

Eucharist: Metaphysical Miracle or Institutional Fact?

If this most holy Sacrament were celebrated in only one place and consecrated by only one priest in the whole world, with what great desire, do you think, would men be attracted to that place, to that priest of God, in order to witness the celebration of the divine Mysteries! But now there are many priests and Mass is offered in many places, that God's grace and love for men may appear the more clearly as the Sacred Communion is spread more widely through the world.

-----*The Imitation of Christ*

Presence as ordinarily understood requires spatio-temporal proximity. If however Christ's presence in the Eucharist is understood in this way it would take a miracle to secure multiple location and an additional miracle to cover it up so that the presence of Christ where the Eucharist was celebrated made no empirical difference. And, while multiple location is logically possible, such metaphysical miracles – miracles of distinction without difference, which have no empirical import – are problematic. I propose an account of Eucharist according to which Christ is indeed really and objectively present in the religiously required sense, without benefit of metaphysical miracles. According to the proposed account, which draws upon Searle's discussion of "social ontology" in *The Construction of Social Reality* and *The Making of the Social World*, the presence of Christ in the Eucharist is an institutional fact. I argue that such an account satisfies the requirements for a real presence doctrine.

1 The Problem of Multiple Location

One of the chief difficulties any account of the real presence doctrine faces is an embarrassment of riches: "there are many priests and Mass is offered in many places." Consequently, if Christ is really present in the Eucharist, he is really present in a great many earthly regions as well as a heavenly place.

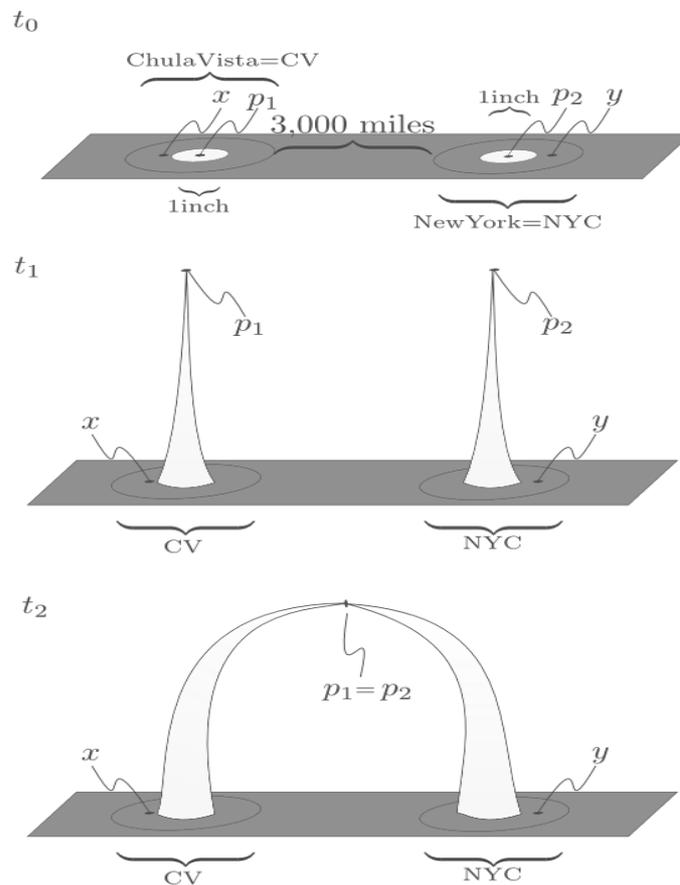
Multiple location is commonplace. In the flyleaf of his geography book, Stephen Dedalus wrote his name and "where he was," viz.: Class of Elements, Clongowes Wood College, Salins, County Kildare, Ireland, Europe, The World, The Universe – all of which were distinct but nested, and so intersecting places in which Stephen was located. According to the Real Presence doctrine however Christ's multiple location does not, prosaically, consist in his occupying the intersection of multiple locations but rather in his being wholly located in (what appear to be) multiple non-intersecting regions on earth, and in heaven. Even if multiple location in this sense does not pose

insurmountable logical difficulties some account of how it comes about would be desirable. Alexander Pruss considers two ways in which we may understand Christ's ostensible multiple location which might be called the Topological Solution and the Mereological Solution respectively. Each account however, requires us to assume the occurrence of what might be called a *metaphysical miracle*: an event that changes features of the material world without making any empirical difference. And it is not clear that even omnipotence is up to metaphysical miracles.

1.1 The Topological Solution

According to the Topological Solution God deforms space in such a way that, appearances to the contrary, all regions that appear to be occupied by post-consecration wine and wafers are the *same* region. Christ is located wherever consecrated wine and wafers appear to be but, strictly speaking, is not multiply located since on this account, these regions are in fact one and the same.

To see how this works, consider wafers at St. John's Church, Chula Vista, California and the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City, which are at t_0 , about to undergo consecration. At t_1 priests in Chula Vista and New York City pronounce the words that alert God to glue together the regions they occupy. At t_2 , the regions are glued together, forming a hole in space.



This, of course, is not the only hole in space since, as Thomas á Kempis notes, “there are many priests and Mass is offered in many places.” So there are many holes in space, each forming, as the illustration shows, a tight loop.¹ As Pruss suggests it is logically possible that space be structured in this way – so that regions we should regard as remote were “glued” together. It does not however follow that the space of *our* world, *given the empirical facts that obtain*, could have that structure.

It does not take an omnipotent being to “shape” an *abstract* space – a set of points, which can be anything we please – by “gluing” together the appropriate points as an exercise in topology.² “Gluing” points together is just defining a function that partitions that space into equivalence classes. Anyone can define a function. *Anyone* can glue together eucharistically-occupied regions in this way.

