

Psychotherapy as Transubstantiation:

A Postmodern Interpretation of the Holy Eucharist as a Subversive Image to Undermine
Individualism and Reductionism in Western Culture and Modern Psychology.

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From a particular theological perspective, the human person is conceived of as the joining together of dust and Divine Breath. Divine Breath is the unitive force that communalizes and makes sacred human bodies. Conceiving divinity as inherent in the composition of persons evokes the sense that humanity has an irreducible, vast core that transcends the scope of human conceptions. Certainly, dust can be measured and contained. However, divinity, by most definitions, cannot ultimately be reduced. To the degree that humans are conceived of as inherently composed of that Breath, they are to be enamored with a sense of mystery and awe.

Western culture, during the modern era, has constructed conceptions of the self that work against this image of persons as sacred, communal bodies. A virulent strain of individualism runs rampant in the culture permeating modern psychology and undergirding particular manifestations of psychopathology. Individualism is the de-sacredization of human persons, a regression into mere dust. Regarding psychology's role in this matter, it has suffocated the self through proliferations of reified operational definitions, which seek to measure, control, and predict behaviors of the truncated person. Hence, from dust humans began and to dust humans have returned themselves.

I envision a time when the self is augmented, not in a narcissistic fashion, but in a way that reconnects it to its communal purposes. By communal purposes I mean, what Charles Taylor (1989) calls, an "orienting framework" that provides the self with a collective sense of justification for beliefs and moral stances. The self reconnects to these communal purposes, I imagine, via the transformative power of the sacramental mystery of Holy Eucharist. The Eucharist provides an even greater context for the meaning of communal purposes. As the body of Christ, it is a sacrament by

which individuals come to realize themselves as no longer disparate atoms but part of a mystical body. I use the word 'mystical' to connote the unitive aspect of this transformation. Although people appear separate, the power of the Eucharist is to unite them under one body. They become contributing members to a divinely organic process, commonly known as the body of Christ. The best adjective I can find to describe this process is the word 'mystical.'

This paper will argue that the process of transubstantiation and the meaning of the Eucharist can provide a powerful image for envisioning the modern self's transformation from dust back to a sacred, mystical body. From my particular Catholic horizon, this image is compelling for its implications in healing the cultural wounds done onto the individual. I agree with Richard Rorty when he stated that powerful images and metaphors are behind constructions of intellectual systems (1979). A proliferation of metaphors and images are needed, which run in contrast to the dominant ones of contemporary culture and, particularly, in modern psychology. I believe that psychotherapy as transubstantiation envisions the self in a way that moves against current trends of modern psychology, whose guiding images include atoms, hydraulic systems, beasts, and computers. In the end, I hope that psychotherapeutic practices are not merely helping a client to get along in a world that has adopted standards of healthiness incorporating these reductionistic and limiting images.

The Eucharist is the zenith of Catholic liturgy, and it is the central image of concern here. The following will briefly articulate an interpretation of this blessed sacrament. Catholicism is concerned not merely with orthodoxy but orthopraxy as well. Adherence to propositional truths without right actions is a step closer to death (James 2:14-26). Philosophically, this can be justified by examining recent developments in the philosophy of language found in the work of John Austin (presented in McClendon & Smith 1994). Austin claims that a speech act is not meaningful if it is merely descriptive of certain realities. It must have a performative element as well. For example, I might say to you at dinner, "There's the salt." At that moment, I am not merely asserting a belief. I

am also implicitly asking you to “Please, pass me the salt.” Austin argues that any attempt to divorce the descriptive component of a speech act from its performative implications creates a bewildering and incoherent conception of language.

I suggest that the Eucharist is the ultimate performative component of the Christian Creed. It actualizes a communal understanding of the human person in a way that mere verbal recitation cannot. When the community partakes in eating the same body as that of God Himself, a transformation of consciousness can take place with the realization that “it is no longer I but Christ that lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). We are reunited to a community through the act of Christ’s eternal bodily sacrifice so that we may participate in it as members. Since this is shared with all our brothers and sisters, we become one in this mystical body. It is this act of eating, rather than mere speaking, that is front and center in the profound awareness that one is part of a larger whole. It reestablishes the sense of a communal purpose and a broadening of one’s “skin-encapsulated ego” to be bigger than the mere fleshy outline apparently dividing human persons.

Many Catholics can be criticized for their failure to implement the Eucharist in its broader perspective. They partake in the sacrament, go home, and live out their lives without a sense of communal purpose. This is a defamation of Christ’s body, for it has been consumed and quickly expelled. Transformation fails to occur because the fullness of the performative act is not fulfilled. Communion means to have “union-together”. The Eucharist cannot be reduced to an individualistic experience without aborting Christ, which would result in dismembering His mystical body.

