

JOHN A. KELLER

ON OMNISUBJECTIVITY

INTRODUCTION

Let us say that a being is *omnisubjective* if it has a perfect first-person grasp of all subjective states (including belief states). The question of whether God is omnisubjective raises a nest of thorny issues in the philosophy of language, philosophy of mind, and metaphysics, at least if there are *irreducibly* subjective states. There are notorious difficulties analyzing the core traditional divine attributes—omniscience, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence—but those difficulties are notorious partly because we *seem* to have a decent pre-theoretic grasp of what it means for something to be all knowing, powerful, and good, and so it is surprising, frustrating, and perplexing that it is so difficult to provide a satisfactory analysis of those notions.¹ Many of the thorny issues that arise when attempting to analyze omnisubjectivity parallel issues that arise when attempting to analyze the core traditional divine attributes, but these parallel problems are compounded by the fact that it is unclear what omnisubjectivity is in the first place: what, exactly, the pre-theoretic notion we are trying to analyze actually is. In this regard omnisubjectivity is perhaps more like the peripheral divine attribute of omnipresence than it is like the core attributes of omniscience, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence.

Linda Zagzebski has done more than anyone to take the first steps towards clearing the nest of thorny issues around omnisubjectivity, starting with ZAGZEBSKI (2008), continuing with ZAGZEBSKI (2013) and (2016), and

JOHN A. KELLER, Associate Professor at Saint Joseph's University, Department of Philosophy; correspondence address: Barbelin 261A, Saint Joseph's University, 5600 City Avenue, Philadelphia, PA 19131, USA; e-mail: jkeller@sju.edu.

¹ Although perhaps now, after (hundreds if not thousands of) years of trying and failing to come up with satisfactory analyses, we shouldn't be so surprised by our failure to successfully analyze the core traditional divine attributes.

culminating in ZAGZEBSKI (2023), my primary focus here. The first steps are often the hardest, and Zagzebski should be applauded for taking them. But they are only first steps: there is still a long walk ahead. Here I canvass some of the remaining questions about what omniscience is, the relationship between omniscience and omniscience, and whether it's possible for God to be omniscient.

1. SUBJECTIVITY

To get a grasp on what *omniscience* is, we first need a grasp on what *subjectivity* is. Zagzebski introduces the notion by saying that “subjectivity is consciousness as it is experienced by the subject of conscious states” (2023, 1). I find it easier to understand the adjective “subjective” than the noun “subjectivity”, so I’ll focus on subjective beliefs, subjective knowledge, and subjective experiential states in what follows. Subjective beliefs are beliefs that are either not objectively graspable, or not objectively true or false—true or false *simpliciter*—but rather true or false relative to some subjects but not others. Subjective beliefs that are justified, true, and un-Gettiered constitute subjective knowledge. Finally, subjective experiential states are more or less the same thing as *qualia*: the subjective phenomenal character of experience.

A natural concern—one I initially found compelling—is that omniscience will turn out to be either an *uninteresting* property (since subjective states reduce to objective states), or an *impossible* property (since there are contradictory subjective states, and the only way to perfectly grasp a subjective state from the first-person perspective is to be in it). If subjective states reduce to objective states, then regular old-fashioned omniscience will be sufficient for omniscience: knowing all the objective facts will be sufficient for knowing all the facts *tout court*. This would *trivialize* omniscience. On the other hand, if subjective states do *not* reduce to objective states, the ability to have a perfect *first-person* grasp on all subjective states seems like an *impossible* property—a property like being able to change the past—and thus not a property that anything, even God, could have.

But focusing on the adjective “subjective” rather than the noun “subjectivity” encourages us to distinguish different forms of omniscience. Let *propositional omniscience* be the idea that God knows all knowable propositions, including first-person propositions. Propositional omniscience neither entails nor is entailed by *perspectival omniscience*, the idea that

God assumes or at least perfectly grasps all first-person subjective perspectives. And both those forms of omnisubjectivity are distinct from *phenomenal omnisubjectivity*, the idea that God has a perfect first-person grasp on all subjective phenomenal or experiential states.

If these theses are separable—and they clearly are—the thought that omnisubjectivity is either trivial or impossible is not just one thought. In what follows, I argue that propositional and perspectival omnisubjectivity are either trivial or impossible, but that phenomenal omnisubjectivity is interesting and at least epistemically possible, and while not *entailed by* omniscience, more strongly suggested by it than propositional or perspectival omnisubjectivity.

2. PROPOSITIONAL OMNISUBJECTIVITY

Zagzebski has made repeated use—in both her initial essay on omnisubjectivity as well as the book under discussion here—of an example of John Perry’s to motivate idea that there are subjective beliefs. Perry says,

I once followed a trail of sugar on a supermarket floor, pushing my cart down the aisle on one side of a tall counter and back the aisle on the other, seeking the shopper with a torn sack to tell him he was making a mess. With each trip around the counter, the trail became thicker. But I seemed unable to catch up. Finally it dawned on me. I was the shopper I was trying to catch. (PERRY 1979, 366)

What, exactly, did Perry learn when he learned he was the messy shopper? What new knowledge did he gain? Well, the bit of knowledge he would express by saying

(I) I am the messy shopper.

Note that (I)² is (apparently) distinct from any third-person objective knowledge Perry might have, including the knowledge expressed by

(JP) John Perry is the messy shopper.

² I will sometimes use labels like “(I)” to refer to sentences (e.g., the sentence to the right of “(I)”), sometimes to the proposition expressed by sentences in the relevant contexts, and sometimes to the beliefs or bits of knowledge someone would most naturally express using those sentences in those contexts.

