

Omnisubjectivity: Why It Is a Divine Attribute

LINDA ZAGZEBSKI
University of Oklahoma
Norman, Oklahoma

Introduction

ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT discoveries in the history of philosophy was the discovery of subjectivity. What I mean by subjectivity is consciousness as it is experienced by the individual subject. At some point in the modern era, philosophers began to appreciate that the viewpoint of the individual subject cannot be reduced to an alleged objective viewpoint outside any person's consciousness. Whether anything is lost by looking at persons from the outside rather than from the inside is an important question. But if persons are unique, as I believe they are, a primary candidate for their uniqueness is their unique perceptual perspective, and even more fundamentally, the uniqueness of contents of their consciousness. But subjectivity raises its own problems. One is the issue of how one person's conscious experiences can be grasped by someone else. If the point of view of the subject is intrinsic to it, no one else can grasp it without "seeing through her eyes," as we sometimes say.

I have argued that the existence of subjectivity requires an addition to the traditional attributes of God. I call the attribute "omnisubjectivity."¹ It is the property of consciously grasping with perfect accuracy and completeness every conscious state of every creature from that creature's own perspective, a perspective that is unique. I believe that,

¹ I argued for the existence of the attribute of omnisubjectivity in "Omnisubjectivity," *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion* (volume one), edited by Jonathan Kvanvig, 2008, and in *Omnisubjectivity: A Defense of a Divine Attribute* (Aquinas Lecture 2013), Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2013.

given the existence of conscious beings in the universe, the traditional attributes of omniscience and omnipresence entail omnisubjectivity and that it is implied in traditional practices of prayer. I believe that this attribute also gives us a way to think about the operations of grace, and it has implications for the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation.

Omniscience and Subjectivity

Subjectivity can be approached in a number of different ways. In one of its senses, it is the feature of consciousness that allows us to say that there is such a thing as *what it is like* to have a conscious experience of a certain kind—what it is like to see the color red, what it is like to taste chocolate, what it is like to sense like a bat, what it is like to feel fear, and so on. Thomas Nagel gets the credit for calling our attention to subjectivity in this sense in his well-known essay “What Is It Like To Be a Bat?” This sense of subjectivity raises the problem of how a being can know what it is like to have conscious experiences that it cannot have. It would seem that only a bat can know what it is like to be a bat. A person blind from birth cannot know what it is like to see color. In fact, we can go further and say that even creatures who *can* see color do not know what it is like to see color if they have never seen color. That was one of the points of Frank Jackson’s famous thought experiment about Mary. In that story, we imagine that Mary has lived all her life in a black-and-white room and has never seen a single colored object. All of her education comes from black-and-white videos and books. Yet, we also imagine that Mary knows everything there is to know about the physical world. There is no physical fact she does not know. But Jackson concludes that she 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 finds out something she did not know before. She finds out *what it is like* to see in color. Knowing what it is like to see in color is something that cannot be known descriptively. She knew complete descriptions of colored objects and human perception before. So even though Mary always was human, and hence was the kind of being who *can* see in color, she did not previously know what it is like to see in color because she had not yet experienced seeing color.

The existence of subjectivity raises a further possibility. Maybe nobody but me sees exactly what I see when I see a red tulip at a particular time. Maybe nobody but me tastes exactly what I taste when I take a bite of a chocolate torte. Maybe nobody but me is in a state exactly like the state I am in when I feel anxious about a deadline. If

so, how can anybody else know what it is like to have my conscious experiences? Even if they have felt something similar to the anxiety I feel, they do not know exactly what it is like *for me* to feel the anxiety I feel unless they have felt something qualitatively identical to my feeling. And of course, the same point applies to any conscious state. Talking about an imaginary person who has never seen in color is just a dramatic way to make the general point that a person must have been in a conscious state of a certain kind in order to know what it is like to be in such a state. What you feel when you feel anxious or cheerful or indignant or peaceful might be similar to feelings I have had, but if there are any differences, I cannot know exactly what it is like to have your feelings and you cannot know exactly what it is like to have mine.

