

The Real Presence¹

The doctrine that Christ is really present in the Eucharist appears to entail that Christ's body is not only multiply located but present in different ways at different locations. Moreover, the doctrine poses an even more difficult meta-question: what makes a theological explanation of the Eucharist a "real presence" account? Aquinas' defense of transubstantiation in *Summa Theologica* Part III, Questions 75 – 81 is a philosophical analysis of the real presence doctrine, invoking Aristotelian metaphysics and the machinery of Scholastic philosophy. My aim is not to produce a "rational reconstruction" of Aquinas' analysis but rather, taking his discussion as a paradigmatic exposition of the real presence doctrine, to produce a metaphysically innocent alternative. In the following discussion I propose a metaphysically minimalist version of the real presence doctrine that "saves the phenomena" of religious belief and practice.

1 Religious motivation for the real presence doctrine

Leaving aside Aquinas analysis, we can extract the following religious claims to which he, and others who profess the real presence doctrine are committed.

(i) Realism: The doctrine that Christ is present in the Eucharist cannot be cashed out in terms of either psychological claims about the psychological state of participants or theological claims about the transmission of grace or other benefits.

(ii) Empirical Vacuity: the consecrated elements are, as regards all physical characteristics and ordinary causal powers, exactly as they would be if they were not consecrated.

¹ I am grateful for comments by participants in the session at the SCP Pacific 2008 meeting at which an earlier version of this paper was presented.

(iii) Reference: The consecrated elements do not merely symbolize Christ. The claim that they are his body and blood is literally true: if someone were to point at them and say, “*That* is Christ,” he would speak the literal truth.

(iv) Asymmetric Dependence: The character of Christ’s presence in the consecrated elements at any given time depends upon his character at that time but Christ himself, impassible in heaven, is in no way affected by physical changes in the consecrated elements.

In Section 2, I consider (i) and (ii). Aquinas doctrine of transubstantiation is committed to the occurrence of two miracles to account for both the change in substance and the persistence of the empirical properties of bread and wine. My account of the change effected by consecration does not involve any miracles, metaphysical or otherwise, but nevertheless, as I shall argue, is “real” in the requisite sense. In Sections 3 and 4, I discuss (iii) and (iv), which pose vexed metaphysical questions about the location of Christ’s body.

2 Real enough for you?

Notoriously, when something is characterized as “real” we have to ask, “real as distinct from what?” Real—not hallucinatory? Real—not artificial? Real—not simulated, fake, inferior, marginal, or what? The real presence doctrine asserts that the presence of Christ in the Eucharist is real as distinct from “subjective,” that is, that it does not depend on the beliefs or other psychological states of participants. Aquinas cashes out this claim by suggesting that the *substance* of the consecrated bread and wine is Christ’s body and blood.

To understand the notion of “real” or “objective” presence and to determine whether we can get it without buying into Aquinas’ analysis, we should note that his account requires him address *two* problems concerning what he takes to be a *sui generis* case of substantial change. First, he has to account for the change that occurs to the elements of the Eucharist at consecration. But

secondly, he also has to explain how, given his understanding of that change, the empirical properties of the bread and wine including their causal powers remain the same. God could, miraculously, replace the bread and wine on the altar with an object that was visibly, tangibly and effectively the body of Jesus of Nazareth. But God, on Aquinas' account, performs two miracles: first, changing the elements into the body of Christ and secondly, keeping all the accidents of bread and wine in place.

The second miracle is more problematic than the first. Intuitively, if it looks like a duck, quacks like a duck and is a microphysical replica of a paradigmatic duck, it's a duck. Given Aquinas' account however it is logically possible that it *not* be a duck. God, we may grant, is not bound by the limits of nomological possibility. He could create *ex nihilo* something that was in every respect like a paradigmatic duck. It is however debatable whether even God could bring it about that something that was in every respect like a paradigmatic duck was *not* a duck. That seems beyond the bounds of possibility understood in a broader sense. Similarly, while producing a quantity of bread and wine *ex nihilo* (or multiplying a quantity of bread to feed multitudes, or turning water into wine) is clearly within the scope of his omnipotence it is controversial whether he can achieve the metaphysically impossible—to bring it about that what is in every ordinary empirical respect like a paradigmatic sample of bread and wine is not bread and wine. The real absence of bread and wine is, to that extent, a bigger miracle than the real presence of Christ.