After all, it seems that Perry could know (JP) without knowing (I) if, perhaps because of amnesia, he didn't know he was John Perry. The supermarket might announce (JP) over the loudspeaker, and Perry might thus come to know it, but if Perry doesn't know that *he* is John Perry, he won't know (I). This has practical consequences: if Perry doesn't know or at least believe (I), he won't stop looking for the messy shopper and take care of the torn sack in his cart. (I) thus seems to be *irreducibly* subjective knowledge—"essentially indexical" knowledge as Perry puts it—knowledge that only some people, perhaps only Perry, can have.

At first blush, the most natural way to make sense of irreducibly subjective knowledge is to posit irreducibly subjective *propositions*.³ There are two ways in which propositions can be subjective: they can fail to be graspable by everyone—objectively graspable, graspable *simpliciter*—but only be graspable by certain subjects,⁴ or they can fail to be true for everyone—objectively true, true *simpliciter*—but only be true for certain subjects. There is a well-known problem that subjective propositions create for omniscience. For *s* to know *p*, *p* must be true (for *s*) and *s* must believe (and hence grasp) *p*. If there are subjective propositions, it would seem to follow, given plausible auxiliary assumptions, that God doesn't know all knowable propositions: e.g., God can't know (I), since, even if God manages to grasp (I)—something that may be impossible (see below)—(I) isn't true of God. Versions of this argument are given in KRETZMANN (1966) and GRIM (1985).

As Zagzebski notes at the beginning of chapter 3, one motivation for propositional omnisubjectivity is that it provides a response to this argument against omniscience. It is natural to think that subjective propositions are only graspable by their subjects, or only true relative to their subjects, or both—that's certainly what's suggested by the phrase "essentially indexical". The existence of such subjective propositions *would* entail that God doesn't know all knowable propositions. But perhaps subjective propositions are only graspable or knowable by people with certain subjective perspectives. Then, if God can *occupy* or *share* all subjective perspectives, subjective propositions would all be graspable and indeed knowable by God. It thus appears that we can transform the argument *against* omniscience *from* subjective propositions into

³ Propositions are generally thought to be the fundamental bearers of truth and falsity, the meanings of declarative sentences, and the objects of propositional attitudes.

⁴ Objective propositions are graspable by everyone only in principle: some might be too complex for certain people to grasp, some people might not have the concepts requisite to grasp others, etc.

an argument *for* omnisubjectivity *from* subjective propositions and omniscience:

Argument from Subjective Propositions

- F1. God knows everything it is possible to know.
- F2. It is possible to know every knowable subjective proposition, such as (I).
- F3. *Therefore*, God knows every knowable subjective proposition.

There is, however, a problem with the Argument from Subjective Propositions that should be apparent to anyone familiar with the literature on defining “omnipotence”.⁵ Consider:

Argument from Omnipotence

- O1. God can do everything it is possible to do.
- O2. It is possible to lie and to cease to exist.
- O3. *Therefore*, God can lie and cease to exist.

This argument illustrates a notorious problem with (O1): there are things that it is possible to do, such as lying or ceasing to exist, that a necessarily existent and essentially perfect God cannot do. Theorizing about the divine attributes is often guided by the thought that God is *maximally perfect*, and indeed the *greatest possible* being. Thus, it is standardly held that God can be all-powerful despite lacking *impossible powers*—the power to make it true that $2 + 2 = 5$, for example—as well as *imperfect powers*: powers that imply any sort of deficiency, limit, or imperfection, such as the power to break a promise, the power to cease to exist, etc. Impossible powers are, well, *impossible*, and imperfect powers are incompatible with divine perfection: the idea that God can break a promise, for example, seems to conflict with the idea that God is essentially perfect, and thus with the idea that God is the greatest or most perfect possible being.

For this reason, it is generally acknowledged that (O1) should be replaced with something like

- (O1*)** God can do anything that it is possible for God to do.

⁵ Chap. 1 of GEACH (1977) is the *locus classicus* of the contemporary discussion; see ZIMMERMAN (2015) for a recent overview.

Since some things, like lying and ceasing to exist, are possible for us yet impossible for God, (O1*) does not, unlike (O1), implausibly entail that God is able to lie or cease to exist. But now consider the relevant analog of (O1*) for the Argument from Subjective Propositions:

(F1*) God knows everything it is possible for God to know.

Replacing (F1) with (F1*) renders the Argument from Subjective Propositions manifestly invalid: the question under dispute is whether God can know every knowable subjective proposition, and (F1*) merely entails that God knows them all if it's possible for God to know them all. That's not controversial.⁶

So on the one hand, the Argument from Subjective Propositions doesn't seem to give us a reason to accept propositional omniscience. And on the other hand, there are reasons to doubt that propositional omniscience is possible in the first place.

One view is that (I) is subjective because it contains an essentially indexical (and hence private) name for Perry: it expresses a proposition of the form "*a* is the messy shopper," where "*a*" is the sense of a name for Perry that only he can grasp. It follows that God can't grasp (I), and so can't know it either, thus making propositional omniscience impossible.⁷

What if we say that God can grasp private names like "*a*"? But if "private" names are graspable by anyone other than their bearers, it is a misnomer to call them "private"—on this view, (I) isn't actually *subjective*. This approach seems to *trivialize* propositional omniscience: (I) just expresses the objectively true proposition *that a is the messy shopper*, an objective proposition that *almost* no one other than *a* is in a position to grasp, but that *can*, in fact, be grasped by people other than *a*.

Conversely, we might hold that (I) expresses a universally-graspable but indexical proposition, a *proposition* that has basically the same (relativized) truth-conditions as the *sentence* "I am the messy shopper": a proposition that is true iff the person asserting or thinking it is the messy shopper. But then, if God knows (I), it follows that *God* is the messy shopper. That's clearly false.

⁶ Speaks (2018) argues for similar reasons that it's impossible to draw any substantive conclusions *whatsoever* from the claim that God is the greatest possible being.

