

CHARLES TALIAFERRO

THE VIRTUES OF OMNISUBJECTIVITY

Linda Zagzebski's work on omnisubjectivity is a refreshing, brilliant contribution to the philosophy of God, with substantial implications for reflections on divine attributes, religious practice, and inter-religious dialogue. In what follows I address five aspects of Zagzebski's book *Omnisubjectivity: An Essay on God and Subjectivity*: the use of the term 'objective', the history of subjectivity as a topic, integrative dualism, the importance of a "God's eye point of view", the preference for not relying on propositional accounts of knowledge, and a literary example of how evils might be overcome through intersubjective healing. Each of these matters are advanced in the spirit of stimulating further reflection, rather than raising deep objections. One of the reasons for my being a friendly respondent to Zagzebski's book in this Symposium is the significant overlap of some of our positions.

In terms of concord between work by Linda Zagzebski (henceforth LZ) and myself is our recognizing the centrality of consciousness in the philosophy of God (TALIAFERRO 1994). Moreover, both of us recognize that many treatments of divine omniscience in contemporary analytical philosophical theology neglect to attend to *how is it that God knows*. My effort to remedy this lacuna was to propose in 1985 that omniscience involves God exercising *maximally excellent cognitive power* (see my "Divine Cognitive Power" for arguments against the adequacy of standard propositional accounts of omniscience). Thankfully, LZ has developed a richer, systematic account of the mode of God's omniscience with a focus on divine subjectivity. Inspired by LZ's work, I hereby expand my earlier view to include God's exercising perfect *subjective* cognitive power. Other points of concurrence include the

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thesis that God's omniscience of evil states of affairs does not compromise God's perfection (BEATY and TALIAFERRO 1990) and contending that God's omniscience does not violate the right to privacy of creatures (TALIAFERRO 1989).

I now turn to comment on five aspects of LZ's work. These comments are brief and suggestive, rather than substantial arguments. All citations of *Omnisubjectivity* are given by page numbers.

1. OBJECTIVITY

LZ's use of the term 'objective' is explicitly delineated. "Subjectivity is the experience of the world from inside a conscious mind. Objectivity is the world as it can be described from the outside" (12). Consulting the OED and other sources, 'objective' has a variety of meanings and so there is no complaint here of LZ violating uniform usage. Still, her usage can be misleading for philosophers who (like me) often use the term 'objective' to refer to "what is the case" or "what there is," and LZ is certainly claiming that subjectivity exists or is the case or is real. Those who use the term 'objective' in that sense (e.g. "it is objectively true that conscious, subjective states, moral properties, and God exist") can be caught off balance when we read "if God grasps everything, it is not enough that God grasps all the objective facts. God must also grasp all the subjectivity there is" (1). My first point, then, is simply to advise readers to be attentive to LZ's usage, and not to interpret such passages as LZ claiming or implying that subjectivity is not the case or is unreal.

2. THE HISTORY OF SUBJECTIVITY

LZ contends that subjectivity (or interest in subjectivity or the relevant concepts) in the West did not emerge until the early modern era. For example, the ancient Greeks "did not distinguish between what we call the internal from the external" (18). Maybe LZ is right; her stance is supported by the scholarship of Mikhail Bakhtin. Without offering detailed counter-evidence, I simply register my reluctance to accept this thesis in terms of Homeric poetry and Greek tragedy. All the portrayals of persons (or characters) lying or concealing or revealing their passions, thoughts, desires seems naturally to

suggest persons have an “internal” life that is distinct from what is “external” in a commonsense, ordinary way. Distinctions between subjective thinking (planning, hoping, intending) and occasions of when such thought is revealed or acted upon seems suffused throughout the Hebrew Bible. To give only one example, it would be hard not to appeal to the commonplace distinction between inner thoughts and action in the narrative of Joseph, his brothers, and their father in Genesis.

3. INTEGRATIVE DUALISM

In *Omnisubjectivity*, LZ is reluctant to censure physicalism in light of the knowledge argument. I am less temperate and have defended a form of mind–body dualism that is anti-physicalist, but stresses the integration of mind and body as a functional whole in a healthy embodiment (TALIAFERRO 1994). I would therefore modify slightly LZ’s claim: “I think it is not much of an exaggeration to say that human living is subjectivity” (23). I suggest, rather, that in healthy, embodied life we have an integration of subjective and bodily life. Still, I would be very happy with LZ’s claim over against the eliminative materialists who still haunt the intellectual climate.

4. GOD’S EYE POINT OF VIEW

LZ’s book provides an important defense of the coherence of a God’s eye point of view. Arguably, such a divine perspective can play an indispensable role in framing axiological realism (TALIAFERRO 2005; TALIAFERRO and EVANS 2021). By ‘axiological realism’, I am referring to moral realism and realism in aesthetics. LZ’s work on omniscience adds a metaphysical foundation that is otherwise lacking in secular accounts of an ideal moral point of view.

Propositions: I commend LZ’s construing omniscience in terms of God’s “grasping” what is the case. “I use the term ‘grasp’ as the most general term for the mind’s successful contact with actual or possible reality, whether objective or subjective” (1). This avoids the notion that God’s knowledge is always propositional (or *de dicto*) rather than *de re*. LZ’s preferred, more general notion of grasping or making contact invites a more intimate, direct concept of divine cognition or awareness.

5. OVERCOMING ILLS THROUGH OMNISUBJECTIVITY

At the end of her book, LZ writes movingly about how the problem of evil for theism is not only a matter of God's defeating horrendous evil, but addressing the "little bads" that pervade so many of our lives (190). A novel that depicts how, after death, some of the little "bads" or wrongs we have committed or been subjected to, may be addressed through reconciliation and mercy is *All Hallows' Eve* by the Anglican writer (poet and editor) Charles Williams, published in 1945 (T. S. Eliot wrote an introduction to the 1948 edition). In the novel, one of the main characters is given the opportunity to re-visit occasions of when she acted badly; these are not occasions of grave wrong-doing like murder, but events in which she acted lovelessly. It is a Christian, imaginative depiction of how our subjective lives might admit of repair and restoration after death. Fans of LZ's book may find this novel a rewarding, speculative narrative of how little wrongs may be addressed by a loving God.

I commend LZ's book highly. It contains material on the Trinity, prayer, omnipresence, and other topics central to Christian thought and practice. Moreover, her reflections on divine omnisubjectivity speaks to the philosophy of God found, not just in Christianity, but in Judaism, Islam, and theistic Hinduism.

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Summary

After observing the concord between Zagzebski's philosophy of God and my own, questions are raised about her use of the term "objectivity," her depiction of the history of subjectivity, and other matters. Zagzebski's work is commended as an important contribution to philosophical reflection on divine attributes, religious practice, and inter-religious dialogue.

Keywords: omniscience; objectivity; subjectivity; God's Eye Point of View

ZALETY WSZECHSUBIEKTYWNOŚCI

Streszczenie

Po odnotowaniu zgodności między filozofią Boga bronioną przez Zagzebski a moją własną, stawiam pewne pytania dotyczące jej użycia terminu „obiektywność”, jej przedstawienia historii subiektywności oraz innych kwestii. Polecam pracę Zagzebski jako ważny wkład w filozoficzną refleksję nad Boskimi atrybutami, praktyką religijną i dialogiem międzyreligijnym.

Słowa kluczowe: wszechwiedza; obiektywność; subiektywność; Boski punkt widzenia