

great sympathy. Religious activity does indeed cover a far wider field than theology or articulated belief. And reflection on belief does indeed demand a constant process of accommodation, in which 'selective amnesia' has a part; how many Roman Catholic theologians today would hold the views about the immolation of Christ in the Mass that were common in the seventeenth century? Again, something more is needed than an inherited sense of fittingness if we are to speak relevantly in a largely non-sacral community, though I wish that Egner showed more awareness of the danger of secularizing the Gospel and not only the medium of its presentation. Understanding and confrontation, yes; but, if John 6 has any roots in history, it was precisely our Lord's declaration that his blood was to be drunk that shocked his hearers. Looseness of fit, yes again; and I warmly appreciate Egner's sympathy for the ordinary Christian and his discrimination between the intention of a dogmatic statement and the possibly questionable terms in which it is made. And finally, it is good, at a time when there is so much superficial and ham-fisted religious writing about, to see how conscious he is of the complexity and delicacy of the theologian's task. For the full exposition of the position which he wishes to defend against both the 'older' and the 'newer' approaches we must await the appearance of his book. And we shall await it very eagerly.

## **Transubstantiation: A reply to G. Egner**

by Herbert McCabe, O.P.

In the first of his excellent articles on the Eucharistic presence (our August issue) G. Egner notes that some people object to the notion of transubstantiation because it involves outmoded philosophical concepts such as substance and accident; his own objection, however, is quite different. He proposes to show that even if we start from this Aristotelian tradition, the notion makes no sense. I hope to show that he is mistaken about this. He also argues that 'a consecrated host is still bread, bread in precisely the way an unconsecrated host is bread'. I shall try to show why I think this also to be untrue. I think it would be useful to clear up these matters in order that his own approach which he sketches in the second article may receive the attention and appreciation it deserves.

*Does transubstantiation make sense?*

I cannot state Egner's argument more lucidly than he does himself

and shall not waste space trying to do so. The reader is referred to pp. 356-7. The first thing to say is that Egner is surely right in thinking that Aristotle could have made no sense of the notion of transubstantiation. It is not a notion that can be accommodated *within* the concepts of Aristotelian philosophy, it represents the breakdown of these concepts in the face of a mystery. This is not, in my opinion, a reason for ditching Aristotelian philosophy (there may be good reasons for doing this, but this is not one of them) for I believe that important theological ideas are invariably expressed through the breakdown of philosophical concepts. Theology is done not within a philosophical system but at its margin.

Aristotle would have been able to make nothing of the idea of transubstantiation but, as Etienne Gilson has frequently pointed out, he would have had the same trouble with the notion of creation. I think that, for several reasons, this is an interesting comparison. Transubstantiation and creation are not only linked as being equally un-Aristotelian ideas, they also come together in Aquinas' understanding of the eucharistic change (cf. 3a.75.8.c).

'The damage comes . . .' says Egner, 'from the impression of content misleadingly conveyed by words that have lost their bearings. 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 that 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.'

Now consider the proposition that God made the world. We have a special name for this making, we call it 'creation', but it is not difficult to see that creation names an Aristotelianly impossible kind of making, just as transubstantiation names an Aristotelianly impossible kind of change; and for approximately the same reason. To make something, in Aristotelian terms is to actualize the potentialities inherent in some material. These tomatoes and mushrooms and bits of meat *can* be made into a stew; making a stew is realizing this capacity. When something has been made it always makes sense to ask what it is made *of* or what it is made *out of* (the two correspond roughly to making by accidental and making by substantial change)—what was it that had the potentiality of being this thing, what did you make a difference to in order to produce this? Now in these terms we can make no sense of the notion that God made the whole universe. There is evidently nothing for the universe to be made of or made out of. In other words creation could not have made any *difference* to anything—there was nothing for it to make a difference to. If God created the world he operated at a different level, or in a different dimension, from making as we under-

stand it. To bring it about, in this sense, that something should exist is not to make any difference to it or to anything else, it is not to change it in any way. It is just for this reason that Aquinas denies that creation is a change (1a.45.2.ad 2). But what sense can we make of a making that does not change anything? It is of interest that Aquinas also denies that transubstantiation is, strictly speaking, a change 'Nec continetur inter species motus naturalis (3a.75.4.c).

