1. Introduction

This paper takes up the relative oddity of the Aristotelian language of accident and substance, or subject, used in Eucharistic theology. Inasmuch as we perceive the appearances of bread and wine in receiving the most holy sacrament of the Eucharist and account for them as Aristotelian accidents, how do they exist when it is Christ Jesus who is present in this sacrament and not true bread and true wine? My modest musings on this question were precipitated by an article by a friend, the Eckharitan theologian Martina Roesner entitled “Transforming Vision: Meister Eckhart’s Speculative Interpretation of the Real Presence in the Eucharist.” While I will swiftly summarize a few important points about Eckhart’s and Roesner’s understanding of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist, I in no way plan to truly recount or dialogue with Meister Eckhart’s thought. Rather, I am here interested in the relation of accidents to their subject, in the case of the Eucharist, and whether there may be grounds to slightly more daring than St. Thomas Aquinas in speaking of these accidents and whether they have a subject. In writing this paper, I will be obviously be following the dogmatic language found in Lateran IV\(^1\) and Trent\(^2\) concerning the accidents of bread and wine and the true presence of Christ Jesus in place of the substances of

\(^{1}\) 1215 AD.
\(^{2}\) 1545-1563 AD; Session 13=1551AD.
bread and wine in the Eucharist—which were nicely influential upon and then influenced by St. Thomas Aquinas. The councils do not absolutely require a strict Aristotelianism. I will thus defend the relation between *per accidens* beings and their underlying *subjectum* by which such accidental beings exist by focusing on this subject to of accidents as that being which empowers accidents to exist, without prejudice to St. Thomas’ language in the *Summa Theologiae, tertia pars*, Q. 77 A 1-2 where he claims that there is 1) no precise Aristotelian subject to these accidents and that there is 2) a sense in which the dimensive quantity of bread and wine acts as a subject for the other Eucharistic accidents to retain their integral individuality together. I therefore content myself with the somewhat awkward name of “quasi-subject” to describe the unique sacramental presence of Christ Jesus *relative to the accidents of bread and wine* in the Eucharist.

2. Rejection of Categories

Transubstantiation and the relation of substance to accidents is not always accepted in Eucharistic theology, both in the modern period of Christian fragmentation and during the era of High Scholasticism (13\textsuperscript{th}-early 14\textsuperscript{th} centuries), even though the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) dignified this concept by entering it into the extraordinary magisterium of the Catholic Church, roughly 330 years before Trent. “[Jesus’] body and blood are truly contained in the sacrament of the altar under the forms of bread and wine, the bread and wine *transsubstantiatis* (having been changed in substance), by God’s power, into his body and blood.” Meister Eckhart is an

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3 See, *Mysterium Fidei: Encyclical of Pope Paul VI on the Holy Eucharist* of September 3, 1965 for the importance of retaining the Church’s language and general conceptualization of defined dogmas, like transubstantiation.

4 For the right understanding of the term “extraordinary magisterium,” see John Joy’s dissertation *On the Ordinary and Extraordinary Magisterium from Joseph Kleutgen to the Second Vatican Council*.

example of a theologian who rejects these sorts of categories in their application to the Eucharist even though Lateran IV, promulgated in 1215, predated the life of Meister Eckhart, who was born in 1260. He is an example of a great theologian who, according to Martina Roesner, “Without ever putting into question the Real Presence as such, Eckhart does not follow the strategy of most contemporary scholastics, who try to explain Eucharistic transubstantiation according to the substance-accident schema of Aristotelian physics.”\textsuperscript{6} While Eckhart accepts the dogma \textit{that} Christ Jesus be present in this Sacrament under the appearances of bread and wine, he does not hold to the apparatus already elected by the mind of the Church at Lateran IV which would come to be used doctrinally roughly 200 years after he died.\textsuperscript{7}

Meister Eckhart’s own theory about the change of bread and wine into the Eucharist is based on his own understanding of all creation in the light of the ongoing process of divine self-realization through natural objects’ connections to the divine ground of being.\textsuperscript{8} This ontology is possible—to the mind of Eckhart—insofar as it is reimagined as a metaphysics of intellect where the categories of physical nature, as in Aristotle, no longer apply. Instead, the intellect, here the Divine Intellect, is productive of its own ontological status in its own self-manifestation.\textsuperscript{9} Therefore, the “I,” especially the Divine “I,” is category-less and never susceptible of being truly related to accidents.\textsuperscript{10} “Eckhart interprets the sacramental presence as an expression of the absolute substantiality of the intellect which can, by virtue of its radical simplicity, never possess any accidents whatsoever.”\textsuperscript{11} This kind of philosophizing is decidedly modern and similar versions of Divine self-realization as explanatory in philosophy and theology have had their ups


\textsuperscript{7} Cf., ibid, 290.

