


ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Divine subjectivity and intersubjectivity

Linda Zagzebski 

Department of Philosophy, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK, USA
Email: lzagzebski@ou.edu

(Received 21 November 2022; revised 25 February 2023; accepted 26 February 2023)

Abstract

This article expands my previous work on omnisubjectivity, the divine property of having a complete and perfect grasp of the subjective states of all beings who have such states. By a subjective state I mean a conscious state as that state is experienced by the one who has it. I argue that only a being with subjectivity can be omnisubjective, and therefore, God has subjective states. The article explores the subjectivity of God as it applies to the Christian doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation, focusing on the important difference between a person and an instance of a nature. I propose that the uniqueness of persons is grounded in their unique subjective states, not their objective nature. Each person of the Trinity has a unique point of view and unique subjectivity even though they share an objective divine nature instantiated in a single divine being. The Son has a single set of subjective states before, during, and after the Incarnation. Each member of the Trinity is omnisubjective and fully grasps the unique subjective states of each other person of the Trinity. The perfect comprehension of each other while remaining unique persons is a model of perfect love within a community of persons.

Keywords: omnisubjectivity; subjectivity; intersubjectivity; Trinity; Incarnation

Introduction

In previous work (Zagzebski (2008), (2013), (2016a)) I have argued that God has an attribute I call ‘omnisubjectivity’, the property of having a complete and perfect grasp of all the subjective states of every being who possesses such states. What I mean by subjectivity is consciousness as it is experienced from the inside, from the first-person perspective of the subject. Subjectivity is deep in reality. It clearly exists in abundance in the created world, and if the creator must fully grasp what he creates and conserves in existence,¹ it follows that God must fully grasp subjectivity in every form and in every detail in the world. Only a being with subjectivity can grasp the subjectivity of others. I conclude that God himself has subjectivity. In this article I will offer my conjectures about divine subjectivity and intersubjectivity as it applies to the Christian doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation. I am writing from a personal standpoint arising from my work on omnisubjectivity. I am not attempting to convince all readers, but I hope that readers will treat these speculations as interesting hypotheses offered for discussion.²

The Trinity

In Zagzebski (2013) I argued that omnisubjectivity is entailed by divine omniscience and omnipresence, and it is presupposed in common practices of prayer. There is nothing in these arguments that refers to God as a person or persons, but all three Abrahamic religions teach that God is personal. That is clear from their scriptures and millennia of theology. The difference is that in Judaism and Islam, God is one person; Christianity teaches that God is three persons. I believe that the attribute of omnisubjectivity has interesting implications for the Christian doctrine of the divine persons in the Trinity. A person has an inside, or what we call a self, which is the bearer of subjectivity. Of course, the doctrine of the Trinity was debated and defined long before the idea of subjectivity entered philosophical and theological discourse, so everything I say about divine subjectivity and the relation between a person and a self requires me to apply a distinctively modern concept to pre-modern writings. My intention is to propose a way to expand and clarify the doctrine, not to deny anything in its credal formulations, and not to engage in historical or contemporary debates. I will do the same thing in the next section in my discussion of the Incarnation.

According to the doctrine of the Trinity, there are three divine persons, but one divine nature. This doctrine is beautifully expressed in the Athanasian Creed:

This is what the Catholic faith teaches: we worship one God in the Trinity and the Trinity in unity.

Neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the substance.

For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son, another of the Holy Spirit.

But the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit have one divinity, equal glory, and coeternal majesty.

What the Father is, the Son is, and the Holy Spirit is.

The Father is uncreated, the Son is uncreated, and the Holy Spirit is uncreated.

The Father is boundless, the Son is boundless, and the Holy Spirit is boundless.

The Father is eternal, the Son is eternal, and the Holy Spirit is eternal.

Nevertheless, there are not three eternal beings, but one eternal being.

So, there are not three uncreated beings, nor three boundless beings, but one uncreated being and one boundless being.

Likewise, the Father is omnipotent, the Son is omnipotent, the Holy Spirit is omnipotent.

Yet there are not three omnipotent beings, but one omnipotent being.

Thus, the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God.

However, there are not three gods, but one God.

The Father is Lord, the Son is Lord, and the Holy Spirit is Lord.

