Subjectivity, Objectivity, and the Resurrection

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Abstract: *This article is a philosophical note in the author's forthcoming book on the Resurrection. It discusses the inevitability of speaking in terms of subject and object, while at the same time arguing for a more discerning use of such polarities. In particular, five uncritical assumptions are questions in the light of the "salvific realism" that is required.*

Key Words: Jesus Christ – resurrection; subject-object polarity; saturated phenomenon; salvific realism

A line cannot be simply drawn, for instance, between the objectivity of the resurrection-appearances and the subjectivity on the disciples[1] involved. Still, I believe there is value in structuring our exploration in accord with the polarity of subjective and objective if carefully handled.[2] To put the matter most directly, in the event of the resurrection something and someone was disclosed to the disciples; not nothing and not no one. The passive form of Greek verb, *ōpthē*, "was seen", suggests that there is something for the seer to see, something given and disclosed.[3] On the other hand, nothing is seen without a seer. But there is the further point: the risen Jesus is seen in such a way as to elect and empower special witnesses in the economy of his divinely-given mission. Though what was seen was not seen by everyone, anyone, in principle, could once have interrogated the witnesses on what they had seen (cf. 1 Cor 15:3-9).

The Polarities of Subject and Object

If we are to respect all the facets of what took place, it is impossible to avoid shuttling between the objective and subjective polarities of what the chosen disciples witnessed to. Yet there is no question of a symmetrical correlation in accord with some predetermined form, as might be attempted by appealing to the fragmented totalities of a reductive subjectivism, on the one hand, or an objectivism that ignores receptivity to the matters in question, on the other. There is no facile symmetry: the objectivity of the

[1] For the sake of this article, I am employing the term "disciples" in a restrictive sense, as referring to the persons and groups to whom the Risen Lord had revealed himself in a unique way, thus constituting the distinctiveness of the apostolic witness (1 Cor 9:1; 15:3-11) within the economy of revelation, and is it is mediated in the ongoing life of the Church.

[2] A fuller treatment would demand the recognition of the intersubjectivity occurring between Christ and the disciples, and even the "inter-objectivity" in the accounts of the appearances/disappearances: it happened here, not there; to these disciples not those; and related to the emptiness of this tomb, not another, and so forth.

[3] See James D. G. Dunn, *Christianity in the Making*, Volume 1: *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids, Michegan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), 872-874; N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 323, 381-382. I recognize that Wright does not make much of the Greek verb in question, nor put much stock on the objective-subjective polarity. Still, I think that even his magnificent exposition might profit from the distinctions as this essay employs them.

divinely enacted event is not relatable to a kind of expectant subjectivity on the part of those to whom it is disclosed. Despite Jesus' efforts to instruct his followers as to the true nature of the Reign of God, they evidently took a long time in getting the point (Ac 1:6). In the end, it is only the horizon of the reign of God that remained for them, bearing its eventual fruit in the resurrection of Jesus himself. Their subjectivity anticipated nothing like what happened, and yet the resurrection-event called into existence a new intentional consciousness. And once this transformed subjectivity is constituted through what must have been an extremely surprising and disorientating experience, it could proceed to explore the objective dimensions of the objectivity of the reality concerned, in line with the Lonerganian axiom, "genuine objectivity is the fruit of authentic subjectivity."[4] When the resurrection is the basic datum, or better, *donum*, there is a new experience to name and understand, a new meaning to elaborate and explore, a new truth to affirm, new values to live, and a new reality to communicate. This naming, exploration, evaluation and communication make up the ongoing business of theology itself in all its forms—fundamental, systematic, moral and pastoral.

The Complexity of Experience

So much for a general statement. Let us now attend to some of the complexities involved in the use of the subjective-objective polarity. When approaching the focal experience of Christian faith, discussions tend to fall immediately into considerations of subjectivity on the part of the early witness (and those who would rely on their testimony), and the objectivity of the event—the action of God in raising the crucified Jesus. A polarity in this regard is already predetermined, permitting no crossing from one to the other. The terms of debate are, as a result, already laid out. For instance, the appearances of the risen Jesus are so objective that anyone there would witness them. Or, more usually in the modern discussion, the resurrection is simply a symbol for the dramatic change that occurred in the disciples, explicable in any number of psychological ways, and unrelated to anything that actually happened to Jesus himself.