I am sure you can see how this problem applies to God. How can a divine being know what it is like to be one of his creatures? No traditional Christian denies that God knows all the objective facts about his creation. God knows of every true proposition that it is true and of every false proposition that it is false, and he knows it with the greatest possible clarity and precision. The problem is that knowing all the facts about his creatures is not enough to know everything there is to know about his creatures because there is more to know about them than the facts. Having conscious states is a feature of conscious beings, perhaps the most important feature. If God knows everything, he must know the subjective part of his creation as well as the objective facts. He must know what it is like to see in color. But, like Mary, he cannot know what it is like to see in color unless he sees in color or has seen color in the past. Likewise, he cannot know what it is like to taste chocolate, feel anxiety, and so on unless he himself has had the conscious experience of tasting chocolate, feeling anxiety, and all the rest of the conscious states experienced by creatures. Even worse, if there are differences between different creatures in their sensations of color or their emotions or moods or other conscious states, it seems that God cannot know with complete accuracy what it is like to be in the conscious states of his creatures without having had conscious states exactly like those of each one of his creatures.

Some philosophers will respond that this is not a problem for God's *knowledge* because knowledge is directed at propositions and that as long as God grasps the truth value of all propositions, God is omniscient. There is nothing left to be known. This response does not solve the problem; it merely requires that it be reformulated. I do not insist that what God would lack if he lacked a grasp of what it is like to have the conscious experiences of his creatures is knowledge. The

crucial point is that he would lack something, and what he would lack is cognitive. He would not fully cognitively grasp everything that happens in his creation. Each of us cognitively grasps what it is like to be in the conscious states we are in right now, and those states are parts of the created world. If God does not grasp those states and grasp them as well as we do, God is not cognitively perfect. As Aquinas says, “even the Philosopher considers it absurd that we should have cognition of something that God does not have cognition of.”² Hence, if God is cognitively perfect, he must grasp what it is like to be his creatures and to have each and every one of their experiences. I will argue that the attribute of omnisubjectivity solves this problem.

Omnipresence

Another traditional attribute of God is omnipresence, or the property of being everywhere. Omnipresence has never received the attention of such attributes as omniscience and omnipotence, and what little attention it gets usually focuses on the puzzle of how an immaterial being can be present at all points of space. That puzzle is not my current concern, but the solution to the puzzle is interesting because it has an implication that nobody talks about, as far as I know.

Anselm’s solution to the puzzle of omnipresence requires denying that being present at a point in space is to be extended in space or contained by some portion of space, the way a chair is contained by the room in which it is located and spread out on the floor beneath it, each part of the chair taking up a different portion of space. God has no parts and does not take up space, and God is not subject to spatio-temporal laws. God is wholly present in each part of the created world. But that means that there is nothing special about God’s presence in spatial beings as opposed to non-spatial beings. Anselm accepts that implication explicitly when he says: “The supreme nature exists in everything that exists, just as much as it exists in every place. It is not contained, but contains all, by permeating all. This we know. Why not say, then, that it is ‘everywhere’ (meaning in everything that exists) rather than ‘in every place.’”³ The solution to the puzzle of how an immaterial, non-spatial God can be present at all points of space has

² St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, q. 14, a. 11 (trans. Alfred Freddoso at <http://www3.nd.edu/~afreddos/summa-translation/TOC.htm>).

³ St. Anselm, *Monologion* 23, in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, trans. by Simon Harrison, ed. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1998).

the consequence that omnipresence applies to the non-spatial part of the creation as well as to the spatial world.

It seems to me that it is as reasonable to think that God is in every non-physical place as in every physical place. If God cannot be “in” a physical place the way a coffee cup is in the cupboard, any sense in which God *can* be in a physical place would apply to non-physical parts of the creation. I think, then, that omnisubjectivity is a requirement of omnipresence in this sense, but before I get to that, I want to look at another issue that is much more personal than the implications of divine attributes: the practice of prayer.

The Practice of Prayer

There is very little scholarly work on prayer by philosophers, and the little I know of usually focuses on issues about petitionary prayer. For instance, if God does not change, prayer cannot make him change, and if God is providential, there seems to be no need to pray anyway. But I am not focusing on any issues about petitionary prayer in particular. The issue I want to raise is how we understand what is going on between us and God when we pray any kind of prayer. It could be a prayer of praise, of thanksgiving, of contrition, or of request, or just a coming together with God.