\textsuperscript{8} Cf., ibid, 301.

\textsuperscript{9} Cf., ibid, 304

\textsuperscript{10} Cf., loc cit.

\textsuperscript{11} Cf., loc cit.
and downs in popularity over the last few centuries. This ontology allows Eckhart to bypass the
question of how Christ Jesus is present beneath the appearances of bread and wine through a
miraculous explanation of motion using Aristotelian physical categories by focusing on the
reciprocal dynamic relation that Creation has to God simply.\(^{12}\) God gives His whole Self in the
Eucharist, “*God gives Himself, all that He is*, in the supper as food to His dear friends.”\(^{13}\)
Eckhart, therefore, does not need to ask how the characteristics of bread and wine have relative
existence—are these accidents now separable or do they somehow truly exist in the person of
Christ Jesus—because his theology “allows” him to consider God to be present undifferentiated
and merely as the one Creator God in this sacrament.\(^{14}\)

3. Basic Traditional Categories

I have mentioned Eckhart as an example of theology which rejects the Aristotelian categories
and language of accident and substance due to the supposed inability of such material categories
to explain the presence of God under these sensible characteristics. Thus, Roesner criticizes St.
Thomas Aquinas saying,

> The Aristotelian concept of accident is analytically defined as something that can only
exist through inherence in a certain substrate. The very idea of accidents existing without
any form of carrier is therefore not only against the natural laws of the existing world but
a logical contradiction that cannot even be potentially conceived by rational thought.\(^ {15}\)

She claims this contradiction through denying the categories of accident and substance when
transposed to spiritual realities, per Meister Eckhart, since the Eucharistic accidents—all of
them, inclusive of the dimensive quantities of bread and wine—have no subject. Indeed, earlier

\(^{12}\) Cf., ibid, 306.

\(^{13}\) Ibid, 309; quoting from Pr. 20a, DW I 331, 8-11. English translation quoted from M.O’C. Walshe, *The Complete

\(^{14}\) Cf., ibid, 297; ibid, 311.

\(^{15}\) Ibid, 296.
today, a recent article from five days ago at the National Catholic Reporter by Father Thomas Reese, SJ, came to my attention. In this article, Father Reese rejects transubstantiation because the Aristotelian philosophy of accident and substance are too difficult to understand for modern man and, therefore, inexplicable in the case of Eucharistic theology—despite the first two Canons of the Thirteenth Session of the Council of Trent. Against such a position, found speculatively in Eckhart before Trent or controversially with Father Reese right now, I would now propose to explain how the relation of “accident” to “substance” or “subject” actually and reasonably apply to the Eucharist.

The philosophical terms of accident, substance, and subject—which Aquinas uses in his Eucharistic theology—already had a long history and development during the High Scholastic period. Such crystallization of positive and deep concepts can obscure the basic realities being discusses, however. Therefore, to speak of subjects and accidents in natural philosophy, it is best to return to the most basic aspects which characterize these concepts. In the Metaphysics, for example, Aristotle identified accidental beings as “‘Accident' means that which attaches to something and can be truly asserted, but neither of necessity nor usually…for neither does [it] come of necessity from the other or after the other.” Aristotle is here pointing out that if there are attributes of things which are not necessary to said thing: just like my hair color, weight, height, habits of knowledge, etc. are not necessary to my being the same sort of thing as all of you—a human being—then these attributes’ exist as something different than my individuated humanity but still exist relative to me in my individual being. In Aristotle’s own Greek the word

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for “accident” is \(\sigmaυμβεβηκός\) which literally is translated as “to come with” or “to go together” (\(συν-βαινω\)). The Greek word expresses its concept in a way that has been effaced in English when I say “accident.” \(\Sigmaυμβεβηκός\), this thing which goes together, obviously names those attributes which come together with a recognizably individual thing (again, as height comes together with a man, though this height is not determined by human nature nor by an individual person’s own existence).