To be theologically interesting, God would have to make that topology model *our* space – the way things are at the actual world. And it is not clear that even God could do it without making any empirical changes to the way things actually are because hypotheses about the shape of space are empirical hypotheses. If the universe were shaped differently things would look different:

[I]f the universe is multiply connected, like a torus, there would be many different possible paths. This means that an observer would see multiple images of each galaxy and could easily misinterpret them as distinct galaxies in an endless space, much as a visitor to a mirrored room has the illusion of seeing a crowd.³

Or again if the universe were unbounded but finite like the surface of a ball, and tiny, we could get rear views of ourselves in the distance.

If God deformed space in such a way that all quantities of consecrated bread and wine were at the same place, we should expect there to be observable consequences though it is a matter for speculation what those consequences might be. If we were in the presence of one of those consecrated wafers, would we be able to get a peek at what was going on in other remote eucharistically occupied regions? Would a bullet shot

¹ What is the shape of space on this account? It depends on the shape of space apart from the deformation required to glue together eucharistically-occupied regions. If the shape is closed, if it's finite but unbounded like the surface of a ball, then given these holes space is a many-holed torus; if the shape of space is otherwise open then it's a punctured many-holed torus.

² See, e.g. James R. Munkres *Topology*. Prentice Hall, 2000, p. 139. “Definition: Let X be a topological space, and let X^* be a partition of X into disjoint subsets whose union is X . Let $p: X \rightarrow X^*$ be the surjective map that carries each point of X to the element of X^* containing it. In the quotient topology induced by p , the space X^* is called a *quotient space* of X .

³ *A cosmic hall of mirrors*. (2005, September 26). Retrieved June 8, 2011, from physicsworld.com: <http://physicsworld.com/cws/article/print/23009>

through one of them come out in those other regions as well as locally becoming multiply located or undergoing duplication?

Like questions about the microstructure of physical objects, questions about the shape of space are empirical questions, even if they are *hard* empirical questions, and even if it takes special instruments, difficult techniques, and theoretical sophistication to answer them. Most of us would not be happy with an account according to which the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist involved an empirical change that made a chemical or physical difference at the molecular, or atomic, or subatomic level. And for the same reason we should be equally unhappy with the Topological Solution. Whatever supernatural changes consecration may make, it is not supposed to make any empirical difference.

God could build a system of loops into space-time so that all regions apparently occupied by post-consecration bread and wine were the same region. It is questionable however whether he could shape space in this way *without observable changes* unless at the same time he performed a very powerful metaphysical miracle to cover his tracks. And it is not clear that even omnipotence would be up to such a miracle.

1.2 The Mereological Solution

Is there an alternative? Pruss suggests another account, which we may call The Mereological Solution. On this account, instead of assuming that space is twisted, we assume space is (near-)flat but that objects occupy it in peculiar ways.

The Mereological Solution begins with the observation that it is logically possible for objects to occupy space in different ways, in particular, that it is possible for objects to *entend* the regions at which they are located:

An object, x , *entends* a region, $r =_{df} x$ is wholly and entirely located at a non-point-sized region, r , and for each proper subregion of r , r^* , x is wholly located at r^* . (Hudson 2005)

We understand being wholly located and being entirely located in the following way:

' x is wholly located at r ' $=_{df}$ x is located at r and there is no proper part of x not located at r

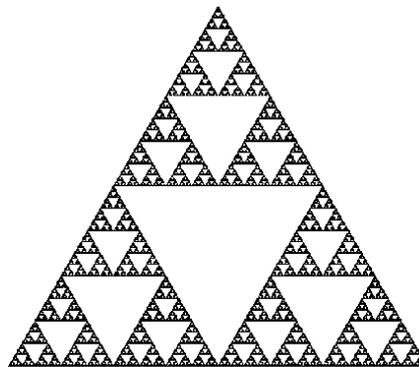
' x is entirely located at r ' $=_{df}$ x is located at r and there is no region of space-time disjoint from r at which x is located. (Hudson 2005)

According to the Mereological Solution, Christ is an entending object. On this account there is a large, *gappy* region, r , in the vicinity of earth and in heaven occupied by Christ. r has a proper part at every eucharistically-occupied subregion, r^* . Christ

entends r. He wholly and entirely occupies *r* since he has no proper part that occupies any other region and there is no other region disjoint from that gappy region at which he is located. He is also wholly, though not entirely, located at r^* (and every other subregion of *r*).

Prima facie, entension seems to capture what Aquinas, whose doctrine of transubstantiation may be taken as a paradigmatic real presence account, claims about the “sacramental presence” of Christ in the Eucharist (as distinct from his “local presence” in heaven). First, it allows us to say, as required, that Christ is wholly located at each of the disconnected spatial regions (apparently?) occupied by quantities of consecrated bread and wine: each region that seems to contain a wafer or quantity of wine contains the whole of Christ and not merely a Christ-part. Secondly, on this account, Christ is wholly located at each of the connected spatial sub-regions the consecrated elements (apparently) occupy. Finally, Christ is wholly and entirely located at the fusion of the heavenly region he occupies and disconnected regions that appear to be occupied by quantities of consecrated bread and wine. Though this last claim is not one that Aquinas or other advocates of the real presence doctrine consider, it seems unlikely that they would object.

There is no reason to reject the view that Christ is wholly present in every region where a quantity of consecrated bread and wine appear to be on purely *logical* grounds: it is logically possible that an object occupy space by *entending*. And it is logically possible that an entending object be gappy. However this gives us no reason to hold that *Christ's body* is, or could be, such an entending object. We might be inclined to regard objects that have certain characteristics as entending. Consider, for example, fractals – infinitely complex geometrical shapes that have the property of self-similarity such that they can be split into parts each of which is a reduced size copy of the whole, and each of which can itself be split into reduced size copies *ad infinitum*:



We might want to regard the infinitely complex shape type (inadequately) represented above as an entending object. The shape type is wholly and entirely located at the largest triangular region and wholly located at an infinity of its subregions.

