New Blackfriars

DOI:10.1111/nbfr.12731

Transubstantiation and the Eucharist: Herbert McCabe vs G. Egner

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Abstract

This article discusses and critically evaluates the dispute between Herbert McCabe and his pseudonymous interlocutor G. Egner with respect to the doctrine of transubstantiation. The aim is to treat their views of that doctrine as exemplary of the difference made by what might be called a 'Grammatical Thomist' approach to our view of the nature of the sacrament of the Eucharist, of sacraments in general, and of theology's propensity to violate the rules of sense that are constitutive of ordinary language and of philosophical systems alike, in order properly to establish and maintain a believer's relation to God. Particular attention is paid to the way McCabe's account at once taps into unacknowledged aspects of Wittgenstein's vision of what it is to be human and violates what are usually regarded as the enabling conditions of that vision's articulation.

Keywords

Grammatical Thomism, Transubstantiation, Wittgenstein, Aristotle, Aquinas, Nonsense

One of the many attractive features of Herbert McCabe's book, *God Matters*[1], is its essentially occasional and responsive nature. The vast majority of the essays it contains were composed as a result of invitations to contribute to specific academic and theological events and settings; and some of the most significant appear in the company of texts by others who pursue more or less critical engagements with McCabe's own writings on the relevant topic (writings which had sometimes advanced criticisms of those others, and to which McCabe charitably offered the right to reply). McCabe thereby presents himself

[1] Geoffrey Chapman: London, 1987 – hereafter 'GM'.

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https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12731 Published online by Cambridge University Press

as someone who writes not to develop an elaborate theoretical edifice, but in response to specific thoughts and words advanced by others which provoked a clarifying desire to respond in himself, and in this way offers one model of what it is to be a thinker. It is not a common model, but it is deeply woven into Wittgenstein's later conception of what it is to philosophize, and so constitutes one fundamental mode of attunement between McCabe's version of Aquinas and what he learnt from Wittgenstein (in part, through conversations with his Oxford colleagues and friends, Anthony Kenny and Terry Eagleton).

Accordingly, I propose to respond to the invitation to participate in this commemorative event by examining the essays that make up Part 4 of *God Matters* – in which McCabe lays out the central elements of his general approach to the sacraments by focussing in detail on the sacrament of the Eucharist, and by engaging in dialogue with the rather different views on that sacrament advanced by one 'G. Egner', the pseudonym of P. J. FitzPatrick, who trained for the priesthood together with Anthony Kenny, and who held a longterm position in the philosophy department of the University of Durham. The structure of this part of the book is not straightforward. Its centrepiece is a three-part exchange between McCabe and Egner about the doctrine of transubstantiation, in which Egner provides the initial statement, McCabe responds, and then Egner responds in turn; but that exchange is bookended by two essays from McCabe – the first on 'Transubstantiation and the Real Presence', and the second on 'Sacramental Language'. The overall sequencing of the essays, therefore, makes it appear to the reader that Egner's first essay is itself a response to McCabe's essay on that topic, but this appearance is misleading. For (according to the acknowledgements section of *God Matters*) McCabe's essay on transubstantiation first appeared in the *Ampleforth Journal* in 1969, whereas the central tripartite exchanges originally took place in the pages of *New Blackfriars* – the journal McCabe edited – between 1972 and 1973, and began with Egner's essay on the topic, which is framed as a direct attack on the traditional doctrine of transubstantiation as well as on its modern transignificationist counterpart, with no direct reference made to McCabe's earlier piece. Of course, it remains possible, even plausible, that Egner was aware of that earlier essay, or at least of the broad character of the views expressed therein – if not when he published his own essay on the topic in *New Blackfriars*, then when he was preparing his response to the journal editor's critical response to it; but I haven't been able to identify any internal textual evidence to confirm this. What seems clearer is that the final essay in Part 4 – McCabe's paper on 'Sacramental Language' – was first delivered as a talk in 1976, and first appeared in print only in *God Matters*; so it is unlikely to have helped Egner to appreciate the broader perspective within which McCabe's response to his views was in fact located.

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I want to draw three moral from this bibliographical exercise. First, although Egner is given two chances to express his views, as well as being given the final word in the *New Blackfriars* exchanges, its recontextualization in *God Matters* gave McCabe both the first and the final word in that part of the book – more precisely, the chance both to set the stage and to oversee the manner of our leaving it. Hence, second, there is a real risk of unfairness in using McCabe's earlier essay on transubstantiation – as I will do – in order to argue that Egner has overlooked crucial aspects of his interlocutor's strategy for defending the doctrine of transubstantiation; for many of those elements don't really surface in McCabe's response to Egner, who simply may not have had any other means of access to them. However, third, I think that Egner's response to McCabe does give us enough of a basis from which to construct his likely reaction to those elements. In particular, since Egner's initial essay criticizes both Aquinas's Aristotelian defence of transubstantiation and the way transignificationists exploit phenomenological conceptions of the embeddedness of meaning in the lifeworld, it isn't hard to imagine him viewing McCabe's synthesis of Aquinas and Wittgenstein as running together the worst of both theological worlds. In the light of these structural points, I propose to treat the debate between McCabe and Egner in two stages: first, I will try to isolate and evaluate the primary bone of contention between them in the *New Blackfriars* exchange; then I will consider the aspects of McCabe's position that go missing in that exchange, relating them to the positive alternative approach that Egner advocates in his contributions to *God Matters*, and expands upon and revises in his later (non-pseudonymous) book on the topic, *In Breaking of Bread*[2] – what he calls 'the Way of Ritual'.