Maybe God's omnipotence does surpass metaphysical as well as nomological bounds: Descartes, notoriously, thought so. This is, however, heavy metaphysical baggage to carry. If we can explain the reality of Christ's presence in the Eucharist without postulating metaphysical miracles, we are certainly better off. It is at least worth a try.

We can avoid miracles altogether by construing consecration as a conventionally generated action which induces a mere Cambridge change in the elements of the Eucharist. In one sense mere Cambridge changes—the widowing of Xanthippe and the like—are not “real” since they do not involve any change in the intrinsic properties of the objects to which they occur. They are however real in the sense required for Aquinas’ purposes insofar as they are not “subjective.”

Xanthippe’s widowing does not depend on the beliefs or other psychological states of observers. It comes about because of Socrates’ death, in virtue of legal conventions governing marriage. And legal facts are as “objective” as rocks: you cannot wish away widowings, debts or traffic tickets.

On the proposed account, the act of consecration is a conventionally generated action analogous to, for example, the act of writing out a check. Check-writing occurs (1) in virtue of a conventionally prescribed action (2) by a legitimately credentialed agent (3) intending to write out a check (4) using appropriate materials (5) as required by institutional conventions. (1) I write the date, payee and amount of the check with my signature underneath. (2) I, a sane adult with a bank account and the money in it to cover the check, am legitimately credentialed. (3) I intend to write out a check. (4) The colored, rectangular bit of paper on which I write is a check form bearing the routing number of my bank. (5) Legal and institutional conventions *make* a check that meets these conditions money: I give you that check saying, truly, “Here’s my \$200.” You may not believe me. You may doubt that I have the money in my account to cover the check; you may be skeptical about the solvency of the financial institution on which my check was written; or, more radically, you may not understand the whole check-writing convention and wonder how a small piece of paper could be worth \$200. That doesn’t matter. I gave you \$200 because conditions (1) – (5) were satisfied. Even if you don’t cash it, you have that \$200 until, given the established conventions, the check expires.

Following Aquinas, theologians have suggested comparable conditions on the *validity* of a Eucharist. (1) A particular sequence of actions has to be done in concert with the recitation of a specified formula. (2) These actions have to be done by a priest, an individual credentialed by the Church to play this role. (3) In doing these actions he must intend to “do what the Church does”—deferring to the theological expertise of others and church doctrine. (4) The matter of the sacrament is correct, as specified by the Church: wine and wheaten bread, leavened or unleavened according to jurisdiction. (5) Institutional conventions *make* that bread and wine the body and blood of Christ. Apart from the intention of the priest to “do what the Church does,” the beliefs and other psychological states of participants are irrelevant: where conditions (1) – (5) are satisfied the elements of the Eucharist are the body and blood of Christ. Virtuous and wicked communicants, believers, unbelievers and the bone ignorant consume the body of Christ—as do church mice gathering up the crumbs from under the table.

On the current account, (1) – (5) are not causal conditions for the bread and wine becoming the body and blood of Christ but constitutive conditions. Just as nothing further happens to make the check I write money, nothing further happens when these conditions are met. Meeting these conditions does not cause the bread and wine to metamorphose into the body and blood of Christ or prompt God to transform them: the fact that the consecrated elements are the body and blood of Christ is *constituted* by the satisfaction of these conditions.

This account meets both the realism requirement and the empirical vacuity requirement. It clearly satisfies the latter. Mere Cambridge changes do not induce any change in the intrinsic properties of the objects to which they occur. Xanthippe married is no different as regards her intrinsic properties from Xanthippe widowed and a rubber check may be an exact intrinsic

duplicate of a valid check backed by cash down to every microphysical detail: no metaphysical miracles are required.

Arguably it also meets the realism requirement insofar the change in the elements of the Eucharist, on this account, not “subjective.” The presence of Christ in the Eucharist does not cash out in terms of the psychological states of participants. It depends on the conventions of an institution, the Church. This is however surely what Christians who believe that Christ is really present in the Eucharist want to affirm. If Christ had not established the Church, instituted the Eucharist and charged his followers to do it remembrance of him, the Church would be nothing more than a cargo cult and the religious ceremonies members performed would be empty rituals.