⁷ As Grim (1985, 154) puts it, "The indexical 'I'.... is *essential* to what I know in knowing [(I)]. But only I can use that 'I' to index me—no being distinct from me can do so."

On this second view, *some* indexical propositions *can* be known by more than one person. What if propositional omnisubjectivity were restricted to such “multiply-knowable” propositions? Assume that

(P) I am pained

expresses a proposition with roughly the same (relativized) truth-conditions as the *sentence* “I am pained.” (P) is thus a multiply-knowable subjective proposition, a subjective proposition knowable by anyone who is pained. But even if we restrict propositional omnisubjectivity to such propositions, problems remain. Assume that I know (P), and that you know

(~P) I am not pained.

If God knows all multiply-knowable subjective propositions, God would know both (P) and (~P). That looks like a straightforward contradiction.

The literature on Christology suggests a variety of ways of rendering (P) and (~P) consistent. For example, they might be paraphrased along any of the following lines:⁸

(P1) I_{qua-jk} am pained

(~P1) I_{qua-you} am not pained

(P2) I am_{qua-jk} pained

(~P2) I am_{qua-you} not pained

(P3) I am pained_{qua-jk}

(~P3) I am not pained_{qua-you}

But it is far from clear whether these proposals are plausible. At some point we have to ask whether the game is worth the candle—especially since we’ve already abandoned “full” propositional omnisubjectivity. Does omniscience really require—does our intuitive conception of omniscience really require—that God knows all knowable propositions, including subjective propositions? Of course, many philosophers, perhaps most, reject the existence of (irreducibly) subjective propositions (see, e.g., MAGIDOR 2015). But even those that

⁸ For related discussion, see KELLER (2017, 2022).

accept their existence think they are equivalent *in a sense* to objective propositions that are universally graspable and true or false *simpliciter*. Suppose that (I) is a subjective proposition that only Perry can know. Still, (I) is equivalent in an important sense to the objective proposition (JP).

It is tempting to say that the sense in which (I) and (JP) are equivalent is that they describe the same fact, or correspond to the same state of affairs. If (I) and (JP) *do* describe the same fact, God could know all the facts without knowing (I), simply by knowing (JP). And surely, one might think, knowing all the facts is sufficient for omniscience. But let's not get hung up on how different bits of knowledge are labelled. If God knows all and only the objective propositions, and thus knows (JP) but not (I), is there really any intuitive sense in which God's knowledge is incomplete? If not, it is hard to see why we should tie ourselves in knots trying to make sense of the idea that anyone other than Perry could know (I).

You might wonder how this squares with our reasons for believing in subjective propositions in the first place. After all, if Perry knows (JP) but not (I), there *is* an intuitive sense in which his knowledge is incomplete: if he knew (I), he would stop looking for the messy shopper! But Perry's knowledge is intuitively incomplete only because *he* is the subject of (JP). God isn't. (I) is true for Perry, but not for God. And so not knowing (I) does not make God's knowledge incomplete in any intuitive sense.

This solution generalizes to other types of apparently subjective knowledge. Some philosophers hold that there are temporal propositions that are only true relative to certain times. For example, I might know that

(10) The meeting is at 10am on October 1, 2024,

but nonetheless remain seated in my office as the meeting starts if I don't know what time it is. It is only learning

(N) The meeting is now

that is *guaranteed* to get me out of my seat. If (N) is an irreducibly temporal proposition that is only true at 10am on October 1, 2024, and thus only knowable by people at that time, it will be impossible for anyone not at that time to

know it, including an atemporal God.⁹ But (N) is nonetheless equivalent in an important sense to the non-temporal objective proposition (10). It is tempting to say that the sense in which (N) and (10) are equivalent is that they describe the same fact, or correspond to the same state of affairs. If (N) and (10) *do* describe the same fact, God could know all the facts without knowing (N), simply by knowing (10). But again, let's not get caught up in how we label different bits of knowledge. We may still ask: if God knows all and only the objective propositions about what's going on when—if God knows (10) but not (N)—is there really any intuitive sense in which God's knowledge is incomplete? If not, then it is hard to see why we should tie ourselves in knots trying to make sense of the idea that an atemporal being could know (N). Of course, if *I* know (10) but not (N), there is an intuitive sense in which my knowledge is incomplete. I might miss the meeting! But my knowledge is intuitively incomplete only because I am *at* the time mentioned in (10). God isn't, being atemporal, at that time. (N) is true for me, but not for God. And so not knowing (N) does not make God's knowledge incomplete in any intuitive sense.

It is admittedly difficult to say, from God's perspective, what it is that I don't know when I don't know (N).¹⁰ That's one reason why many philosophers reject the existence of irreducibly subjective propositions. But if there are no irreducibly subjective propositions, propositional omnisubjectivity is trivial. So rejecting the existence of irreducibly subjective propositions is no way to avoid the conclusion that propositional omnisubjectivity is trivial or impossible.

The Argument from Subjective Propositions is thus, I believe, a failure. But now I must make a confession. I suspect that Zagzebski does not mean to endorse the Argument from Subjective Propositions, or even propositional omnisubjectivity itself.¹¹ She argues that subjective beliefs provide evidence for omnisubjectivity *regardless* of whether Perry learns a new fact when he learns (I). She says,

⁹ As Grim (1985, 160) puts it, "A timeless being ... has no temporal location. But it appears that there are things which can be known only at a particular temporal location—what I know in knowing that the meeting is starting now, for example. If this cannot be known by a being at any other time—at any other temporal location—then it surely cannot be known by any being which has no temporal location at all."

¹⁰ You might think this is easy: I don't know what time it is. But what, in the mouth of an atemporal God, does that sentence mean?

¹¹ This suspicion has been confirmed in personal communication. But then how is omnisubjectivity supposed to undermine Kretzmann's and Grim's arguments against omniscience?