However, *prima facie* there are no observable features of the fusion of consecrated wafers, quantities of wine and Christ's resurrection body in heaven that would lead us to regard it as constituting a gappy, entending object since we should not regard an empirically indistinguishable fusion of *unconsecrated* wafers, quantities of wine and Christ's resurrection body in heaven as a gappy, entending object, much less identify it with Christ. Moreover, even if there is some reason to regard certain *types* of shapes as entending objects, we may feel a certain discomfort construing Christ's Body, which is a particular, albeit an extraordinary one, as an entending object.

Prima facie it looks as if, once again, nothing short of a metaphysical miracle can make this solution work. [Religious believers may not worry about metaphysical miracles, particularly in connection with the Eucharist. Nevertheless,](#) metaphysical miracles pose, what Dummett suggests is the "primary philosophical question" concerning the *intelligibility* of Eucharistic doctrine, viz. the question of "how it is possible to deny propositions that pass all the normal tests for truth, namely that this is bread and that wine, and affirm in their place propositions that pass none of those tests." (Dummett, 1987) [Even if, as Christians, we take it on faith that Christ is really present in the Eucharist, to the extent that we are engaged in theological reflection it is incumbent on us to address the philosophical questions posed by metaphysical miracles.](#)

2 Metaphysical Miracles

Each of the accounts considered so far has a story to tell about why we should affirm propositions concerning the presence of Christ in the Eucharist that pass none of the normal tests for truth. But neither gives any account of why we should deny what appear to be straightforwardly empirical propositions that pass all the normal tests for truth. Even if they provide some explanation of the real presence of Christ, they do not offer any explanation for either what Pruss calls the "real absence" of bread and wine or for the absence of any empirical consequences of the spectacular changes in the shape of space or its occupants that are supposed to have taken place.

2.1 Illusion

There is of course a facile response, which Dummett attributes to followers of Descartes. “According to them,” he writes, “God systematically induces sensory illusions in us after the consecration.”

If he did not, we should perceive upon the altar a human Body and human Blood: they really are there, but God causes them to appear to us exactly as did the bread and wine that were formerly there. (Dummett, 1987)

The illusion here would presumably be one to which everyone, everywhere at all times is subject, and which cannot even in principle be dispelled by any empirical investigation. It is however controversial whether such a perfect illusion is possible. O. K. Bouwsma imagines Descartes’ Evil Genius failing in his attempt to produce a perfect illusion precisely because perfection in this regard precludes illusion – and it is not clear that God could do any better:

[T]he evil genius sees, touches, smells, and does detect the illusion. He made the illusion; so, of course, he must know it. How then does he know it? The evil genius has a sense denied to men...He has certainly created his own illusions, though he has not himself been deceived. But neither has anyone else been deceived. For human beings do not use the word "illusion" by relation to a sense with which only the evil genius is blessed. (Bouwsma, 1949)

God likewise might create what would be to him a perfect illusion, maintaining the mere appearances of bread and wine. But if Bouwsma is correct then for us, epistemically confined to the world of phenomena, it would be no illusion at all.

Whether this is convincing or not, there is a further reason to reject this account of “real absence” as illusion: it is, as Dummett puts it, “repugnant.” However, Dummett notes, “its rejection is just what poses our problem.”

Our question is not just how we can claim that what look like bread and wine, satisfy all normal observational criteria for being bread and wine, and will pass any ordinary test for being bread and wine, are nevertheless not bread and wine, but how we can so much as intelligibly make this claim simultaneously with the assertion that we are suffering from no illusion. (Dummett, 1987)

2.2 Change of Substance

Aquinas’ account, Dummett notes, avoids this objection. On his account, after consecration, the perceived features of bread and wine which formerly inhered in the *substance* of bread and wine attach to a *space*, namely the “dimensions” of the bread and

wine which remain after their substance is replaced by Christ's Body and Blood. The sensible qualities of bread and wine on this account are no illusion since they are present, just as they were prior to transubstantiation, even though they no longer inhere in any substance. Dummett however suggests that this account is also unsatisfactory:

[I]f it makes sense at all to ascribe such qualities – whether particularized or universal – to a region of space, then the same ascription must surely be made to the space occupied by the bread and wine before the consecration...And now the thesis may be advanced that the presence in a given location of an object characterized by certain qualities simply amounts to the possession of those qualities, in the appropriate sense of 'possession', by the relevant region of space. This thesis is only a version of the contention with which we are centrally concerned, that it is unintelligible to deny that bread and wine are present when all the ordinary criteria for their being so are satisfied.
(Dummett, 1987)

Harking back to Bouwsma's take on the Evil Genius's shenanigans, even if God could extract the substance of bread and wine, leaving its sensible qualities to occupy the relevant region of space, we should not conclude that the bread and wine were no longer there. Arguably, for us human beings "the presence in a given location of an object characterized by certain qualities simply amounts to the possession of those qualities...by the relevant region of space." (Dummett, 1987) So for us, substance does no work: whatever it took to license us in claiming that bread and wine were present prior to consecration is still there afterward.

Put another way, this account of transubstantiation does not support the contention that Christ is present in regions that appear to be occupied by quantities of bread and wine so much as it promotes skepticism about the notion of substance. We have a dilemma.

Suppose, as required for this account, it is possible for God to transform an object of some kind, F, into an object of some other kind, G by switching its F-substance for G-substance without making any other changes. Then we are committed to accepting what Dummett characterizes as a "degenerate" notion of substance, which precludes there being any *criterion* for answering the question "what is it?"