A kind of mental myth is constructed, useful for polemical purposes, but strangely inapplicable to any familiar experience. We might question, for example, whether the beauty of a Mozart symphony is an objective or subjective experience. Is beauty only in the eye of the beholder or in the ear of the listener? Is it possible, for instance, that the kind of objectivity which the classic musical tradition associates with the genius of Mozart can be appreciated only by those who come to a discerning appreciation of music and its possibilities, whose ears and hands are trained through a long tradition of musical discernment? Furthermore, is not the recognition of the Mozart symphony in its normative classical status the reason why so many generations have put so much of their time into trying to appreciate it? If that is the case, the objective work of art is a catalyst for an ever renewed subjectivity. Something similar might be said about Shakespeare's *Hamlet* or *King Lear*. Exposing a group of children, say, to either kind of classical masterpiece without adequate preparation would risk the unfortunate and culturally destructive outcome of having the symphony dismissed as mere noise, or the play regarded as an unintelligible jumble of exotic verbiage, with the interest reduced, say, to the ghost scenes or bloody duel at the conclusion. Wise educators will point to the need of leading the young from a point of ignorance or neutrality or incapacity with exercises designed to broaden their horizons, and to grow in the sensitivity that would allow them

[4] Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1972), 265, 292.

to participate in the cultural events of the classic tradition, leading even, in some cases, to some form of appropriate performance. The postmodern critique of classical forms may well object that there are other forms of music and drama that deserve attention. But here, too, preparation is needed; otherwise, the youthful generosity behind an invitation to accompany grandparents to a rock concert might lead to confusion! Any appreciation of art would seem to rely on a tradition of prior witnesses—good critics, for instance—who, because of what they are in terms of personal and aesthetic development, point to the aesthetic object in question, invite new generations to participate in it, and so to share in their subjectivity of taste and appreciation.

Moreover, there is that elusive wager that we refer to as "the test of time". History is always moving on. Yet, there would be a sense of impending cultural self-mutilation if in any era the music of Mozart would be dismissed as cacophony, or the plays of Shakespeare regarded as the unintelligible posturing of premodern human beings. The tradition of appreciative witnesses is the only guarantee that there is something to be discovered and enjoyed in its transformative effect.

Along with the objectivity of art, there is the objectivity of a beloved "other." What is objective and what is subjective in this experience? The more Jack embarks on the life-determining commitment of love for Jill, the more Jill is recognised in the objectivity of her personal uniqueness. Eyebrows might arch from a long experience of the vanity of romantic attachments and infatuations, and the peculiar tragedies inherent in this domain of life. Yet there is a truth here, that only way to know the other is through love, and that the attraction of this other in one's life can mean the world to the lover. Without this recognition, human relationships would be corroded by a manipulative cynicism: the other is only a function of the immutable, all-consuming ego. Against the prejudice of those who have been hurt and disappointed in love, there is witness of those who have found that love, realised only in self-giving and commitment, is the most illuminating and enduring reality in the course of life.

The above little aside pointing to the complexity of experience and language dealing with subject and object has one purpose: namely, to undermine any assumptions that the subjective and objective are mutually exclusive, or that the two poles of our experience are incompatible, as though the more subjectivity, the less there is of objectivity; and the more objectivity, the less any subjective engagement. Paradoxically, there two polarities of experience are, in fact, not poles apart. It is a denial of experience to assume that there is no crossing from the one to the other, or any possibility of relating the two. An objectivity that owes nothing to subjectivity, or a subjectivity necessarily undermining the objectivity of what is given in its arresting otherness, be it an event, a person or a work of art, are both caricatures. The stricken look on the face of a bag-lady on the corner may call me to a conversion in my social conscience. And that change in my social conscience makes me recognise more compassionately the poor that I have hitherto ignored. Moreover, the witness of the notably compassionate people who hunger and thirst for justice on behalf of the poor and forgotten, powerfully affects our routine indifference, so as to make the world more hospitable to those whom society has marginalised. The polarity of subject and object, if grounded in personal experience and open to the testimony of others, is not a dichotomy: subject and object may be distinguished but not separated.

Five Assumptions Questioned

Since the language of subjectivity/ objectivity is pertinent to the Christian experience of the risen Jesus—on the part of the privileged witnesses, and the community formed by a

tradition of faith which accepts such testimony—let us look at this polarity more fully. Five assumptions must be questioned.