Aristotle: Analogous Uses and Creative Rule-Breaking

Egner's attack on the traditional Catholic understanding of the doctrine of transubstantiation focuses on Aquinas' adaptation of Aristotelian philosophical categories to articulate and defend that doctrine, and it has two prongs. First, he wants to demonstrate that the adaptation obliges us to misuse Aristotle's ideas in such a way that they cease to have meaning; and second, that the adaptation can only be made plausible if we take his terminology as a species of armchair physics – as if the Aristotelian distinction between substance and accident amounted to the claim that all objects could be dissected into these distinct components, rather than the provision of one way of conceptualizing the metaphysical category of 'change' or 'alteration'. I will

[2] P. J. FitzPatrick; Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1993.

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pass over the second of these issues, since McCabe expresses complete agreement with Egner's rejection of this way of (ab)using Aristotle, and since – whilst I'm not enough of an Aquinas scholar to adjudicate Egner's claim that Aquinas repeatedly falls into this trap – I take it that, insofar as he ever does, McCabe would be committed to regarding it as something to be deprecated. My concern is with the first issue, and with McCabe's attempt to argue that the fate of what Egner calls 'meaninglessness' is not only not a flaw in Aquinas' adaptation of Aristotle, but is rather an instance of the kind of linguistic breakdown to which theological uses of language in contexts such as these must succumb if they are to perform their rightful task.

Egner offers an exemplary elucidation of Aristotle's way of using the categories of substance and accident, and of the breakdown they suffer when employed (as they are by Aquinas) to articulate the doctrine of transubstantiation. For Aquinas asserts that the Eucharistic change is one of the whole substance of the bread, form and matter, into the whole substance of the body of Christ; and such a change is neither accidental (as when hammering is conceived of as actualizing the potential sphericality of a brass cube) nor substantial (as when a blacksmith's consumption of steak-and-kidney pudding is conceived of as prime matter actualized first by the actuality of the pudding and then by the actuality of the blacksmith) but transubstantial. Egner's worry about such an assertion is pithily summarized thus:

> For better or worse, Aristotle and Aquinas have chosen to describe change in terms of potentialities that are actuated first in one way then in another by successive actualities. What possible sense inside that tradition can we make of a change in which, as Aquinas puts it, there is no potential element? How can terms which have been devised for use in a system that calls for actuality and potentiality in all changes be used to claim that there is a change where no potential element is to be found? (GM, 133)

For Egner, then, to talk in Aristotelian terms about the Eucharistic change is to violate the rules for their meaningful use: it is to abuse those terms, to talk nonsense. For McCabe, this is true, but it is also precisely what one should expect, since he believes that important theological ideas are invariably expressed through the breakdown of philosophical concepts in the face of a mystery. He offers the Christian idea of God's making of the world from nothing as an analogous case – analogous insofar as 'making' is a kind of change. This making is also impossible to articulate coherently in Aristotelian terms, since to make is to actualize the potentialities inherent in some material, but 'nothing' is not a kind of material. Hence insofar as Aquinas means to retain the Aristotelian idea of making whilst acknowledging that the rules for its use are thereby violated – insofar as he continues to want to talk of God as creating the world whilst simultaneously denying that he created it

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in any sense that we can understand – then he will necessarily seem to be desirous of having his cake and eating it too.

To understand this kind of linguistic manoeuvre as McCabe does, we shouldn't think of it as an attempt to establish new rules for using the relevant words, but rather as a deliberate breaking of the existing rules with elucidatory intent - to illuminate or disclose something essentially beyond our understanding (an aspect of the mystery of God and his relation to the world). McCabe's Aquinas does not think that breaking the rules allows us actually to articulate some particular mystery – some specific thing that lies beyond our grasp; for then it wouldn't be beyond our grasp, but could in fact be grasped by effecting this manoeuvre. Rather, Aquinas means to disclose that we here encounter something mysterious, something that transcends what the relevant word can possibly mean; but he also seems to think that holding on to that word is essential to pointing us in the right direction – that only breaking the rules that govern the use of this particular word will do the theological work of acknowledging the true depth of reality.

It is easy to see why Egner will find McCabe's position, as so far sketched, to be unsatisfactory; for it seems simply to replicate Aquinas' apparent desire to have his cake and eat it. On the one hand, we shouldn't think that we understand what we mean when we say 'God created the world *ex nihilo*', since to apply the word 'creation' in this context is to break the familiar rules for its use without supplying any alternative rules; on the other hand, it is precisely the word 'creation' to which we cleave, and to which McCabe thinks we are not only entitled but required to cleave, if we are to perform our theological task appropriately.