In Catholic theology, prayer is traditionally defined as raising one’s mind and heart to God. What is interesting to me about this definition is that it focuses on the human side of prayer and is curiously silent about the recipient. Does God hear our prayers? Most people who pray do not think of prayer as a form of talking to themselves. They will say that their prayers are directed to God, and they believe, or at least hope, that God hears their prayers. But it is hard to get clear on how God hears them. In communal prayer at Mass or a worship service, people pray out loud, but it is very unlikely that they think of God as hovering above them in the room. Obviously, they do not think they need to pray loudly to make sure God hears them. In fact, many prayers are not vocalized. The words are only in the head, yet we still think of that as prayer. If God can hear prayers, surely he can hear the words that are unspoken. As the psalmist says, “Before a word slips from my tongue, Lord, you know what I will say” (Ps 139).

But consider also the practices of prayer that do not involve words, not even unspoken words. Many meditative practices begin with images before the mind, and in more advanced states of contemplation, the images disappear and the person feels herself or himself to be in the presence of God with neither words nor images. Is God aware

of that person's state? Well, why not? It seems to me it is no more difficult to imagine that than to imagine God hearing the unspoken words mentioned by the psalmist. In both cases God would have to be "in our head" to be aware of our mental state. But if he can be aware of words we are thinking, why not images we are having and feelings we are feeling?

But what exactly is the connection between your psychic state when you are praying with or without words and God's psychic state? One possibility is that your conscious space is occupied by two persons, or two conscious selves. That seems to make omnibusjectivity impossible because, sometimes, a self is just defined as the being who possesses a certain conscious space. A psychic state is individuated by its bearer. Only one being can be thinking the thought you are having right now, and that being is you. If someone else had that thought, it would not be *that* thought, although, of course, it could be like your thought in content. If you feel an itch, you are the being who has the itch. Nobody can have that particular itch but you. If you make a choice, you are the one making the choice. There cannot be any other being making that choice. If more than one being had those states, that would mean there are two of *you*, and that is impossible.

We also need to avoid the consequence that, when you make a decision, God makes the decision, even when the decision is sinful. This view will not work on anything close to the traditional view of God. We need another model, one that does not require that God literally feels your feelings or makes your choices, but which also explains how God understands your prayers as well as you do.

The Model of Empathy

The model I will use starts with human empathy. I assume that empathy is a way of acquiring an emotion like that of another person. When Michael empathizes with Elizabeth's grief, Michael becomes conscious of Elizabeth's grief and acquires an emotion like that of Elizabeth in the process of taking on her perspective—imagining what it would be like to be Elizabeth in her situation as she sees it—to have lost her loved one and to have her personal history with that person. Michael's grief is not identical to the grief Elizabeth has because human empathy is never a perfect copy, but more importantly, Michael's emotion is consciously representational, whereas Elizabeth's emotion is not. Elizabeth's emotion comes first and has nothing to do with Michael. Michael's emotion comes in response to hers, and loses its point if

he discovers she does not have the emotion he thought she had. His psychic state includes his attempt at copying Elizabeth's emotion "as if" from her first-person perspective, but it also includes his own ego. So he does not grieve over the death of Elizabeth's father when he empathizes with her, but he imaginatively adopts a state of grieving as if he were Elizabeth.

Although I assume that this experience of empathy is common, it is not important for my purpose that I have identified the features of every instance of human empathy. I am starting with the experience I have described because I think everyone has had an experience like it. I want us, then, to imagine expanding that experience to apply to the transference of other psychic states from one person to another, and we will use that as a model for the transference of all psychic states from a human to God.

Suppose you imaginatively project yourself into another person's perspective and attempt to copy other conscious states she has in the same way you attempt to copy her emotion when you empathize with her. We can do that with intimate friends, and we can often do that when we are reading a novel. As we imaginatively project ourselves into the character's point of view, we imagine having his or her thoughts, beliefs, feelings, desires, sensations, and emotions, making choices and acting, and experiencing various responses from others as these states are described by the novelist. Our ability to do all of that is limited both by the novelist's skill at description and by the fact that we have to depend upon our previous experience to use those descriptions in imagining what it is like to be the character in the novel. My conjecture is that novelists usually are fairly successful at conveying visual scenes because they can depend upon the readers' past experiences of virtually all colors and shapes and most elements of nature that aid readers in imagining something visual. But it is harder for the writer to convey sounds and smells and tastes. If the writer says the character smells cinnamon, perhaps most readers can bring the smell to mind, but if the writer says the character smells Chinese Five Spice, many readers will not know what to imagine. The same point applies to tastes and sounds, and it certainly applies to emotions, which is the reason the young have so much trouble understanding stories in which complex emotions play a central role. Conveying the character's thoughts, beliefs, and decisions is easier because those kinds of states are verbally mediated even within the character's own mind, and since the novelist makes the character mentally verbalize, the