Now we might make bogus sense of the notion of creation by saying as, in a moment of inadvertence, Mr Frank Sheed does: 'God made it (the universe). And he made it out of nothing. What else was there for him to make it of? . . . if God, having made the universe, left it, the universe would have to rely for its continuance upon the material it was made of: namely nothing' (*Theology and Sanity*, pp. 105-6). This is to invoke a mythological stuff called 'nothing', it is to do the kind of thing that Egner rightly stigmatizes as 'armchair physics'. 'Nothing' here has the same sort of function as the mythological 'mysterious kernel' that lies underneath the accidents of things. Aquinas himself was fully aware of the dangers of such a reification of 'nothing' and he is careful to point out (1a.45.1.ad 3) that 'God made the world out of nothing' does not mean that 'nothing' was what he made the world out of, it means that God did not make the world out of anything. The difficulty is simply that to a good Aristotelian this just means that God did not make the world. Aquinas wants to eat his cake and have it; he wants to say that God made the world while denying that he made it in any sense we can understand of the verb to make. I think Egner is not sufficiently recognizing that this kind of trick is characteristic of theologians' language. Aquinas became very interested in this right at the beginning of the *Summa Theologiae* (cf. 1a.13.3 & 5). He saw that we were always saying things like 'God is good—but not in any way that we can understand goodness'.

'The damage comes . . . from the impression of content misleadingly conveyed by words that have lost their bearings.' Now all theological talk has, in an important sense, lost its bearings, or cut loose from its moorings. To put it more politely, in doing theology, as in any other kind of prayer, we are reaching out into a mystery for which our language is inadequate, whether we be using words or gestures. We take, for example, some fairly familiar word like 'making', 'speaking', 'changing' or 'forgiving' and we stretch it to breaking point in order to point towards more than the word can mean. For this reason it would be perfectly possible to apply Egner's kind of criticism destructively to any significant theological statement (try 'Christ rose from the dead'). In every case we take a word out of the familiar context in which we have learnt and understood its sense and we use it to probe a depth of reality that escapes this context.

Egner acknowledges that 'technical terms have been usefully

extended in the past—"Atom" and "Square Root", for instance. But such extensions were part of a whole new set of rules and procedures, they were not simply the juxtaposition of words that do not fit. It is not possible to take Aristotle's account of change, then remove a crucial part of it, and then to expect without more ado that words and expressions of the original account will still make sense.' What Egner does not allow for is not the elaboration of a new set of rules and procedures within which a new usage may make sense, but the very creative act of breaking the rules that captures the illumination we wish to convey.

Clearly there is breaking and breaking: there is the really creative extension of usage and there is sheer self-contradiction. In the case of certain words, we not only learn their meaning within a certain context, but they actually include reference to that context within their meaning (cf. 1a.13.3. ad 1). The notion of being 'off-side' is not only one that we learn within the context of football, it also refers to that context. To say that someone was off-side although he was not playing football at the time would be self-contradictory—though we might say it in some rather far-fetched metaphorical sense.<sup>1</sup> We might, however, learn in the context of football, the meaning of words like 'foul' or 'skill' or 'fair play' and there is no evident contradiction in taking these out of the context of football or even out of the context of games altogether.

Aquinas thought that there were certain words or phrases which moved freely within the context or contexts in which we learn them, words which in any case have their meanings at many levels and are not tied down to very particular conditions, words like 'good' or 'beautiful' or 'active' or 'alive', and these could be used without absurdity in a non-metaphorical though analogical way in speaking of God and divine activities.<sup>2</sup>

When we make this move, the penalty we pay is, of course, that we do not, strictly speaking, know what we are talking about. When we say that God is good but good in some infinitely more intensive way than we can understand, we are really admitting that

<sup>1</sup>Cf. here the famous Zen question 'What is the sound of *one* hand clapping?'