On this view, all we ever truly know are appearances: whenever we judge, on the basis of what we see or hear or feel, that an object of any given kind is present...we should never have any reason for inferring, from the fact that

something gives rise to those appearances that we associate with, say, tables, that it is not, for instance, a hippopotamus. (Dummett, 1987)

Suppose that it is *not* possible for God to transform an F into a G by switching F-substance for G substance. Then substance, if there is such a thing, does no metaphysical work, so that even if, for whatever reason, we believe that God maintains substances (and perhaps occasionally switches them around) they are ontological junk we can safely ignore. More to the point, this account of substance will not satisfy even Dummett's minimal requirement for a real presence doctrine, viz. that the correct and unqualified answer to the question, 'What is it?' asked of either of the consecrated elements, is 'The Body of Christ' or 'The Blood of Christ' (Dummett, 1987) It commits us to understanding substance as an idle metaphysical fifth wheel and fails to explain how regions that appear to be occupied by bread and wine are occupied by something quite different.

I suggest that we can meet Dummett's requirements, and get anything else we should want from a real presence account, without assuming either multiple location or faux multiple location or the change-of-substance doctrine by recognizing the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist as an institutional fact rather than a metaphysical miracle.

3 Transignification

The account I shall propose to achieve this end is a version of what has been called "transignification," and which was rejected by Pope Paul VI in his 1965 encyclical *Mysterium Fidei*. (Pope Paul VI, 1965) Dummett dismisses a version he attributes (without citation) to Charles Davis and which says was "derived from Heidegger" according to which "the consecrated elements are the Body and Blood of Christ because of the way we *treat* them – because, to that extent, they signify Christ to us. While the version of this account he considers is indeed defective I shall propose an alternative version that delivers the results we require.

Dummett suggests that a real presence account meet two conditions:

- (i) **Reference Condition:** the correct and unqualified answer to the question, 'What is it?' asked of either of the consecrated elements, is 'The Body of Christ' or 'The Blood of Christ' and
- (ii) **Theological Commitment Condition:** any belief in the Eucharist must be as dependent on a prior belief in the Incarnation as the latter belief is dependent on belief in God."

His requirements however are metaphysically minimalist: he wants an account that is “unburdened with metaphysical baggage.” (Dummett, 1987) The account I shall propose is, clearly, unburdened. It satisfies (ii) and an only slightly tweaked version of (i) and, I shall argue, captures what matters for a real presence doctrine as suggested by Dummett’s criteria.

3.1 What’s wrong with transignification?

Some things, Dummett notes, are the kinds of things they are in virtue of how they are used or treated. We make something an ashtray or a coin by treating it as an ashtray or coin, but we cannot make something bread or wine, flesh or blood, by use or treatment. The worry therefore is that the transignification account is reductivist, implicitly interpreting talk about the presence of Christ to mean that the consecrated elements have acquired a character that *can* be imposed on an object by the way in which it is used or treated as, for example, a symbol of one’s affiliation, a pledge to work with others for social betterment or a meditation object on which to focus one’s attention. Reinterpreted in any of these ways, claims about the presence of Christ are theologically uncommitted.

To see this, imagine that you are at an “underground mass” c. 1965, the year of Pope Paul’s encyclical. You and a dozen other people have met in a neighbor’s basement rec room to “make Eucharist,” a communal event which consists of sharing an agape meal, and planning the coming week’s round of peace demonstrations and soup kitchen tasks. There are guitars. And there is homebaked, whole grain bread which the priest blesses and distributes, proclaiming that the caring and sharing of this little community “makes Christ present in the breaking of bread” since in saying “Christ is present” we *mean* that we have bonded with one another and are committed to an agapistic way of life. No supernaturalistic commitments are required to affirm the “transignification” of the bread and wine to represent the community’s commitment to working for a more just social order and a better world. This understanding of the Eucharist thus fails the Theological Commitment Condition: it does not depend on any prior belief in the Incarnation or, for that matter, the existence of God. Non-Christians and atheists participate and when they say that they don’t believe in God or in the real presence you set them straight about their “conceptual mistake.” You explain that the community has adopted a convention according to which saying “Christ is present” *just means* that you recognize the ceremony in which you are participating as a corporate expression of mutual support and good intentions that commits participants to acting according to Jesus’ moral teachings. You don’t have to believe in the

Incarnation or, for that matter, in God to make that commitment and so to sincerely affirm that Christ is present, given the community's linguistic conventions.

The version of transignification that this thought experiment exhibits, according to which the Eucharist signifies a state of affairs that can be adequately described in purely naturalistic terms, is the one that [the Pope and other](#) critics likely had in mind. It clearly fails as a real presence account. So, Dummett worries that transignification accounts fail (ii): "the transignification theory," Dummett writes, "would allow a non-Christian, or even an atheist, to acknowledge the truth of the doctrine of the real presence: indeed, he would, on that theory, be committing a conceptual mistake if he failed to acknowledge it." (Dummett, 1987) Accounts according to which talk about Christ's presence in the Eucharist cashes out as participants' commitment to work together to implement Jesus' moral agenda or the social teachings of the Church fail. So do accounts according to which liturgy is no more than a routine for inducing a particular flavor of religious experience and the elements are a convenient meditation object.

Arguably, however, it is possible to formulate a theologically committed transignification account that will satisfy Dummett's [Theological Commitment Condition](#). The proposed understanding of real presence is indebted to Searle's account of institutional facts in *The Construction of Social Reality* and *Making the Social World*.

3.2 Status functions

"[H]umans" Searle writes, "have the capacity to impose functions on objects and people where the objects and the people cannot perform the functions solely in virtue of their physical structure.

The performance of the function requires that there be a collectively recognized status that the person or object has, and it is only in virtue of that status that the person or object can perform the function in question...status functions can only work to the extent that they are collectively recognized" [and] depend on collective intentionality. (Searle, *Making the Social World*, 2009)

A coin becomes money in virtue of being collectively recognized as money, by being used as a unit of exchange; a dish becomes an ashtray in virtue of being used as an ashtray.