However, there are not three lords, but one Lord. (English translation from BeginningCatholic.com).

The Athanasian Creed emphasizes the unicity of God rather than the difference of persons, and it does not indicate the principle of distinction among the persons, so there is a multitude of interpretations of the difference between what God is as one being and who God is as three persons. Usually persons are interpreted as individuals, but the Creed says explicitly that there are not three individual beings. It is no wonder, then, that the Trinity is a mystery.

I will begin with remarks about the concept of a person as a preamble to my conjectures on how the idea of a person connects omnisubjectivity with the Trinity. Unlike the

modern idea of a self, the idea of a person can be traced back to the debates about the Trinity and the Incarnation in the early centuries of the Christian era.³ The idea of *persona* was refined to help in defining these doctrines, so the doctrines were not made to fit a concept that had already been well analysed and elaborated. The fundamental insight that I see in the debates leading to the development of the idea of a person and in subsequent philosophy is that there is a difference between a *who* and a *what*. A person is a *who*. A nature or essence is a *what*. When we count beings, we count instantiations of essences. When we count persons, we count whatever it is that makes something a *who*. God is one *what* and three *whos*. Jesus Christ is one *who* and two *whats*. The difference between a *who* and a *what* was essential for both the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of the Incarnation. We still distinguish a person from an individual of a given nature in moral and legal discourse.⁴

Without the idea of subjectivity, the idea of a person had to be just as objective as a nature, and that led to intricate theoretical moves to explain the difference. The influential Boethian definition of a person as an individual substance of a rational nature explicitly states that a person is an individual of the genus substance (Boethius (1973), 85). That says nothing about what makes a person a *who*. It also leaves out something that became important in the way we think about persons after the idea of subjectivity was discovered: their uniqueness.

The idea of omnisubjectivity does not depend upon my claim that the subjectivity of one person is necessarily different from the subjectivity of another. God would be omnisubjective even if you share your subjective states with some other person. If so, that would mean that God knows the respects in which your subjectivity is shared. But I believe that one of the most interesting ways in which subjectivity is important metaphysically and morally is that it can explain what makes each person unique.

The idea of the uniqueness of each person of the Trinity did not wait for a modern revolution. It was emphasized in the twelfth century by Richard of St Victor in his critique of the Boethian definition of person. Richard defined a person as ‘an incommunicable existence of a rational nature’ (Richard of St Victor (1959), 282, 284). By incommunicable, Richard meant that each person has something that cannot be shared with another, something that cannot be duplicated in another person. He does not, of course, mention subjectivity, but I suggest that since the incommunicable feature of a person cannot reside in their shareable nature, it must exist in their subjectivity.⁵

The incommunicable feature of persons makes them different from each other. Gradually over the last few hundred years, that difference has come to be treated as important and valuable. I have argued in other work (Zagzebski (2000); (2016b); (2021), ch. 4) that the rise of the recognition of the value of persons for their differences from each other accompanied the shift from a focus on persons defined by their nature to a focus on selves as possessors of unique consciousness. The shift from the objective to the subjective was important for the idea of human dignity. Originally, the ground of the dignity of persons was said to be their rational nature, the property identified by Boethius to distinguish persons from non-persons. Rationality gives persons supreme or at least very high value in the universe, but that cannot be what makes persons irreplaceable because rationality is a shareable property. It is communicable. I believe that there is another sense of dignity, that of irreplaceability, and in that sense, dignity is grounded in the unique subjectivity of each person.⁶ I propose that what makes persons incommunicable in the sense Richard of St Victor was attempting to identify is their subjectivity.

I intend my brief excursion into the connection between a person and a self to call attention to the way that the idea of a person as a *who* has developed over the last several centuries. That development affects the way we think of the personhood of God. The

nature of consciousness and its relation to value can be appropriately applied to God, at least by way of conjecture. High value and the value of irreplaceability are two different things. My position is that human beings have high value because of our rational nature. We have the value of irreplaceability because of our unique subjectivity. Likewise, I propose that God has the highest value because of the divine nature. Each person of the Trinity has the value of irreplaceability because of their unique subjectivity. Even though the divine persons are identical in their essence, each one is a distinct self, and that means that their consciousness cannot be identical.