McCabe attempts to demystify this combination of features or impulses by inviting Egner to consider more seriously the heterogeneity of language use, and in particular the distinctive nature of analogous terms. He begins by distinguishing words that seem tightly tied to the specific original contexts of their use from words that seem capable of being projected into new contexts: in the case of football, 'offside' belongs to the former category, 'foul' or 'skill' to the latter. Then he notes the distinctive character of terms such as 'good', 'beautiful' and 'alive': they are inherently applicable in an open-ended range of contexts, in each of which the criteria for their application differ, but without tempting us to regard them as equivocal in meaning across contexts; and they are also notions of which it makes sense to talk of acquiring a deeper or more penetrating sense of their significance (as when we realize that what we hitherto took to be good parenting or beautiful painting has been revealed to be shallow or impoverished by a new encounter with parental or aesthetic excellence): these are analogous terms in the proper sense. And McCabe reminds us that Aquinas thinks that such terms can legitimately be applied to God – that we can without absurdity say that God is good in some infinitely more intense or

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intensive way than we can understand. He then suggests that we think of ‘creation’, and in particular of transubstantial change, as exemplifying that kind of use of words.

Here McCabe (without exactly signalling it) is shifting our focus from what is licensed by the rules of Aristotle’s preferred system for conceptualizing change to what is licensed by the rules for the use of words in ordinary or everyday life, and thereby reminding us that the impulse towards creative theological rulebreaking is not restricted to those working within specifically philosophical modes of discourse. He thereby relocates himself outside the immediate focus of Egner’s concern (which is abuses of Aristotelian concepts); but it’s not obvious to me that this manoeuvre is sufficient to allay Egner’s underlying concerns, which are hardly restricted to abuses of Aristotelian, or even of philosophical, modes of conceptualization, and which are likely to lead him to question the robustness, and so the legitimacy, of McCabe’s association of theological abuses of language with analogous uses of it.

For it is surely clear to both parties that the relevant theological uses of words behave differently to what one might call secular patterns of analogous use. In particular, rather than inviting or requiring a shift in the criteria for their use, these theological contexts do not supply any such criteria; and whereas each secular context of their use always holds open the possibility of deepening our grasp of their significance, in theological contexts that significance is regarded as being absolutely or unconditionally perfected, as beyond any conceivable refinement. So these theological uses are ‘analogous’ only in a decidedly analogous sense of that term: and although McCabe might want us to view them as intensifying or perfecting such analogicality – disclosing a depth or range of that notion’s significance in relation to which our ordinary realizations of it seem imperfect or shallow – it is clear that Egner might well regard them as simply violating the criteria for analogous usage. To put it otherwise: just as Aquinas wants to have his Aristotelian conceptualization of change and abuse it, so McCabe wants to anchor his Thomist idea of analogy in its ordinary contexts of use and simultaneously unmoor it.

This already tells us something important, however: for the fact that we now find ourselves taking another turn around the same argumentative circle strongly suggests that McCabe’s characterization of his preferred modes of theological uses of words itself exemplifies that mode, and so cannot function as a neutral methodological ground on which his and Egner’s first-order disagreements might be objectively adjudicated. For if we don’t share the relevant rule-breaking impulse at the first-order level, we are not likely to find it in ourselves to do so when characterizing that level. And Egner is alive to the implications of this:

> Whether such different verdicts are reconcilable by argument is to me doubtful. McCabe’s distinction between analogy and metaphor is

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> interesting, but I am sure he would not deny that, while the distinction *records* an acceptance of certain strained uses of language, it cannot *compel* such an acceptance… What is illumination for one will be fruitless darkening of counsel for another. (GM, 155)

Since, however, Egner himself nevertheless proceeds to provide more detail about the grounds for his position, it might be worth offering a supplement to McCabe's own (necessarily truncated) presentation of the grounds for his own, and one that attempts to address Egner's worry about having one's cake and eating it – that is, about McCabe's and Aquinas' desire to continue employing the very words whose criteria for use they are deliberately violating. And perhaps unsurprisingly, I will do so by offering some analogies.

In other work of mine[3], I have characterized the linguistic operations effected by McCabe and Aquinas as 'privative recastings of sense'; and I illustrated their point or purpose with some non-theological examples. The first comes from the early Wittgenstein, and the distinction he draws (in his 'Lecture on Ethics') between a relative and an absolute mode of evaluative judgements.

Take someone who claims to feel safe. Ordinarily, this is a relative judgement: it is a claim to feel safe *from* something – a rabid dog, a threat to our reputation, a tsunami; what it means to be safe is thus determined by the specific threat, and we can always envisage what our current safety in fact depends upon, and how those factual conditions might be otherwise. But if I claim to feel *absolutely* safe, I invoke an idea of safety that is essentially unconditional – that is not a matter of being safe from anything in particular, hence is not keyed to any particular threat, and so is not vulnerable to any change of contingent circumstances or conditions, hence could not conceivably be overcome or subverted.