First, we need reject the assumption that *we already know in a particular context what the subject and object mean*. What they might mean is determined by the field of experience, the dimensions of its meaning and the values that motivate it. That field of significance, be it in art, love for the other, moral responsibility or religious faith, provides the respective contexts in which a discriminating employment of the subjective-objective polarity comes into play, each relying on a formative tradition animated by its respective witnesses. Here a more deft phenomenological approach is required. An all-significant event must be allowed to present itself on its own terms. It is does not come "pre-packaged" in notions of what the subject is capable of, or of what is objectively possible in the ontological domain. While the world of routine communication employs symbolic or verbal signs to refer to the phenomenon of the resurrection, and so name Christ as the risen One, and Peter or Mary Magdalene as those who "saw", it is not as though the event or those so named are automatically conjured up as presently available realities. Our signifying activity cannot endlessly repeat and represent past historical events or persons. What is most obvious is that this past complex event has left a trace or effect in our history which retires into its own uniqueness even as it is invoked. It occurs as a summons to wager oneself on the truth so revealed, to be judged by it, to enter into its field of communication, to receive its witnesses, even without being able to "signify" or ever represent it fully. History as a consequence is an endless hermeneutic of the excess that defies objectification. The peculiar nature of this hermeneutic for Christian faith in instanced in a number of ways. A certain number of its symbols are celebrated as "sacraments"—*efficax gratiae*, communicating the originally given gift. Its sacred texts are recognised in a canon of scripture, to be accepted as the inspired Word of God. Its original witnesses form the apostolic tradition, and its present and past saints, martyrs, mystics, doctors and artists enrich the tradition of faith and expand its subjectivity. All these suggest an excess of significance animating the open-ended interpretation of the Church in its historical development.

Secondly, there is the assumption pretending that *the polarities of subject and object are mutually exclusive and set one against the other*. Lonergan states, as was mentioned above, that genuine objectivity is the fruit of authentic subjectivity. The more the subject is authentically attentive to what is given, the more vigorously it seeks to understand what has been disclosed, the more reasonably it seeks to arrive at a judgment regarding the objective truth of what has been revealed, the more one seeks to respond to the implications of what is so given, the more genuine the objective grasp of the reality in question. There is the other side to this: the more communicative and transformative the event or reality, the more it has the capacity to involve those it affects, and makes them part of itself. This is of clear importance when discussing the resurrection, the appearances of Jesus and the witnesses involved. Given the transcendence of the event, we may not assume that the subjective and objective polarities are in some kind of psychological or ontological rivalry. Healthy subjectivity is nourished on what is the case; and what is given as luminously and radiantly the case, brings forth its own kinds of subjective participation and receptivity.

This is not to deny that that there is an inauthentic subjectivity that pretends to restrict reality to the ambit of its own fears or needs, and thereby to remain inextricably self-enclosed. Nor, for that matter, do we intend to deny that there is, so to speak, an imperious objectivity in actions or events that crush, disable or belittle those affected by

them. But the phenomenon of the resurrection is not so, either in its effects or in the witnesses it calls forth. Hence, it is better, not to play off subjectivity and objectivity, as though the more of one, the less of the other, but to locate both polarities in a field of communication and participation. This suggests an exchange in which the objectivity of the event enhances the subjectivity of those who witness it and of those who will profit from such testimony; and the transformed subjectivity of those who have experienced it and participated in it, so as to make them into witnesses to its objectivity.

Thirdly, we reject as unwarranted, the assumption that *the subject-object distinction can be univocally applied in all circumstances*. There is what we might call the objectivity of experience, in terms of what is immediately given. This empirical component is only one feature of the objectivity of full knowledge. In a critically-established form of objectivity, the given experience is (eventually) located in a meaningful context, its truth is assessed, and an appropriate moral response may follow. This, in turn, affects the character of the witness it engenders.

There is a further kind of objectivity which affects both the fundamentally empirical and the fully formed critical forms of objectivity. We might call it the objectivity of interpersonal communication. It is not neatly subsumed under objectivity of either an empirical or critical kind. There are three special aspects to be noted in an interpersonal encounter: First, what is immediately given has the character of personal self-giving, or "givingness", if you will. Secondly, rather than calling forth a primarily critical or purely intellectual evaluation of the other so experienced, the imperative is more like a summons or call emanating from and for the Other. Thirdly, rather than terminating solely in a particular objective judgment or moral decision, it inspires an unreserved commitment, realised in self-surrender, fidelity and belief. Reverting to the first-person mode of expression, it can be stated thus: my experience of being loved by an other, or of loving the other, leads me to an ongoing, open-ended way of experience in which the other is allowed to mean the world to me. Person-to-person relationship is the appropriate site in which the meaning and value of the other is communicated.

