Omnisubjectivity: An Essay on God and Subjectivity. Linda Zagzebski. Oxford University Press, 2023, x and 209 pp, $35 (hrd)

Graham Renz, Marian University – Indianapolis

This book, building on and refining earlier work, articulates, defends, and explores applications of a novel divine attribute: omnisubjectivity, the property of knowing, or cognitively grasping, the subjective states—the what it is like to be—of all conscious beings perfectly (1, 119). According to Zagzebski, the omni-God of traditional theism knows perfectly every conscious state, from the exuberant joy of a father at the birth of his child to the hopelessness and despair of an addict, *as they are experienced from the inside*.

This fairly brief and easy-reading book runs as follows. The first chapter defends the fundamentality of subjectivity. Zagzebski argues that whatever the ontological status of the mind, subjectivity is a non-negotiable feature of reality (7-8). This is because knowledge of what it is like to be, feel, *et cetera* is not reducible to propositional knowledge: Mary the color scientist can describe her experience of the color red to a friend, but she cannot convey the experience itself propositionally (11).

Chapter two marshals a series of arguments for the conclusion that God must be omnisubjective. The two most convincing arguments begin with other, less controversial divine attributes. First, since God is omniscient, He knows all particular existents insofar as He is their cause and sustainer. Subjective states are particular existents. So, God knows all subjective states (35). Second, since God is omnipresent, He is present in all things. Subjective states exist. So, God is present in (and so knows) all subjective states (42). Zagzebski also offers a fascinating argument from prayer. We engage in private, non-verbal prayer. Plausibly, God has access to these prayers, and the easiest way to make sense of this access is by ascribing omnisubjectivity to God (48-49).

Chapter three advances three models, along with a suggestive metaphor, for understanding omnisubjectivity. The first model is the empathy model. God perfectly grasping a creature's subjective state is similar to how we 'feel' the subjective state of others when we empathize: we represent another's inner state through a sort of imaginative projection (65-67). Next is the perception model, where God's knowledge of our inner states arises from His ability to 'see' into our heads. On this model, our inner lives are likened to a movie playing in our heads, and God can look in as if our skulls were made of glass (71). The third model is based on panentheism, the view that the universe is a proper part of God. On this view, Zagzebski suggests that we—individual consciousnesses—could be understood as pieces of a larger whole—Consciousness. Consciousness, and so, subjectivity, would be something like an Armstrongian universal. So, God is omnisubjective insofar as our subjectivities are scattered portions of His subjectivity (75-76). Lastly, we're offered the metaphor of light. Light, we're told, contains—be it potentially, virtually, or what have you—all colors. Similarly, God, as the infinite and perfect creator and sustainer of all being, contains within himself all perfections. Since God knows himself as the creator and sustainer, He thereby knows himself as the creator and sustainer of all perfections and creatures. So, as light contains and so 'knows' all the colors within it, God knows all the subjectivities He creates and sustains (82).

Chapter four considers objections, such as putative problems arising from the incorporation of omnisubjectivity with other divine attributes. For example, if God is atemporal, how can He perfectly grasp what it is like to be temporal? Zagzebski's argumentative maneuver throughout is broadly the same: if there is something problematic about the conjunction of atemporality and omnisubjectivity, say, then the problem lies with atemporality (or impassibility, *et cetera*) not omnisubjectivity (92, 98, 101). (However, Zagzebski argues, ultimately, that omnisubjectivity is consistent with atemporality and other traditional divine attributes.) She also considers worries about omnisubjectivity weighing down God normatively, such as that perfectly grasping evil mental states, or merely coming in contact with the profane, would besmudge God. The discussion here is rich, and Zagzebski does an admirable job of showing that not only do creaturely

imperfections fail to weigh God down—A's empathetic representation of x is not A feeling x—but that we should want, in fact, *need*, God to perfectly grasp our negatively charged mental states (107-108).

Chapter five takes up the problem of counteractual subjectivities, or the problem of how God knows perfectly well the subjective states of beings that are merely possible, and ultimately appeals to the divine imagination. God knows what it would be like for me to eat a bucket of habaneros because He can imagine it; all facts, including the subjective facts, whether actual or possible, are ultimately grounded in the divine mind (p. 133, 143, 182-183; cf. Ward 2020: ch. 8). Chapter 6 shows how omnisubjectivity can be put to work, particularly in helping illuminate the trinity, problem of evil, incarnation, and divine-human interaction via the holy spirit. The concluding chapter argues for the primacy of subjectivity over objectivity insofar as God possesses (better: *is*) subjectivity and there is no being apart from God, prior to creation, that can consider God as object. It also makes some interesting suggestions about the explanatory value of subjectivity in explaining the moral perfection of creatures in the eschaton (189-191).

I'm happy to recommend this book without hesitation. It explores an interesting and novel position. It is full of forthright, untortured arguments. Its tone is refreshingly personal and casual. It is well-structured, clear, and exceptionally readable (although there are some exceptions, e.g., the argument on imaginative graspings at pp. 82-83). It is accessible, laying out debates concisely without technical jargon and formalism. It is historically-informed and engages with non-Western traditions. And its focus straddles various sub-fields, making it a worthwhile read for philosophers of mind, language, religion, metaphysicians, epistemologists, and even historians of philosophy (in particular, medievalists) with an eye toward contemporary philosophy of religion. Zagzebski's attention to scripture will also help to make the book approachable to theologians.

