

Expansive Naturalism and the Justification of Metaphysics in Sacramental Theology

John D. O'Connor OP

A feature of much modern sacramental theology, and indeed theology in general, is a distrust of traditional metaphysical categories such as 'cause' and 'effect.' Much of the impetus for this has arisen from the critique of metaphysics instigated by Martin Heidegger, which has sought to overcome the "totalising" tendency of traditional Western thought. In the theological sphere this position has generally taken the form of regarding metaphysics as imposing a straitjacketing framework upon the intersubjective dynamic of grace and symbolic mediation.

It is the aim of this article to question this critique as it appears in what is perhaps the *locus classicus* of the post-Heideggerian approach to sacramental theology, Louis-Marie Chauvet's very fine book, *Symbol and Sacrament*.¹ It is not the aim of this article to examine Chauvet's sacramental theology *per se*, but, rather, to evaluate one of the principal motivating factors behind his theology, namely, the rejection of metaphysics. It will be argued that Chauvet's concerns do not entail a rejection of metaphysics *tout court*. In addition, it will be argued that the non-reductive naturalist worldviews of modern mainstream British moral realists such as James Griffin, John McDowell and David Wiggins effectively undermine the dichotomies underpinning the rejection. This has the advantage of lessening the apparent differences between different theological camps through the establishment of a basis of common intelligibility. Although there have been other attempts to reconcile Chauvet's theology with metaphysics, most notably with the process metaphysics of Whitehead,² this article approaches the problem from a more traditional metaphysical viewpoint and thereby one more likely to command widespread agreement.

The rejection of metaphysics

For Chauvet the fundamental problem of the classical metaphysical understanding of the sacraments is that the necessary recognition of the alterity of God is not an intrinsic part of its framework: "Thus, the great thinkers have always known how to take a *step backwards*, a step of humble lucidity before the truth, a step which has protected them from

falling into the deadly dogmatism of confusing their thought with the real. On occasion, they have even explicitly reflected on this disparity. But to ponder such a disparity is one thing; to take this disparity *as a point of departure and as a framework* for one's thought is another."³ That is, the great theologians of the past, and Chauvet focuses on the Scholastics and St Thomas in particular, have brought to sacramental theology metaphysics derived from everyday life and applied it to the sacraments. The problem is that the qualifications required in the theological context of grace and the mystery of God are appended afterwards. This subsequent introduction of analogy or other qualifying elements is a necessary addition to safeguard against an overweening ratiocentrism. What is not in dispute is the need for an appreciation of the severe limitation of theological language; all discourse relating to the divine must have this feature. But, for Chauvet, in the case of scholastic theology this does not go far enough. This is because the framework itself is contaminated by a thinking which tries to fit the theology into human categories, beginning with those categories and not with the divine subject at hand, the divine mystery and the cultic intersubjectivity, the interaction of God and man, at the heart of the sacramental life.

Chauvet thinks that this is reflected in the centrality of the concepts of cause and effect in the sacramental theology of St Thomas. Perhaps the principal analogy used by St Thomas in the *Summa Theologiae* for the operation of the sacraments is that they are God's instruments for the imparting of grace.⁴ For Chauvet, this commits several errors. It removes the sacraments from their essential ritualistic and ecclesial context where intercourse of God and man takes place. Of course, he is not claiming that St Thomas wished to separate the sacraments from their proper context, but, as his analogy does not contain this as a constitutive part, it is fatally flawed. It is not only that the analogy is flawed, it engenders a conception of the sacraments where such a separation of the sacraments from necessary constitutive elements can be conceived of. This in turn has led to theologies treating grace as an "accidental"⁵ effect of this "productionist"⁶ scheme.

