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OMNISUBJECTIVITY: SOMETHING IT IS LIKE TO BE GOD

It is surprising to find something proposed as an essential attribute for an orthodox Christian view of God, which was unknown to the Fathers of the early Christian church. This however is the case with Linda Zagzebski's proposal of *omnisubjectivity*, the doctrine that "God ... grasp[s] all the subjectivity there is."¹ Subjectivity is understood to be "consciousness as it is experienced by the subject of conscious states" (1); that is to say, *directly* experienced, not considered as an object of reflection or as viewed indirectly in some way. God's grasping of subjectivity is *immediate* in every case; his grasp of your or my subjectivity is just as direct as our grasp of our own states of consciousness. Divine omnisubjectivity is an implication of omniscience: "The metaphysical question of what exists, and the theological question of what God knows are the same question" (1). If God's knowledge of the consciousness of creatures were in some way indirect, this would leave a "shadow area" in between God's indirect knowledge of that consciousness *as represented*, and the consciousness itself. This shadow area would then be invisible to God, thus compromising divine omniscience.

If omnisubjectivity is, as has been claimed, an implication of omniscience, how can we account for its absence from classical listings of the essential divine attributes? The problem is not that omnisubjectivity was rejected by classical theologians. Rather, the concepts needed for an understanding of this

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¹ LINDA T. ZAGZEBSKI, *Omnisubjectivity: An Essay on God and Subjectivity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), Kindle edition, chap. 1 (numbers in parentheses refer to chapters).

attribute were simply not available to them.² Zagzebski provides a brief but illuminating historical discussion of the rise of subjectivity in Western consciousness, first in literature, later in philosophy and science. An important role was played by Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, which was distinguished, according to one critic,³ by "the invention of 'characters,' each of whom is not just a type, but is like a real person with a subjective world of his own and a unique point of view" (1). For a more recent example, compare *Son of Laughter*, Frederick Bueckner's retelling of the stories of the biblical patriarchs, with the original versions of those stories in Genesis. Bueckner's version adds vividness and individuality to the characters that exemplify the modern interest in such features. In philosophy, Zagzebski contends that the self "is not the same as the *I*, which Descartes argued is a conscious substance. But scrutiny of the *I* led to the idea of the self" (1). In science, there is considerable interest in the question of which non-human organisms may enjoy conscious states. "Presumably, having a certain kind of functioning biology is sufficient for consciousness even if it is not necessary. We perceive consciousness in many species of animals from acquaintance with them, and we can develop relationships with them that includes mutual communication of conscious states" (1). Once subjectivity became prominent as an aspect of human life, it was inevitable that the question of divine subjectivity would also become important.

If God enjoys subjectivity, it seems that there must be some feature of reality which constitutes the fact that a particular item of experience is *Jones's experience*, and not *God's experience*, and another feature which constitutes the fact that this other experience is *God's experience*, and not *Jones's experience*. These features must somehow be inherent in the experiences themselves; God does not need to infer from facts external to the experiences which of them are God's own experiences and which are not. God, we want to say, is a *self*, and each human being is also a *self*. Whereas God experiences your subjectivity with the same vividness and immediacy as his own, God also knows, with the same immediacy, which self is the proper and original subject for any particular experience.

At this point I need to state that, so far as I can see, the concepts we have been introducing, of subjectivity, omnisubjectivity, and of the subject or self, are clear, well-defined, and useful, and deserve to be part of our conceptual equipment as we engage in philosophical theology. And the conclusions so far

² Zagzebski states, "I think that if the idea of subjectivity had existed at the time of the Church Fathers and the medieval theologians, they would have said explicitly that God is omnisubjective" (6).

³ EGGINTON (2016), quoted in ZAGZEBSKI (2023, chap. 1).

drawn, in particular about divine omnisubjectivity, seem evidently correct. Zagzebski's book consists in applications of these and related concepts to a number of different areas of metaphysics and theology, and often in reading these applications I have found myself saying, "Of course! That is the way it must be!"