A being who knows everything must not only know what you believe, but that being must be able to tell the difference between your conscious state and the conscious state of a knower looking at you in the third person, which could be yourself. (ZAGZEBSKI 2023, 7)

This sounds more like an argument for *perspectival* or *phenomenal* omniscience than an argument for propositional omniscience, and so it is to these species of omniscience that I now turn.

3. PERSPECTIVAL OMNISCIENCE

Perry himself rejects the existence of subjective propositions. He nonetheless argues that some *beliefs* are subjective, since we sometimes believe (objective) propositions under subjective *guises*: “modes of presentation” that are irreducibly tied to subjects or subjective perspectives. On subjective *proposition* accounts, subjective beliefs involve a two-place relation between a subject and a subjective proposition: when Perry learns that he is the messy shopper, he comes to stand in the belief relation to a *new special subjective proposition*, (I). On subjective *guise* accounts, subjective beliefs involve a three-place relation between a subject, a *subjective guise*, and an objective proposition. On such views, when Perry learns that he is the messy shopper, he comes to stand in a new belief relation to (JP)—an objective proposition he may have already believed—under a new subjective guise. And so, on subjective guise accounts, God *can* know all knowable propositions, since, e.g., God knows (JP), which expresses the same proposition as (I). So subjective guise accounts would trivialize propositional omniscience. But what about perspectival omniscience? Can God assume all first-person points of view, or perspectives? While Perry holds that some guises are *subjective*, he doesn’t hold that any are *private*. On Perry’s view, there is a subjective first-person guise associated with (I). Many objective propositions can be grasped under that guise: *that John Perry is the messy shopper, that John Keller is the messy shopper, that Linda Zagzebski is the messy shopper*, etc. If perspectival omniscience is the view that, for every subjective guise, God can grasp a proposition under it, perspectival omniscience is trivial: *of course* God can grasp the proposition *that God is the messy shopper* under the subjective guise associated with (I). But if perspectival omniscience is the view that God can grasp *any* proposition under *any* subjective guise, it

seems impossible: of course God *can't* grasp *that John Perry is the messy shopper* under the subjective guise associated with "I am the messy shopper." Only Perry can do that!

In an earlier discussion, Zagzebski says,

In order to tell the difference between the state of a subject who first knows *de re* that she is making a mess and then comes to know *de se* <I am making a mess>, an omniscient being must be able to assume her first-person point of view. This is a challenge to omniscience whether or not the subject knows anything different in the two cases. (2008, 236)

How plausible this is depends on what it means to "assume" someone's perspective. Having read and understood PERRY (1979), I can tell the difference between the state Perry's in when he believes (JP) and the state he's in when he believes (I). Does that mean I've assumed Perry's perspective? Only in the trivial sense that I grasp the subjective guise associated with (I) and how it's different than the objective guise associated with (JP). In that same trivial sense it seems plausible that God can assume all perspectives. On this account of what it is to assume someone's perspective, perspectival omnissubjectivity is trivial.

To make perspectival omnissubjectivity non-trivial we might hold that to assume someone's perspective is to occupy it. Perspectival omnissubjectivity would then require God to occupy all perspectives. Is this coherent? Is it even possible for two people to occupy the same perspective? And if God occupies Perry's perspective, does that mean God believes (I)? After all, (I) is *true* from Perry's perspective. But then, since (I) isn't true of God, this would entail that God believes a falsehood. That's impossible. Other aspects of Perry's perspective are sinful in various ways, and so fully occupying Perry's perspective would require God to occupy a sinful perspective. Perspectival omnissubjectivity thus seems to be either trivial or impossible, depending on how we flesh it out. Perhaps there is some third interpretation of the doctrine that is neither trivial nor impossible, but if so, it requires explication.

4. PHENOMENAL OMNISUBJECTIVITY

What about phenomenal omnissubjectivity? Zagzebski uses Frank Jackson's (1982) famous Knowledge Argument to illustrate the idea of a subjective

experiential state, and to argue that such states cannot be grasped on the basis of objective cognition:

Imagine that Mary has been confined to a black-and-white room her entire life. She has been educated through black-and-white books and videos, and she has come to know everything there is to know about the physical world by these means (Mary is the ultimate genius). There is no physical fact that Mary does not know, including all the physical facts about color and color perception, including her own color perception. But in that paper Jackson argues that Mary does not know everything there is to know because when she leaves her black-and-white room and sees in color for the first time, she learns something she did not know before. She comes to know *what it is like* to see color... Whether or not Mary comes to know a different fact when she leaves the room and sees in color for the first time, she is in a qualitatively different conscious state. (2023, 7)

Zagzebski goes on to say,

The story about Mary shows that there is a real difference between Mary's subjective states before and after she leaves the room. Jackson originally used the story of Mary to argue that reality cannot be reduced to the physical. My point is that it cannot be reduced to the objective. (2023, 8)

Let us grant for now that there are irreducibly subjective states. Why think they would require God to be phenomenally omnibusjective? One argument Zagzebski considers derives from the idea that God is omnipresent. She says,

If subjective states are in space, presumably located where our bodies are located, then omnipresence entails omnibusjectivity for the same reason that it entails that God is wherever your body is. If instead, our subjective states do not have a spatial location, and omnipresence means "in everything that exists," as Anselm proposes, then again, omnipresence entails omnibusjectivity. Whether or not our subjective states are in space, God is in them. (2023, 42)

Call this the **Argument from Omnipresence**. It faces significant problems. As Zagzebski (2023, 61) acknowledges, words like "in" are used in a variety of ways, and so it is easy for arguments that hinge on such words to equivocate. Consider: I am in pain; my blood is in me; *therefore*, my blood is in pain. This argument is clearly fallacious. But the Argument from Omnipresence seems to have the same structure.