<sup>2</sup>On the distinction between analogy and metaphor, see Brian Wicker's article in this issue. I may perhaps also be allowed to quote from the notes to my own translation of Questions 12 and 13 in the *Prima Pars (Summa Theologiae)*, Vol. 3, Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1964, Appendix 4, p. 106). 'We might ask why he (Aquinas) is not content to say simply that our language about God is metaphorical. He does not say this because he wants to distinguish between two different kinds of things that we say about God; between statements like "The Lord is my rock and my refuge" and statements like "God is good". The first of these is quite compatible with its denial—"Of course the Lord is not a rock", whereas the second is not. We would not say "God is not good", though we are quite likely to say "God is good, but not in the way that we are". It is an important point about metaphor that while we can easily say "God is not really a rock" we cannot so safely say "The Lord is not a rock in the way that Gibraltar is". For one thing there is only one way of being a rock, but more importantly, being a rock in the way that Gibraltar is is what the poet has in mind. Unless we think of God as being just like Gibraltar—although, of course, not really being a rock—we betray the poet's meaning. Qualification emasculates his meaning in a way that contradiction does not. In the case of "good", however, since there are in any case many ways of being good amongst creatures, there is nothing incongruous in saying "He is good though not in our way".'

we don't know what it is for God to be good—which is natural enough since we do not know what it is for God to be God. Consider once more the case of creation: we know what it is to make, say, a statue by carving and altering a piece of wood; we are also familiar with a more fundamental change in which stuff is changed into a different kind of stuff, as in cooking or digestion—here not just a new shape but a new thing has come into existence. Now we extrapolate from here to speak of a coming into existence which is not out of anything at all, a making which is not an operation upon anything—evidently we cannot conceive of this, we do not understand what we are saying. Similarly we do not know what we are talking about when we speak of transubstantiation; it is a change which, rather like creation,<sup>1</sup> takes place neither at the level of accident nor of substance but of existence itself. When the host is consecrated it means a different thing for it to be a substance, a different thing for it to exist.

These are enigmatic words. A good, plain, common-sense Aristotelian could make a certain sense out of them, but it would not be the sense I am trying to convey. An Aristotelian would say that in *any* substantial change—say the death of an animal—there is a change in the meaning of existence. First what it meant for this to exist was for it to be a dog, now what it means for it to exist is for it to be a corpse. For an Aristotelian the (primary) meaning of existence is just being something, being a substance of a certain kind. Evidently existence means something different for different kinds of things; there is no *genus*, no common element or factor or quality called 'existence' that is shared univocally by shoes and ships and sealing wax. For such an Aristotelian, to say that when the host is consecrated it means a different thing for it to exist, would simply mean that a substantial change had taken place, the host had become a different kind of thing. But this is *not* the notion of transubstantiation. Transubstantiation is not a matter of a masked or camouflaged substantial change; it is not being said that what was bread has been substantially changed into human flesh (as it might be by metabolism) which is then miraculously concealed from us. The stupendous act that takes place in the consecration lies not in the concealment of the results of the change, but in the change itself. The notion of transubstantiation depends on the idea that there can be a kind of transformation in what it *means* to exist which is not simply a change in *what it is* that exists.

This clearly depends on driving some kind of wedge between being and being-this-sort-of-thing, a difficult wedge to drive since the Aristotelian is surely quite right to deny that any sense can be made of 'existence' as a detachable or abstractable quality or element common to things that exist. But as a matter of fact we have already

<sup>1</sup>Aquinas does not hold that transubstantiation consists in the annihilation of the bread and its replacement by the body of Christ. This would indeed, as the Thirty-Nine Articles put it, take away the nature of a sacrament. For Aquinas the Eucharist is sacramental just because it is bread that becomes the body of Christ.

begun to drive such a wedge as soon as we speak of creation. As I have already argued, creation does not make any *difference* to anything, it is not a matter of a transition from one kind of thing to another kind of thing, it does not, so to say, take place at the level of substance, it is not a substantial change, it is the 'change' from non-existence to existence. In thinking of something as *creature* we are not thinking of it in contrast and distinction from other creatures, we are thinking of it, or trying to think of it, as existing instead of not existing (cf. 1a.44.2.c.). We merely fool ourselves if we think that we are here deploying concepts of sheer 'existence' and 'non-existence'—they are simply words we use in our attempt to point to some more fundamental account of things than having-come-into-existence-out-of-something-else, to some coming to be more fundamental than substantial change.

