

Response to Linda Zagzebski's "Omnisubjectivity: Why It Is a Divine Attribute"

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LINDA ZAGZEBSKI HAS MADE a strong case for the need to expand the list of divine attributes. In my view, she has successfully taken the philosophy of divine knowledge one step further. I agree with her main thesis: I think that omnisubjectivity follows directly from a classical Christian notion of God's perfect knowledge coupled with a modern notion of human subjectivity. My comments will therefore focus on ways in which Zagzebski's proposal might be nuanced or developed. Her stimulating insights deserve our closest attention.

Zagzebski nicely distinguishes between human and divine empathy. In a human relationship, we try to represent for ourselves what another person experiences. But divine knowledge is direct, as Zagzebski affirms. God does not try to copy our consciousness within himself. That is, Zagzebski rightly warns us to recognize the immense difference between human and divine modes of knowing. I would like to take this approach a bit further by integrating the scholastic notion that God is present in all things as their cause. God's knowledge of our conscious states and our first-person perspective is somewhat like a kind of direct window into the depth of the human self, yet it is also much more. For, God's way of knowing individual creatures follows directly from his relationship to them as their Creator. Thus, God's cognition occurs by his being the first cause of our conscious states, first-person perspectives, and acts of knowing, yet without violating

human freedom.¹ Any actuality and goodness that can be found in our mental acts utterly depend on the constant operation of the Creator God within us. According to Thomas Aquinas, God is the first cause of every human act (except for the evil element in human acts, though evil can never deprive an act of all *metaphysical* goodness). Consequently, God is also the first cause of our mode of knowing and of my way of perceiving my surroundings right now. If we do not give some account of divine knowledge as essentially causal (Thomistic or otherwise), then we end up making God's knowledge reactive to our activity. This approach leads to endless metaphysical and theological problems and ultimately renders a Christian account of the divine life incoherent.²

Now, if we propose that God possesses omnisubjectivity as the first cause of all human subjectivity, then we move even further away from the notion that God's knowledge involves an external perspective whereby he tries to climb into our heads and our emotions. In this way, God can precisely be aware of how Mary is aware of being Mary. Yet, because he is aware of Mary's self-awareness as her Creator, God's so-called conscious awareness remains distinct from hers. That is to say, God can have each of Mary's thoughts and know them from her perspective, but because he always knows them as her primary cause, those thoughts remain distinctly hers.

God's knowledge as cause goes hand-in-hand with divine simplicity. The latter notion also helps us to grasp omnisubjectivity in a more coherent way. In himself, God does not have multiple thoughts, but only a single infinite thought whereby he knows all things, events, persons, and the whole of our lives. This single divine thought is identical with the divine essence. Now, when we posit God knowing things as cause and in an utterly simple way, we further transcend the problematic notion that divine cognition remains limited to the objects

¹ Thomas Aquinas discusses the link between God's knowledge and causality in *Summa theologiae* (hereafter, *ST*) I, q. 14, a. 8. For the non-competitive nature of divine causality and human freedom, see Michael J. Dodds, *Unlocking Divine Action: Contemporary Science & Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2012), 205–228; and Bernard Lonergan, *Grace and Freedom: Operative Grace in the Thought of St. Thomas Aquinas*, *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan* 1 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000).

² Process theologies and other major modern schools of thought that exclude the cause–knowledge link in God and introduce limit or finitude into the divine life lead to unacceptable theological consequences, as I argue at the end of this paper.

of propositional or factual knowledge, an idea that Zagzebski rightly rejects. Indeed, the latter model would seem to reduce the divine mind to some type of supercomputer. Now, the cosmos is filled with fascinating elements that can ground divine naming, such as love, beauty, and power, but computers make for very bad analogies when it comes to our way of conceiving and speaking about God, just as computers make for terribly misleading analogies for our way of conceiving the human mind. Thus, overall, omnisubjectivity deserves to be integrated more fully with a notion of the Creator God as the first cause of being, he whose being is utterly simple.³