This is confirmed when he defines the various senses of the term “to be” in *Metaphysics* V.7. Here he does not define what “accidents” are but what “to be” is when applied to accidents. Here he uses this same word \(\sigmaυμβεβηκός\) as an accusative in a prepositional phrase instead as a nominative as the subject of its own discussion. Therefore, Aristotle is capitalizing on this more pedantic use of the word by adding a preposition—"κατα \(\sigmaυμβεβηκός\)"\(^{18}\) as “downwards/in coming together with [another].” This is again reflected in the Latin *accidens* or, rather, the phrase *per accidens* derived from the verb *accido*. *Accido* is itself a combination of the words *ad-cado* or “to fall.” Therefore, the etymology of the English word “accident” depends upon this very same understanding as the Aristotle’s \(\sigmaυμβεβηκός\), it denotes “that which falls into” or in an ontological context, “that being which falls into another.”\(^{19}\) The term and concept in this most basic form does not require more than this—for example, it says nothing about how such accidents would determine or modify things.

What these attributes fall into, however, still needs an account. Having spoken of the attributes which can change or can resist change when a thing is moved or altered, we have not

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\(^{19}\) For these Greek and Latin etymologies, see the Liddle and Scott Greek Lexicon and Lewis and Short Latin Dictionary.
yet accounted for what this “thing” is. Most properly, this “thing” which these attributes fall into and which they are predicated of are called “substances.” Aristotle says,

We call 'substance' the simple bodies, i.e. earth and fire and water and everything of the sort, and in general bodies and the things composed of them, both animals and divine beings, and the parts of these. All these are called substance because they are not predicated of a subject but everything else is predicated of them.20

Note that Aristotle does not name substances such because they are elemental or composites or ensouled, but because these most basic things are what other things are predicated of without also being themselves predicated of another. They are, therefore, privileged because of their status relative to how they exist, i.e., they exist independently and not in some other being.

While Aristotle uses the term ὀὐσία here without distinction between essence and substances, which are themselves existing subjects, the sense of the term just used is obviously this latter option of substance.21 Thus the term for “subject” which Aristotle uses, and which belongs to this sense of ὀὐσία, is ὑποκειμένον.22 This word is a combination of ὑπο and κεῖμαι—under-lie—which is well translated by both the Latin substantia and subiectum. Thus, the former is “what stands under”—from sub and stare—and the latter is “what is thrown under”—from sub and iacere. Substance is, in this respect, very simply defined according to its relationship to its accidents; that which is subject to characteristics which depend upon it (the subject) for their own existence.

4. Eucharistic Theology of Accident and Subject

It should again be mentioned that I have just isolated the most basic aspect of what substances are relative to their accidents. Normally, accidents, to stick to my example, modify the being of

21 Cf., Aquinas, ST I q29 a2 resp.
their substance in individuation and in perfecting their substance, as when I am qualified by my size, genetics, habits, etc. It is because I set aside such precision in the case of the accidents of bread and wine relative to Christ really present in the Eucharist that I only chose to speak of a quasi-subject for the Eucharistic accidents.

Obviously, this is extremely important since it is a dogma that Christ Jesus is “truly, really, and substantially contained...under the appearance of” the accidents of bread and wine.\(^{23}\) Therefore, the Second Person of the Trinity is present under every appearance of bread and wine via real concomitance—and, since He is so present, it would be monstrous to claim that God Himself was modified by these accidents as if He were the proper substance in which they exist.\(^{24}\) For this reason, St. Thomas recognizes that Christ’s body and blood are not the subjects of these accidents (speaking in a precise Aristotelian sense) either as the subjects of the changes of bread and wine to Christ’s Body and Blood or as the subjects of these accidents after said changes.\(^{25}\) However, it remains true 1) that the accidents of bread and wine must fall into being and 2) that the Incarnate Word is Personally, thought sacramentally, present in the Eucharist concomitantly to this same body and blood of Christ. St. Thomas, declining to speak of Christ Jesus as a subject to these accidents, prefers to say,

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[T]he accidents continue in this sacrament without a subject. This can be done by Divine power: for since an effect depends more upon the first cause than on the second, God Who is the first cause both of substance and accident, can by His unlimited power preserve an accident in existence when the substance is withdrawn whereby it was preserved in existence as by its proper cause.\(^{26}\)
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\(^{23}\) Henry Joseph Schroeder, tran., Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent; Original Text with English Translations (St. Louis, MO: B. Herder Books, 1941), Session 13, ch. 1.
\(^{24}\) Cf., Aquinas, ST III q76 a1 ad1; cf., Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, Session 13, ch. 1; ibid, canon 8.
\(^{25}\) Cf., Aquinas, ST III q75 a5 ad3; ibid, q77 a1 resp.
\(^{26}\) Ibid, q77 a1 resp.
Going forward, I will push the bounds of this concept of “subject” by reflecting on this pre-eminence of Divine Power.