On the proposed account of the real presence, suitably authorized humans confer a status function upon quantities of bread and wine in virtue of which [when pointing to the consecrated elements one can say, truly, "That is the Body and Blood of](#)

[Christ.](#)” Dummett worries that whereas collective recognition and use can make something money, or an ashtray, they cannot make something a human body or human blood by collective recognition or use. Being money is a status humans confer on objects; being copper is not a status that humans can confer by declaration or through use. We can, nevertheless, by declaration and through use bring it about that the correct answer to the question “What is it?” asked [asked when pointing to the](#) consecrated elements is what Dummett takes it to be.

It is important to recognize apropos of Dummett’s examples that coins and ashtrays, that coins and ashtrays acquire status functions in quite different ways. Money is an institutional construct maintained by the state (or some comparable social institution) and the status function of coins as money depends on convention. Objects become ashtrays simply by being used for the disposal of ash. There are physical requirements for ashtrays – they have to be big enough to accommodate a cigarette’s worth of ash and cannot be flammable – because ashtray use is a straightforward physical action. But *anything* can be money because money-use is not a straightforward physical action: it is an exchange of rights, permissions and entitlements, conferring on parties to the exchange what Searle calls “deontic powers” inducing various “reasons for acting that are independent of our inclinations.” (Searle, *Making the Social World*, 2009)

Because money-use is essentially an exchange of deontic powers, where physical actions are only the means and certifications of the transaction, virtually anything can be money, including metal coins, shells, stones, paper, certificates, checks and other objects that have little or no intrinsic value. Moreover the exchange of deontic powers can take place without any token changing hands: we buy online using only our credit card information. What matters about financial transactions is not the medium of exchange (if any) but the backing of an institution that manages the system and the collective acceptance of the rules and practices it has established by people who engage in these transactions.

Arguably, what matters in the Eucharist is like what matters in financial transactions to the extent that it is the deontic powers involved rather than the medium of exchange that are important. The medium matters only insofar as it is of the kind designated by the institution that establishes the practice. Consecration confers the deontic power on the elements of the Eucharist such that they “may be unto us the Body and Blood” through which human participants come to be, [after a fashion](#), *en rapport* with God through Christ. Bread and wine are the vehicle of the transaction because they were designated by Christ for this role at the Last Supper when, celebrating the Eucharist for the first time, he blessed bread and wine saying, “Do this

in remembrance of me.” The Church, which he established, has taken this to mean that we should do *this kind of action* using *this kind of stuff*, viz. bread and wine, in remembrance of him as another instance of the action he did.

Now there is disagreement about what *this kind of action* is: there are a variety of different liturgies that purport to be instances of the action Christ performed at the Last Supper. It is also controversial what kind of stuff is required: Should the bread be leavened or unleavened? Must it be wheat bread? Will unfermented grape juice do as “wine”? Regardless of how we resolve these controversies, however, our aim is to determine what Christ’s intention was when he said “do this” – not to determine the inherent suitability of different kinds of stuff to do the job. Christ could have chosen other kinds of stuff: bread and wine are the elements of the Eucharist because he declared them to be such. By the same token, the U.S. government could have declared shells and cassowary feathers as the vehicle for financial transactions. But it didn’t. It declared coins of various descriptions and paper bills, produced at its designated facilities, as currency: they count as money because the government *declares* them to be money.

3.3 Declaration

In the same way, bread and wine count as Christ’s body and blood in virtue of his *declaration*. “All institutional facts,” Searle writes, “and therefore all status functions are created by... ‘Declarations’...cases where we change reality to match the propositional content of the speech act...because we represent the reality as being so changed.” (Searle, *Making the Social World*, 2009)

We use Declarations to make something the case by declaring it to be the case as, for example, in declaring war or adjourning a meeting. On the current account, Christ brought it about that the bread and wine at the Last Supper were his body and blood by *declaring*: “This is my Body...This is my Blood.” That declaration confers deontic powers on substances of these kinds when they are consecrated by his authorized representatives: it establishes a whole range of entitlements, obligations, permissions and the like associated with them. We are obliged to treat them with respect, as we would treat Jesus if he were, in the ordinary way, present amongst us. We reverence them and the altar. Leftover wine is reverently consumed – not poured back into the bottle or down the drain. Chalices, patens and altar cloths are rinsed in a sink that drains into the ground rather than into the common sewer. All baptized persons who are not notorious evil-livers are entitled to receive Communion; others may not.

Granted: there is no reason in principle why some other human couldn't issue a declaration which, with suitable social cooperation, would make it an institutional fact that a quantity of bread and wine, in the same way, represented him. But no other human being has solicited or secured such cooperation. More importantly, even if someone had done so, that institutional fact would not carry the same deontic powers. The entitlements, obligations and permissions associated with the Eucharist come about because Jesus Christ, the person who is represented, is divine. On the current account, the presence of Christ in the Eucharist is not in and of itself miraculous: the miracle is the Incarnation – the God-manhood of Christ. The religiously significant feature of the Eucharist is not that it features some unique mode of presence but that Christ, the individual who is present, is unique.

The story is however further complicated. Christ's presence is an institutional fact that obtains in virtue of his institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper however apart from his declaration at the Last Supper, Christ does not *directly* impose any status function on quantities of bread and wine. Rather he establishes an institution, the Church, whose representatives he authorizes to act on his behalf to do what he did at the Last Supper in remembrance of him. There is disagreement about which organizations count as Church and which individuals are Christ's authorized representatives. Nevertheless, the Church, wherever it is and whatever its extent, is established to celebrate the Eucharist by authorizing individuals to act on Christ's behalf in declaring bread and wine to be his body and blood.