I now come to my main critique of Zagzebski's paper, which concerns her description of the Trinity. Having closely linked consciousness with personhood, she posits a qualitative difference between the knowledge possessed by the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. Each divine person perfectly grasps the experience of the other, she says. Furthermore, according to Zagzebski, each divine person enjoys a distinct point of view. I think that this notion stands in too great a tension with the Trinitarian theology that has constituted the classical position since the Cappadocian Fathers in the fourth century, namely, that the divine persons share a single divine operation. The three persons' operational unity follows directly from the unicity of the divine nature. For, operation follows primarily from nature, not personhood. Operation naturally includes the act of knowing. Now, let me qualify my claim: recent studies in Trinitarian theology have certainly helped to recover the notion that each divine person acts according to their proper mode or their personal property. That is, divine action has a truly Trinitarian character. We find this position in many classical theologians, including Bonaventure, Albert the Great, and Thomas Aquinas.⁴ We can say that the Father knows as the ultimate source of the Son, the Spirit, and of all things, that the Son knows as the generated Word, and that the Spirit knows as spirated Love, the Love of Father and Son. However, the notion of three distinct conscious states in the Trinity strikes me as problem-

³ Let us note that Thomas's approach to divine knowledge also avoids conceiving of God's knowledge as operating in a propositional mode, since God's knowledge is simple.

⁴ See Gilles Emery, *The Trinitarian Theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Francesca Aran Murphy (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007), chapter 14; and Emery, *La Trinité créatrice: Trinité et création dans les commentaires aux Sentences de Thomas d'Aquin et de ses précurseurs Albert le Grand et Bonaventure*, Bibliothèque Thomiste 47 (Paris: Vrin, 1995).

atic. Can we refer to such distinct states without also positing three distinct divine minds? Would such distinct mental states not entail three separate acts of knowing? In that case, we risk moving toward three distinct divine agents. I do not see how this can be reconciled with unicity of the divine nature. I suspect that Zagzebski's close link between personhood and a state of consciousness lies at the root of the problem. The classical vision of the Trinity focuses on a properly metaphysical understanding of personhood, of which the sixth-century philosopher Boethius offers a good representative: a person is an individual substance of a rational nature. Here, we are dealing with the level of first act (substance with its *esse*), which grounds second act or operation. Consciousness occurs at the level of second act. But if the divine nature is perfectly simple, then the distinction between first act and second act cannot be real in God. I agree that individual consciousness, relationality, and life in community are all crucial for a rich understanding of human personhood (at the level of second act), but these categories can mislead us when we try to apply them to divine persons. Here, we need a bit more apophatism, a bit more distance between our conception of human personhood and our way of understanding divine personhood. Also, the Swiss Dominican Gilles Emery has made a strong case for the claim that only a metaphysical approach to personhood can allow us to posit three divine persons in a coherent way, a way that avoids modalism and tritheism.⁵ A coherent Trinitarian theology demands both analogy and metaphysics for our way of conceiving divine personhood.

I would now like to apply some of Zagzebski's insights to the humanity of Christ as it relates to our subjectivity. I think that her proposal can be developed in a Christological way. For, the human soul of Christ can receive the gift of sharing in the Trinity's omni-subjectivity through the direct, beatifying vision of the Father and the divine essence. Jesus thereby enters into deep empathy with us. First, I will treat the glorified Christ who abides in the presence of the Father since his Ascension, and then I will turn to Jesus's earthly life.

When Thomas Aquinas discusses Christ's human vision of the Logos, he explains that, unlike other saints, the human soul of Jesus enjoys a particular privilege. Because all things will be submitted under his feet in the *eschaton*, and because Christ *in his humanity* is to judge the living and the dead, he must know the deeds and thoughts of

⁵ Gilles Emery, "The Dignity of Being a Substance: Person, Subsistence and Nature," *Nova et Vetera* (English) 9 (2011).