In effect, a familiar use of evaluative words has here been recast in such a way as to deprive us of our familiar way of making sense of it. And for Wittgenstein, this lack of coherence is their distinguishing mark: the verbal expressions of experiences of absolute value are essentially lacking in sense. And accepting such a reading of absolute value judgements is entirely consistent with seeing their employment as intelligibly motivated, and so as possessed of significance – a significance they possess for their users (not despite but) by virtue of their nonsensicality. For if such a speaker finds satisfaction precisely in refusing any available assignments of meaning to her words, then understanding her means understanding why she might find such assignments essentially unsatisfying. In both the *Tractatus* and the later lecture, the specific kind of meaning-assignment to ethical utterances that is being resisted is that characteristic of fact-stating, empirical discourse in general, and

[3] *The Great Riddle* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2015).

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of empirical psychological discourse in particular. Hence, the unconditional nature of the refusal indicates a sense of absolute discontinuity between this conception of the ethical and the empirical world. Evaluating threats can be understood perfectly well in naturalistic terms; so can the use of language to alter people's feelings and attitudes, or to express adherence to prescriptive principles, or to guide action. So by refusing to accept any such assignments of sense to his utterances about absolute value, Wittgenstein draws a sharp contrast between two *kinds* of evil (and hence two kinds of good): in Cora Diamond's words, 'evil [that] is… inconsequential…, something close to home… something [not] very bad to which one might become accustomed, and [evil as] something terrible, black, and wholly alien that you cannot even get near' (EIM[4], 85-6).

This is where my second example comes in – the brothers Grimm's fairy tale about the fisherman who rescues a magic flounder. The flounder offers to grant his rescuer whatever he wishes; the fisherman's wife begins by asking for a better home and ends by expressing dissatisfaction at the sun's and the moon's rising independently of her will – at which point a cosmically destructive storm arises from the flounder's ocean and returns her to the pig-sty in which they had originally been living. Being dissatisfied at living in a pig-sty is not only not evil, it may even seem essential to anyone's sense of self-respect; so the wife's transition to her climactic dissatisfaction may appear to be seamlessly comprehensible. But to see her final demand as the endpoint of some intelligible process of moral deterioration, one must overlook the fact that wanting the world to conform to her will amounts to wanting it not to be a world at all; it requires the unintelligible idea of her occupying God's perspective on the world. To see in this nothing more than an unwise but understandable overextension of an essentially healthy self-regard would be to obliterate the distinction between genuine human needs and world-extinguishing hubris.

The early Wittgenstein's removal of thought and talk about the good and evil will from the empirical realm is another way of marking that contrast - one of a number of possible techniques of language through which it might be indicated and maintained. The dissatisfaction of the fisherman's wife is akin to that of the unhappy man of the *Tractatus*, who is dissatisfied at the world regardless of how things go within it, hence not so much dissatisfied with *how* that world is as with the bare fact of its existence, with its sheer independent reality - its refusal to meet the conditions he lays down, to submit to his control. The discontinuity is manifest in the unintelligibility of the dissatisfaction (for what would it be like if the world did answer to the conditions either

[4] 'Ethics, Imagination and the Method of the *Tractatus*', in Crary and Shieh (eds), *Reading Cavell* (London: Routledge, 2006).

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lays down?); and yet, both techniques for marking it simultaneously acknowledge an underlying continuity.

The cosmic dissatisfaction of the fisherman's wife is intuitable even in her initial desire to have a cosy little house rather than a pig-sty: the tale explicitly marks this by noting that the sea is already faintly discoloured and mildly turbulent when the fisherman brings his wife's first wish to the flounder's attention, quite as if the world-annihilating storm she eventually unleashes is already gathering its energies. So the wife's catastrophic hubris is at once something absolutely out of the ordinary, and yet always already lurking beneath the surface of the most innocuous expressions of human will. Her terrible evil is essentially irreducible to everyday moral and psychological understanding, and yet somehow haunts them: that is why, however much violence we must do to their familiar modes of use, it is precisely these words (the ones we employ to talk intelligibly about intra-worldly objects of desire and dissatisfaction) to which the violence must be done if what we intend by our utterance is to be satisfied. Nothing other than the failure of sense resulting from that violence could convey the simultaneous continuity and discontinuity we mean to capture; it is the unintelligibility of *these* forms of words that alone can articulate the resistance of such evil to our comprehension.

I hope that the analogy I wish to exploit between Wittgenstein and the brothers Grimm, on the one hand, and theological versions of privative recastings of sense, is now becoming clearer. The words that comprise expressions of absolute value are devoid of sense; but we can make sense of their being so employed, and so of those employing them, if we can see their lack of sense in this evaluative context as a denial or deconstruction of the sense they make in other evaluative contexts – as a stripping away of those specific patterns of sense-making. We relate to them not as simply lacking sense but as lacking *that* particular sense, as deprived of or refusing *that* familiar meaning (so that each bare mark is marked by the present absence of its symbolic individuality, by that which its user's refusal necessarily invokes). This is not a matter of grasping the peculiar internal logic of an expression of absolute value (since it has none), but of grasping what Nietzsche might call its genealogy; we appreciate the peculiar significance of uttering such nonsense by seeing it as an intelligible outworking of the broader forms of human life within which the words uttered have uses whose internal logic and overall significance can be more straightforwardly grasped.