Zagzebski might reply that this parody is inapt, since my blood is not a person, and so is incapable of being in pain. But even if a (very small) person were in me, they would not thereby be in my subjective states, not even if they were in my brain. Zagzebski might once again reply that the analogy is inapt, since a very small person would only occupy a very small part of me, whereas God occupies all of me. But this does not seem to be a relevant difference. If it is coherent to think that an immaterial spirit like God could be co-located with me, it seems coherent to suppose that an immaterial spirit like a ghost or an angel could be co-located with me as well. They would not thereby be in my subjective states. Put differently: the obvious way to try to patch up the Argument from Omnipresence would be with a bridge principle like “if *a* and *b* share a location, they also share a subjective perspective”. But the case of the co-located spirits shows that this principle is false, and it is unclear what the next-best patch would be.

In any case, the most fundamental problem with the Argument from Omnipresence is that an argument for divine omnisubjectivity cannot be an argument that God is *in* our subjective states, since many of our subjective states are sinful. What we need is an argument that God has a perfect first-person grasp on our subjective states *without* being in them.

Zagzebski is clear that she doesn't think that omnipresence entails that God is “in” us in a spatial sense. But the Argument from Omnipresence requires God to be “in” us in something more than a merely analogous sense: e.g., for Aquinas, God is “present everywhere” only in the sense that his power and knowledge extend everywhere (over all things), and everything is sustained in existence through God's essence (being) (AQUINAS 2006, 1.8). While this understanding of omnipresence undermines the Argument from Omnipresence, it suggests another argument for omnisubjectivity.

Zagzebski (§ 3.5) argues that the fact that God sustains all things in being—including subjective states—might explain, if not require, God's being phenomenally omnisubjective. This **Argument from God's Essence** is intriguing. But while God clearly must have a very *close* relationship with subjective states in order to sustain them in being,¹² it isn't clear why that close relation-

¹² The Argument from God's Essence provides a good explanation for how God knows we're not zombies: since God is sustaining our qualia in being, He knows we have them. Of course, a true skeptic might ask how God knows that we are experiencing the qualia He is sustaining in being for us. But as (NOZICK 1997) argues, even *God* may not be able to refute a true skeptic. Even if God were, in fact, a telepath who shared our experiences, there would be no way to *prove* that God

ship must involve having a perfect *first-person* grasp of them. The bridge-principle “if x sustains y in being, then x has a perfect first-person grasp of y ” doesn’t seem true, but it is difficult to decisively refute since the way in which God sustains all things in being is so different than the way in which anything else sustains anything else in being. It seems clear that for all x , God must have *some sort of* grasp on x to sustain x in existence. The question is why God must have a *first-person* grasp on x , particularly when x is *someone else’s* subjective state. Why isn’t a second- or third-person grasp of subjective states sufficient for God to sustain them in being?¹³

The idea that God can have at least a very good second- or third-person grasp on subjective states can be used to provide a response to an interesting argument for phenomenal omnisubjectivity that Zagzebski hints at on page 82. The idea is that if God *providentially* created subjective states, and ordained the laws connecting them to brain (or soul) states, He needs to know what subjective states to create, and which brain (or soul) states to connect them with: a world where pleasant qualia were associated with bodily damage would not be a good one.¹⁴ A well-designed world requires “psychophysical harmony” between subjective states and the physical states that give rise to them, and one might wonder how God could ensure that there was psychophysical harmony if He doesn’t know what subjective states are like. Call this the **Argument from Providence**.

This argument would have significant force against the view that God has *no idea* what *unfamiliar* subjective states are like (i.e., subjective states that God is not and perhaps could not be in, including sinful states). But denying phenomenal omnisubjectivity does not mean denying that God knows *anything* about unfamiliar subjective states. God surely knows a great deal about them, even if He doesn’t have a perfect *first-person* grasp on them. And very good (much less perfect) second- or third-person knowledge of what unfamiliar subjective states are like seems sufficient for knowing how to “hook up” the right sort of subjective states with the right sort of brain or soul states. Thus, the Argument from Providence is unsuccessful.

was actually a telepath sharing our experiences rather than just hallucinating the experiences we would be having if we were not zombies. But if even God can’t prove the skeptic wrong, perhaps that isn’t a task worth undertaking.

¹³ Zagzebski suggests in various places that subjective states can *only* be grasped from the first person. This is an intriguing suggestion, but requires significant development: as she grants, there is an obvious sense in which subjective states *can* be grasped objectively.

¹⁴ Compare the argument from psychophysical harmony in CUTTER and CRUMMETT (forthcoming).

The most fundamental reason to think that God must be phenomenally omnisubjective is that a phenomenally omnisubjective being would understand us better than a being lacking a first-person grasp of our subjective states. Zagzebski argues that understanding us better—knowing us more intimately—would allow a phenomenally omnisubjective being to be a better (more empathetic) friend (§ 2.4), to love us more fully (§ 2.5), and to judge us more fairly (§ 2.6). More generally, a phenomenally omnisubjective being would be *greater* than one that is not. Call this the **Argument from Greatness**. Grant, for now, that the relevant premises of the Argument from Greatness are true. Even so, it is unclear how cogent it is.

As we saw above, the idea that God is the *greatest possible* being doesn't entail that God has impossible or imperfect powers. This exemption holds even when it comes to powers that would otherwise be great-making. It would be great—it would be a truly impressive power—for a being to be able to change the past. A being that was capable of such a feat would be more powerful and thus greater than a being that wasn't. So, the ability to change the past *appears* to be a great-making property. And it would be great *for us* if God could change the past: then God could undo our mistakes! Indeed, God could undo *the* mistake—the ur-mistake that broke the world.¹⁵ Nonetheless, the idea that God can change the past is widely if not universally rejected. Aristotle (citing Agathon) says, “For this alone is lacking even to God, To make undone things that have once been done” (1980, 139). A cynic might argue that tradition holds that God *cannot* change the past simply because He *has* not: God has not, in fact, undone our mistakes, much less the ur-mistake. But this seems more like an argument that God isn't the greatest possible being than an argument that the power to change the past isn't a great-making property. Rather, the traditional reason why the ability to change the past isn't considered a great-making property is given by Aquinas (among others): it is *impossible* for God to change the past, since doing so would entail a contradiction.¹⁶ So as great as the power to change the past would be, it is an impossible power, and thus not a power anything, even God, could have.