Not always, however. In drawing conclusions from novel concepts, conclusions that range over multiple, diverse realms of thought, it is hardly to be expected that full agreement will immediately become evident. So I have selected two areas for discussion in which it seems to me that we will do better to go in different directions than the ones Zagzebski has laid out for us.

One of these areas of disagreement is found in chapter 4, which is entitled "Objections from other attributes." Zagzebski states,

People often tell me that they find omnisubjectivity plausible, whether they are classical theists, or theists who are comfortable with modifying some of the traditional attributes. I have defended omnisubjectivity partly by arguing that it is entailed by the attributes of omniscience and omnipresence, but there are other classical attributes that appear to conflict with omnisubjectivity—for instance, timelessness, immutability, and impassibility (4).

Zagzebski does not state whether she personally affirms these three attributes, and I am not sure what her personal attitude is towards them.⁴ What is clear is that she would prefer that omnisubjectivity not be incompatible with these classical attributes, though it may also be compatible with the denial of some of them. If that is the case, then we would be free, while affirming omnisubjectivity, to adopt positions on those other attributes that we find congenial for various other reasons. Zagzebski states,

Timelessness and immutability go together on classical views of time deriving from Aristotle, who defined time as the measure of change (*Physics* IV, chap. 11). A temporal being is changeable; a timeless being is unchangeable. It is not obvious that any temporal being must be changeable, but I think it is fair to say that most philosophical theologians put temporality and mutability together and timelessness and immutability together (4).

⁴ Interestingly, she does not mention simplicity here; some of her comments on Aquinas suggest that she is not interested in affirming the traditional strong doctrine of divine simplicity. But later in chapter 4 she explores some of the implications of assuming that God is simple.

So, is there a problem about an immutable and timeless God being omnisubjective? Zagzebski approaches this question in a somewhat roundabout fashion, but she finally comes to what she sees as the most compelling form of the problem:

I agree that an omnisubjective being knows what it is like to experience temporal duration, and he must have direct acquaintance with the experience of temporal sequence, but does it necessarily follow that he must exist in time? (4) ...

Even aside from omnisubjectivity, the defender of timelessness needs an account of how a timeless being can grasp the temporal sequence of a star burning through the elements in its core, then collapsing and violently exploding, creating a neutron star. Is that any different than the problem of how a timeless being can grasp the temporal sequence of anticipation, waiting, boredom, and relief? (4)

Presumably the expected answer is “no,” but she acknowledges that there may seem to be a crucial difference:

It is reasonable to think of the difference between timelessness and temporality as a difference in point of view on the same thing. The same thing grasped from a temporal point of view can be grasped from a timeless point of view. The point of view does not alter what is grasped. So, a timeless deity can grasp a sequence of events in objective nature like the explosion of a star because the point of view of the timeless viewer is independent of the events and does not alter them. But the perspective of a conscious subject going through a temporal experience is what the experience is. To grasp that experience from a timeless perspective is to change it into something else. A timeless God cannot get what it is like to wait, and wait, and wait, getting more bored with each passing second. To grasp what it is like to experience the passage of time as boring, one must experience the passage of time. To experience [the passage] of time, God must be in time, or so it can be argued. (4)

Nevertheless, Zagzebski thinks this objection can be answered. A key role in this answer is played by the concept of empathy:

In the empathy model, when God empathizes with your grief, God does not grieve. God can empathize with your experience of smelling roses without smelling roses. God can empathize with your boredom without being bored. If the empathy model works for smelling roses, it should work for feeling bored.

Think again about the way we empathize with the experience of a character in a novel. Rarely do we imagine the character’s experience in real time. Usually, our conscious representation of the character’s experience is temporally compressed.