So when the theologian continues to cleave to the word 'creation' despite having deliberately stripped away its ordinary patterns of sense-making, he does so in the first instance because he takes it to be consonant with his idea of God's perfection (His being 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived') that His creativity should be devoid

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of any conditions or presuppositions of the kind which make it possible to realize human creative action, but which also make such creativity dependent on and limited by a range of external factors. Privatively recasting the sense of this expression is thus intended to point us towards an inconceivably intensified or purified form of creativity – a mode of making than which nothing greater can be conceived.

It is this capacity for creativity that is to the fore in McCabe's Aquinas' idea of transubstantiation, which privatively recasts the sense of our everyday notion of change in such a way that it can no longer be understood as a change (whether accidental or substantial) in what it is that exists, but only as a change in what it *means* to exist – a change in existence that is not a change in the nature of what exists, and so counts as an incomparably deeper or more fundamental mode of change, insofar as it is free from the constraints imposed by the need to effect the change upon something with a given nature. And just as creation *ex nihilo* does not make a difference to anything because it is not a matter of a transition from one kind of thing to another kind of thing, so transubstantiation does not make any difference to the bread, but rather to what it means for the bread to exist. When the host is consecrated it means something different for it to be a substance, for it to exist; in this unique case we can say that between the unconsecrated and the consecrated host, there is a distinction without a difference. But it doesn't follow that we can or should say that the consecrated host just *is* bread; for that form of words deploys the verb 'to be' in its ordinary sense, in which there is no being that is not the being of a specific kind of thing. Since the idea of transubstantial change requires a distinction between those two notions of being, it amounts to a privative recasting of our idea of being or existence as well as of our idea of change.

Wittgenstein: Communication and Communion

Even if we are willing to acknowledge that the early Wittgenstein was sensitive to, and even disposed to make use of, private recastings of sense, we might be far less willing to acknowledge that the later Wittgenstein maintained any such disposition. But the essays by McCabe that bookend his *New Blackfriars* exchanges with Egner make it clear that he prefers to articulate the doctrine of transubstantiation in primarily Wittgensteinian rather than Aristotelian terms, and that in so doing he regards himself as engaged in exactly the same process of creative rule-breaking with respect to the later Wittgenstein's philosophical vision that he detects in Aquinas' intentional abuse of Aristotelian philosophical categories.

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McCabe's account of transubstantiation is plainly rooted in a broadly Wittgensteinian vision of the bodily roots of meaning. The *Philosophical Investigations*[5] not only regards the ability to speak as central to being human, but famously claims that to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life; and that latter notion is deliberately intended simultaneously to invoke both a biological and a cultural reading, in which that which distinguishes us from other living beings informs and is informed by that which distinguishes any given human culture from others (as well as that which links each to all). Accordingly, it views rule-governed behaviour – and in particular linguistic behaviour – as making sense only against a background of shared natural reactions, so that the normative grows out of what our bodily nature equips us with, as that is inflected by our induction into a specific culture. And the book's famous treatment of the fantasy of a private language foregrounds a specific aspect of that dependence of our life with words on our bodily being, when it articulates a vision of our inner life as inherently oriented towards – and so as conceptually intertwined with – public behavioural expression.

This is the background against which McCabe finds it natural to claim that:

> Every organism is an organism in virtue of its power of communication. Human life is constituted by an especially high level of communication, the kind we call language. What makes a human body human is that it is involved in linguistic communication. (GM, 118)

Any organism inhabits a world – an environment organized in terms of relevance to its activities and needs, and so as demanding certain kinds of response from it (as food, as a threat, and so on); and the ways in which the environment is rendered meaningful to any organism is mediated via its senses, which are generally determined by its bodily structure. In this way, the animal body constitutes the animal's world, by establishing communication between the individual animal and its environment, and between one such animal and its fellows: to communicate is to share in the interpretation of, and response to, a world. The human animal is in addition capable of extending its bodily media of communication, by the creation of artificial organs such as tools, and of new interpretative and communicative media, new modes of meaning-creation – preeminently language, and the social and cultural structures it informs and is informed by. But these are not alternatives to bodily communication, for the human body is not itself a tool for communication (like a flag, a telephone or a meme). Since one has to have a body to use such communicative tools, the body is better thought of as the source of communication; in this sense, there is no form of human

[5] Revised 4th Edition; Hacker and Schulte (eds), Anscombe, Hacker and Schulte (trans.); Wiley-Blackwell: Oxford, 2009).