¹⁵ Although given the non-identity problem, it's unclear that this would be great *for us*.

¹⁶ See AQUINAS (2006, 1.25.4). His argument is that if Socrates sat, and God changed the past so that Socrates did not sit, then it would be true that Socrates sat and true that he didn't. This standard argument is too fast: if the past can change, then we need to evaluate claims about the past relative to a time. There's no immediate contradiction between it being true at *t* that Socrates sat and true at *t+1* that Socrates did not sit. Indeed, we already need to evaluate claims about the past relative to a time: “there has been a female US President” is false now, but will be true in the future. Still, I am happy to grant that it is impossible to change the past.

This type of “perfect being theology” is not beyond criticism. Speaks (2018) argues that we cannot derive substantive claims about God’s nature from the idea that God is the greatest possible being; if Speaks is right, the Argument from Greatness will *necessarily* fail. But perhaps Speaks is not right (see LEFTOW 2021). The Argument from Greatness may still *contingently* fail, and there is reason to worry it does.

The Argument from Greatness assumes that a being that had a perfect first-person grasp of all subjective states—and thus knew what it was like to be a bat or a badger or you or me—would be cognitively greater than one that didn’t. It also assumes that understanding us better—having a perfect first-person grasp of our subjective states—would have various benefits for us. This seems plausible: there is certainly some pull to the claim that it would be desirable for God to know what it is like to be you or me, struggling with our own particular temptations and limitations. Such knowledge seems useful for determining the level of moral responsibility we bear for our shortcomings, for knowing us deeply, and for loving us truly.

But nobody denies that God has *maximal* knowledge of what it’s like to be you or me: the deepest and most complete knowledge that it is possible for God to have. And just as tradition is skeptical that maximal power requires God to be able to change the past, given its apparent impossibility, so might we be skeptical that God is able to have a perfect *first-person* grasp of unfamiliar subjective states, given *its* apparent impossibility.

Many philosophers accept the **Empiricist Principle** according to which the only way to have a first-person grasp of an irreducibly subjective state is to experience that state oneself. For example, Nagel (1974) argues that the only way to know what it is like to be a bat is *to be a bat*; Jackson’s Knowledge Argument assumes that the only way for Mary to know what it is like to see red is for her to see red; etc.¹⁷ But being a bat, and being embodied more generally, implies all manner of deficiencies and limitations. And while God *can* become embodied—according to Christians, He *did*—it is unclear that God could become a bat. But more importantly, Christians don’t hold that perfection *requires* embodiment: God was perfect—the greatest possible being—prior to creation, much less incarnation, and so incarnating can’t be required for perfection.

Furthermore, even though God did, according to Christians, become human, God did not experience various *sinful* human subjective states such as

¹⁷ Dennett (1988) claims that the traditional view of qualia is that they are inherently private and ineffable, and thus can only be accessed via experience.

wrath, lust, or envy. And so, if the Empiricist Principle is true, perfection can't require having a first-person grasp of the unfamiliar subjective states of sinful or embodied beings. (This is what Zagzebski [2023, § 4.4] calls *the moral objection* to omnisubjectivity.)

This point is only compounded by the fact that what it is like to be a man is plausibly different than what it is like to be a woman, what it is like to be you is plausibly different than what it is like to be me, etc. Subjective experience is *fine-grained*: even a perfect first-person grasp on the subjective experiences of one human life—say, the life of a Nazarene carpenter—would give one only a limited grasp on the subjective experiences of other human lives, and even less of a grasp on the subjective experiences of non-human lives. Even if one was willing to say that the Incarnation was *necessary* for phenomenal omnisubjectivity, it would still be *insufficient* (assuming the Empiricist Principle). The Incarnation might give God a perfect first-person grasp on some human subjective states, and a better (second-person?) grasp on other human subjective states, but it would provide no real insight into the subjective states of non-human creatures. It certainly wouldn't give God a perfect first-person grasp on *all* subjective states. To be phenomenally omnisubjective, God would have to be *omni-incarnate*: to be all conscious things. At least if we assume the Empiricist Principle. But the Empiricist Principle is clearly inconsistent with phenomenal omnisubjectivity anyway, since they jointly entail that God is in various *sinful* states.

Zagzebski is open to tinkering with the traditional conception of God for the sake of omnisubjectivity: with letting God's omnisubjectivity constrain how we think about other divine attributes. For example, she seems open to modifying or rejecting the idea that God is timeless, immutable, and impassible (§ 4.2 and § 4.3) if doing so is necessary to make sense of divine omnisubjectivity. She does not, however, want to abandon the idea that God is holy and perfectly good (§ 4.4). She argues in this context that God can have a perfect first-person grasp of, e.g., wrathful subjective states by merely *imagining*, without *feeling*, wrath itself: that, contra the Empiricist Principle, having a first-person grasp of a subjective state does *not* require having or experiencing that state. It is difficult to know what to think about this. On the one hand, God has incomprehensibly greater powers than we do—what's impossible for us may well be possible for God. On the other hand, it does not seem as if our inability to perfectly grasp other people's subjective states arises out of any sort of contingent human limitation: regardless of whether Jackson's Mary is an alien, an angel, or a god, it is hard to believe that her grasp on what

it is like to see red won't improve when she sees red for the first time. If it were merely some human limitation that prevented Mary from knowing everything about the experience of color in the black-and-white room, the Knowledge Argument would be an obvious failure.¹⁸ Of course, the Knowledge Argument may *be* a failure: perhaps Mary knows all the *facts* about color in the black and white room—which is plausibly what matters for the question of whether she “knows everything” about color—despite lacking some sort of non-factual “know-how” (as argued in, e.g., LEWIS 1983). Or perhaps when Mary leaves the black-and-white room she comes to know an old fact in a new way—to know an old proposition under a new guise (as argued in, e.g., PERRY 2001). These responses are attempts to *shoot down* the Knowledge Argument. But if we thought it was merely some contingent limitation of the human mind that prevented Mary from perfectly grasping what it is like to see red while trapped in the black-and-white room, the Knowledge Argument wouldn't get off the ground in the first place: there'd be no need to shoot it down.