Yet how much an interpersonal context is the basic determinant of empirical and critical objectivity would be a matter of endless discussion. For example, the love of a parent is the basic experience shaping the child's basic experience and interpretation of the world. The love of friends and colleagues inserts one in a particular tradition of feeling for the world, highlighting certain ranges of meaning and emphasising some values over all others. An inspired teacher is likewise profoundly formative of one's taste and discrimination, at least in certain areas of life and learning and evaluation. The face of the poor and the suffering may call me out of myself into a life-time of compassionate commitment. There is one level of self-transcendence implied in being attentive to the data, to the given, on the empirical level. There is the further self-transcendence instance in exploring, questioning, locating what is experienced in the world of meaning. There is the decisive self-transcendence of the judgment which moves beyond impressions or ideas to the reasonably affirmed fact or probability. In all this, I go beyond myself, not simply to interpret the world, but to shape it, in a responsibly deriving from the objectivity of one's knowledge. Decision is based on judgment; and judgment is based on facts. As this experience is assimilated into personal consciousness, as its meaning enlarges one's capacity to understand the whole of reality, as its truth extends to the whole world, as its values include the whole human race and the universe itself, witnesses emerge who will form and enrich the tradition in which the experience, understanding, judgment and responsibility of later generations will occur.

But all this is put on a new footing in an interpersonal context. If the experience is in fact that of the self-giving of the other or the self-disclosure of the Other, a more radical form of self-transcendence emerges in the encounter and commitment that follow. A new and transformed self comes into being in the light of the self-communicating other; deep calls unto deep; existence is now radically co-existence, as being by, from and for the other. The most objective world-determining fact is, in this way, profoundly is inter-subjective.

Applications of the subject-object polarity must, therefore, share an analogous character. The more singular the object or event, the more transformative and communicative is its import, and the more distinctive its witnesses. And the more "excessive" this singularity, the more flexibly the language of subject and object must be employed. A chair in one's room, a tumour in one's body, a fellow driver on the road, a loved friend or spouse or child, God, the risen Jesus, or his presence in the eucharist, represent a range of different "objects". Each of these entails its own kind of relationship to the subject who affirms them or is affected by them. I might look out on the world from the undisturbed comfort of sitting in a favourite chair. I may be rather more apprehensive over an impending medical report in the case of the tumour. I would find routine vigilance appropriate in regard to other drivers on the road. I might relate in an elementally enjoyable way to friends and family. Or, I might feel awe in the face of infinite mystery, and feel drawn to wager all on the truth of faith, and to celebrate its liturgy with becoming reverence. For its part, the event of the resurrection is phenomenon which, to use Marion's metaphor, "saturates" a whole field of communication between God and Christ, between Christ and the chosen witnesses, and between Christ, the apostolic witnesses and the whole Church. In that field of brimming communication, different determinations of objectivity and subjectivity are inevitable in the light of the overwhelming objectivity of the divine action, and the initiative of the divine self-giving involved. Once there is evidence of an initiative and a self-giving on the part of the other subject, let alone on the part of the divine Other, all clearly determined categories of subject and object are "saturated" in a field of intersubjectivity, and not so easily pinned down. The objectivity of an historical or physical fact, the objectivity of gift and the love from which it comes, the objectivity of witnesses transformed in the event, are all part of a larger movement of communication and transformative action. We shall refer to this below.

Fourthly, we question the assumption, that there can be *an objectivity that can do without subjects, and a subjectivity that is entirely unbeholden to some objective content*. Put simply, there can be no objective statement unless it is registered in the mind and heart of a subject. To pretend otherwise, would be to banish objectivity from the realm of experience and to lift it out of classic formative traditions as they are found in all forms of learning, science, faith and art. Reality may indeed be infinitely more than the human mind can grasp or the heart imagine, and certainly far exceed any human need or usefulness. To allow for that possibility of "excess" is already an indication of how both mind and heart experience intimations of something more. This is to say that revelation inspires faith. It cannot be so objective as to bypass those who receive it. The Word of revelation presumes a human hearing. It reverberates in the human mind, heart and imagination. It is not the source of irrelevant information, even when it might appear to be so, say, in the doctrine of the Trinity. For all "revealed mysteries" derive from data registered in the human mind and heart. The divine object is never unrelated to the human subject.

On the other hand, subjects are without a world unless there is varieties of objects—even if these were to be considered as pure ideal forms. More to the point, the more developed one's subjective capacities, the greater and wider the range of objects is disclosed: the keener the sight, the further one sees. There is a further consequence: the more world-transforming the object, the more it impinges on subjectivity and affects our forms of experience and knowing, and our capacity to witness to what has occurred. A driver placidly passing me on the road provokes a different reaction from one who suddenly swerves and crashes into my car. God conceived as a remote world-principle of some kind would make less demands on me compared to God who has raised the crucified Jesus from the dead.