Aside from the Trinity, God is unique in the sense that the divine essence can only be instantiated in one being. Arguably, it is impossible that more than one being can instantiate the set of properties constituting the divine essence. For instance, no more than one being can be omnipotent because omnipotence implies power over every other being. But that is not uniqueness in the sense that applies to persons. An essence is the kind of thing that could in principle be shared by more than one being. Some essences are such that they can only be instantiated by a single being, making that being one of a kind. The uniqueness of persons is different. A person is not one of a kind because there is no kind that it instantiates. If there is something different about each of us that makes us impossible to duplicate, that difference must be in our consciousness, and it cannot be something qualitative since a qualitative difference can in principle be duplicated. What makes each person different from every other and hence irreplaceable cannot be anything in their objective nature. That difference must exist in their subjectivity.⁷

I have used the term 'self' to refer to the inside of a person. If so, the definition of a person given by Boethius should be expanded to say that a person has an inside, and its inside is its subjectivity. As applied to the persons of the Trinity, that would mean that each person of the Trinity has a distinct self with its own distinct subjective states. Each has a unique point of view, a unique first-person perspective. Each has a different relation to himself than to the other persons of the Trinity. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit each thinks of *myself* as distinct from *yourself* in the Trinity. The Father's sense of self is different from the Son's sense of self and the Holy Spirit's sense of self.

Aquinas's exposition of the Trinity is constrained by his metaphysical account of the divine essence.⁸ He argues that the persons of the Trinity are distinguished only by their relations to each other, which are internal to the essence (Aquinas (2012) [henceforth ST], I q. 28, a. 2–3; q. 29, a. 4). The Son proceeds from the Father and the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. The divine essence is communicated from the Father to the Son and then to the Holy Spirit without dividing the essence into three. There is one God because the procession from Father to Son is inside the Father; it is not the relation of cause to effect. Aquinas compares it to a concept or word proceeding from the intellect, where the word remains in the speaker, and that is why the Son is the Word (ST I q.27, a.1, corpus). Similarly, the love between the Father and the Son proceeds within God:

The procession of the Word is by way of an intelligible operation. The operation of the will within ourselves involves also another intelligible operation, that of love, whereby the object loved is in the lover; as, by the conception of the word, the object spoken of or understood is in the intelligent agent. Hence, besides the procession of the Word in God, there exists in Him another procession called the procession of Love. (ST I q. 27, a. 3 corpus)

The Holy Spirit is the love that proceeds from the Father and the Son. The Son and the Holy Spirit are God because 'All that is in God is God' (ST I q. 27, a. 3, reply obj.2).

Aquinas says that the members of the Trinity are distinguished only by their relations to each other, but if God is conscious, those relations imply differences in their consciousness. Differences of subjectivity are entailed by or supervene upon the relations Aquinas recognizes. Subjective differences are not intrinsic to the divine essence, and that make the members of the Trinity distinguishable by their relation to themselves. Each person is conscious of being known and loved by the others. The Father's consciousness of being loved by the Son and the Holy Spirit differs from the Son's consciousness of being loved by the Father and the Holy Spirit. Aquinas does not venture into their individual consciousness and comes close to reducing the Son to something abstract: a thought or word, and similarly he comes close to reducing the Holy Spirit to something abstract when he says that the proper name of the Holy Spirit is love (ST I q. 37). But a word is not a knower and love is not a lover. A word is not conscious, and love does not love. Aquinas is aware of this problem, and his answer is that there is no distinction between abstract and concrete in God: 'For personal properties are the same as the persons because the abstract and the concrete are the same in God; since they are the subsisting persons themselves, as paternity is the Father Himself, and filiation is the Son, and procession is the Holy Spirit' (ST I q. 40 a. 1 corpus). In reply, I suggest that consciousness adds something to the concrete that the abstract does not have. The argument that the abstract and the concrete are the same in God permits Aquinas to make the Trinitarian persons internal to the divine essence, but I think that he leaves aside the distinguishability of the persons in ways other than their internal objective relations. Their personal distinguishability explains much in subsequent theology.