We experience in a few seconds a copy of what the character goes through in several minutes or hours. Sometimes it can be the reverse. Our empathetic experience can take longer than the experience of the character, as when the novelist intentionally stretches out the description of an event that would take only a few seconds (Henry James does that). My point is that the empathetic copy of an experience need not have the same temporal duration as the experience it copies, and in fact, typically does not. I also think that a temporally compressed copy of an experience need not be inferior because of the temporal compression. (4)

Arguably what Zagzebski says here is correct. However, she has omitted one crucial aspect of omniscience, namely the *immediacy* of that relation. Your empathy with the experiences of a fictional character does not amount to an *immediate experiencing* of the character's own experience. (This would, of course, be impossible if the character is fictional, and therefore unable to go through any actual experiences at all.) By way of comparison, consider yourself observing an expert springboard diver. You can, if you so desire, observe the dive in slow motion, so that your observation takes up considerably more time than the actual dive. Or, you might observe it speeded up, so as to take less time than the actual dive (though it is harder to imagine a reason for doing this). But if you observe the dive directly, "in real time," your observation of the dive will take exactly the same time as the dive itself—a few seconds, more or less. Your *immediate observation* of the dive is of necessity temporally coextensive with the actual dive.⁵ And God's immediate awareness of human subjective states must temporally coincide with those states as experienced by a human subject. But for a timeless God, this is not possible.

I conclude, then, that Zagzebski's claim that an omniscient God can be timelessly aware of human temporal subjective states does not succeed. It follows that, if the arguments for omniscience are compelling, the doctrine of divine timelessness must be abandoned.

The other doctrine to be discussed here, among those to which Zagzebski applies the notion of omniscience, is the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation. She quotes the famous definition of this doctrine from the council of Chalcedon, and she intends her own discussion to be in agreement with this definition—although, as we shall see, it is doubtful that she succeeds in this. That definition states that Christ is "made known in two natures [which exist]

⁵ Of course, your observation of a dive cannot be "immediate" without qualification. The observation must be mediated by your sensory apparatus as well as by the physical relationship between the event of the dive and your sense organs. This does not, however, affect the point I am making.

without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the difference of the natures having been in no wise taken away by reason of the union, but rather the properties of each being preserved, and [both] concurring in one Person (*prosopon*) and one *hypostasis*.” As many others have done, Zagzebski considers which aspects of Christ pertain to his two natures, and which pertain to his personhood. She states,

It turns out that most of what is interesting about a person is included in nature, not personhood. The will goes with the nature, not the person, and so it follows that Jesus Christ had two wills—one divine, one human.⁶ Similarly, the intellect goes with the nature, so orthodox teaching is that Jesus Christ had two intellects and two wills, but he was one person. On the traditional account, the personhood of Jesus is rather mysterious given that thinking and willing are not components of him as a person. (6)

Zagzebski, however, thinks this mystery can be relieved by introducing the concept of subjectivity:

if subjectivity is a component of personhood, not nature, the personhood of Jesus Christ becomes very interesting. My hypothesis is that if Christ is one person, he has one self and one sequence of subjective states. There is one *I* since the *I* expresses the person. Christ could have had any subjective states possible for his divine nature, and any subjective states possible for his human nature, but divine subjective states were not simultaneously experienced with human subjective states. The fact that Christ had two intellects and two wills need not mean that they operated simultaneously. I propose that Jesus Christ had only one sequence of subjective states, the same as other persons (6).

This of course raises the question whether this “one sequence of subjective states” consists of the types of states typical of a human person, or the types typical of a divine person. “One possibility is that Jesus never had any subjective states arising from his divine nature even though they were all possible since everything belonging to a nature is possible. He voluntarily gave up those states while on earth in order to fully experience being human. Those attracted to a kenotic Christology will find this in agreement with their theological perspective” (6).