those whom he is to judge.⁶ In other words, it is not just the hypostatic union, but also the nature of Christ's saving mission that calls for this extraordinary knowledge of the lives of all human beings. The glorified Christ never judges in an arbitrary way: because he knows the depth of our minds and hearts, because he knows our personal history in the most intimate way, his judgment is utterly lucid, just, and most merciful. We can see how this leads directly to a profound empathy between the glorified Christ and human beings on their earthly pilgrimage: by sharing our first-person perspective, Jesus, in his humanity, can fully grasp our deepest motives and intentions, desires and longings, our reasons for acting virtuously, and the reasons for our shortcomings. Without a share in the Trinity's omnisubjectivity, Christ could not perfectly fulfill his mission as eschatological judge, he who orders all things rightly and with mercy. We can claim omnisubjectivity for the glorified Christ without collapsing his two natures, for omnisubjectivity does not require an infinite mind (though it evidently constitutes an extraordinary noetic gift that Christ receives in his sacred humanity). Following the gospel passages that show Christ reading the minds of his interlocutors, Aquinas affirms Christ's graced human ability to pierce the secrets of our hearts, all the while affirming that the same Christ cannot wrap his human mind around the infinite divine nature and all that the divine mind contains.⁷ Exhaustive knowledge of God and all that God can do escapes the human cognition of Christ, but I think that omnisubjectivity does not fall into this category.

Now in addition to enabling Christ's perfect and merciful judgment, omnisubjectivity could also shed new light on other important activities of the glorified Christ, especially his constant intercession for us as heavenly High Priest and his perfect friendship for us. Thus, Zagzebski's proposals concerning omnisubjectivity and a philosophy of prayer can enrich a theological account of the glorified Christ who prays with and in us.

Now let us consider how omnisubjectivity relates to Christ during his earthly life. Here, too, I posit Christ having the beatific vision already during and even before his passion.⁸ The beatific vision once again forms the bridge that makes it possible to attribute to Christ's humanity some share in God's omnisubjectivity. At first sight, such a Christology may seem naïve and outdated. However, the recent revival of so-called "High Christology" in biblical exegesis points in a

⁶ *ST* III, q. 10, a. 2.

⁷ *ST* I, q. 12, a. 7; q. 14, a. 3; *ST* III, q. 10, aa. 1–2.

⁸ *ST* III, q. 9, a. 2.

different direction. Scholars such as Larry Hurtado and Simon Gathercole have shown convincingly that the doctrines of the pre-existent and divine Christ are neither a late-first-century invention nor limited to the Johannine literature.⁹ The need to account for Christ having some human awareness of his divine identity takes us directly to the issue of his beatific vision. Also, the French exegete André Feuillet has made a strong case that we have a biblical foundation to posit Christ's pre-Paschal beatific vision. Feuillet appeals to the Johannine Prologue, Christ's discourse with Nicodemus in John 3, and Jesus's cry of jubilation in Matthew 11 (about the revelation that God has made to his little ones).¹⁰ The French Dominican Emmanuel Durand builds on this exegesis and offers further theological arguments for Christ's pre-Paschal beatific vision.¹¹

If Durand is correct, then we can go even further in applying some share in divine omnisubjectivity to Christ's humanity. Let us recall that his beatific vision of the Father does not suffice to establish that the pre-glorified Christ already knows all the thoughts and deeds of every human being. As noted, Aquinas links Christ's knowledge of our thoughts and deeds with his mission as eschatological judge. Interestingly, Durand sees Christ's knowledge of others' thoughts as either linked to the beatific vision or to a type of habitual prophetic cognition. Durand holds that Christ's knowledge of our thoughts may be distinct from what he learns via the beatific vision.¹² I would go one step further and argue that *some type* of extraordinary awareness of all human hearts was crucial for Christ to make a perfect offering of himself on the Cross for each of us and our salvation. Aquinas makes a similar claim as he appeals to Galatians 2:20, where Paul exclaims: "Christ loved me and gave himself up for me."¹³

⁹ See Simon Gathercole, *The Preexistent Son: Recovering the Christologies of Matthew, Mark and Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2006), and Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2005).

¹⁰ André Feuillet, "La science de vision de Jésus et les évangiles," *Doctor Communis* 36 (1983): 158–179.