Fifthly, there is the need to reject the assumption based on the conviction that *we cannot be objective about subjectivity, nor subjective about objectivity.* To the contrary, we can be objective about subjectivity, and refer to the state of the subject, to his or her reactions in fear, awe, doubt, puzzlement, joy, courage—as is the case with the disciples who "saw the Lord". Similarly, there can be no particular problem in admitting subjective responses to what is revealed in the resurrection event. If the Lord is risen, the alleluia expressed in feelings of joy, thanksgiving and awe, is not inappropriate.

The "Saturated Phenomenon"[5]

The reason for delaying to set aside these five assumptions is to clear the ground for two remarks: First, the value of a different approach to the phenomena of Christian experience is clarified. Rather than strait-jacket reactions to the resurrection in terms of subjective-objective considerations, it is necessary to appeal to the phenomenon of the resurrection as it is given, in its saturated significance. Only then, can we allow consideration of what is objective and what is subjective to come into play, in a way that respects the singular event in question, and the witnesses it calls forth. The resurrection of the crucified One must be permitted to occupy Christian consciousness on its own terms. For that phenomenon *par excellence* "saturates" both the objective and subjective poles of Christian experience with its own excess, and situates them in its own field of God-originated communication and testimony. The "idol" of both subjective projection and objective neutrality is brought into contact with the "icon" of God's self-communication in Christ. This, in turn, overflows and dissolves the rigidities of the predetermined categorisation of what is subjective and what objective.

An Intersubjective Field

Furthermore, it is of special importance to acknowledge the divine subjects involved in the Resurrection, the Son as the one who is raised, and the Father who raises him in the power of the Spirit: it is a God-wrought objective event. The phenomenality of the resurrection cannot be appreciated outside the inter-subjective field of communication in which it occurs. For this field embraces the inter-subjectivity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. It overflows into relationships between Jesus and the disciples. It inspires the apostolic witnesses and the wider community of believers, both past and present, and energises their witness to the world.

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[5] Jean-Luc Marion, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, trans. Robyn Horner and Vincent Barraud (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002). For a nicely sketched theological comment on Marion in this regard, see Robyn Horner, *Jean-Luc Marion: A* Theo-*Logical Introduction* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005).

Implied in these varieties of inter-subjective relationship and encounter, there is the objective character of the event itself. God has raised Jesus, not someone else; God has done this, not that, and under these conditions, and so on. To that degree, there is what we might term, the inter-objectivity implied in the resurrection. The Trinity is not only invoked, but affirmed as the actuality of the roles of Father, Son and Spirit. The witnesses to the resurrection are listed, and recognised as historical persons, as Paul lists them (1 Cor 15:3-8). Their objective witness is handed on in the tradition of the Church throughout history. That wider, later Church is related to the early communities and its witnesses, and to the contemporary world, and indeed all creation. In each of these cases, the personal reference to "they" or "we" is compatible with the impersonal form of "it", in reference to the Church, the world and to all creation.

Conclusion

To sum up, in the phenomenon of the resurrection, though distinctions related to subject and object are inevitable, such terms are caught up in a kind of spiral of reciprocal redefinition. In such a moving viewpoint, genuine objectivity remains the fruit of authentic subjectivity. But the objectivity of God's act in raising Jesus summons the subjectivity of those it touches into an ever fuller self-transcendence.

The use of the categories of subject and object must be sufficiently buoyant and flexible to serve "the saturated phenomenon" of the resurrection. By being alert to this excess or saturation, we are prevented from drying out the language of faith at its most focal point into a brittle form of apologetics or of desiccated rationalistic reduction.

These considerations of subject and object are intended to serve what we might call, "salvific realism". The adjective "salvific" is used to highlight the precise kind of realism involved. It is not contrary to the respective realisms of historical, metaphysical, scientific and anthropological methods. Each has its own limitations, particular concerns, traditions of interpretation, criteria of evidence. Salvific realism is focused on a unique event. It is, first of all, intent on being receptive to the phenomenality of event which is the focal point of faith and a shock at the foundations of every theology. If the methods of other forms of phenomenological disclosure and patterns of knowing end by declaring the resurrection to be a non-reality, a non-event, the problem could be one of unexamined prejudice against recognising the resurrection-effect in history. This is not helped by a theological method either un-attuned to what is at stake, or simply taking for granted what should be taken *as* granted, and respected in the singular conditions of its "given-ness". It is maximum theological importance not to be distracted into apologetics before discerning the unique form of what has taken place. Apologetics is at its most persuasive when Christian faith risks being rejected for the right reasons.

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