Does God have one intellect or three? One will or three? Aquinas identifies both intellect and will with God's essence. So, there is numerically one intellect and numerically one will in God. He says also that there is one act of willing and one act of the creation, but the act is initiated by the Father, giving each person of the Trinity a different role.

God is the cause of things by His intellect and will, just as the craftsman is the cause of things made by his craft. Now the craftsman works through the word conceived in his mind, and through the love of his will regarding some objects. Hence also God the Father made the creature through his Word, which is His Son; and through His Love, which is the Holy Spirit. And so the processions of the Persons are the type of the productions of creatures inasmuch as they include the essential attributes, knowledge and will. (ST I q. 45, a. 6 corpus)

Aquinas argues that God's act of thinking and act of willing in the creation are identical with his essence. Given Aquinas's position on divine simplicity, that is what we would expect. All of God's attributes and acts are one and they are identical with his essence. But the act of creation is a cooperative act of the three persons. It is a single act arising from the idea of the created world in God's intellect that God wills to make actual by the Father acting through the Son and the Holy Spirit. However, this position does not force us to say that God has one self with one set of subjective states. Subjective states precede the formation of the idea of a world to create and the will to implement it.

So, is there numerically one intellect and one will in God? Aquinas must be right that essences include powers. The power of thought and the power of will exist in the divine essence, and both powers are perfect. The persons of the Trinity share one power of thought and will. There is also one act of knowing and one act of willing in the creation and in any divine acts pertaining to the created world. But some acts are cooperative, and Aquinas clearly thinks that the act of creation is a cooperative act with each Trinitarian person performing a different function. If that is the case, the point of view of the Father in the act of creation differs from the point of view of the Son and Holy Spirit, and I

believe that that difference is explained by their distinct selves with their unique subjectivity. But the three points of view are in perfect harmony. There is one act of the intellect and one act of the will because the union of subjective perspectives in God leads to one cooperative act.

Even human beings can experience something like the union of subjective perspectives. In close loving relationships we sometimes feel that we see together through each other's eyes, form a belief together, and acquire feelings together. We can make joint decisions. Do we have one intellect and one will? No, but we have a union of intellects and wills in those circumstances in which our intellects and wills unite for a time. We can surmise that in God, the union of intellect and will in the Trinity is perfect, and that is compatible with three distinct subjectivities, corresponding to three distinct selves. A perfect union of subjectivity results in one act of will.

The difference in function within the Trinity is not limited to different roles in the creation, as we see in the Gospel of John before the betrayal and arrest of Jesus.

If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him because he abides with you, and he will be in you. (John 14: 15–17 NRSV)

Then later: 'I came from the Father and have come into the world; again, I am leaving the world and am going to the Father' (John 16: 28). Then Jesus prays:

Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. (John 17: 1–3)

He also reveals the work of the Spirit: 'Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you' (John 16: 7).

Many centuries of reflection on these verses have led to the idea that each member of the Trinity has a distinct role in interaction with the human world. The Father initiates the creation; the Son is the primary agent of the Redemption; the Holy Spirit guides, teaches, strengthens, and sanctifies human lives in the world after the Ascension. These distinct roles are plausibly interpreted as involving distinct subjective points of view, even distinct personalities.⁹

In Zagzebski (2016a) I hypothesized that each member of the Trinity has his own intellect and will, but they are in perfect harmony. In his response to my article, Bernard Blankenhorn (2016, 453) objects that the traditional view of the Trinity affirms that there is one single divine operation in God because operation follows primarily from nature, not personhood. Blankenhorn's objection led me to rethink my proposal about God's will and intellect. I agree that the powers of the intellect and will obtain in one's nature, not one's personhood, and so there is one power of the intellect and one power of the will in God. But individual thoughts, motives, and aims are internal to a person's consciousness and can be shared intersubjectively to produce a single thought or act of will. I propose that in God the execution of divine intellectual and executive powers involves both individual consciousness and intersubjective consciousness. The execution of the powers of nature is an act of a person or persons working together. The subjectivity of each person of the Trinity means that they execute a single shared power out of their

own individual subjective states, and their intersubjective union explains why they can agree in a single act of will leading to joint action.