⁶ The teaching that Jesus Christ had two natures but one will was the Monothelism heresy condemned in 681 at the Sixth (*sic*) Council of Constantinople. (Zagzebski’s footnote; in fact, the council in 681 was the Third Council of Constantinople, and the Sixth Ecumenical Council.)

To be sure, there are other possibilities. One possibility is that “Jesus Christ had predominantly human subjective experiences, but his divine will was still operative and sometimes he willed to be aware as God” (6). Yet another possibility: “perhaps the Father initiated an act of the divine will that Jesus would have subjective states as the Son” (6). Both of these options contemplate an alternation of divine and human states of consciousness for the Son: sometimes he experiences the world through human states of consciousness, sometimes through divine states, but never both at the same time. “My proposal is just that as one person, Jesus Christ had one continuous sequence of subjective states as all persons do. He did not have a dual mind or a split mind or a split personality. He had a single *I* with the same continuity all normal persons have” (6).

In order to illustrate what she has in mind here Zagzebski proposes a scenario in which a dog-loving human being assumes a dog-nature in addition to her human nature; she becomes, one might say, “encanined.” “As a dog-human you have two distinct sets of natural powers, and you are able to will as a human in addition to willing as a dog, but as a single person, you do not exercise you[r] will as a dog and your will as a human at the same time.” ... “If I am right that a person has a single sequence of coherent subjective states, then you have a single continuous sequence of subjective states before, during, and after your life as a human-dog” (6). (One wonders how “coherent” the sequence would be while the states are alternating between canine and human—for instance, in contemplating a “delicious” but somewhat over-ripe piece of raw beef!)

Several questions may occur to us as we consider Zagzebski’s proposal. First, it would normally be thought that kenoticism represents an alternative to orthodox Chalcedonian Christology, rather than a version of that Christology. One reason for this is kenoticism’s assertion that divine attributes are lost, or at least are unable to be exercised, during the times at which Christ is experiencing the world through his human nature. (This after all is what *kenosis*, “emptying,” means.) But this is certainly in conflict with what the Chalcedonian fathers would have understood in saying that the natures exist “without change”; the divine attribute of omniscience could not have been interrupted, or even temporarily inhibited, during the Incarnation. Indeed, adding omnisubjectivity to the kenotic view means that the Son will fall short of full omnisubjectivity; he will be lacking the knowledge of all the subjective states

that occur to other creatures—as well as those of the other divine Persons⁷—during the time when he is experiencing life through his human nature. Note, additionally, that the orthodox view has been that Christ, in becoming incarnate by assuming a human nature, retains that status permanently: once incarnate, always incarnate. But combining this with the kenotic view would mean that, once the human nature had been assumed, Jesus would never again have any subjective states that arise from the divine nature. I think that, upon reflection, this is not the sort of view thoughtful Christians should welcome.

I conclude from this that Zagzebski's proposal for applying the doctrine of omni-subjectivity to the Incarnation is not something we should accept. This does not mean, we may hope, that accepting omnisubjectivity should lead us to reject the Incarnation. But how can omnisubjectivity and Incarnation be better combined?

I suggest that, for each divine Person, there is indeed a complete, uninterrupted sequence of divine subjective states. Once the human nature has been assumed by the divine Son, there is also a complete, uninterrupted sequence of human subjective states (except, of course, for naturally occurring interruptions such as deep sleep or a coma). This enables us to assert unequivocally that it was *as a man* that Christ suffered and underwent the other experiences of his human life. So far, this proposal emphasizes the distinctness of the divine and human conscious states. But how are they unified, so that Jesus Christ is one person, and not two? It will also be the case that the Son is immediately and vividly aware of each of Jesus' conscious states, just as each and every person is immediately and vividly aware of their own conscious states. But this, of course, is not anything special that applies uniquely to Jesus. The doctrine of omnisubjectivity implies that each of the divine Persons is immediately and vividly aware of all the conscious states of *any and all* created persons. It seems that something more is needed, in order to complete this picture of the Incarnation.