reader can imagine the character's experience of thinking, believing, and deciding from the character's viewpoint. What we do when we imagine being the character and taking on the character's beliefs and decisions in this way is analogous to empathizing with her feelings. Since we never forget that we are doing this in imagination, there is no difficulty of confusing who we are with who the character is. We are always aware that the character's beliefs are not our own beliefs, that the character's sensations are not our own sensations, and that the character's decisions are not our own decisions. But we have an imaginative identification with the character that permits us to empathize—very imperfectly—with many different psychic states of the character, and thus to grasp—again very imperfectly—what it is like to be such a character.

We can expand this model even further. What I will call total empathy is empathizing with every one of a person's conscious states throughout that person's entire life—every thought, belief, sensation, mood, desire, and choice, as well as every emotion. What I call perfect total empathy is a complete and accurate representation of all of a person's conscious states. If A has perfect total empathy with B, then, whenever B is in a conscious state C, A acquires a state that is a perfectly accurate copy of C and A is aware that her conscious state is a copy of C. A is in this way able to grasp what it is like for B to be in state C. Because A is in an empathic state, A's awareness of her ego is included in her empathic state, so an empathic state always includes something not included in the state of the person with whom she is empathizing. In addition, since she is always aware that her empathic copy is a copy, that her empathic copy of B's awareness of being B is not an awareness of being B. Nobody can be aware of being B except B.

I propose that God has total perfect empathy with all conscious beings who have ever lived or ever will live. That is the property I call omnisubjectivity. Since I also accept the traditional view that God knows everything directly, I propose that omnisubjectivity is direct acquaintance with the conscious states of creatures—like direct seeing, only without any physical distance between perceiver and perceived. It is not mediated by anything analogous to a novelist's attempt to convey conscious states of an imaginary character to the reader, nor is it inferred from behavior, as in our experience of persons in daily life. Since it is not inferred, it does not require a similarity of past experience between God and creatures in order for God to understand the experience. There is no imaginary projection from the

outside. What we do by imagining, God does by directly grasping someone's conscious state. Since your state is from your first-person point of view, God grasps it from your first-person point of view, but in an empathic way, never forgetting that he is not you. Also, as with empathy, you may be unaware that there is someone empathizing with you. The empathizer's consciousness does not necessarily affect what is going on in your own consciousness, although it *can*, and I will return to that briefly at the end of this essay.

I think that the model of omnisubjectivity as total perfect empathy shows that omnisubjectivity is coherent. At least, I do not see anything that rules out its possibility. It does not rely upon the view that two distinct selves literally have the same conscious state. You and God are not confused or merged, and you are not a part of God. If omnisubjectivity is total perfect empathy, it is the most intimate acquaintance possible compatible with a separation of selves.

I propose that omnisubjectivity resolves the puzzles I mentioned about the attributes of omniscience and omnipresence. If an omniscient being is a being who knows everything there is to know, that being must know what it is like to have every conscious experience anyone has ever had, and since each conscious experience is distinguished by the way it is experienced from the perspective of the subject, an omniscient being must know what it is like to have the experience from the perspective of the subject. God is not omniscient unless he is omnisubjective. The puzzle about omniscience is solved as long as omnisubjectivity is possible and an omnisubjective being knows what it is like to have each conscious state and knows it as well as the subject who is in that state.

Omnisubjectivity recognizes that there is something that is learned through living a conscious life that cannot be learned any other way. What is learned through living a conscious life is not a list of facts. There is something about lived experience that cannot be summed up by facts about the world that are gleaned from that experience. I am suggesting, then, that God lives through the conscious experience of each being who possesses consciousness. He knows everything you know or understand from living your life, and similarly for every other conscious being. He knows what it is like to be you, what it is like to be your dog, and what it is like to be each and every animal that has conscious awareness.

If I am right about that, omnisubjectivity is implied by the traditional solution to the puzzle of how an immaterial God can be present in all points of space. As I have said, the traditional answer to the puzzle

is that an immaterial being is not present in space the way a material being is located in space or extended over some portion of space. Instead, to say God is omnipresent is to say at least this much: God is present to everything that exists, and is present to everything that is going on in the sense of being immediately and directly acquainted with it. "All things are naked and open to his eyes," as Aquinas says,⁴ and that applies as much to the non-physical part of creation as to the physical part. If omnipresence means everything is immediately and directly grasped by God, then surely that includes not only objects located in space, but also conscious experiences that are not located in space. If God is truly everywhere, God must be omnisubjective.