It is possible for the consciousness of two or more persons to be unified but not identical, and for the same reason it is possible for two or more persons to direct their consciousness separately towards the consciousness of each other, and that involves separate internal acts of will. But they can have numerically one act of will in any joint action. There is one power of intellect and will, and one act of thought and will directed towards the world in the creation, providential governance, redemption, and sanctification of the world. But each member of the Trinity has his own unique consciousness that he directs towards himself and the other members of the Trinity. So, I propose that acts of will in directing their internal consciousness differ from person to person, but it is their ability to direct their consciousness towards each other perfectly that produces one cooperative act when they create and interact with the world.

My position on omnisubjectivity is that God is neither omniscient nor omnipresent unless he is in some sense 'in' the mind of each conscious being, able to grasp what that being grasps in as perfect a way as is possible, compatible with a distinction of persons. On my hypothesis, this point applies to the persons of the Trinity. If each person of the Trinity is omnisubjective, each perfectly grasps the point of view and sense of self of each other member of the Trinity. Each omnisubjective person *A* grasps the conscious states of person *B* 'as if' from *B*'s viewpoint, but never forgetting that *A* is himself. 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.¹⁰ I propose that each member of the Trinity is perfectly omnisubjective of every 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, and that is compatible with a difference in the point of view of each member of the Trinity and a different sense of self, the centre of consciousness. What unifies them is their perfect grasp of each other, which explains why they are able to think, intend, and will together as one. Their perfect grasp makes possible something else that is crucial for Christian teaching: perfect love among the three 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 perfect love between perfect persons that is generated from perfect comprehension of each other. Similarly, God's love for each of us is generated from a preceding act of total, unmediated comprehension of us. Omnisubjectivity is a condition for the perfect love God has for us, and its model is the perfect love within the Trinity.

The connection between creation and intersubjective imagination is very interesting. Many children have that in their fantasy play. When my twin sons were young, one of them could describe an imaginative situation in a few words, and the other one would immediately understand it, and they would engage in acting out the fantasy narrative together. I think that that can be a way to imagine how the joint creation of the world could arise out of the intersubjective imagination of the Trinitarian God. Each is a separate person with separate subjective states, but they are able to combine those states into a single imaginative narrative.

A stronger union of subjective states might even be possible. Max Scheler (2008, 12–13) proposed that a perfect union of subjectivity can produce a single subjective state. He describes two parents grieving together at the funeral of their child. The grieving of

one is not an empathetic sharing in the grieving of the other. They do not have two separate grieving states. Rather, they grieve together, and the grieving that was first separate becomes one state. We grieve, they would say. What they mean by 'we' is a new subject of grieving, and Scheler proposes that they have a common subjective state created through intersubjective consciousness.¹¹ I do not know if that can happen, but I think that its possibility can illuminate subjectivity within the Trinity. Each person of the Trinity has his own set of subjective states, but if it is possible for parents to grieve together in one act of grieving in which the two of them together are the subject, the divine persons can think, grieve, love, and will together in one act in which the three of them are the collective subject. Even if Scheler is mistaken in thinking that two human subjectivities can merge in one subjective state, it is much easier to think of that possibility in God.

Articulate mystics have given us images from their visions of the Trinity.¹² Almost all reports of Trinitarian experiences use analogies or metaphors. Some are analogies from nature; some are analogies of human powers. For instance, William of St Thierry describes his experience of the Trinity as memory, reason, and will (Hunt (2010), 9), which we see again in Bonaventure (*ibid.*, 60). None of these three is a person. The same point applies to Hildegard of Bingen's vision of the Trinity as sound, word, and breath (*ibid.*, 41). Julian of Norwich describes her inspiration upon looking closely at a hazelnut and seeing in it the work of the Trinity as maker, preserver, and lover of everything in the world (*ibid.*, 108). We have already seen these functions of the divine persons, but the functions are not the persons. The objects of nature are not either. Geometrical analogies are even less helpful. They are constructed just to help us imagine the possibility of three-in-one.

The Creeds refer only to the difference of origin of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, without comment on whether there are other differences. I think it is important that a difference of origin does not preclude other differences. The differences of function that we see in scripture suggest differences of consciousness, and we know that intersubjective consciousness permits persons to think and feel as one. Even if it is only *almost* as one in human beings, it is close enough that it shows the importance of intersubjectivity as an aid to understanding how three selves can form a perfect union of thought and action.