More needs to be said about transubstantiation, the process of by which bread becomes Eucharistic. To understand this process, a brief overview of Aquinas’ use of Aristotle’s metaphysics is in order. In contrast to Plato, Aristotle rejected the separability of the forms from matter. However, he still differentiated them. Matter was considered sheer physical existence (Leahey 2004, p. 64). Form makes a thing what it is. The forms of things consist of three components: *essential*

causes, a things definition, *efficient causes*, how a thing comes to be, and *final causes*, the purpose for a things existence (p. 65). Aquinas used these categories to explain the process of transubstantiation. Bread is considered to have a specific definition, an understanding of how it comes to be, and certain purposes as it relates to human activity. By itself, bread is a rather ordinary substance. The priest, through the work of God's grace, is the designated conduit for actualizing a change in the bread's form. The *essential*, *efficient*, and *final causes* are altered in a way that the bread is transformed into the actual body of Christ.

Ludwig Wittgenstein's concept of language-games may help facilitate understanding of this process from a postmodern perspective. Language-games refer to the various linguistic activities or forms of life (Wittgenstein 1953/2001). There are many kinds of linguistic activities each with their own grammatical rules. Wittgenstein's use of the word 'grammar' refers to the logic of a given linguistic activity. By changing bread's definition, causes, and purpose, the actual grammatical structure surrounding the concept is changed. Bread is placed into a new language-game. If, as Wittgenstein argues, all things are linguistically bound, then by changing the grammatical form surrounding the concept of bread, its constitution is re-constructed in such a fashion that the old bread is not commensurate with the new.¹

This postmodern interpretation of the Eucharist is useful for understanding how psychotherapy can be viewed as a form of transubstantiation. Returning to the prevalent images of modern culture, I spoke of their demeaning portrayal of human nature. There is a de-sacredization of the human person from sacred body back into dust. The modern self is embedded in linguistic forms that define it as being atomistic, self-sufficient, and, to use Phillip Cushman's term (1995), empty. This disorienting, fragmented self is best conceived as a return to dust because, like dust which is

¹This is not an attempt to state that anyone can simply transform an object on their own accord through a semantic game. Only the one who has vested communal authority within the tradition, i.e. the priest, is justified to engage in this process. However, I believe once we participate in the Eucharist, begun by the priest, we are then

easily dissipated by a mild wind, it lacks a cohesive unity of communal purposes that orient the self to a greater whole.

I believe psychotherapy can potentially undermine the destructive influences of the dominant culture by transforming clients in a way analogous to how bread is transformed into the Eucharist. It requires, first, a period of cleansing and opening up on the part of clients, what is known as the *kenotic* effect of confession in the Catholic Church. As this process unfolds, therapists elicit dominate linguistic activities at work inside clients' psyches. If one of the goals is a healing transformation into wholeness, then the social-political structures, as they are embedded in the psychological make up of individuals, need to be evoked as well.

Psychotherapy becomes transformational when these, often unconscious, collective images are unearthed and their destructive implications in personal psychopathology are brought to awareness. As this process unfolds, clients and therapists can work collaboratively to begin to shift clients' linguistic structures to identify with a perspective more congenial to communal understandings of the self. Clients adopt new linguistic forms that impact their identity in novel ways, resulting in tectonic shifts in their personal narratives. No longer are they identified with the old self-defining narratives inherited from the culture. Rather, they undergo a process of transubstantiation in which the *essential*, *efficient*, and *final causes* that compose their narratives are changed to incorporate linguistic forms embracing communal purposes.

I do not believe this process can be undertaken without prior transformations within therapists. As culturally-embedded clinicians, we are wounded-healers in need of our own transubstantiation into wholeness. This is accomplished by becoming Eucharistic as well. Therapists are in need of emptying their selves of the collective sins of culture. Through reestablishing therapists' own sense of communal purposes and embodying an awareness of being made new in a

empowered and mandated to transform the world, to make the mundane and profane to be sacred and holy by being

mystical body, we are given the sacramental grace to provide healing and reconciliation in clients. When clients “ingest” the transformed therapist, they will not simply re-digest the deleterious images of contemporary culture and modern psychology. Clients will, instead, be nourished and made whole by “consuming” a therapist who offers the potential for a transformation of character and personhood rather than merely the reduction of symptoms. Such a provincial goal as symptom reduction appears nothing less than a disquieting of the anxious soul who cries out in defiance to systemic sins hoisted upon it.

God breathed life into dust, creating sacred bodies that live in communion with Him. Ontologically, this may never, in actuality, be altered, despite shifting historical conceptions of human nature. However, the significant point is not the actual “Being” of human nature but, rather, the practices of human societies with their multifaceted presentations of it. Contemporary social constructions of the self have de-sacredized the person, removing the ineffable Divine Breath that, ultimately, makes human nature uncontainable and mysterious. The images of Eucharist and transubstantiation provide powerful and moving metaphors for envisioning therapy as subversive against current trends. I believe that these life-giving images work against modern individualism and alienation and move the person closer to the union experienced by being a part of a collective body, resulting in a raising of consciousness to one’s communal nature. More importantly, clients undergo a process of transubstantiation whereby they move from merely atomized dust particles to a holy and irreplaceable member of God’s unified, mystical body.

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