹ or is an image of the Father for it is the potentiality and contains in unity the whole human person. The body is thought to correspond to the Son for the “soul is the essential form of the body,” as the Son is the essential form of the Father.³² The spirit of a person moves her to acts of transcendence, so also the Spirit unfolds the life of God back to God and also into the world. One’s spirit also unfolds the life within the soul from the life it receives from the soul through the body.³³ Therefore, when a Christian is attempting to heal her lost sense of self, it will be helpful to adopt the primordial truth of being the *Imago Dei* by

²⁸ Edith Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being: An Attempt at an Ascent to the Meaning of Being* (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, Institute of Carmelite Studies, 2002), 430.

²⁹ Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being*, 467.

³⁰ Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being*, 460.

³¹ If one wants to use Mother, I do not think there is a problem with gender change. The argument still stands, however, Stein uses Father rather than Parent or Mother so I have chosen to stay with this language.

³² Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being*, 434.

³³ “To the Father-the primordial creator-from whom everything derives its existence but who himself exists only by and through his own self, would then correspond the being of the soul, while to the Son-the ‘born-out’ essential form-would correspond all bodily being. And the free and selfless streaming forth (of the Holy Spirit) would have its counterpart in the activity of the spirit, which merits the name spirit [Geist] in a special sense. We might then see a triune unfolding of being in the entire realm of reality.” Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being*, 361.

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beginning to believe that one's soul mirrors the Father, one's body reflects the Son, and one's spirit mirrors the Holy Spirit.

The second insight of Stein's that can help interpret oneself through a trinitarian anthropology relates to the whole created order when she states, "all creatures have a triune structure as substance that stand upon themselves (Father), and that are filled with meaning (Son), and power (Spirit)."³⁴ Therefore, by the "the standing -upon-itself of every independent reality," one may see the image of the Father as the primary unconditioned principle.³⁵ He is the constitution of each person's personhood. He is the fullness of every creature, for there is never an empty form. The Logos, the second person of the Trinity, is meaning in totality or the totality of meaning.³⁶ If one wants to see the Eternal Word in oneself, then one should look at one's quest for her meaning or the meaning which is inherent within her already. Finally, the Holy Spirit is the powerfulness that unfolds all the essence and meaning of everything.³⁷ "The personal identity of God the Father is revealed only through the divine processions of Son and Spirit...of Meaning and Power."³⁸ Therefore, according to Stein, there is not a fullness (Father), which is not also meaningfulness (Son) and a powerfulness (Holy Spirit) that helps form each person. In light of Stein's arguments one's natural constitution is grounded in God and is essentially trinitarian, and this helps begin to create an anthropology that points someone to becoming the

³⁴ Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being*, 464.

³⁵ Stein, *Edith Stein: Selected Writings* (Marian Maskulak, editor; New York; Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2016), 61-62.

³⁶ Stein, *Selected Writings*, 61-62.

³⁷ Stein, *Selected Writings*, 61-62.

³⁸ Donald L. Wallenfang, "The Heart of the Matter: Edith Stein on the Substance of the Soul," *Logos* (Saint Paul, Minn.) 17.3 (2014): 132.

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self one already is rather than self-sacrificing a self that never was fully developed at all.

According to Stein, humanity is created in the image of the Trinity and this same God can be the one to help heal the developmental structure of the self that requires deep renovation to become what it always was destined to be.

Edith Stein argues that this trinitarian God may indeed be the only one that fully mirrors a creature back to herself in the act of empathy, for God is the empathizer par excellence “as the possessor of complete knowledge,” he “is not mistaken about people's experiences, as people are mistaken about each other's experiences.”³⁹ If the root cause of codependency issues usually stems from dysfunctional family experiences, then would not a theology of the Trinity as family representing paternity (Father), brotherhood (Logos), and the eternal bond between these (Holy Spirit) be the perfect place to begin reconstituting or healing lost personhood? What would it mean for a codependent psyche to begin to look to the heavenly parent i.e., the Father or Mother, for the fullness of and validation of her identity instead of its diminution? Stein suggested that meaning is essential in an actual act of empathy; would not the second person of the Trinity as Meaning Totality help a codependent person figure out the meaning of his or her self and life? Could the Holy Spirit's powerfulness begin to empower one beyond codependent behaviors that stemmed from a lack of control one felt as an infant? Through prayer to this Trinitarian God, would it not be essential to get connected with the dark, unfathomable depths of her own soul (Father) and receive the light of meaning (Son) and then the power to live out the truth (Holy Spirit) from her innermost center?

³⁹ Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, 111.

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The most crucial insight regarding healing the lost sense of self and Edith Stein's anthropology is "as the life-giving principle of the organism, the soul is at the same time the actuating agent of its own potentialities."⁴⁰ Therefore, every human person has the power from within to form and become her true self if one depends upon the God who created her. This means that the codependents' true, deep, and pervasive experience of being dependent on helping or having another for her sense of self is counteracted by a deeper and more primordial truth, the person has all that she needs within the dark depths of her being to know and become all she was destined to be. The hidden self or the lost selfhood is not truly gone (Father), nor is the knowledge of it (Son) or the power to become it (Holy Spirit) lie outside of the codependent when using Edith Stein's anthropology. One's soul has just been given obstacles in her development to the unfolding of its actuality. These obstacles are what need to be removed. The father of depth psychology "Jung has said that no matter how much he and his patients contribute to an analysis [a form of therapy], they can at best only prepare the way, remove the obstacles, to healing...healing itself, he says, always comes in some wholly unexpected way from the unknown, *wie tin Wunder*'— like a miracle."⁴¹ Stein would say this miracle is the mystery at the heart of the universe, the dark depths of the Father coming to manifest his life through the light of the Son unfolding through the power of the Spirit. So also the human person becomes a portal to and participates in this very mystery within her own being when she is able to connect to, know, and live what she already is within her inmost depths. This participation alone is the origin and healing of her personhood.

⁴⁰ Wallenfang, "The Heart of the Matter," 130.

⁴¹ Victor White, *God and the Unconscious*, with a Foreword by C. G. Jung, and an Appendix by Gebhard Frei (United Kingdom: H. Regnery Company, 1953), 233.

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