This brings me to the implications of prayer. What I have said about practices of prayer so far does not require the full attribute of omnisubjectivity because it does not require that God is intimately acquainted with the first-person perspective of beings who do not pray. But it requires at least the attribute of assuming the first-person perspective of all human beings who have ever lived and have ever prayed, or will ever live and will ever pray. However, I think that our practices of prayer do not assume that God becomes aware of our conscious life only at the moment of the prayer. How could we address God in prayer unless God was already aware of what was happening in our consciousness? If I am right about that, prayer is a practice of us noticing God more than of God noticing us. If so, our practices assume that God is directly acquainted with the conscious states of any being who *can* pray, whether or not that being actually prays. That would require the attribute of grasping the conscious states of all human beings from their own perspectives. We might call that attribute "omni-homo-subjectivity." It would not apply to non-human conscious animals, animals who cannot pray. However, it seems to me that, if you accept such an attribute, it is but a small step to accepting the full attribute of omnisubjectivity. Surely a being who has the power to enter into the consciousness of a human also has the power to enter into the consciousness of all creatures with consciousness. If he can do it for one, he can do it for all of them. I have already argued that an omniscient God *should* be omnisubjective, and I have argued in this section that he *can* be omnisubjective. I am claiming now that we *treat* God as being omnisubjective in our practices of prayer.

⁴ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Compendium theologiae* bk. I, ch. 216, trans. Cyril Vollert (St Louis and London: B. Herder, 1947).

The Trinity

I assume the Christian doctrine of the Trinity according to which there are three divine Persons, but one nature. I interpret the doctrine to mean more than that the three Persons share a nature in the way you and I share a nature. If that was all there was to the doctrine, there would be no mystery to it, and the correct answer to the question “How many Gods are there?” would be “three.” But I assume there is one God, one divine being. I think also that there is only one divine substance, although I am not going to try to adjudicate controversies about the concepts of “being” and “substance” in this paper. I do, however, want to say something about the concept of a person, since it is a concept that connects the topic of this paper with the Trinity.

I said at the beginning of this paper that I believe there is something unique about persons. I do not know whether the uniqueness is qualitative, meaning that each person has a different *kind* of experience than anyone else. To make this point another way, I do not know whether chocolate has a different kind of taste to one person than to another, whether each person’s fear has some qualitative difference from any other person’s fear, whether your thought that Oklahoma is a state in the middle of the United States has a different conceptual content than my thought that Oklahoma is a state in the middle of the United States. But I do think that there is *something* different in my consciousness that makes it impossible to duplicate and that is intrinsically connected to what makes me the person that I am. If the difference between my conscious states and your conscious states were merely qualitative, there would be nothing in principle preventing the duplication of my conscious states. But if there is something unique about each person, and if each person is essentially tied to her conscious states, then the difference between one person and another cannot be limited to a qualitative difference between the conscious states of one person and another. But what could it mean for there to be a non-qualitative difference between the conscious states of one person and another? In this paper, I have adopted the idea that one person necessarily differs from another in what we vaguely call “point of view.” This perceptual term is misleading because a person is not just the bearer of a particular view on the world. A person is also an agent, and while the nature of agency is one of the most trying of philosophical problems, I want to say at least this much: agents exist; the way an agent is understood by another agent is necessarily different from the way an agent understands herself; and there is something superior or more fundamental about the way an agent relates to herself than the way someone on the

outside relates to her. When I say a person has a point of view that is necessarily unique, I mean to include the uniqueness of agency as well as the uniqueness in viewpoint on what is outside the agent.

I have argued that God is not omniscient nor omnipresent unless God is in some sense “in” the mind of each conscious being, able to grasp what that being grasps in as perfect a way as it is possible to have, compatible with a distinction in persons. I think this point applies to the Persons of the Trinity. Intrinsic to the personhood of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is a distinction in point of view. The point of view of the Father is necessarily distinct from the point of view of the Son and from the point of view of the Holy Spirit because, on my hypothesis, such a difference is intrinsic to the distinction in personhood.