Teresa of Avila describes a vision in which each person of the Trinity was so real, she could describe and speak to each one while being aware of their one inseparable essence:

What was represented to me were three distinct Persons, for we can behold and speak to each one. Afterwards I realized that only the Son took human flesh, through which this truth of the Trinity was seen. These Persons love, communicate with, and know each other. Well, if each one is by Himself, how is it that we can say all three are one essence, and believe it? And this is a very great truth for which I would die a thousand deaths. In all three Persons there is no more than one will, one power, and one dominion, in such a way that one cannot do anything without the others. (*Spiritual Testimonies* 29, quoted in Hunt (2010), 139)

This is not as perspicuous as we would like, but at least it makes each Trinitarian person a real person who communicates with the other two and with Teresa. Ordinary Christians address the Father, Son, or Holy Spirit individually in prayer or hymns, and my proposal that each person has a distinct subjectivity is a natural implication of those religious practices as well as of Teresa's vision.

Intersubjective experience is underexplored in philosophy, and I think that that is because of the trajectory philosophy has taken in the West. The objective/subjective split is often described in terms of third-person vs first-person perspectives. The first-person perspective is the view from within one's own mind. The third-person perspective

is the view from outside of minds. Some philosophers, such as Nagel (1986), have suggested that these two perspectives lead to intractable conflicts. The idea that there is a second-person or intersubjective perspective has appeared from time to time, but it has had very little traction in philosophy. I believe that the study and practice of intersubjectivity has the potential to help us in getting a coherent conception of the world as a whole, and as a model for Christian lives, it is helpful to see that there is a model of perfect intersubjectivity in the Trinity.

The Incarnation

Omnisubjectivity also has interesting implications for the doctrine of the Incarnation. Other philosophers have observed that it would be odd if God had to become incarnate in order to become omniscient.¹³ I agree. Likewise, it would be odd if God had to become incarnate in order to become omnibusjective. It follows from the nature of God that he is omniscient from all eternity. Omniscience cannot depend upon a decision to enter the created world in the particular manner in which the Son became incarnate as Redeemer. Similarly, God did not need to become incarnate in order to know what it is like to be human and to have human subjective states.¹⁴ Does that mean that omnibusjectivity removes one of the reasons for the Incarnation?

In his article on omnibusjectivity and the Incarnation, Adam Green (2017) argues that there is plenty for an omnibusjective God to learn through the Incarnation. Even though God already knew what it is like to be a human, the Incarnation gave God the knowledge of what it is like to be a human being who is God incarnate, and Jesus Christ also gave God the knowledge of what life is like for a perfect human. Further, Green suggests that Christ gains the direct experience of having a limited human perspective, and Christ learns what it is like *for me* to be tempted. My position is that God already knew all of that because he always grasped all possible as well as all actual subjective experiences. He always knew what it *would* be like for him to have a limited perspective, to be tempted, to be a perfect human who is God incarnate. So, he does not learn anything new in the Incarnation. I think that the experience of becoming incarnate does not teach God anything; its importance is in teaching us something. Since we have no contact with God's infinite mind, we cannot know what God eternally knows. Would we even be able to *imagine* the Incarnation and the life of Christ if it had not happened?

The Incarnation could not be motivated by the desire to gain new divine knowledge. But the actual subjectivity of Jesus Christ is a singular reality of monumental importance for Christians, and I would like to comment on its relation to the divine nature. Of course, traditional statements of the doctrine of the Incarnation do not mention the subjectivity of Christ, but the proclamation of the Council at Chalcedon gives us the constraints within which subsequent theologians have formulated their theories about the mind of Christ. Jesus Christ had two natures – one divine, one human, but was one person.