The current account therefore meets conditions (i) and (ii)

3 Presence

Construing consecration as a conventional action, even we take that as an adequate account of the reality of the change it effects, leaves hanging metaphysical questions about the location of Christ’s body which troubled Aquinas and his successors. Christ ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of the Father, but according to the real presence doctrine, the consecrated elements *are* his body and blood. Moreover, according to Aquinas, every consecrated wafer and every bit of every consecrated wafer is Christ’s body entire, though lacking in its ordinary “dimensive properties” as well as other accidents.

This poses two problems. First, as critics of the real presence doctrine long recognized, it seems to treat Christ’s body as a stuff rather than a thing. Secondly, it suggests that Christ’s body is not only multiply located, but present in a different way on earth and in heaven. Christ’s body, as Aquinas puts it, is locally present only in heaven but on earth is, in the elements of the Eucharist, “sacramentally present.”

Ignoring for now the distinction between local and sacramental presence, we can respond to the first worry by noting that it is at least logically possible that objects occupy regions in different ways and, in particular, that we may take it that the location relation which holds on objects and regions is not one-one. Hudson, indeed, distinguishes four ways in which objects may be “located” at regions.

To sort out the ways in which objects may occupy regions we first distinguish between their being entirely and wholly located as follows:

‘ x is entirely located at r ’ =df x is located at r , and there is no region of spacetime disjoint from r at which x is located.

‘ x is wholly located at r ’ =df x is located at r , and there is no proper part of x not located at r .

Extended composite objects as we ordinarily think of them, *pertend* the regions they occupy where pretension is understood as follows:

‘ x pertends’ =df x is a material object that is entirely located at a non-point-sized region, r , and for each proper subregion of r , r^* , x has a proper part entirely located at r^* .²

Christ’s body was locally present at different times in various regions in Palestine during the first century and is current locally present in heaven by pretending various non-point-sized earthly and, subsequently, heavenly regions. Arguably Christ’s body is “sacramentally present” in the Eucharist to the extent that it *entends* the (earthly) regions occupied by certain quantities of bread and wine.

‘ x entends’ =df x is a material object that 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^* .³

² Hudson, p. 99

³ Ibid.

Entension in fact captures just what Aquinas claims about the “sacramental presence” of Christ in the Eucharist. First, it allows us to say, as required, that Christ is wholly located at each of the disconnected spatial regions occupied by quantities of consecrated bread and wine: each wafer and each cup of wine is 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 occupy. Thirdly, Christ is wholly located at the fusion of disconnected regions occupied by quantities of consecrated bread and wine and, though this is not a claim that Aquinas or other advocates of the real presence doctrine consider, it seems unobjectionable.

Finally, insofar as Christ’s body extends the fusion of disconnected subregions occupied by the Eucharistic elements *entirely* it does not occupy any earthly region from which they are absent. Ignoring for now the local presence of Christ in heavenly regions, this is to say that Christ is not anywhere else. He is *not* present in the regions occupied by quantities of consecrated bread and wine because he is ubiquitous and so is present there as well as everywhere else. He is *not* present in the elements of the Eucharist because he is in some sense present wherever two or three are gathered together in his name or in the community of believers at all times or in the regions occupied by those who participate in the Eucharist at any given time. According to the real presence doctrine, taking Aquinas’ account as the paradigmatic, he is sacramentally present in the regions occupied by consecrated bread and wine and in no other earthly place.

We could revise the real presence doctrine so that Christ’s ubiquity (as the Second Person of the Trinity) or his presence in the community of Christians gathered in his name counted as real presence but it is hard to see why we should do this. Moreover, arguably, such a revision would undermine the religious belief and practice that motivates the real presence doctrine, specifically, the status of the Eucharistic elements as objects of worship.

Many Christians are squeamish about the impulse to regard inanimate objects and places as holy. The Church, we are told is the People of God. On this view the holiness of church buildings is parasitical on the holiness of communal worship and the Eucharist is to be understood primarily as a corporate act of the People of God, gathering in the name of Christ who promises that he will be there when two or three are gathered in his name. The real presence doctrine represents a complimentary flavor of piety that affirms the holiness of the impersonal—of inanimate objects and sacred space.