Therefore, I would like to jog over to how St. Thomas Aquinas proves that God is the cause of all being, not only creating the essential natures of things but also creating individual substances. Thus, all substantial beings participate in being by having their own created esse. This obviously means that the substances bread and wine are effects of the Divine Power—as are their accidents. Moreover, all actions of created beings are caused by God. I would like to focus on the capacities of substantial being, considering them also as the effects of Divine Power that they are. Here, I am using capacity in a mildly analogous sense, since I am focusing on substance’s inherent power to hold accidents in being instead of some faculty of a concrete individual like the will, intellect, sense appetites, etc. Here, God is the cause of that power whereby quantity, quality, relation, etc. exist through their relevant subject, and He is such a cause in a pre-eminently perfect manner. Therefore, in an admittedly remote fashion, God is the cause of all accidental beings’ esse—indeed He is the cause of the immediate capacity of their existing in a substance.

Granted that there is the miraculous change of bread and wine into the body, blood, soul, and divinity of Christ Jesus, we may then ask how these accidents of bread and wine exist without their natural subject of the substances of bread and wine. I would suggest a seemingly simple jump. These accidents, which must fall into being, are kept in being by directly being granted their relative existence through this same Divine Power now Personally present in a

27 See Aquinas’ Fourth Way.
28 See Aquinas’ Third through Fifth Ways.
29 Cf., Aquinas, ST I q2 a3 resp.; ibid, I-II q9 a6 resp.
30 As opposed to speaking of faculties of concrete individuals, considering their substantial being and relevant accidents together.
31 Aquinas, ST I q4 a2 resp.
sacramental mode to them. Indeed, St. Thomas himself admits that these characteristics are truly accidents, “they do not cease to be accidents, because neither is the definition of accident withdrawn from them.”  

32 Whatever being is needed for these accidents to exist is found in a more eminent mode in the Incarnate Word than in the natural substances of bread and wine and therefore He is more able to give created esse than such substance are according to the natural relation of substance and accident. Such natural mode of accidents falling into existence through a created substance requires these accidents to modify the individual being of this bread and this wine. This is why St. Thomas, in the fourth reply in article 1, question 77 of the tertia pars, merely rejects a Eucharistic subiectum and says that these Eucharistic accidents have existence in a miraculously independent fashion.

However, to repeat, the pre-eminent causal mode proper to God over His creation would allow Him to keep these accidents in being through the change of transubstantiation without their modifying Christ Jesus sacramentally present. Therefore, whatever the subiectum of bread or of wine does to their various characteristics is still done by Christ Jesus in His Divine Power even though the precise Aristotelian notion of a natural substance is not maintained in this instance—hence the Power of the Son is as a quasi-subject. This, not through the law of nature as normally found—whereby Roesner objected to St. Thomas’ Eucharistic theology—but according to the order of grace.  

33 This supernatural mode of upholding these accidents in being would not contradict St. Thomas’ position of how the dimensive quantity of bread and wine act as a kind of individuating subject to the rest of the Eucharistic accidents insofar as all these accidents would still fall into being by this unique act of the Word’s Power.

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32 Aquinas, ST III q77 a1 ad2.
33 Cf., ibid, ad1.
Indeed, I would suggest that this awkward “quasi-subject” reflects how St. Thomas speaks of Creation’s real dependency upon God versus His merely logical or notional relation to Creation. Here, the Eucharistic accidents have a real dependency upon Divine Power’s immediate presence, though in a sacramental mode, for their being. However, the Incarnate Word sacramentally present is not Himself determined by being under these appearances of bread and wine. As we may still speak awkwardly of God relative to His Creation, as when we speak of Israel causing God to become enraged in Scripture. Thus Deuteronomy 9:8 says, “Even at Horeb you provoked the Lord to wrath, and the Lord was so angry with you that he was ready to destroy you” (RSV-CE). This statement does not actually say that God was really determined by the wrongdoings of Israel and reacted with “anger.” Rather, Moses’ statement implies a notional relation of God to Israel, which has to really be understood as God’s judgement of Israel’s sins even in His foreknowledge of their actions at Horeb. Such an interpretation of Deuteronomy takes some steps, however. Similarly, I do not think it too violent to say that this use of a term “quasi-subject” too awkward to express how the Incarnate Word and His Power are not determined by these created accidents of bread and wine in the Eucharist. This would allow us to reasonably maintain the relationship between accidental beings and their subjects, or substances, without giving this relation up in the subtleties which St. Thomas shows to be necessary—despite many theologian’s urges to reject these categories, like Meister Eckhart in the Middle Ages or like Father Thomas Reese just did.
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