

us with an excellent volume, which will help continue to keep alive the huge contribution that Wittgenstein and Dewi Phillips have made to the study of philosophy of religion.

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Linda Zagzebski. *Omnisubjectivity: A Defense of a Divine Attribute*. Marquette University Press, 2013.

When I first read Thomas Nagel's 'What Is It Like To Be A Bat?' immediately I wondered, 'Does *God* know what it's like to be a bat – or *me*?' In her 2013 Aquinas lecture, Linda Zagzebski answers in the affirmative, arguing that God has 'omnisubjectivity', the 'property of consciously grasping with perfect accuracy and completeness every conscious state of every creature from that creature's first person perspective' (p. 10). Two distinct but intersecting tracks can be discerned throughout this small book, one defensive and the other exploratory. The former defends the possibility of omnisubjectivity by advancing a model that seeks to demonstrate *how* God can be omnisubjective; the latter explores the attribute's scope, relation to other divine attributes, and practical significance to believers. Consider each in turn.

It seems impossible that anyone but me could know what it's like *for me* to see red or taste a strawberry. A friend and I could see and taste the same strawberry, but we could never have qualitatively identical experiences, which seem *essentially* private to our own conscious perspectives. But if this were so, argues Zagzebski, God would not know all there is to know about creation. Even if God were omniscient and knew all the objective facts about the world, 'perhaps the most important feature' (p. 13) would be left out: the what-it-is-likeness of creaturely experience. This is unbecoming of the Christian God who, from an Anselmian perspective, is not merely omniscient but *cognitively perfect*. God must therefore 'grasp what it is like to be his creatures and to have each and every one of their experiences' (p. 15).

Zagzebski considers two models of how God could 'grasp' creatures' mental states. According to the first, God's consciousness merges or overlaps with creatures' consciousnesses. So when I see and taste

a strawberry, God *literally* sees and tastes it exactly as I do. Indeed, on this model, my and God's conscious experiences aren't really distinct at all. For this reason Zagzebski thinks this model is more at home in panentheistic or process thought, which, in contrast to more orthodox thought, is comfortable blurring the Creator/creature distinction. In fact, she rejects any model – call it a 'sharing model' – that requires that either (a) God *literally share* the selfsame mental state with a creature, or (b) creatures to be in any sense 'part of God'. Zagzebski's dismissal of sharing models as unorthodox, however, may be too quick. One might for instance adopt an Alstonian model of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, according to which 'there is a literal merging or mutual interpenetration of the life of the individual and the divine life, a breaking down of the barriers that normally separate one life from another' (see William Alston, 'The Indwelling of the Holy Spirit', in *Divine and Human Language* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 246). Alston likens 'indwelling' to a partial merging or sharing of two individuals' interior lives such that 'when you are moved by a scene I will thereby be moved with your feelings; when you find a remark distasteful I will thereby find it distasteful' (*ibid.*).

Nevertheless, Zagzebski proposes 'the model of total empathy' as a corrective to sharing models. Unlike human empathy where one adopts by imagining – albeit imperfectly – another's mental states, God is capable of 'perfect total empathy', or the ability to acquire 'a complete and accurate copy of all of a person's conscious states'. Zagzebski continues: 'Since your state is from your first person point of view, God grasps it as if it were from your first person point of view, but in an empathetic way, never forgetting that he is not you.' (p. 30) Because the mental states God acquires empathetically are *copies* – albeit perfect ones – of a creature's mental states, this model sidesteps the pitfalls thought to afflict sharing models. However, it's not clear to me how exactly we are to understand the modifiers 'perfect' and 'complete' in describing God's copied states. One understanding would threaten to collapse the perfect empathy model into a sharing model. In *Parmenides* 130-134d, Plato argues that no object in the sensible world can *perfectly* resemble the Form of which it partakes, for if it did, it would *just be* the Form itself. Similarly, Frege argued against the correspondence theory of truth on the grounds that *perfect* correspondence between thought and reality – a relation he thought essential to the theory – would require thought and reality to be identical. The reasoning seems straightforward: compare any two

things, x and y , where y is a copy, resemblance, or representation of x ; if y differs from x in *any* respect, then y cannot be a *perfect* or 'complete' copy of x , for y does not copy x at least in that respect. However cogent this reasoning is, at the very least something more should be said about how we are to understand 'perfect', 'total', and 'complete' as modifiers.

The model of total empathy, according to Zagzebski, shows that omnisubjectivity is possible. This conclusion alone is enough to diffuse Patrick Grim's well-known argument that God cannot know first-person indexical propositions expressed by creatures. But she argues further that God *is* omnisubjective, a fact implied by other divine attributes, principally omnipresence. Zagzebski takes Aquinas's description of omnipresence as all things being 'bare and open to [God's] eyes' almost literally, meaning 'there is no aspect of the created world about which God does not have intimate acquaintance' (p. 19), including the interior lives of creatures. God does not just know *that* you are anxious; God is *present in* your anxiety.