Fortunately, this “something more” is already available, from our initial statement of the doctrine of omnisubjectivity. It was stated that “If God enjoys subjectivity, it seems that there must be some feature of reality which constitutes the fact that a particular item of experience is *Jones's experience, and not God's experience*, and another feature which constitutes the fact that this other experience is *God's experience, and not Jones's experience*.” Omnisubjectivity is, of course, a characteristic that the Son enjoys in virtue of his

⁷ Zagzebski assumes, rightly in my opinion, that each divine Person has his own subjectivity, distinct from that of the other Persons.

divine nature, and in grasping the subjective experience of Jesus the Son will grasp the fact that *these are my own experiences, which I experience through my own human nature*. With respect to the experiences of other human beings, the Son will realize that *these are not my own personal experiences, but rather the experiences of John, or Susan, or whomever*. We must suppose that the Son's responses to a given experience will be, or at least may be, significantly different depending on whether this is the Son's own human experience or someone else's. Omnisubjectivity entails that each divine Person grasps immediately each and every emotional state of each created person, but it does not entail that the divine Person shares that emotional state. Indeed, the attribute of divine perfect goodness entails that, in many cases, the emotional state of the human being *cannot* be shared by the divine Person. Human beings in general dislike suffering and are averse to experiencing it. But sometimes suffering is necessary for the good of the person who suffers; for instance, the human may need the suffering to remind him of the need to repent for something wrong he has done. In this case, a perfectly good divine person cannot possibly share the human's desire that the suffering should cease. Or if a human feels pleasure because he has succeeded in doing something that is morally reprehensible, a divine Person who is perfectly good cannot possibly feel pleasure at his success. So whereas the Son is fully aware, through his divine nature, of any and all human experiences, it makes a difference whether a particular experience is the Son's own experience, through his own human nature, or is the experience of some other human being. I believe the notion of omnisubjectivity throws an insightful light on God's profound and intimate knowledge of each and every human being.

In composing this response to Zagzebski, I have followed the usual practice of focusing on areas of disagreement. Nevertheless, I wish in closing to underscore the fact that, in my opinion, she has made an important original contribution to our understanding of an under-appreciated divine attribute. Many of the conclusions she draws concerning this attribute of omnisubjectivity are deserving our acceptance, and there are also numerous areas of philosophy and theology which await our further explanation in relation to divine omnisubjectivity. For this, we owe her our heartfelt thanks.

OMNISUBJECTIVITY: SOMETHING IT IS LIKE TO BE GOD

Summary

Omnisubjectivity, proposed as a divine attribute by Linda Zagzebski, is the view that “God grasps all the subjectivity that there is.” My article explains omnisubjectivity and endorses the claim that it should be accepted as an attribute of God. However, I criticize Zagzebski’s claims that omnisubjectivity is compatible with (1) divine timelessness and (2) a kenotic view of the incarnation. If omnisubjectivity is affirmed, those two views must be given up.

Keywords: subjectivity; omnisubjectivity; divine timelessness; incarnation; kenoticism

WSZECHSUBIEKTYWNOŚĆ: JAK TO JEST BYĆ BOGIEM

Streszczenie

Linda Zagzebski zaproponowała, aby przypisać Bogu atrybut wszechsubiektywności. Teza o wszechsubiektywności głosi, że „Bóg pojmuje całą subiektywność, jaka istnieje”. Mój artykuł wyjaśnia tę tezę i uzasadnia przypisanie wszechsubiektywności Bogu. Krytykuję jednak pogląd Zagzebski, że wszechsubiektywność jest zgodna z (1) boską bezczasowością oraz z (2) kenotyczną koncepcją Wcielenia. Jeśli przyjmuje się tezę o wszechsubiektywności, to należy odrzucić ten pogląd.

Słowa kluczowe: subiektywność; wszechsubiektywność; boska bezczasowość; Wcielenie; kenotyzm