If, then, we are allowed to talk about creation, we are allowed to talk of a 'change' in existence (coming to exist) which is not simply a change in the nature of what exists. This tenuous licence may also extend to speaking of a 'change' in the existence of the host when it is consecrated which does not simply mean a (disguised) substantial change.

If we speak of transubstantiation in this way, then we must deny that the consecration of the host makes any *difference* to it (just as creation makes no difference). If Egner had confined himself to saying that the consecrated host is no different from bread he would have been quite correct. What has happened to it is not that it has become different. But Egner goes further than this: he says that the consecrated host *is* bread. In all ordinary circumstances this would be a perfectly legitimate move, in fact hardly a move at all, but these are not ordinary circumstances—what happens at the consecration is precisely that circumstances cease to be ordinary. In this unique instance we can truly say that between the unconsecrated and the consecrated host there is a distinction without a difference.

The really strong case against talking in terms of transubstantiation is that it sounds as though we were concerned with a quasi-chemical change within the host. The starting point of your language has been the consideration of this kind of change. It is true that in using the special term transubstantiation you have signalled that you have kicked over the traces (thereby according to Egner relapsing into unmeaning, according to me using words analogically) but the impression remains that the Eucharist can be discussed in terms of an exact account of what happens within this piece of bread. It is the merit of the approach that Egner indicates in the second of his articles that it avoids any such impression. It is true that once we have begun to talk about a change in what it means for the host to *exist* we have already moved away from simply examining this piece of stuff and started to talk of it in terms of the context, the world in which it is set and in which it has its significance, but this is by no

means so clear as it should be. It is for this reason that I myself would dissent from the opinion of the Council of Trent that transubstantiation is a 'fitting and suitable' name for what happens in the Eucharist. I think it is a dangerous and misleading name, at any rate in our post-scholastic age.

*Is it still bread?*

Egner's argument is the simple and plausible one that the word 'bread' has a clear meaning in the English language; there are criteria for its use. The consecrated host (whatever else may be true of it) satisfies these criteria in exactly the same way as the unconsecrated host and it is therefore a misuse of language to say that it is not bread.

I think that this argument involves too mechanistic a view of the English language which, like every other real language (I mean every language that is actually used in the ordinary complex business of human communication—as opposed to language games belonging to particular specialities like mathematics or physics), is capable of coping to some extent with the question of its own limitations, its own applicability and validity. If the only criteria for the use of a word were simple litmus tests ('the proper and only use of the word "acid" is for what turns the paper red') then Egner's argument would be perfectly convincing. But we are able to indicate in English not only where something fits within the language structure, but also, to some extent, where the structure breaks down, or where something transcends it. In our own particular case, when we say 'This is not bread' we *might* be saying that it is zinc or that it is miraculously disguised human flesh or whatever, but we *might* also be saying that here the ordinary criteria for deciding whether this is bread or zinc or any other stuff just are not relevant, that it is misleading to apply them at all, because to apply them presupposes that what we have here is something that can be dealt with within these terms.

It is not that God tricks us—so that while all our criteria for decision make us think that it is bread, he has secretly switched the 'inner reality' to make it zinc or flesh. On the contrary the consecration is God's quite public announcement that here these criteria no longer apply. It makes no more sense to ask whether this is bread than to ask whether God is bread—of course both these questions *could* be asked within the realm of metaphor. It *appears* that we have here a fit subject for our ordinary criteria. It is only because we have faith in the consecrating word of God that we know the criteria cannot sensibly be applied. If we did not know this we would make the mistake of applying them (as the unbeliever does) and then naturally we would say that this is bread and not anything else.