But if each Person of the Trinity is omnisubjective, each perfectly grasps the point of view of each other member of the Trinity, but does so in the way I have described, in which the omnisubjective person A grasps the conscious states of person B “as if” from B’s viewpoint, but never forgetting that A is himself. As I mentioned in describing empathy, when A empathizes with B, there is more in the consciousness of A than in the consciousness of B because A has her own ego in her consciousness as well as a simulacrum of the ego of B. On this model, the Father perfectly grasps the Son’s experience of suffering as if from the Son’s point of view, but the Father is aware of being the Father grasping the Son’s conscious state, and that is not identical to the Son’s grasp of his own state. But the Son is also omnisubjective. So the Son grasps all of the Father’s conscious states from the Father’s point of view, which means that the Son grasps the Father’s grasp of the Son’s conscious states. The same point applies, of course, to the Holy Spirit. I propose that each member of the Trinity is perfectly omnisubjective of each other member of the Trinity. The Trinity is a model of the most perfect understanding possible among persons, the most perfect understanding possible within a community of persons. The union of consciousness among the Persons of the Trinity is perfect, but that is compatible with a difference in the point of view of each member of the Trinity, and it is also compatible with the existence of qualitatively different conscious states among the members of the Trinity. What unifies them is not a qualitative similarity among all their conscious states, but a perfect grasp of each other. That grasp makes possible something else—perfect love among the three Persons. We cannot love what we cannot grasp. A perfect grasp makes possible perfect love.

The Moral Objection

Omnisubjectivity would be a problem if (a) some conscious states are immoral and (b) even the representation of such states in the consciousness of a perfectly empathic being is immoral. I will not deny that some conscious states are immoral. If an act is morally wrong, surely the conscious decision to perform the act is wrong, and probably also the intention to perform it. Motivational states and certain emotions might be wrong, as well—for example, hate, envy, bitterness, and despair. There are probably also morally wrong beliefs, such as the belief that some person does not deserve to be treated as a full person. There are so many examples that it does not matter if I am mistaken about some of them. Clearly, there are morally wrong conscious states.

But if a state is wrong, is it wrong to consciously represent it? Once again, think about reading a novel. If a character is vicious, is there anything wrong with empathizing with that character's vicious feelings, beliefs, or decisions? Surely there is nothing wrong with empathizing with the character's decision or belief, since a representation of a decision is not a decision and the representation of a belief is not a belief. One can fully grasp a belief from the character's viewpoint without having the belief, and likewise for a decision.

But what about empathizing with a sensation or an emotion? As I have already suggested, a representation of a sensation is something very much like a sensation, and similarly for an emotion. One cannot grasp what it is like to see red without seeing red in imagination, and seeing red in imagination is very much like seeing red. The difference is that, when we humans imagine, we usually do not imagine as vividly as an actual sensation, but that is because of a defect in our imaginations. If we could imagine red perfectly, would not the sensation of red pop into our minds? I am not saying we would be confused about whether the imaginary sensation is an actual sensation. We would probably have a way to tell the difference—for instance, because we know we intentionally brought it to mind rather than had it inflicted on us by turning our heads. My point is not that we could not tell the difference. I am only suggesting that a copy of a red sensation is phenomenally very much like a red sensation. Even though the items in our imagination tend to be weaker than the items they copy, a perfect empathizer's imagination would not be weaker. If there are morally bad sensations, an omnisubjective being would have a morally bad sensation. Or so it seems.

The problem is aggravated when we look at copies of emotions. Possibly there are no morally bad sensations, but emotions are a harder kind of case. Suppose a person feels hatred, fury, or envy. Maybe someone takes pleasure in the pain of another. Would it not be morally wrong for a perfectly empathic being to consciously copy those conscious states?