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communication which is not bodily communication. To have a human body is to be in communication (with the world and other humans); and a common language can be regarded as an interweaving of extensions of that common body.

So far, so (however idiosyncratically) Wittgensteinian: but at this point McCabe introduces an element to his discussion that radically alters its trajectory, and that few will regard as a variation on familiar Wittgensteinian themes. To do so, he exploits another register of his key concept of communication – the idea of communication between the past, the present, and the future forms of our distinctively human life with language. McCabe points out that these extensions of bodily communication can themselves be extended, that is refined or elaborated so that they establish a deeper or more complete level of common life, a fuller version of humanity, in two main ways: the reformist, and the revolutionary. The reformist seeks improvements within the basic structure of a community's present form of life; the revolutionary seeks a radical modification of those structures themselves, and so a radical shift in the meaning of 'community'. Hence, from the perspective of the reformist, revolutionary change makes no sense when it presents itself as a desirable goal, for it can only appear as purely destructive – as a way of depriving their community of a future, bringing its glorious past to an end. And yet, once the revolution is successful, the newly-attained state of that community provides us with the communicative resources to reinterpret the meaning of its past in such a way that its post-revolutionary form can be understood to disclose an unexpected continuity between its past and its present – to be more deeply British, or Dominican, or socialist. After the revolution, one might say, what seemed to be destruction turns out to be death and resurrection.

Now we have in place all the elements of McCabe's account of the Eucharist. After his death and resurrection, Christ has lost many of the characteristics we think of as bodily, but he is in fact more bodily than ever, and more deeply or truly bodily, insofar as he intensifies or perfects the body's communicative significance. He is the body in whom our bodies are to find unity and final humanity, the medium of communication in which humankind is ultimately to realize itself, the embodiment of a future world in which no further change – reformist or revolutionary – will be needed or conceivable, the future world that absolutely or unconditionally fulfils the human project of becoming more fully human. And in the bread and wine of the Eucharist we encounter an intersection of our present, pre-revolutionary world and that future world; it is food and drink of the future world appearing as food and drink of this present world.

> When Christ appears as the food and drink of our era, he is not appearing as the whole of what he is, but he has a better right to appear as food and drink than bread and wine have. The doctrine of transubstantiation,

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> as I see it, is that the bread and wine suffer a revolutionary change, not that they change into something else, they become more radically food and drink, but this food and drink which is the body of Christ, appears to us still in its traditional dress, so that we will recognize it. To look at this food and drink and say that it was bread and wine would be like… looking at the risen Christ [before his Ascension] and saying he is a man like ourselves;… you would be right and wrong, right because there is continuity between what appears and what is, wrong because it is a revolutionary continuity, one that involves a radical re-making. (GM, 126)

Christ has a better right to appear as food and drink than bread and wine do because food and drink have a fundamental role in bodily communication between human beings and the world they inhabit, and between human beings – they are a means of sharing human life. What could be more basic to sharing a world than to eat together – animals interpreting the same feature of their environment as bodily sustenance, sharing in the experience of gathering, preparing and consuming it, and thereby reinterpreting a physical necessity pertaining to the source of human meaning as such as a means of expressing solidarity? Food and drink are thus an utterly primordial medium in and through which we communicate, come together, become more human; we might even say that all eating and drinking is an attempt to reach towards the communication we will only find in Christ.

For these reasons, McCabe thinks of the consecrated bread and wine as constituting the intersection of two distinct communicative media – at once signifying elements in a present language (one that articulates the core human meaning of food and drink), and signifying elements in a future language (one in which sharing in Christ's risen body constitutes the fullest possible realization of our common humanity). The two languages are at once continuous and discontinuous with each other: the second completely fulfils or realizes the first, but its significance can only be grasped after the absolutely revolutionary change it promises – the death and resurrection of which moral and political forms of revolutionary change are the utterly inadequate analogue. It is not so much that such sacramental signifying is a communicative medium that God employs: it is rather God's self-disclosure *as* language (as Word), as the absolutely intensified, perfected realization of bodily communication and community. From our present perspective, therefore, its meaning utterly transcends our grasp, precisely insofar as Christ's risen bodily presence does; we cannot possibly understand what we are saying when we 'speak' sacramentally. Hence, to declare one's participation in this future community by nevertheless using the expressive resources of the present community in a sacramental context can only be an act of faith, a way of pointing towards and encountering a mystery.

We might think of this idea of an essentially unintelligible future language as McCabe's way of honouring the Christian idea of God as

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a God of revelation – an element of his thinking that was equally significant, although perhaps more implicit, in his earlier treatment of the idea of divine creation *ex nihilo*. We saw that divine creation is necessarily not any kind of human creative activity; but it is equally essential to McCabe's approach that the very meaning of the word 'creation' in this context is not purely the result of human linguistic creativity. For if we are to regard these and similar ways of talking of God as having been given to us by divine revelation (or by working out the implications of divine revelation[6]), then their meaning must be such that it can only be given to us by the very Being that they disclose, when, and only when, we meet Him face to face; and one way of expressing that conviction is to refuse to accept any proffered specification of a grammar for these words, precisely on the grounds that doing so would confer intelligibility upon them. Precisely because of their source, we can know *that* they truly apply to God, whilst simultaneously knowing that we cannot conceivably grasp *how* they do.

