

BOOK REVIEW

Gerda Walther’s Phenomenology of Sociality, Psychology, and Religion edited by A. Calcagno. Book 2 in *Women in the History of Philosophy and Sciences* series. Springer, 2018. 171 pp. ISBN 978-3319975917.

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This book is part of a Springer series on *Women in the History of Philosophy and Sciences* that attempts to rebalance the sexism in science and the so-called “Matilda” effect (denial or minimization of the scientific contribution of women researchers to the benefit of their male colleagues). I’m clearly not a specialist in the deep philosophical work discussed by the contributors of this book, and thus will not give a fully technical review, but I was strongly curious to learn more about Gerda Walther (1897–1977). Indeed, she was for me the famous “secretary of the Baron von Schrenck-Notzing” (1862–1929), one of the main psychical researchers of the modern era (Mulacz, 2013; Sommer, 2012; Wolfram, 2006). For my own historical research (Evrard, 2016), I read a lot of correspondence between Walther and members of the Institut Métapsychique International in the archives of that French research group and in the archives of the Institut für Grenzgebiete der Psychologie und Psychohygiene in Freiburg-im-Breisgau. But I didn’t have any clue about the wide dimension of this scientist’s thinking and her importance for the history of philosophy as a brilliant student and continuator of Edmund Husserl’s thinking.

The book provides probably the best overview of her life and philosophy. In the first part, “The life and work of Gerda Walther,” Rodney Parker gives “a sketch of her life” (pp. 3–9); and Marina Pia Pellegrino writes about the general orientation of her phenomenological approach of “traces of lived experiences” (pp. 11–24).

The second part, “Social ontology and the self,” goes deeper in the contextualization of her philosophy. Alessandro Salice and Genki Uemura discuss her theory of social acts and communities (pp. 27–46); Anna Maria Pezzella focuses on “Community” and the comparison with Edith Stein’s philosophy; Antonio Calcagno explores the “possibility of a non-intentional we of community” (pp. 57–70); Julia Mühl digs into her anthropological approach of human beings as social beings (pp. 71–84); Christina Gschwandtner does the clearing of the German concepts of *Körper*, *Leib*, *Gemüt*, *Seele*, and *Geist* in early phenomenology (pp. 85–99); and Manuela Massa has a chapter on “What is the condition for members of social communities to be ‘real’ people according to Gerda Walther?” (pp. 101–111).

The third part is clearly the most attractive for readers of this journal because, under its title “Religion and mysticism,” it depicts Walther’s original phenomenology of mysticism and paranormal experiences. Rodney Parker introduces what Walther considered her main philosophical work, *Zur Phänomenologie der Mystik* (1923). Angela Ales Bello analyses “the sense of mystical experience” (pp. 135–147) and Kimberly Baltzer-Jaray the “phenomenological approaches to the uncanny and the divine,” through the influence of Adolf Reinach on Walther (pp. 149–167).

This is how I understand what happened: During the winter of 1918, Walther had a strong mystical experience, which is described at the end of the book (pp. 153–154). Her experience has two distinct elements: a moment of foreseeing into the future, and then feeling the presence of something Divine. She recalled having been in a strange state in her parent’s home, before taking the train: She had episodes of weakness sweep over her to the point of losing control of her body and most likely her consciousness, too, and she tells of a growing distance from and disinterest in her life and all she cared about.

Suddenly, I knew with uncanny clarity: "When I arrive in Freiburg, I will either be dead or mentally ill—or I will have found something entirely new, unknown, which gives a different meaning to my entire life." (quoted on p. 153)

In the second part of her experience, she felt a new source of energy:

“a sea of warm love and kindness surrounded me. It stayed with me a long time” (quoted on p. 154). Later, she arrived at the conclusion that this was a mystical experience, something absolutely remarkable, given that she was raised as an atheist, and this atheism leads her to give up her political ambitions in the Social Democratic Party and pursue an academic career. “It also opened her eyes to all the experiences possible for humans, ultimately resulting in her interest not only in mystical experiences but also parapsychology,” (Baltzer-Jaray on p. 154).

She found in the phenomenology of her time the appropriate tool to develop this approach. Indeed, even if neither Husserl nor his colleagues “were attracted to the study of the paranormal and the occult, [they] all maintained that no phenomena were to be excluded from phenomenological study” (Bello on p. 139). In addition to this openness, the second quality of phenomenology is its non-reductionism. As Henry Corbin (1958) highlighted in his review of the second edition of her masterpiece, this book fulfills its promise to analyze the mystical phenomenon for itself, with no other presupposition than to let it show itself as it is and to accept what it shows.

It is therefore not a question of abstract constructions, of views of the mind, of fantasies, of memories, or of ‘thinking of’, but of *Erlebnisse*, lived-states of a real presence, in which the ‘phenomenon of God’ presents itself in the state of data. (Corbin, 1958, p. 94; my translation)

Mystical phenomenology consists in studying all the lived phenomena (*Erlebnisse*), which, according to their intrinsic meaning, claim to make God a real datum, however imperfect it may be. Comparing her to Edith Stein, Bello (p. 135) wrote that “Walther can be rightfully viewed as the phenomenologist who carried out the most sustained and focused research on the phenomenon of mysticism (. . .) making illustrative references to mystics from a variety of religions.”