To complicate matters even further, on the current account, by declaration bread and wine come to *represent* Christ's Body and Blood. Coins and bills do not represent money: they *are* money. In the past tokens that had no intrinsic value were reckoned to have monetary value because they represented precious metals, and could, at least in theory, be exchanged for quantities of silver or gold. Nowadays, however, we no longer maintain that fiction. Bills and coins are money solely in virtue of the institutional rules and conventions by which they are designated as media of exchange. There is nothing more to money than the units of exchange we use, which are money in virtue of the role they play in our transactions, backed by government regulations: to believe that some token is money is just to believe that it plays that role.

This however is exactly what we do *not* want to say about the elements of the Eucharist. "Belief in the Eucharist," as Dummett maintains, depends on one's endorsing theological claims that go beyond anything that can be said about the role they play in ecclesiastically sanctioned transactions – in liturgy, pious practices, or the attitudes and beliefs of participants. It remains to be seen whether the current account,

according to which the elements of the Eucharist represent Christ, satisfy [this requirement](#).

3.4 Representing

This token is money: it doesn't represent something else in virtue of which it is money. No reasonable person would ask for anything more, for some "real" money in virtue of which ordinary bills and coins have value.⁴ But bread and wine are Christ's Body and Blood wholly and solely in virtue of something beyond, namely Christ.

When we ask, "What is it?" of a piece of money – a coin, bill, or other money token – the question is unambiguous because reference is unambiguous. We can say different things about *that* object. We might even distinguish the kinds of predicates we ascribe to it as P-predicates and M-predicates – physical and monetary predicates respectively – to mark the categorical difference between saying of it that it is a 3"x 6" piece of paper and that it is worth \$5. But even if we distinguish talking about it *qua* physical object from talking about it *qua* its institutional role as money, we are uncontroversially talking about the same thing. By contrast, when I indicate the consecrated elements of the Eucharist and ask: "What is it?" the question is ambiguous. We can answer, "it is bread" or "it is the Body of Christ," but even if both claims are true they are not true of the same object. The former is true of the object on the altar; the latter of the individual it represents.

In general, representations are referential devices. Where x represents y we can use x to pick out y . I can point to a picture of my dog and say, truly, "That's my dog." Having succeeded in referring to *him*, I can continue telling heartwarming stories about *him* and my interlocutor will know *who* I am talking about. But I can also talk about the picture as such: *it* was taken with my iPhone and is not very high resolution. The difference is a difference in reference, not in the mode of predication: when I point to the picture saying, "That's a Labrador retriever!" I am not speaking metaphorically about the picture: I am speaking literally about the dog.

That difference, between referring to the representation itself and referring to the object it represents, should not be confused with the difference between literal and metaphorical discourse. Metaphor is a feature of predication rather than reference. And the difference between literal and metaphorical ascriptions does not track difference between reference to objects in our immediate vicinity and reference to remote objects that we can only pick out by description or by means of their representations. We can

⁴The exception proves the rule: the mathematician, J. J. Sylvester, recruited to be one of the founding members of The Johns Hopkins University faculty, insisted on being paid in gold.

speaking metaphorically about objects in our immediate vicinity, which we identify by ostension. When John the Baptist pointed to Jesus saying “Behold, the Lamb of God” he was speaking metaphorically. And we can speak literally about objects that are not in our immediate vicinity, identifying them by description or by indicating other objects that represent them. When I point to the figure at the center of Da Vinci’s *Last Supper*, which represents Jesus, and say “That’s Christ” I am speaking literally – as, I suggest, would also be the case if I pointed to the elements of the Eucharist.

Representation is a matter of intention and convention: resemblance is neither necessary nor sufficient. Even in the absence of resemblance, when an object x is intended to represent some other object y and observers recognize it as a representation of y , we can still use it as a referential device for speaking about y . X ’s representing y means that we can, at least in a range of cases, use x to go proxy for y . And when this happens, a representing object may acquire and confer deontic powers. I choose a counter in a board game to represent me: when that counter occupies a space on the board it means that, according to the conventions of the game, *I* am there. According to the rules of the game, the conventions by which these items confer deontic powers I may take another turn or collect play money or other players may be blocked from moving ahead. I leave my backpack on a chair to save my place: others will recognize that seat as occupied and, if they understand and accept the convention, would no more remove the backpack to take that seat than they would pick me up bodily if I were sitting there.

Christ declared that when authorized representatives of the Church, which he would establish, did what he did at the Last Supper, the bread and wine they blessed would come to represent [him](#). They do not represent him merely because *we* chose them to play this role: they represent him because he said so and [the fact that they play that role](#) confers [a range of](#) deontic powers.

4 What matters for real presence

[The current account is intended to](#) provide an account of “what matters” for the [real presence of Christ in the Eucharist in](#) the way that [discussions of criteria for the persistence of persons purport to](#) account for “what matters” for survival. When it [comes to survival we want an](#) account [that will](#) make sense of [our practice of holding people responsible for past actions, of our egoistic interest in some future states of affairs, and for a range of other concerns that figure in our understanding of ourselves and other persons. Understanding survival as identity poses familiar logical difficulties in light of which we may adopt some other account of the relation that matters. But that](#)

is controversial: it may be that nothing less than identity will do. In any case, our account of personal survival, whether in terms of identity or some other relation is driven by our interest in accounting for our anticipation of future states, assignment of responsibility for past events, and a range of other concerns that matter for us as persons.