I am suggesting that the consecrated host exists at a level of reality at which the question of whether it is bread cannot relevantly be

asked; our language breaks down when we try to speak of it, just as it does in the case of God. What happens at the consecration is not that the proper description of the host shifts within our language (from 'bread' to 'Body of Christ') but that it no longer becomes possible to give an account of it *within* our language at all. While I am inclined to say that it is the touchstone of Catholic orthodoxy to assert that the consecrated host is not bread, it should be remembered that the heart of the teaching is that it *is* the Body of Christ. We get a distorted picture of the Eucharist if we deal with it simply by asking 'How can this not be bread?' and neglecting the special oddity of the statement that it is the Body of Christ. This positive statement is of a quite different kind from an assertion like 'This is bread'; it involves a very peculiar use of language, what I have called a 'stretching of language to breaking point'. Certainly when we speak of Christ's body we are using the word 'body' analogically; his bodiliness is of an intensity that goes beyond anything we experience as our own bodies. I speak here of the body not as object but as we subjectively and intersubjectively experience it, as our primary medium of communication, as our mode of presence to each other. It is because 'body' used in this sense (as distinct from, say, the use we make of the word in physics—'a body moving with uniform velocity . . .') is an odd or mysterious word that we are able to use it analogically, to take it beyond the context in which we learn it, and use it to interpret the life of the risen Christ. To say 'This is the Body of Christ' is, then, to use language in much the same way as when we say 'This is created by God' and quite differently from when we say 'This is bread'. To say what happens at the consecration we need to do more than simply change the predicate, we have to make a change in the way we are using language.

It might be asked why we could not say of the consecrated host 'This is bread', using the word 'bread' analogically. The answer to this seems to be that the word 'bread' is too attached to the particularities of its ordinary context to be free to be used analogically. It is a word like 'off-side' rather than like 'fair play' (the same is perhaps not true of a word like 'food'). For this reason we can only say metaphorically that the consecrated host is bread—and this, of course, we do many times in the liturgy.

The general point I am making may perhaps be illustrated by looking at the words 'pain', 'ride' and 'four'. It is perfectly obvious what these mean, although the second has a certain ambiguity—it might mean what you do on a bicycle or it might mean a wide pathway through the woods or it might be what the Godfather has you taken for. There are also possible nuances of meaning in the other words as they are used in different sentences, e.g. 'I had no wish to cause you pain' and 'I have a shooting pain in my knee'. But now consider what a completely different change of consciousness is involved if you discover that all three are in fact being used in the



French language and mean respectively bread, wrinkle and oven. It would then be absurd to say: 'Whatever else we may want to say about it the word "ride" is spelled R-I-D-E and hence satisfies the criteria for being a word meaning what you do on a bicycle, we must just accept this and then go on to consider the implications of the fact that we now see it to be a word in the French language'.

The kind of change that the consecration makes is represented by the change we have to make in our use of language when speaking of it; and, in fact, I think we can usefully say that in the Eucharist the bread and wine themselves become part of a new language. This has, of course, to be distinguished most carefully from the view that the bread and wine 'acquire a new significance'. Of course, food and drink shared together always have a significance, they form a means of communication; and of course food and drink shared in a sacred context will have a different and deeper significance—having to do with human communication in terms of the gods or the divine presence. Food and drink shared in re-enactment of the passover meal and still more of the sacrificial meal of the Last Supper will have an even deeper and more mysterious significance, but the doctrine of the Eucharist says more than this. It is not just that in these signs we reach the limits of our human language in expressing the divine; what we believe is that our signs are taken over and become the language of God himself. There is a dramatic change of perspective. Grace becomes no longer simply a matter of our being able to reach out towards God, we have in concrete form his reaching out towards his communication of himself to us, his incarnate Word.

But in these matters I would expect to find myself in agreement with G. Egner; in this article I have merely tried to show where and why I differ from him.

## **Those who Dare not See**

### **The tap-roots of violence**

by **Richard Murphy**

The journals give the quantities of wrong,  
Where the impatient massacre took place,  
How many and what sort it caused to die,  
But, O, what finite integers express  
The realm of malice where these facts belong?

W. H. AUDEN

Man is conceived in aggression: too often, he dies in it.

The sexual act may be enhanced by its manner, exalted by its