Above I argued that omniscience doesn't require God to know subjective propositions, given their “factual equivalence” with objective propositions: that even if God doesn't know all subjective propositions, there's an intuitive sense in which there's nothing He doesn't know. But I do think there is an intuitive sense in which there is something God doesn't know if He doesn't know what it's like to be you or me. I know my wife very well, but we are still *somewhat* alienated: I do not have a perfect first-person grasp of what it is like to be her. I do, however, have a very good *second*-person grasp of what it is like to be her. In certain ways, I know her better than she knows herself. God knows her even better still: He has a maximally good, indeed *perfect*, second-person grasp of what it is like to be her. I understand my wife deeply and love her profoundly; God understands her vastly more deeply and loves her vastly more profoundly. My limited understanding and love are a source of limited comfort to her. God's unlimited understanding and love are a source of unlimited comfort. If God were able to have a perfect *first*-person grasp what it was like to be her, perhaps that would add, in some way, to His unlimited understanding and love. But since adding to the unlimited does not really make a

¹⁸ I don't mean to imply that this would show that physicalism was true; my point is just that it is a premise of the Knowledge Argument that it's impossible to know what it's like to see red while in the black-and-white room. If the physical facts don't entail the mental facts, physicalism (as standardly defined) is false, even if, contra the Knowledge Argument, it's possible for Mary to somehow *imagine* what it's like to see red. Thanks to Joe Corabi for helpful discussion on this point.

difference, it is hard to see why she should be disappointed if it turns out to be impossible for God to have such a perfect first-person grasp of her subjective states. And so, in the end, I don't think we should feel compelled to bite whatever bullets are necessary to make sense of phenomenal omniscience.

But does making sense of phenomenal omniscience actually require us to bite any bullets? I have argued that God's omnipresence, essence, providence, and greatness don't give us compelling reason to accept divine phenomenal omniscience. But that isn't to show that there's anything particularly implausible about phenomenal omniscience. The truth of divine phenomenal omniscience would entail the falsehood of the Empiricist Principle, but the Empiricist Principle isn't plausible to begin with. Hume's missing shade of blue seems like an obvious counterexample (HUME 1975, 20–21), and there are others: e.g., if I've seen a red cube and a blue sphere, I can imagine what it would be like to see a red sphere and a blue cube. But if *we* can imagine what it would be like to experience states we're not in, so can God. One traditional way of rejecting empiricism is to hold that we gain knowledge of non-experiential subjects like mathematics through a faculty of *rational intuition*. Hume's missing shade of blue suggests that we also have a faculty of *phenomenal intuition*, a faculty that allows us to gain knowledge of phenomenal states we haven't experienced. Our human faculty of phenomenal intuition is quite weak—it can fill in small gaps, *ala* Hume's missing shade of blue, and it can mix and match phenomenal states we have experienced, *ala* the red sphere and the blue cube. That's why almost nobody thinks that Mary knows what it's like to see red while trapped in the black-and-white room. But God's faculty of phenomenal intuition is undoubtedly much more powerful than ours: presumably, it's *maximally* powerful. If God can intuit any phenomenal state whatsoever, making sense of phenomenal omniscience is no problem whatsoever. If there are limitations on what God is able to phenomenally intuit given God's phenomenal base, we'll face difficult questions about what those limitations are and what sort of phenomenal base God has. These are, to my mind, the most pressing and interesting questions related to divine omniscience. What sort of a phenomenal base *does* God have? And how powerful is God's faculty of phenomenal intuition? If *we* can fill in a single missing shade of blue, can God fill in everything between black and white? Or does God need to experience some shade of each primary color? And are there phenomenal states of which it would be immoral to have a first-person grasp, even if one didn't experience those states? These questions don't have obvious answers.

So, as far as I can tell, we can't rule out that God can simply know, through phenomenal intuition, what it's like to be in unfamiliar experiential states. This seems like it *could be* possible, but it isn't *clearly* possible. And so perhaps, in the end, we've found what we've been looking for: a form of omnisubjectivity that is neither trivially true, nor obviously false.

CONCLUSION

Omnisubjectivity is not one thing. Some forms of omnisubjectivity, such as propositional and perspectival omnisubjectivity, are either trivial or implausible, if not impossible. But phenomenal omnisubjectivity is another matter. While I don't think the arguments for divine phenomenal omnisubjectivity are compelling, I don't see any compelling reason to reject it either. What *are* the limits of phenomenal intuition, not just for humans, but for any possible being? I don't know. Mary's inability to know what it's like to see red in the black-and-white room doesn't seem like a merely human limitation, but there's a significant gap—an infinite chasm—between merely human limitations and limitations on God. So perhaps, even if unlimited second-person understanding is all we could reasonably *ask* of God—even if that's all we could reasonably *want* from God—we can nonetheless reasonably *hope* for something more.¹⁹

REFERENCES

- AQUINAS, Thomas. 2006. *Summa Theologiae: Questions on God*. Edited by Brian Leftow and Brian Davies. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- ARISTOTLE. 1980. *The Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by W. D. Ross. New York: Oxford University Press.
- CUTTER, Brian, and Dustin CRUMMETT. Forthcoming. "Psychophysical Harmony: A New Argument for Theism." In *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion*.
- DENNETT, Dennet C. 1988. "Quining Qualia." In *Consciousness in Contemporary Science*, edited by Anthony J. Marcel and Edoardo Bisiach. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- GEACH, Peter. 1977. *Providence and Evil*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- GRIM, Peter. 1985. "Against Omniscience: The Case from Essential Indexicals." *Noûs* 19 (2): 151–80.