Yet, this is only one manifestation of what is for Chauvet a much wider problem. It is the metaphysical thinking of Western philosophy itself starting with Plato which is deeply flawed due to its deep-seated tendency to eliminate: "[the] permanent state of incompleteness [which] defies any logic and destroys any discourse; *any thought which would not come to rest in a final term*, a final significance, a recognisable and ultimate truth."⁷ Theology conceived through this language, "onto-theology," regardless of any attached qualification to the contrary, is thereby condemned to the inescapable undermining of the radical ontological difference between God and man. This is the imposition upon theology of a "totalising," "scientific," closed, static rationality insensitive to the dynamic and open

“scientific,” closed, static rationality insensitive to the dynamic and open horizon of divine interaction with man.

Chauvet’s positive account of sacramental theology is that of symbolic mediation. To single out one example among many, Chauvet illustrates this by presenting an account of “symbolic exchange” as practised by the Franks and Merovingians.⁸ This exchange acts as an analogy with sacramental symbolic exchange. The goods pillaged in their wars are not regarded in terms of individual capital, but as enabling a complex dynamic of exchange, thereby creating and cementing an intricate web of social bonds. What is crucial to understanding this, for Chauvet, is that in being without utilitarian or instrumental intent the goods are symbols of giving and openness to the other. Whatever the inherent implausibility of such social intercourse as having “nothing to do with business,” it nonetheless illustrates a model to be aspired to in the sacramental exchange within the ecclesial community, and which is truly attained in God’s gift to us in the sacraments.

This setting of the sacramental realm outside the instrumental is part of the critique of metaphysics. This is the critique of metaphysics as effectively viewing language as emerging after thought, simply as mere instrument for communication. A word has a precise meaning, and likewise, an object has a quantified worth. But Chauvet’s sacramental theology is a theology of acts, where the expressing of words is more than a statement of concepts syntactically joined, and the giving of an object a transaction. Language does not simply emerge from the subject, but also shapes him in a complex interaction of world and subject. Instead of a theology conceived in terms of what Chauvet considers an inadequate closed and sterile totality, what he argues for is a discourse of symbols which expresses an ongoing, open-ended encounter of language disclosing and being shaped by reality, beyond the realm of precise repetition and linguistic paraphrase.

It is on the basis of this dichotomy that Chauvet makes what is perhaps his key terminological distinction: “To the extent that [...] the distinction between “*sign*” and “*symbol*” turns, according to us, on whether the subjects *as such* are taken into account (in a symbol) or not (in a sign), we will be led to theologically think of the sacraments in terms of symbol rather than sign.”⁹ Yet, he is explicit that one should not think the distinction a sharp one. To do so would be to fall prey to the totalising mindset already rejected. On Chauvet’s conception, the sacramental discourse he proposes represents the dominance of the symbolic order, whilst metaphysics represents the dominance of the signifiatory. This is the difference between accepting the true nature of things as given in their richness and constant disclosure, rather than imposing an essentially foreign framework of ratiocentric categories. Just as in the instrumental and non-instrumental conceptions of language, symbol and sign act as

poles in dialectical tension. As the non-instrumental approach will always have a certain referential (*i.e.* instrumental) aspect, so the symbol will have too. But the idea of symbol communicates the introduction of the subject into a realm to which the symbol itself belongs, rather than pointing to something beyond itself, which is what a sign does.¹⁰ To enter into the world of the symbol is to enter into a web of association, a whole socio-cultural world in which human beings move and have their being. It is to enter into a world not only necessarily intersubjective, but one which is constitutively so. In the case of the sacraments, the symbol is a making present of the reality, the sacramental reality, and its engagement with humanity.

Metaphysics revisited

If metaphysics is to overcome the critique posed by Chauvet it must either demonstrate that his whole conception of sacramental theology in being founded on intersubjectivity is false, or argue that metaphysics has within itself resources to overcome his concerns. As a dehumanised mechanistic understanding of the sacraments would be unacceptable, it is clear that only the second option is viable. This will require showing two things. The first is that it is possible to have a metaphysics which has the conceptual elements required to do justice to what it attempts to elucidate as a constitutive element of its framework. It must also be able to do justice, to the extent that any discourse can, to the dynamic of intersubjective symbolic mediation.