If, however, McCabe's reformulation of the church's doctrine of transubstantiation ultimately arrives at a notion of sacramental language that is essentially and necessarily beyond our grasp – a language that is transparent to God alone, hence divinely private or impenetrable, an expressive medium from which every individual human being (not just all but one) are necessarily excluded - one might well conclude that the medium of this re-articulation, the later Wittgenstein's philosophical vision of our life with language, has been fundamentally abused. For this account of the sacraments treats them as a language when none of the ordinary criteria for something counting as a language – in particular, its being usable as a communicative medium by more than one user – are satisfied. And yet McCabe wants at the same time to claim that sacramental language constitutes the fullest possible realization of essentially bodily human communication and community.

This account certainly confronts us with privative recastings of the sense of a range of interlinked concepts that are central to the later Wittgenstein's philosophical views – modes of employing not only the concepts of language and meaning, but those of communication, community, the body and life, that are not so much akin to our ordinary notion of analogous usage as they are radicalized or intensified versions (analogues) of it. But it is worth seeing that there is a sense in which Wittgenstein's general vision does not exclude a priori, and may even be said to hold open a place for, the idea of such revolutionary modes of linguistic change.

Take, for example, his view of the relation between his own method of grammatical investigation and the past and present forms of the

[6] To fully explain this remark requires a long tale, which I tried to recount in *The Great Riddle* (op. cit.).

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philosophical enterprise as he inherited it. Should we think of his self-imposed restriction to reminders of what we say when as essentially discontinuous with traditional Western European philosophy, or as a way of continuing that endeavour by radically new means? When Wittgenstein tells us that essence finds expression in grammar, is he presenting his grammatical investigations as a superior way of illuminating the essence of things, or as a way of directing our attention away from any such subject-matter?

I would suggest that here we have precisely the combination of continuity and discontinuity that McCabe associates with revolutionary change in any media of human communication and community: to those invested in the current dispensation of philosophy, Wittgenstein's work will appear wholly destructive, but to those who take the time fully to inhabit his reconceptualizations of philosophy's real needs and interests, they will acquire a way of reinterpreting philosophy's distant and immediate past so that its post-revolutionary future appears rather as a deepening or intensifying of philosophy's distinctive nature and rewards. But if the concept of 'philosophy' can be subject to such revolutionary reformulations (as can our understanding of the two conceptual factors in that concept's etymology – namely, 'love' and 'wisdom' – and as can our understanding of its subject-matter – 'essence'), then it must at the very least be an open question as to whether any other ordinary concept must be thought of as akin in these respects to analogous terms.

Once that concession is made, two further concessions will seem much harder to refuse. The first is that if analogous uses of terms are generally legitimate, then there seems no basis on which to prohibit an analogous use of the concept of 'analogous usage' – that is, to acknowledge the possibility that we might be intelligibly motivated to construct uses of analogous terms which are both continuous and discontinuous with their more familiar originals, to deploy privative recastings of sense. The second concession is that, insofar as Wittgenstein has created a distinctive array of concepts in terms of which to articulate his vision of philosophy – concepts such as 'grammar', 'language game', 'form of life' – then he must (on pain of inconsistency) be open to the possibility that these concepts are not only inherently analogous in their use (shifting criteria from context to context without equivocation), but might themselves have to be dispensed with in some contexts if their users are thereby better able to achieve their fundamental goal – call it returning us to the reality of our life with words.

Suppose, for instance, that some of our uses of words exemplify not only the shape of analogous terms, but also the radically analogous mode of such analogous usages – in, say, articulations of absolute value, or in the theological rule-breaking endorsed by McCabe. Should a Wittgensteinian dismiss such uses in advance on the grounds that they violate the established grammar of the term 'language game'

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(according to which all words belong to rule-governed practices), or should they rather recognize that in this context these signature concepts are helping to occlude the reality of our life with words that they are ultimately meant to illuminate? To be willing to sacrifice that which appears to be definitive of a Wittgensteinian mode of philosophizing in order to deepen or intensify its ability to meet the demands it places on itself would amount to a revolutionary change in this mode of philosophical communication and community – a way of recasting our sense of what it is to inherit Wittgenstein that deepens our understanding of that inheritance. It would be the reverse of surprising if many contemporary Wittgensteinians, whether conservatively inclined or even reformist, viewed the proposal of such a revolutionary change in their self-understanding as equivalent to the destruction of their inheritance. But it seems to me that there is a sense in which Wittgenstein's own philosophical sensibility is in this respect more open to the possibility of such creative rule-breaking than, say, Aristotle (at least before Aquinas got his hands on him).[7]

What, though, of Egner's philosophical sensibility? It's clear from his response to McCabe's response in the *New Blackfriars* exchange that he continues to see a significant difference between their respective views on transubstantiation; but it also seems clear that what Egner means by 'transubstantiation' is the church doctrine as articulated by Aquinas and other scholastic theologians, and as incorporated into the Catholic Church's official formulations of its fundamental beliefs. So his attempt to defend his sense that, in articulating that doctrine, words are being abused rather than creatively repurposed concentrates primarily on citing texts from the relevant authors and statements that do not appear consistent with McCabe's understanding of the doctrine, suggesting rather that they involve pervasive hypostasization in the service of a misbegotten armchair physics.