Having defended the idea that God can be and is omnisubjective, Zagzebski explores some of its implications. Zagzebski first ponders the scope of omnisubjectivity, proposing that in addition to grasping creatures' actual subjective states, God grasps creatures' *counterfactual* subjective states, i.e., 'what it *would be* like for any possible conscious being to have any conscious state possible for that being' (p. 36). Without counterfactual subjective states of His own, God could not know what it would be like for one world to be actual as opposed to another, severely limiting His sovereignty. Further, without knowing what it would be like for creatures to experience joy, sorrow, suffering, etc., God's creating them is apt to come across as an insensitive and premature gamble.

Zagzebski also considers the apparent conflict between omnisubjectivity and the traditional divine attributes of timelessness and impassibility: because creaturely experience is marked by temporality, an omnisubjective God must know what it's like to have temporal experiences (e.g., anticipation). But the essentially temporal character of such experiences makes it hard to see how God could know what they're like without being in time. Here Zagzebski appeals to an analogy, observing that when empathizing with characters in a novel, 'rarely do we imagine the character's experience in real time' (p. 42); the character's experience can be drawn out or compressed dramatically. Similarly, God could empathize with someone's extended temporal experience in 'a single moment' or 'in a flash' (p. 43). But the reviewer wonders how we

are to understand these locutions, if not temporally. Apart from a tenseless paraphrase, Zagzebski's defence seems incomplete. Zagzebski is less optimistic about the compatibility of omnisubjectivity and impassibility, as the former requires that God be affected *ab extra* by creaturely mental states. She softens the blow by suggesting that omnisubjectivity 'comes closer to expressing what is included in perfection and the implications of prayer and worship' (p. 45).

Turning to these more practical implications, Zagzebski effectively demonstrates how omnisubjectivity illuminates how God 'hears' prayers and comprehensively loves us (love being premised on a kind of intimate personal knowledge. Cf. Gen. 4:1; 1 Cor. 8:3; 13:12). Omnisubjectivity can also bring more clarity to what it means to 'know and experience God personally', language many find frustratingly vague. For example, we might think of personal knowledge or experience of God as our awareness of God's awareness of us, like 'when someone is empathizing with us and we are able to detect the sharing of our emotion' (p. 52).

Some might worry that omnisubjectivity implies *too* intimate a knowledge of creatures. For example, God might know what it's like for me to feel sad, but does God know what it's like for me to sin? Would this 'contaminate' God's perfect holiness and purity? Only if an empathetic representation of an immoral conscious state is itself immoral, answers Zagzebski. But when we empathize with evil people or fictional characters, it hardly follows that *we* are thereby immoral. Reading a biography of Hitler might enable us to empathize with his anti-Semitic attitudes and feelings, but we still respond to his attitudes and feelings *as ourselves*. Indeed, seeing things from a miscreant's point of view facilitates fair judgment. For this reason Zagzebski thinks it not unlikely that God *must* empathize perfectly with sinners in order to exercise perfectly righteous judgment. Zagzebski does not address a related worry, however. Plausibly, some creaturely knowledge *ought* to be private. For instance, I know what it's like to have intimate relations with my wife. And, intuitively, *only* I ought to know that. But omnisubjectivity implies that God also knows what it's like for me to have intimate relations with my wife! At the risk of sounding crass, the example effectively captures a consequence some might find alarming, to say the least (Zagzebski's response, relayed in personal communication: 'get over it').

One additional worry and one comment. Zagzebski maintains that the intimate Creator/creature relationship secured by omnisubjectivity helps to distinguish the Christian conception of God from the impersonal

God of the Philosophers. But I wonder if the distinction is fully carried out. The Christian God is Tri-Personal. But now the claim that God is omnibusjective is taken to a new level (two new levels, to be precise). If each Person of the Trinity has His own subjective mental states, being cognitively perfect, each must empathize perfectly with the others' mental states. The Father, for example, must know what it's like for the Son to suffer and die on the cross, which may raise patrispassianism concerns. Further, in addition to knowing what it's like for me to see red, would the Father also know what it's like for the Son to know what it's like for me to see red? If so, we're off on an infinite regress: if the Father knows what it's like for the Son to know what it's like for me to see red, then the Son must know what it's like for the Father to know what it's like for the Son to know what it's like for me to see red, and so on.

Finally, I would like to have seen Zagzebski interact with Yujin Nagasawa's *God and Phenomenal Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), which presents a view of omniscience according to which omnibusjectivity is impossible. Nagasawa argues that if omniscience is understood in terms of epistemic powers, and if God does not – as a matter of metaphysical necessity – have the epistemic power to know what it's like for me to see red, then this counts no more against God's omniscience than the paradox of the stone counts against God's omnipotence. In other words, cognitive perfection does not require God to be omnibusjective any more than being perfect in power requires universal possibilism, because what can be done delimits what can be known (Nagasawa's account is especially relevant because it is consistent with thinking cognitive perfection entails having more than propositional knowledge). It is puzzling why Zagzebski doesn't consider this view because it is ably represented in Thomistic and Anselmian traditions, with which she has much sympathy.

Omnibusjectivity: A Defense of a Divine Attribute is a fast and fun read, but leaves many interesting areas along the defensive and exploratory tracks open for further investigation. I very much hope to see a longer, more technical analysis of this fascinating attribute in the future, but the present treatment is in keeping with the stimulating and exploratory character of preceding Aquinas lectures.