A first point to note is that the illustration of what Chauvet regards as non-instrumental exchange, that among the Franks and Merovingians, is not in fact non-causal. What may give the impression of non-causality is that it cannot be characterised in terms of reductive causal laws. That is, causal laws expressed in scientific terms, be they psychological or physical. But the fact that such interactions are not reductive does not detract from the fact that the act effects (a causal term) something and would not have done so had the act not taken place. This indicates that Chauvet's idea of metaphysics is that it is reductive, which is an assumption needing justification.

This rejection of a metaphysical "straw-man" brings about its own tensions, as this shows. Indeed, it is possible to read Chauvet as not being really concerned with the total elimination of metaphysics despite certain avowals on his part. This is very much to interpret him in the most sympathetic light from a metaphysician's perspective. It could be argued that for Chauvet, just as the instrumental and non-instrumental conceptions of language, and symbol and sign, represent opposite poles in dialectical tension, so the causal and non-causal accounts represent opposite poles. That is, as representing theoretically distinct approaches which in reality are not wholly exclusive. This would then shift the critique of metaphysics

to being a critique of the causal approach as being an inappropriate perspective from which to address the sacraments, rather than being simply invalid. Despite these elements possibly implicit in Chauvet, it is still incumbent to argue a clearer case for metaphysical sacramental discourse. This is due to the fact that the elements inveighing against metaphysics are so overwhelming in his account.

In fact, it can be argued that the subjective worldview cannot be eliminated from any metaphysical conception whatsoever. This is, in effect, to abandon any notion of a “pure science.” As formulated by C.S. Peirce, such an approach would involve an absolute conceptual analysis of the world in impersonal terms, terms without any reference implicit or otherwise to a personal standpoint. Given that such an analysis requires human beings, this would take the form of a determinate method capable of reaching convergence in terms of its concepts. In addition to being non-distorting, it would have to contain within itself the resources for justifying its own account. As McDowell argues, even leaving aside sceptical objections such as to the existence of external reality, such a “pure science” could only aim at giving the very barest account of reality, totally excluding features of the world such as colour and the human experience of pain.¹¹ On the pure scientific conception, ‘looks green’ does not presuppose any prior understanding of ‘green’ or ‘is green.’ To abandon any prior conception of what ‘green’ or ‘is green’ are is to treat the colour as separate from the object in some way, since to predicate it of the object is to include a premiss which itself must be justified in pure scientific terms. That is, the pure scientific account commits one to describing and explaining such features independently of the objects in which they are supposed to reside, which leads to a methodological breakdown. Similarly, to have an absolute conception of someone, say A, having a pain is to implicitly predicate ‘as it is for A’ of the pain. The introduction of such a vague predicate deviates from the constrictions of the pure scientific view through introducing individual perspective. Moreover, its phenomenological content could only be understood by sentient beings of sufficiently close constitution to that of A. Thus, to some degree at least, all comprehensive explanatory metaphysical frameworks must have some constitutive subjective element.

Non-reductive naturalism

It has to be conceded that this entails only a minimal element of subjective perspective, insufficient to address Chauvet’s concerns. The subject may be ineliminable, but is hardly central as things stand. Therefore it is necessary to present a global metaphysical understanding which is capable of answering Chauvet’s critique. That is, a metaphysical conception which has a subjective openness intrinsic to its framework which can help give an

understanding of symbolic mediation. It has already been argued that this metaphysical conception cannot be a scientifically reductionist one. It will further be argued that a viable metaphysical conception must be a non-reductive naturalism.