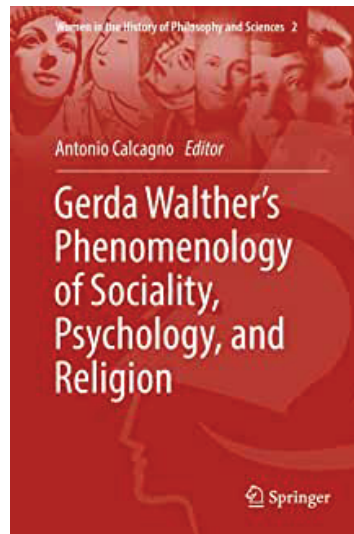
One of the main influences on her research was Adolf Reinach, to whom she showed fidelity: “Above all, to leave religious phenomena their intrinsic meaning, even if they pose enigmas. Because it is precisely these puzzles that can have the greatest value for the knowledge of the truth” (Walther, 1923). This may sound like a scientific value in

anomalistics: to avoid the pretension of resolving the *quaestio juris* before the *quaestio facti*, that is to say to decide a priori the possibility of a fact before having studied it.

Indeed, a quick look into Reinach's initial work leads us into parapsychology, with a study that may be compared to Charles Richet's work on soldiers' various parapsychological experiences (De Vesme, 1919). During WWI, in 1916 while fighting at the Belgian front, Reinach overheard conversation at his camp of soldiers foreseeing their own deaths. The staff sergeant there thought these experiences were pure superstition, the result of exhaustion, and furthermore death in war is a very likely occurrence that can be somewhat predictable. In listening to this conversation, Reinach realizes that the only way to overcome the skepticism of someone like the staff sergeant is "to provide evidence for these experiences and proof that knowledge is obtainable from them" (Baltzer-Jaray on p. 155). It seems that Walther follows the same guidelines, starting from her own experiences like others after her (for instance, Evrard, 2013).

Walther discriminates against the mystical experience leading to the meeting of a personal God and that which immerses the Spiritual in an abyss of light, love, power, where "there is no one." But most interestingly, she treated "parapsychological" experiences with the same tools she used with religious and mystical experiences. She is clearly a pioneer of this approach to let the experiences speak for themselves. This collective book is really struggling to clarify anything that could be extracted from her analysis of these specific experiences. It focuses in an unbalanced way on the social objects studied by Walther to the detriment of the mystical and parapsychological phenomenology to which her attention was particularly pointed (again, coupling literature cases with her own experiences).

However, Corbin (1958, p. 96) claims one of the most original



analyses in the book, her study of the telepathic connection between human beings (Chapter IV of the 1955 edition of her *The Phenomenology of Mysticism*) and internal communication with the deceased (Chapter V). The experience of a “stranger subject,” someone else’s soul in my own interiority, reveals to us a crucial dimension of human subjective construction: its connectivity. Corbin (1958, p. 96) saw “an interesting indication in the author’s affinity for the telepathic link and the *unio mystica*, the deep inner unity between the ‘sender’ and the ‘receiver,’ the feeling of a bi-unit (*Zwei-Einheit*).” Indeed, Walther found in telepathy a kind of fundamental phenomena that allows a better understanding of the construction of human psychism. Humans seem to be not fully individual, but can connect with a collective noetic dimension that is the basis of mystical experiences.

This scholarly book is quite symptomatic of the neglect of parapsychology in philosophical circles. Here we have a philosopher whose mystical and paranormal experiences are the starting block of her thought, but her commentators still find a way to make distinctions and disconnect orthodox subjects from heterodox ones. In fact, while more than half of the book is on “social ontology and the self,” the authors clearly failed to show how this is related to parapsychological topics discussed elsewhere. A community, for Walther, is understood as a unity or oneness, a *Vereinigung*. Communities have both subjective and objective sides. Walther also identifies the possibility of we-communities that are non-intentional and have no classical intentional object. Love is an example she focuses on. A way to connect these points is to argue that Walther’s example of the telepathic link as a transcendent connection between human beings is behind her theory of (spontaneous) social communities. Similar ideas may be found in French philosopher Jean Jaurès’ “universal solidarity of living beings” (1892) or later in Gabriel Marcel’s defense of “communion” as a philosophical concept that should be applied to extra-sensory perception (Bouëssée, 2013).

Even if this book allows us to have a look into usually inaccessible German texts and Walther’s correspondence and personal papers, it still fails to integrate them into a whole picture of her work. There’s no exploration of Walther’s parapsychological correspondence and work, particularly her collaboration with Schrenck-Notzing (Walther, 1962).

This missing chapter is probably the missing link to understanding how her philosophy of personal experiences teaches us something about the general human condition.

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