As I said earlier, I don't have the scholarly acquaintance with Aquinas (let alone with the pronouncements of Church Councils) to adjudicate the question of whether Egner's texts catch Aquinas occasionally nodding, and McCabe's texts better capture the general tenor of Aquinas' approach, or the reverse. But it's clear to Egner that McCabe's own account must be distinguished from those he has been attacking (GM, 158), and he expresses an interest in seeing it further developed. He also expresses a suspicion that, when so developed, there may be rather less disagreement between McCabe and Egner's own preferred account of the Eucharist, which he characterizes as the result

[7] The Wittgenstein-inspired work of Jonathan Lear on irony, and in particular of Stanley Cavell on perfectionism, certainly share this sense. See Lear, *A Case for Irony* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass., 2014) and Cavell, *Cities of Words* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass., 2004).

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of following 'The Way of Ritual' (GM, 155). I want to conclude with a very preliminary exploration of the extent of that agreement.

Egner's book *In Breaking of Bread* offers a very extended and detailed exploration of how that 'Way of Ritual' might reconfigure our understanding of the Eucharist. Simplifying massively, it depends upon seeing the sacrament as a species of ritual, and in particular as a pattern of ritual behaviour originating in the way in which Christ's Last Supper repurposes the Jewish Passover feast, which in turn repurposed ancient human patterns of incorporating shared preparation and consumption of food and drink into celebrations of human community. It is against this complex palimpsestic understanding of the inauguration of the sacrament that Egner proposes to evaluate the various evolutions to which the rite of the mass has been subject in the history of the Church, and in particular to evaluate the gains and losses consequent upon Vatican II's reforms of that rite, with due attention to the inevitably complex and multifaceted processes of historical reinterpretation and forgetting to which such genealogical phenomena are subject and by which they are constituted, and without occluding the extent to which any rituals centred on food and drink cannot but be marked by the darkness attendant upon the need to consume other living beings in order to sustain our own lives.

It seems to me that a very great deal of this analysis – perhaps all of it – could be used to fill out the Eucharistic vector that McCabe calls 'the language of the present' – as a way of fleshing out the human meaning of shared meals, and the ways in which religious traditions accommodate and refine those meanings. And Egner's use of a tripartite model – his sense that the Eucharist is inaugurated as a new interpretative circle drawn around two prior interpretative circles – *could* helpfully point us in the direction of what McCabe would call revolutionary rather than reformist change, in which continuity is maintained (although it may only be retrospectively disclosed) by potentially radical discontinuity. Egner even helpfully labels these circles 'concentric analogies' (GM, 142). But it also seems to me that Egner himself does not allow his model to reorient himself in that direction, that he does not emphasize the element of discontinuity implicit in the drawing of each new circle – the sense that the encircling of each prior ritual is a radical reinterpretation of it that immeasurably deepens its significance.

And this, I think, is why Egner ultimately baulks at McCabe's suggestion that – whilst it may be right to say that the consecrated host is no different from bread (since divine creative change, having to do with existence rather than what exists, institutes a distinction without a difference) – it cannot be right to say that it simply *is* bread. Egner is happy to agree with McCabe that in the Eucharist a human sign is taken over by God, even that it becomes the language of God himself:

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> Where I differ is in denying that this taking over of signs into the divine language cancels their meaning in our own. What it does, of course, is to display to provisional and incomplete nature of the account we give of things… God does not deny our language in talking his own. If he did, we could not understand him (GM, 161)

No doubt McCabe appreciated the Wittgensteinian allusion in this final sentence: he certainly cites the remark to which it alludes in his later essay on 'Sacramental Language' (GM, 171). But I suspect he would also have noticed the crucial modal shifts: whereas Wittgenstein says 'If a lion could talk, we would not understand him', thereby presenting this communication failure as no more than a fact, Egner takes it to be an *a priori* philosophical insight that God could only talk to us if he refrained from breaking the present rules of human language (rules such as the established criteria for bread, which the consecrated host patently satisfies). But that would amount to treating our present ways of talking, about bread or anything else (including God), as authoritative constraints on what God might do, rather than acknowledging that his revelations of Himself might show up our ways of talking about him or about anything (such as bread, such as the body) as utterly shallow and inadequate – needing not reformist improvement but revolutionary change. McCabe's stance, by contrast, depends upon appreciating the way in which theology creatively draws upon and radicalizes analogous uses of words in its privative recastings of sense: it is seeing that relation, and so that distinction, that makes all the difference.

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