A crucial step in establishing a non-reductive naturalist metaphysics is to note that in the account already given two assumptions have been made. That they are prosaic does not detract from the fact that they have not been argued for as such. Quite simply, they are that objects have colour, and that human nature is sufficiently similar across human beings for explanatory discourse to be meaningful. This is to make a major methodological point. That is, for there to be a serviceable philosophical account of the world there needs to be some degree of relaxation in the philosophical criteria of non-circularity, and exhaustive necessary and sufficient conditions. Some initial premisses have to be allowed if any progress is to be made. This is, in effect, a further denial of any aspiration towards totalisation or pure science, whilst upholding common intelligibility. As McDowell points out,¹² this philosophical conception undermines the sharp objective/subjective dichotomy interpreted along veridical/illusory lines. A case in point is that a colour judgement may be veridical though subjective, and therefore be claimed to be both objective and subjective, properly understood.

Next, the non-reductionism required by symbolic exchange is in fact a much wider feature of the natural world. There has been no widely accepted detailed account which has managed to overcome the explanatory gap between the physical world and conscious experience (*e.g.* the phenomenology of colour). In the lack of any viable positive account, this points to the absence of any bridging concept between experiential states of affairs and the concepts of features of objects intelligible otherwise than in terms of how their possessors would strike us.¹³ Indeed, it seems difficult to conceive how such a concept could be formulated. We cannot understand the concept of the colour 'green' without reference to experience of the colour green. This points very strongly to a non-reductivist metaphysics, where, for example, properties such as colour cannot be reduced to the primary qualities of the coloured object, the emitted light and the biology of the human eye.

Yet this is most certainly not in any way to entail a non-dependence on the natural world. Indeed, there is clearly a dependence between experiential qualities (*e.g.* green) and the physical, as can be seen by change of colour with wavelength of light. But to assert the dependence relation need not require that one specify exactly what it is. As James Griffin points out, the default candidate is usually some form of supervenience.¹⁴ This strongly suggests a naturalistic metaphysical understanding, where metaphysics depends on the natural world. In the absence of the postulation of platonic supernatural (in the sense used in the

analytical philosophy of value)¹⁵ metaphysical realities, the dependence will be only on the natural world and hence metaphysical truths can be regarded as natural.

An expansive naturalism

As it stands, this is still inadequate to address Chauvet's critique. What is required is that the metaphysical conception go one crucial step further and introduce value concepts into its framework, value not in the sense of quantifiable worth, as Chauvet frequently uses the term (*valeur*),¹⁶ but of evaluation (e.g. beauty, goodness, elegance, virtue). These are the terms of human response to objects and states of affairs, and therefore apply to the discourse about the intersubjective world of the symbolic, as in the analogy of the symbolic exchange of the Franks and Merovingians.

The account already given is that of a non-reductionist naturalism which incorporates subjectivity and objectivity, thereby undermining any sharp dichotomy between the two. However, to introduce evaluative terms into the metaphysics is clearly to enter into a more disputed area, given the degree of disagreement about value. It is only possible to present a case for the plausibility of the incorporation of value in an article of this length. But it is worth remembering that one who believes in sacramental reality seems committed to belief in value-realism, so in the context of sacramental theology the philosophical difficulties are greatly reduced.

The only alternative to this naturalist account in the context of full-blooded value-realism is to reject naturalism altogether, thereby adopting a platonist supernaturalism, situating value outside the natural sphere with all its attendant metaphysical and epistemological problems. In the sacramental context this alternative can be rejected. Despite the fact that the sacraments derive from God Who is beyond the natural, the positing of all value outside of the natural would undermine the significance of the materiality of material symbols, thereby reducing the material to mere instrument and sign.

To understand a non-reductionist naturalist account of value, consider the evaluative predicate 'funny.' As Wiggins¹⁷ points out, one could provide an account of it in terms of <property, reaction> pairs. A joke and its context have certain properties, and we can regard the joke as funny through personal reactions. But humour and conditions are varied and, so, a comprehensive account in this manner would result in an enormous disjunctive set of such pairs. One could imagine some pairs leading to a refinement of what is perceived as funny. Some would enable communication and a mutual education, while others would not. Some pairs might even enable a broadening of what is considered to be funny, while others do not. In any case, what seems likely is that the set of <property, reaction> pairs would be in Roger Crisp's phrase: "shapeless in