I think the answer is no, but to explain why I think that, I want to return to reading a novel or watching a movie. The most evil person I have ever seen depicted in any form—biography, novel, or film—is the character of Daniel Plainview, played by Daniel Day-Lewis in Paul Thomas Anderson's movie *There Will be Blood*. Assuming you can tolerate watching this movie and can bring yourself to empathize with Daniel Plainview, you project yourself into the consciousness of a person who fears love and humiliates people who love him, who has no appreciation of the value of other persons, who enjoys inflicting pain, and who is treacherous, prideful, greedy, and so on. When you do that, you grasp the world and Plainview's reactions to the world through his eyes, but you also respond to those attitudes and feelings as yourself. If you have a negative reaction to cruelty and greed and hate, you will have a negative reaction to your empathic copy of those psychic states. You "get" what it feels like to be hateful and greedy, but that does not make you hateful and greedy or even more likely to be hateful and greedy. In fact, it probably makes you less likely to be hateful and greedy. Since Plainview enjoys hurting people, empathizing with him will permit you to get what it feels like to enjoy hurting people, and I imagine you will feel revulsion for that feeling also. Of course, it can happen that empathizing with another person in the real or fictional world leads you to change your reaction to certain psychic states. You might even come to judge that someone's feelings are not bad after all. Such a judgment is either correct or incorrect. If it is correct, it is no objection to the morality of empathizing with him. If it is incorrect, that is because you, the empathizer, have made a mistake in your reaction to the psychic state with which you are empathizing, but that is no objection to the empathic state. It is a problem with the reaction that you have as the empathizer. Since God does not make mistakes in his responses to states with which he empathizes, there is no danger that empathizing with a hateful person is a taint on God's character, any more than it is a taint on your character if you empathize with Plainview in *There Will Be Blood*. In fact, I think a case can be made that God *must* empathize perfectly with a person's conscious states in order to judge the person with complete accuracy and fairness.

This answer will not satisfy someone who thinks that there are intrinsically immoral emotions and that the conscious representation of an intrinsically immoral emotion is itself intrinsically immoral. On this view God would be contaminated by his own creatures if he really grasped what it is like to have their bad feelings. God can only know these things in the abstract. According to this view, God can know *that* someone is hateful, but God cannot grasp what it feels like to be hateful without jeopardizing his own goodness. A perfectly good God must be shielded from too intimate a contact with certain human experiences.

I find the idea that God would be less than fully perfect, and hence, less than divine, if he had too close a contact with the created world peculiar and quite implausible, but I doubt that this issue can be settled without a closer look at other Christian doctrines that pertain to the relationship between God and human beings, such as the doctrines of grace, providence, and sanctification, and I will only raise a couple of questions about the implications of these doctrines. For instance, given that a person in a state of grace shares in the divine life (1 Cor 1:9), does that sharing go both ways? I am inclined to think it does because intimate sharing between two persons always goes both ways. Sanctification may involve a breaking down of the barriers between human life and divine life so that, when a human being shares in the divine life, God also shares in our own lives.

The issue of sharing lives is especially important when we think about love between God and individual human persons. Love is premised on understanding the other, and the fuller the understanding, the greater the possibility for love. The Trinity gives us a model of love between perfect persons that is generated from perfect comprehension of the other. St. Thomas understands the Second Person of the Trinity, or the Word, as the *verbum mentale*, or intellectual concept, of the Father. The Holy Spirit proceeds as an act of the divine will whereby the Father and the Son love each other. Although the three Persons of the Trinity are equal, the order of generation is important, the intellectual generation preceding the generation of the act of love. I am proposing that God's love for each of us is generated from a preceding act of total, unmediated intellectual comprehension of us. God knows everything we know about ourselves through living our life, in addition to knowing all the things we do not know about ourselves. I am suggesting, then, that omnisubjectivity is a condition for the perfect love God has for us.

Conclusion

I like the attribute of omnisubjectivity because it is the most personal of divine attributes, and yet it is just as much a high metaphysical property as omniscience, omnipotence, and perfect goodness. It is an attribute we would expect in a perfect being, but it is not vulnerable to attack on the grounds that it belongs to the so-called “God of the philosophers,” who does not seem to be a person at all. The traditional “omni” attributes have often been criticized as a hold-over from Greek philosophy, insufficiently grounded in the Biblical message of a loving God who has continuous personal relationships with his people. In my view, omnisubjectivity ties omniscience and omnipresence to the personhood of God. It is the attribute of being omniscient and omnipresent in the most personal way. An omnisubjective God is the most intimately loving because he is the most intimately knowing. If there is an omnisubjective God, each of us has the comfort of knowing that, no matter what is going on, we are never truly alone. That knowledge allows some people to acquire a knowledge of God and a depth of love for him that would be impossible if there were not an omnisubjective God present to them. Perhaps mystics are those persons who become aware of God’s awareness of them, as we sometimes can do when someone is empathizing with us and we are able to detect the sharing of our emotion. That awareness brings us into the conscious life of the empathizer, and that can affect the way we think of our own experience and its significance. More importantly, it brings us into unity with the empathizer. We feel understood, accepted, sustained, and loved. We can understand and love others because we ourselves have been understood and loved in the way of perfect intimacy. **N V**