¹¹ Emmanuel Durand, *L'offre universelle du salut en Christ*, *Cogitatio Fidei* 285 (Paris: Cerf, 2012), 156–173.

¹² *Ibid.*, 169–173.

¹³ Pope Pius XII's encyclical *Mystici Corporis* (1943), §75, and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §478, read this Pauline text in a similar way. The Catechism does not explicitly evoke Christ's beatific vision in relation to Galatians 2:20, but it does refer to the Incarnate Word having an immediate knowledge of the Father (§473).

This Christology can be enriched by integrating Zagzebski's insights on omnisubjectivity. Here, I would posit a distinction between the glorified Christ's perfect share in divine omnisubjectivity and his limited share in that subjectivity before the Resurrection. That is, it is not clear to me that Christ had to know the whole of our lives and perceive our first-person perspective for every thought and act in order to make a perfect sacrifice and enter into perfect compassion with us on the Cross. One can also give numerous biblical arguments for placing limits on Christ's knowledge of human hearts before his glorification. For example, during his ministry, Jesus did not read the hearts of all those whom he encountered, for he also expressed surprise at several key moments. Perhaps Christ's human knowledge of each individual person and life from a shared first-person perspective need not have been actualized before the Passion. However, might a powerful yet partial participation in divine omnisubjectivity have become actual in Christ's human soul precisely in the moment of the Passion, the very moment when such extraordinary knowledge would enable a perfect human love for each human person? As Zagzebski recalls, perfect knowledge grounds perfect love.

Finally, I should point out one of several advantages behind this Christology as it relates to omnisubjectivity, as well as the imperfect omnisubjectivity just described. If we maintain that Christ's human soul had a partial glimpse of our consciousness during his Passion, then we can give a powerful account of his perfect compassion for us. Consequently, the infinitely loving and immutable compassion of the three divine persons in their shared divine nature finds its complement in the suffering compassion of Christ's human nature. That is, we can locate in the Second Person of the Trinity a perfect empathy that concretizes itself as a way of suffering with us precisely in the moment of the Passion. On Calvary, by a single, intuitive flash, Christ's human soul glimpses something of our lives from the perspective that each of us has. This supernatural cognition provokes in Christ an act of perfect human love for us. That love is intimately joined to his suffering in his human nature. This would also allow us to posit a perfect suffering compassion in Christ without turning suffering into a divine perfection. Thus, by integrating Zagzebski's proposal into Christology, we can offer a richer account of Christ's perfect, human compassion.

There is a payoff in keeping the operations of the two natures of Christ distinct on this point. The notion of divine suffering seems to remain popular today. But I suspect that it leads to endless problems. For if God suffers, then he suffers eternally. If God suffers, then

suffering is a divine perfection. But this would mean that our destiny in heaven would involve a share in God's suffering, for heaven is the place of human perfection, of us becoming like God in the most intense way possible without losing our creaturely status. Divine suffering thus leads directly to a heaven filled with human suffering. But that is precisely not the heaven revealed to us in the Bible's apocalyptic literature or other eschatological texts of Scripture. Rather, we want to maintain both God's perfect, immutable compassion that entails no suffering in the divine nature and a perfect, suffering compassion in the humanity of Christ. The latter may well require something like Christ having the beatific vision before his glorification.

We can see that the pastoral consequences of the theology of Christ's beatific vision are considerable. That being said, I do not doubt that Aquinas's Christology needs modification and development. But we hardly need to dismiss his metaphysical Christology as outdated or the whole of Aquinas's psychology of Christ as exegetically surpassed.

Overall then, I think that Zagzebski's insightful proposal needs the classical notion that God knows as cause in order to remain internally coherent and in harmony with both Scripture and Tradition. In addition, any Trinitarian account of omnisubjectivity should integrate a healthy dose of apophatism and some type of substance metaphysics, so as to avoid both tritheism and modalism. Finally, Christology can gain much from Zagzebski's philosophical claim, especially when we integrate it with the seemingly outdated "High Christology" of the medieval scholastics and their successors. Here, the partial complementarity of analytic and scholastic modes of thought comes to light. N·V