While I was dubious initially, and am circumspect currently, I think Zagzebski is successful in her defense of omnisubjectivity. Recognizing two things helped me swallow the pill. The first was recognizing what omnisubjectivity is not. Zagzebski's entire project hinges on the distinction between the objective and the subjective. An objective point of view is one open to all, the perspective from nowhere, while the latter is the perspective from the inside, the viewpoint of the self. So, it seems, to grasp subjectivity is to be the self as *they* experience the world. Given this division, omnisubjectivity sounds like the property of experiencing all conscious states; God experiences my pain after eating a habanero just as I do. For, how could God truly know the inner lives of all conscious beings without experiencing their experiences (79)?

However, this is not what Zagzebski means by omnisubjectivity. God knows my pain after eating a habanero perfectly, but, unlike creatures, He needn't experience my pain to know it as it is felt, as I do from my own subjectivity (pp. 82-85, 107, 114, 182). Instead, God imagines, perceives, or contains our own subjectivities in a way such that He may perfectly grasp them while not being in them as we are ourselves. So, omnisubjectivity is knowing what it is like from the inside without being on the inside. Making sense of this is the work of the models advanced in chapter three. While I find the empathy model, in conjunction with the light metaphor, helpful, I suspect how informative these models are for each reader will be the primary determining factor in whether or not they accept omnisubjectivity.

The second point is simply keeping in mind that the God of classical theism creates and sustains all being, subjectivity included, and does so through knowing Himself. I exist in virtue of God's continuous sustaining activity. I am a subject. So, God continuously keeps subjectivities in existence, just as He keeps rocks and habaneros in existence. Supposing God is perfectly rational and omniscient, then God knows what he is creating and sustaining in being perfectly. As Zagzebski puts it bluntly "God can grasp everything in the universe he created, including all the feelings within it." (113) While this makes God's knowledge of subjectivities seem objective—as beings outside Himself—we need simply remember that God knows the creation by knowing himself, and so, does not look 'out' at subjectivities (as the perceptual model suggests).

While none of this adds anything to Zagzebski's arguments, focusing on God as a rational creator and sustainer, for me at least, makes accepting omnisubjectivity less rattling.

Keeping this second point in mind also helps show how certain low-hanging objections to omnisubjectivity are misplaced. Ryan Mullins (2020) and Chad MacIntosh (2015) worry an omnisubjective God is creepy. God knows perfectly what it is like for you to, say, orgasm with your partner/s. Gross, right? Perhaps initially, but, after a minute's reflection, it shouldn't be. As Zagzebski is right to point out (112), God designed us, to continue with this example, as sexual beings, knows what an orgasm is and how you like to achieve them (with whom, if anyone, or anything), and most of all, God sustains all the parties involved in being. So, an omnisubjective God, if creepy, should seem no creepier than the omniscient designer, sustainer God of traditional theism we've all been comfortable with up to this point.

All that said, I'll push on the supposed import of the priority of subjectivity from the final chapter. In brief, since objectivity is an approach to being *from the outside* (178), it requires a distinction in being, that is, subject and object, observer and observed. Prior to creation, there is just God, a subject. So, with no distinction in being prior to creation, and the assumption that God doesn't know himself as an object, there is no objectivity, only subjectivity. Hence, subjectivity is prior to objectivity (179): being is first and foremost *from the inside*. From this, Zagzebski concludes that "God's being is intrinsically pure subjectivity…" (181) and so "objectivity does not exist of necessity. Subjectivity does." (182).

Some of the discussion in this chapter seems needlessly wild. Zagzebski makes claims such as that "the actuality of God's objective nature depends upon divine choice in the creation…" (179). Initially, claims like this sound as if God makes up who, what God is. Of course, this is not what Zagzebski means; she means just that there is no treating God as a *this such* when God is all that exists. Perhaps claims like this sound wild because many of us—myself included—often conflate *objective* with *intrinsic*. Whether or not God is viewed as an object, He certainly is in certain ways (to speak loosely). After all, we say meaningful and true things of God: that He is omniscient, omnipotent, *et cetera*. And this is so even if, with Aquinas and Zagzebski, we understand God as being itself (being itself, unlimited by a nature, is omniscient, omnipotent, *et cetera*).

However, I worry that once we're clear on what Zagzebski is really getting at, the grandeur of this argument proves to be ephemeral. The basis of her argument is that objectivity is relational and so cannot exist without relata. If we've admitted that God is a person, a subject, then the primacy of subjectivity should be fairly obvious: Primary Being is subjective, so, subjectivity is prior to objectivity. But this is just one incarnation of a form of argument that, along with its usual conclusions, is uncontroversial. Different incarnations get us that perfect knowledge is necessary and prior to imperfect knowledge, eternity is necessary and prior to temporality, being is necessary and prior to non-being, act is necessary and prior to potency, and so on. Insofar as a classical theist finds these priority relations uncontroversial, I think they'll find the priority of subjectivity uncontroversial too. Once it is clear that objectivity is merely relational for Zagzebski, the intrigue of her proclamation fades. So, the view isn't some sort of fantastical idealist witchcraft, but another way of putting the uncontroversial fact that God—the primary and necessary being—is a person. Of course, I might be missing the point, and simply be heaping praise on Zagzebski in a horribly roundabout way; perhaps Zagzebki's service is showing us what we're antecedently committed to, and doing it with such skill so as to make it seem uncontroversial. However, I suspect that this final chapter is more flourish than insight. That said, you should go read this book.[1]

[1] Thanks to Will Bell, Joe Gamache, and Linda Zagzebski for comments on and conversations about this review.

References

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