the sense that the only way of making organisational sense of it will be by seeing it in terms of the very predicate of which it purports to be an elucidation.”¹⁸ This unavoidable shapelessness is strong evidence that such a reductionist analysis of ‘funny’ is doomed to failure. Similarly, that one can only make sense of ‘funny’ with reference to human response indicates that what counts as ‘funny’ is necessarily anthropocentric and subjective. However, again as in McDowell’s sense of the word, this does not entail that it is not objective. Somewhat controversially, it can be understood as objective in the sense that reasons can be given why some jokes are indeed very funny and others weak. Some element of cognitive under-determinism would have to be introduced to address the diversity of evaluations of the same jokes. In such a conception of ‘funny’ the response does not make the joke funny but is epistemologically necessary for the qualities to be perceived. On this scheme, the fact that a person lacks a sense of humour means that he will not be able to understand the property ‘funny’ (because it is not reducible) nor can one say that his lack of humorous reaction means that the joke does not have the property of being funny.

In not being an absolute form of objectivity, the objectivity can be regarded as being dependent on context, the complex interaction of a cultural and societal conditioning and a human nature sufficiently stable and uniform to enable a common value discourse. Values, and especially aesthetic values, have their wider origins embedded in them. The non-reductive naturalism with its incorporation of anthropocentric objective and subjective elements brings us to a position where one can make sense of Chauvet’s understanding of symbol in metaphysical terms. For Chauvet, the chief characteristic of a symbol is that the subjects *qua* subjects are taken into account. This is precisely what this non-reductionist naturalist metaphysical account of value entails as a constitutive element of its conception.

However, one can continue this analysis further. Not only can metaphysics accommodate Chauvet’s conception of sacramental discourse, it also points to a richer conception of the natural, a richness no reductive scheme could possibly express. This could have appreciable impact on how one views the world from a spiritual perspective. By adopting a full-blooded value-realism in a naturalist context, the boundaries of what constitutes the ‘natural’ are pushed beyond what is often taken to be the case. As Griffin rightly says, ‘natural’ is: “grossly defined.”¹⁹ Such a position may not in fact be as daring as imagined. If one wishes to assert a dependency of value on natural properties (*i.e.* naturalism), whilst rejecting a scientific reductionism, such an option is quite reasonable. McDowell²⁰ has proposed precisely that. Evaluative qualities such as ‘funny’ or ‘spontaneous’ (required to avoid certain forms of determinism) simply cannot be understood in terms of a “bald naturalism.” This richer conception of the world is one constituted by more than mere ‘stuff,’ but as value-bearing, value-embedded. An “expansive naturalism,” to use Griffin’s phrase.²¹ This expands the

metaphysical conception to one capable of giving a holistic account of the material aspect of symbolic mediation. Through being value-embedded the matter is not simply a symbol by virtue of being regarded as such, though such a context is necessary. Instead, a mediatory potentiality is found within nature itself, a power which is recognised and brought to fruition in the sacramental forum.

It follows from this naturalist value-realism that one can meaningfully speak of the symbol causing without implying a univocity with 'cause' in scientific processes. But to speak of a realism about value in the case of the symbol enables one to ascribe real, though non-reducible, meaning to the symbol. It is therefore possible to speak of the reality of this meaning as a quality it embodies in some way. Therefore one can speak of it as causing effects, analogously to a joke causing laughter or a beautiful painting causing pleasure. The process is not reducible and constitutively involves the subject in his historical and cultural reality. Perhaps, in the case of the sacraments terms like 'brings about' or 'brings to fruition' or 'enables' may offend less, but the point is the same. As in any language regarding the sacraments, this is not to circumscribe God. All language about God is radically insufficient, and this must apply in all sacramental discourse.