Likewise, an account of the manner in which Christ is present in the Eucharist should be driven by what matters religiously for Christians who affirm Christ's real presence. Like other sacraments, the Eucharist is held to be an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. But the doctrine of Christ's real presence in the Eucharist goes beyond this: it licenses a range of devotional practices and ceremonies that have no counterpart in connection with other sacraments. All the sacraments essentially involve material media – water and oil, bread and wine. But only the elements of the Eucharist are taken to be proper focus of worship. Christians who believe that Christ is really present in the Eucharist we regard it as an opportunity for adoration and, though Communion, for a taste of union with God – we regard the Eucharist as an image of heaven and a foretaste of the encounter with God, which (we hope) we will experience fully in eternity. That is what matters. And that is what licenses all the devotional practices and ceremonies surrounding the Eucharist. The current discussion is an attempt to see whether we can, without recourse to metaphysical miracles, capture what matters, that is whether we can provide a rationale for the ceremonies, devotional practices and mysticism that surround the Eucharist.

On the current account, Christ's presence in the Eucharist is an institutional fact, which like all institutional facts, is "ontologically subjective" but "epistemically objective." Institutional facts are "intentionality-relative," and to that extent depend on psychological states, but unlike beliefs, desires and sensations, are not "in our minds" insofar as the "truth and falsity [of claims about institutional facts] can be ascertained independently of the attitudes and opinions of observers." (Searle, Making the Social World, 2009) Beauty may be in the eye of the beholder, but, unlike aesthetic judgments, claims about money, property, government and marriage are not.

We ask: is epistemic objectivity, absent ontological objectivity, good enough to capture what matters for the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist?

4.1 Dummett's criteria

Recall that according to Dummett, in order for a doctrine that purports to explain the manner in which Christ is present in Eucharist to be a *real presence* doctrine two conditions must be met:

- (i) **Reference Condition:** the correct and unqualified answer to the question, ‘What is it?’ asked of either of the consecrated elements, is ‘The Body of Christ’ or ‘The Blood of Christ’ and
- (ii) **Theological Commitment Condition:** any belief in the Eucharist must be as dependent on a prior belief in the Incarnation as the latter belief is dependent on belief in God.”

As it stands, Dummett’s Reference Condition is too strong to deliver the goods “without commitment to any philosophical thesis” as he requires. If it is true of the elements of the Eucharist in all of the places in which they are located that they are the Body of Christ and the Blood of Christ, then Christ’s Body and Blood must be multiply located. To avoid commitment to multiple location (or, via the Topological Solution, faux-multiple location) we can, I suggest, modify the reference condition without losing what matters for real presence as follows:

- (i’) **Weak Reference Condition:** the correct and unqualified answer to the question, ‘What is it?’ *when indicating* either of the consecrated elements, is ‘The Body of Christ’ or ‘The Blood of Christ’

The Weak Reference Condition does not require that it be true of the elements that they are the body and blood of Christ but only that they serve as referential devices for indicating Christ’s body and blood. Does an account according to which the elements are, in this sense, proxies through which we may refer to Christ, capture what matters for real presence?

Arguably, traditional accounts do not do any better. Nowadays, doing our professional business online and socializing through Facebook, local presence doesn’t matter as much as it used to. But it does matter: most of us want more than virtual encounters. Flesh and blood people have causal powers that their virtual avatars lack, which make local, corporeal encounters very different from online interactions. When it comes to ordinary human encounters, virtual experience is very different from a meeting in the flesh. But even on traditional accounts of the real presence, according to which it is true *of* the consecrated elements that they are the body and blood of Christ, the experience of participants is no different from the experience they would have if that were not so. The elements do not have any of the causal powers of Christ’s body and blood.

More importantly, on the positive side (i’) licenses whatever pious practices and ceremonies (i) licenses. Should we, in the manner forbidden by the 39 Articles, gaze upon and carry about the elements of the Eucharist? We most certainly should, and (i’) supports these practices just as (i) does. When it comes to honor, adoration and

worship it does not matter whether the object toward which it is directed is the object of worship itself or a representation. The conquering hero returns: we hoist him up on the shoulders and parade him around town. Would he be less honored less if we paraded around carrying his picture, or statue, or banner representing him?

When it comes to religious devotion, it does not seem to make any difference whether (i) or (i') is satisfied. In either case it is reasonable and appropriate to direct worship and adoration toward the elements of the Eucharist. In either case we take ourselves to be en rapport with Christ, gazing into another world. And that is what matters for real presence.

The current account meets the Weak Reference Condition and it does so in the manner required by Dummett: “without commitment to any philosophical thesis.” When x represents y , a correct and unqualified answer to the question “What is it” asked when indicating x , is “It’s y .” “What’s that?” you ask pointing to a picture? “It’s an armadillo.” In most circumstances we would not qualify that by saying it was a *picture* of an armadillo.² The consecrated elements represent Christ and so when asked what it is we can say correctly and without qualification, “The Body of Christ” or “The Blood of Christ.”

By itself, this convention for referring to objects via their representations is nothing special and answering the “What is it?” question in the way required by (i') does not presuppose any theological commitment. The real bite is in (ii), and this requirement is satisfied because in instituting the Eucharist at the Last Supper Jesus did more than establish a convention for reference such that one could refer to him by picking out quantities of bread and wine. He established an institution and conferred on its representatives the authority to impose a status function carrying a range of deontic powers on quantities of bread and wine. To acknowledge the truth of the real presence doctrine is not merely to acknowledge or even to adopt a linguistic convention according to which one may refer to Christ’s Body and Blood by indicating certain quantities of bread and wine. It is to accept a body of doctrine, which is constitutive of the Church (whatever its character and extent) that Christ established, even if the details are controversial. That theological package includes the recognition of Jesus’ divine status in virtue of which he was empowered to establish the Church and,

In some circumstances we might want to qualify this claim: if someone rushed into the room and asked whether there were an armadillo there we would not (in most circumstances) say yes. But a believer in Aquinas doctrine of transubstantiation would not give an unqualified yes to that answer either since, on that account Christ is sacramentally present in the Eucharist not locally present.

arguably, to impose on all humans in perpetuity the duty to become members through baptism and the obligation to participate in the Eucharist.