This is not to say that inanimate objects and sacred places are holy in and of themselves. They are holy for the same reason that people are holy—because they are set apart by God. And the real presence doctrine affirms this in asserting the asymmetric dependence of Christ's presence in the Eucharist on Jesus Christ, incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, who taught, preached, and instituted the Eucharist at the Last Supper, and who is now locally present in heaven.

4 Asymmetric dependence

Aquinas affirms the asymmetric dependence of Christ's sacramental presence in the Eucharist on his local presence by noting (1) that the character of Christ as present in the Eucharist at any given time is determined by Christ's character at that time and (2) that Christ is impassible in Heaven, impervious to change and, in particular, to any changes in the elements of the Eucharist.

So, in Question 81:4, Aquinas asks: "What would have been the condition of Christ's body under this sacrament if it had been reserved or consecrated during the three days He lay dead?" and responds "The same Christ Who was upon the cross would have been in this sacrament...Therefore, if this sacrament had been reserved, He would have died therein." At any given time, the sacrament represents Christ as he is at that time. Again, in Question 76:6 he asks

“whether Christ’s body is in this sacrament movably” responding that “Christ’s body is at rest in heaven. Therefore it is not movably in this sacrament.”

These claims help us understand “sacramental presence” as distinct from “local presence” and cash out the earlier claim that while Christ currently pertends a heavenly region, at any time, he extends the disconnected earthly regions where the consecrated Eucharistic elements are located. Arguably, the elements represent Christ in the way that images represent their objects in what we take to be cases of indirect observation.

I saw Barak Obama yesterday—on the evening news. I pointed at the TV screen saying, “*That’s* Obama” and what I said was literally true. Likewise, according to the real presence doctrine as understood here, if I pointed at the consecrated elements of the Eucharist saying “*That’s* Christ” I would speak the literal truth. In each case, if pressed, I would qualify my claim and qualify it in the same ways. No, I did not see Obama or Christ in person. I saw Obama on TV and I saw Christ in the sacrament. In both cases the character of the representation depends upon the character of its object and in both cases actions done to the representation do not affect the object represented. Even if I move my TV set, Obama is impassible and unmoved in Chicago and turning off my TV set does not turn off Obama, who keeps talking regardless of what viewers do in the privacy of their living rooms.

But still, I saw Obama: I didn’t just see a symbol of Obama. It is admittedly controversial when we can be said to observe an object. Did I see electrons in the cloud chamber or merely see streaks of smoke? Did I see the moons of Jupiter or did I merely see their images on a mirror in a reflecting telescope? Do I ever see *myself* in a mirror? We can nuzzle about when an experience counts as direct observation of an object, when it is an indirect observation and when it is no observation at all but there are some cases in which we are prepared to say that observing a

representation is observing the object represented and where pointing in the direction of the representation counts as an ostension to the object represented. On the current account of the real presence doctrine this why we express a literal truth when we point at the consecrated elements and say, “*That is Christ*” and, arguably, that is what the claim that Christ is sacramentally but not locally present comes to.

Consequently, the current account verifies both (iii) and (iv). Christ’s representation extends disconnected regions occupied by quantities of consecrated bread and wine. In pointing towards those regions we point to Christ.

5 Is this account reductivist?

No. On this account the religious language of real presence is straight-forwardly descriptive and talk about Christ’s presence in the Eucharist is not “really” about something else, e.g. people’s psychological states or behavior or moral obligations. This account is however minimalist: it does not invoke the occurrence of miracles or assume any controversial metaphysical doctrines. But it is not so minimalist that everyone counts as believing it. Skeptics who do not believe that Christ now exists and pretends a heavenly region or endorse the conventions of the Church according to which the elements of the Eucharist represent him, do not believe it.

But Christians who endorse the Church’s conventions and recognize the Eucharist as a representation of Christ in the sense described do. And that belief licenses religious practice since it means that the Eucharist is not only a convenient meditation object that serves as a prop for inducing religious experience but rather *is* Christ. Consequently worship directed toward this object is not idolatrous but is directed to Christ who is God, the only fit object of worship.