Conclusions

Using the resources of traditional metaphysical approaches a non-reductive naturalism has been argued for which incorporates into its framework as a constitutive element objectivity and subjectivity which in turn provide a grounding for the intersubjectivity required by Chauvet's sacramental theology. Indeed, it has been shown that considerable flexibility can be achieved in metaphysics once an appropriate relaxation of philosophical criteria is allowed. In effect, this is simply to try to do justice to reality in the spirit of Bishop Butler's phrase much loved by Wittgenstein: "Everything is what it is and nothing else."²² This comment, that metaphysics must not impose but do justice to the particularity found in the world, parallels Heidegger's own aims, but, crucially, emerges from within a metaphysical tradition capable of self-criticism. Of course, the arguments presented also point to their possible extension to attempts to vindicate the Scholastics from Chauvet's critique.

However, final verdicts are not straightforward. It should be remembered that the argument has only tried to show that there is an appropriate metaphysical perspective of sacramental discourse. It has not tried to make the case for it as being the most appropriate, though to attempt to eliminate it is unsustainable. The question of what constitutes the most fitting sacramental language is left open. Nor has it tried to advocate or argue against Chauvet's general sacramental theology as such, though areas of concern have been addressed. Certainly this vindication of

the metaphysical perspective may be a reason to reject accounts such as those of Chauvet, and to question aspects of his theology driven by the rejection of metaphysics. Yet there remains a more conciliatory option. That metaphysics has been argued to be consistent with the basis for Chauvet's wider sacramental theology means that the possibility that accounts such as his are rendered more acceptable (or remediable) from a metaphysical standpoint is one that cannot be immediately discounted.

The author would like to thank Fiona Ellis, Yonatan Witztum, Christiane Diehl, David Goodill OP and Fergus Kerr OP for helpful comments and insights.

- 1 Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbole et sacrement: Un relecture sacramentelle de l'existence chrétienne* (Paris, 1987), translated into English by Patrick Madigan SJ and Madeleine Beaumont as *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence* (Minnesota, 1995)
- 2 Joseph A Bracken SJ, "Toward a New Philosophical Theology Based on Intersubjectivity," *Theological Studies* 59(4) (1998) pp.703 – 719 and *c.f.* David Ray Griffin (ed.), *God and Religion in the Postmodern World: Essays in Postmodern Theology* (Albany, SUNY 1989)
- 3 Louis-Marie Chauvet, *op.cit.* p.8
- 4 *cf.* *Summa Theologiae*, III.62.1.2
- 5 Louis-Marie Chauvet, *op.cit.* p.19
- 6 *ibid.* p.22
- 7 *ibid.* p.24
- 8 *ibid.* pp.100 - 101
- 9 *ibid.* p.110
- 10 *ibid.* pp.112 - 113
- 11 John McDowell, "Aesthetic Value, Objectivity and the Fabric of the World," in J McDowell, *Mind, Value and Reality* (Harvard, 1998) pp. 112-130
- 12 John McDowell, "Values and Secondary Qualities" in J. McDowell *op.cit.* (1998) p.136
- 13 *ibid.* p.138
- 14 James Griffin, *Value Judgement* (Oxford, 1996) p.48
- 15 *i.e.* not referring here to God or angels
- 16 Chauvet uses 'value' as synonymous with 'worth' and similar quantifiable terms. *E.g.* Chauvet, *op.cit.* pp. 25, 100. However, in this essay the term connotes the evaluational.
- 17 David Wiggins, "A Sensible Subjectivism?" in D Wiggins, *Needs, Values, Truth* (Oxford, 2002) pp.194 - 199
- 18 Roger Crisp, "Naturalism and Non-Naturalism in Ethics" in S Williams and S Lovibond (eds.), *Essays for David Wiggins*, (Oxford, 1996) p. 119
- 19 James Griffin, *op.cit.* p.38
- 20 John McDowell, *Mind and World*, (Harvard, 1994), Lecture IV and "Two Sorts of Naturalism" in J. McDowell, *op.cit.* (1998) pp.167 - 197
- 21 James Griffin, *op.cit.* p.51
- 22 quoted in Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein, the Duty of Genius* (London, 1991) p.451