¹⁹ Thanks to the members of the Rutgers Center for the Philosophy of Religion reading group, the Saint Joseph's University Friday Reading Group, and Linda Zagzebski for helpful comments and discussion.

- HUME, David. 1975. *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principle of Morals*. 3rd ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- JACKSON, F. 1982. "Epiphenomenal Qualia." *Philosophical Quarterly* 32 (April): 127–36.
- KELLER, John A. 2017. "Paraphrase and the Symmetry Objection." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 95 (2): 365–78.
- KELLER, John A. 2022. "Jc Beall, THE CONTRADICTIONARY CHRIST." *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* 39 (3): 488–95.
- KRETZMANN, Norman. 1966. "Omniscience and Immutability." *Journal of Philosophy* 63 (14): 409–21.
- LEFTOW, Brian. 2021. "Perfect Being Attacked! Jeff Speaks's THE GREATEST POSSIBLE BEING." *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* 38 (2): 262–73.
- LEWIS, David K. 1983. Postscript to "Mad Pain and Martian Pain." In *Philosophical Papers*, 1:130–32. New York: Oxford University Press.
- MAGIDOR, Ofra. 2015. "The Myth of the De Se." In "Epistemology." Special issue, *Philosophical Perspectives* 29 (1): 249–83.
- NAGEL, Thomas. 1974. "What Is It Like to be a Bat?" *The Philosophical Review* 83 (4): 435–50.
- NOZICK, Robert. 1997. "Testament." In *Socratic Puzzles*, 324–28. Cambridge: MA, Harvard University Press.
- PERRY, John. 1979. "The Problem of the Essential Indexical." *Noûs* 13 (1): 3–21.
- PERRY, John. 2001. *Knowledge, Possibility, and Consciousness*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- SPEAKS, Jeff. 2018. *The Greatest Possible Being*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- ZAGZEBSKI, Linda T. 2008. "Omnisubjectivity." *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion* 1:231–48.
- ZAGZEBSKI, Linda T. 2013. *Omnisubjectivity: A Defense of a Divine Attribute*. Marquette University Press.
- ZAGZEBSKI, Linda T. 2016. "Omnisubjectivity: Why It Is a Divine Attribute." *Nova et Vetera* 14 (2): 435–50.
- ZAGZEBSKI, Linda T. 2023. *Omnisubjectivity: An Essay on God and Subjectivity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- ZIMMERMAN, Dean. 2015. "Defining Omnipotence." In *Reason and Faith: Themes from Richard Swinburne*, edited by Michael Bergmann and Jeffrey E. Brower, 84–125. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

ON OMNISUBJECTIVITY

Summary

Linda Zagzebski argues that God is *omnisubjective*: that God has a perfect first-person grasp of all subjective states, including belief states. While it's impossible for any *finite* being to be omnisubjective, what's impossible for finite beings may be possible for God. According to Zagzebski, divine omnisubjectivity is not only possible, but entailed by divine omniscience. In this paper, I argue that we should distinguish between three forms of divine omnisubjectivity: *propositional omnisubjectivity* (the thesis that God knows all first-person subjective propositions), *perspectival omnisubjectivity* (the thesis that God assumes all first-person subjective perspectives), and *phe-*

nomenal omnisubjectivity (the thesis that God grasps all first-person phenomenal states). Distinguishing these forms of omnisubjectivity is important, since we should have different attitudes towards these different forms of omnisubjectivity: while *propositional* and *perspectival* omnisubjectivity are trivial or impossible (and not entailed by omniscience), *phenomenal* omnisubjectivity is interesting, epistemically possible, and *suggested by* other divine attributes.

Keywords: subjectivity; omnisubjectivity; The First Person; qualia; omniscience

O WSZECHSUBIEKTYWNOŚCI

Streszczenie

Linda Zagzebski argumentuje, że Bóg jest wszechsubiektywny: że Bóg ma doskonałe pierwszoosobowe rozumienie wszystkich stanów subiektywnych, w tym stanów przekonań. Wprawdzie takie rozumienie jest niemożliwe dla istot skończonych, ale jest możliwe dla Boga. Według Zagzebski, boska wszechsubiektywność nie tylko jest możliwa, ale wynika logicznie z boskiej wszechwiedzy. W tym artykule argumentuję, że powinniśmy rozróżnić trzy formy boskiej wszechsubiektywności: wszechsubiektywność propozycjonalną (teza, że Bóg zna wszystkie pierwszoosobowe subiektywne sądy logiczne), wszechsubiektywność perspektywiczną (teza, że Bóg zajmuje wszystkie pierwszoosobowe perspektywy subiektywne), oraz wszechsubiektywność fenomenalną (teza, że Bóg pojmuje wszystkie pierwszoosobowe stany fenomenalne). Rozróżnienie tych form wszechsubiektywności jest ważne, ponieważ powinniśmy potraktować każdą z nich osobno: podczas gdy wszechsubiektywność propozycjonalna i perspektywiczna są trywialne lub niemożliwe (i nie wynikają logicznie z wszechwiedzy), wszechsubiektywność fenomenalna jest interesująca, epistemicznie możliwa i sugerowana przez inne boskie atrybuty.

Słowa kluczowe: subiektywność; wszechsubiektywność; pierwsza osoba; qualia; wszechwiedza