Prima facie this seems to undermine the “epistemic objectivity” of claims about Christ’s presence in the Eucharist insofar as, according to Searle, claims are “epistemically objective,” only if “their truth and falsity can be ascertained independently of the attitudes and opinions of observers.” Not everyone recognizes these duties. But, arguably, Searle’s requirement for “epistemic objectivity” sets the bar too high. It would rule out paradigmatic epistemically objective claims about (Searle’s examples) money, property, government and marriage in light of protests by ideologues, cranks and refusniks. Anarchists on the right do not recognize the legitimacy of government and anarchists on the left regard property as theft. Henry VIII did not believe that he was married to Catherine of Aragon and the opinion of his followers carried the day in England, even though people elsewhere disagreed.

In each case however there are hypotheticals whose truth or falsity can be ascertained independently of anyone’s attitudes or opinions, which refusniks would endorse. Ideologues who believe property is theft can agree that *if* property were a legitimate institution then the exchange of money, the signing of deeds and various other transactions, would transfer ownership between parties to the agreement. When they stomp across other people’s backyards or shoplift they know that *if* property weren’t theft they’d be misbehaving. Everyone, including individuals who reject these institutions as illegitimate, can agree about how they operate and about the character of the rules and conventions by which they are constituted.

By the same token everyone, including non-Christians and atheists, can agree about whether criteria for a valid mass are satisfied, and about other [theological counterfactuals](#). [They can agree that](#) *if* Christ had the divine authority to institute the Eucharist then this stuff would be his body and blood and that [we would be obliged](#) us to treat it with reverence. Non-Christians and atheists do not subscribe to that big IF and so [they do not count it as Christ’s body and blood or recognize the obligation to behave accordingly](#). But they can understand the Church’s rules and conventions: you don’t have to believe in God to be a theologian.

So if this is correct, the current account satisfies the Theological Commitment Condition and the Weak Reference Condition. Nevertheless, these criteria may be challenged: even if they are necessary conditions for any real presence doctrine, are they sufficient?

4.2 Cargo cults and the end of Church

On the current account, the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist involves a rich network of obligations, rights, entitlements, permissions and the like, but is still, like all institutional facts, “ontologically subjective”: it would not exist apart from human institutions and human activities. It depends not only on the overt behavior of humans, but also on attitudes, and on the persistence of the Church as an institution. In this respect it is like other institutional practices, which depend upon the continued survival of institutions.

We humans can make anything we want money; coins and bills are money in virtue of the role imposed on them by the government, which is a human institution. Consider a possible world without sentient beings where what we use as money grew on trees – coins and bills ripening on the branches! Less fancifully, imagine that the government collapsed and we, over centuries, reverted to a barbarous state in which we forgot the use of money and did all business by barter. In such circumstances, even if some bills or coins survived, preserved as curios, they would not be money. A \$100 bill would not be worth \$100, or strictly speaking, any dollar amount (including zero) because the very notion of quantifiable monetary value would not be applicable. At most one might say, skating close to metaphor, that it was “worth” three squirrel skins, or whatever else would be accepted in trade for it.

Likewise, we can imagine our barbarous descendants⁶ centuries after the Church has collapsed and religious belief has died out, going through rituals whose origins they have forgotten and whose significance they do not understand, which approximate what we might identify as celebrations of the Eucharist. On the current account Christ is not really present at these events.

But isn't this exactly what Christians who believe that Christ is really present in the Eucharist would want to say? We want to say that Christ's presence in the Eucharist is bound up in the most intimate way with his life and redeeming work, and with the Church as a “continuation of the Incarnation,” embodying doctrine and continuing his work in the world. We can imagine our remote descendants participating in ceremonies that bear some resemblance to contemporary liturgy but which do not play a role in their lives comparable to the role liturgy plays for Christians, without a clue as to their origin or significance. I doubt that we should count their activities as Eucharistic liturgy or suggest that Christ was really present in virtue of their activities. It does not follow, however, that Christ is present only to those who believe he is, since the Eucharist, like

⁶ see, e.g. *Idiocracy*

money, depends essentially on an institution – though one which, unlike the US government, is not merely a human institution.

Moreover it does not follow, on this account, that believing it to be so makes it so for any given individual. All social facts, including institutional facts, are “self-referential” in the sense that the social fact of something’s being an F is constituted by its being regarded as an F and used as an F. Searle notes however:

[T]here is a distinction between the self-referentiality of the concept as applied to types and as applied to tokens. Where money is concerned a particular token could be money even if no one thought it was money, but where cocktail parties are concerned if no one thinks of a particular event that it is a cocktail party it is not a cocktail party...In general, if the institution in question is codified in an ‘official’ form, such as in the laws concerning money, then the self-referentiality in question is a feature of the type...Codification specifies the features a token must have in order to be an instance of the type. Hence a token may have those features even if no one thinks about it, but the type is still defined in this self-referential way.

So long as the institution Christ established persists and the Eucharist is done in remembrance of him, the consecrated elements are his Body and Blood – even when they are consumed by unbelievers or church mice gathering up the crumbs from under the table.

4.3 Real enough for you?

Is [that](#) real enough? This poses a further question that is religious rather than philosophical: why do we participate in the Eucharist – why *should* we? Not to benefit materially. God may bestow special gifts on communicants as he pleases but the consecrated elements themselves do not, on any theologically respectable account, have special causal powers that ordinary bread and wine do not have, whether to bring good luck, to attract money, or to provide any other material benefits. On the other hand we do not want to understand the Eucharist as either a mere device for producing psychological states or as a mere expression of belief and commitment. And on the current account it is neither. It is rather an act we do as members of the Church Christ established, in remembrance of him, by means of which bread and wine [count as](#) his body and blood. [The current account licenses talk about the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, traditional religious devotion and cultic practice. What more should we want?](#) This is what the current account delivers and, arguably, that is real enough.

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