Following, then, the holy Fathers, we all with one voice teach that it should be confessed that our Lord Jesus Christ is one and the same Son, the Same perfect in Godhead, the Same perfect in manhood, truly God and truly man, the Same [consisting] of a rational soul and a body; *homoousios* with the Father as to his Godhead, and the Same *homoousios* with us as to his manhood; in all things like unto us, sin only excepted; begotten of the Father before ages as to his Godhead, and in the last days, the Same for us and for our salvation, of Mary the Virgin *Theotokos* as to his manhood;

One and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only begotten, made known in two natures [which exist] without confusion, without change, without division, without

separation; the difference of the natures having been in no wise taken away by reason of the union, but rather the properties of each being preserved, and [both] concurring in one Person (*prosopon*) and one *hypostasis* – not parted or divided into two persons (*prosopa*), but one and the same Son, and Only-begotten, the divine Logos, the Lord Jesus Christ; even as the prophets from of old [have spoken] concerning him, as the Lord Jesus Christ has taught us, and as the Symbol of the Fathers has delivered to us.¹⁵

An enormous amount of Christology since Chalcedon has focused on the issue of how it is possible for two natures to coexist in one individual person, but the attention has usually been on what a nature is and how two natures can combine, not on what a person is. It turns out that most of what is interesting about a person is included in nature, not personhood. The will goes with the nature, not the person, and so it follows that Jesus Christ had two wills – one divine, one human.¹⁶ Similarly, the intellect goes with the nature, so orthodox teaching is that Jesus Christ had two intellects and two wills, but he was one person. On the traditional account, the personhood of Jesus Christ is rather mysterious given that thinking and willing are not components of Christ as a person.

On the other hand, if subjectivity is a component of personhood, not nature, the personhood of Jesus Christ becomes very interesting apart from the way it connects to Christ's two natures. My hypothesis is that if Jesus Christ is one person, he has one self and one sequence of subjective states. There is one *I* since the *I* expresses the person. Christ can have any subjective states possible for his divine nature, but divine subjective states are not simultaneously experienced with human subjective states. The fact that Christ had two intellects and two wills need not mean that they operate simultaneously. I propose that Jesus Christ had only one sequence of subjective states, the same as other persons.

There is more than one possibility for how this worked. One possibility is that Jesus never had any subjective states arising from his divine nature even though they were all possible since everything belonging to a nature is possible. He voluntarily gave up those states while on earth in order to fully experience being human. Those attracted to a kenotic Christology and related views will find this in agreement with their theological perspective. Christ's awareness that he was divine might have been retained, but dimly, without the subjective experience of his divinity. Another possibility is that Jesus Christ had predominantly human subjective experiences, but his divine will was still operative and sometimes he willed to be aware as God. Or perhaps the Father initiated an act of the divine will that Jesus would have subjective states as the Son on occasion. There are many other possibilities. My proposal is just that, as one person, Jesus Christ had one continuous sequence of subjective states as all persons do. He did not have a dual mind or split mind or split personality. He had a single *I* with the same continuity all normal persons have.

Thomas Weinandy (2019) discusses disputes about the *I* of Jesus Christ. He mentions the view that Jesus Christ had two *I*s, one human, one divine, and the Thomist response that there was only one *I*, and that *I* was divine (*ibid.*, 404–405). Weinandy argues that Christ had a human *I*. My response is that all these views misinterpret the connection between the *I* and a nature. The *I* is a feature of the person, not the nature, although, of course, the nature limits the possibilities of subjective experience for the person. I think it is a mistake to speak of a divine *I* or a human *I*, as if the *I* is a component of the nature. Rather, the person of Jesus Christ the Son is one continuous *I* from all eternity continuing through the entire life of Jesus to his post-Incarnational existence. That *I* always had the divine nature, but he took on human nature for a time. There was no change in the *I* because there was no change in the person.

An important reason for the teaching that Jesus Christ had two wills is that it had to be possible that his human will conflicted with his divine will. Otherwise, the idea that Jesus was tempted does not make sense. That is a very plausible reason for the teaching that he had two wills, but it does not have the consequence that Jesus exercised his two wills at the same time. That would not be reasonable even if the two wills willed the same thing. Two acts of will occurring simultaneously suggests a mental abnormality. My proposal is that Christ's two willing *powers* existed simultaneously, but two acts of will did not. That is plausible if I am right that Christ had one continuous sequence of subjective states as one person.

Imagine that you have such an abundant love of dogs that you want to take on the nature of a dog in addition to your human nature, and you find that you are able to do so. You have no wish to give up any part of your human nature. After all, you like being human. And you certainly do not want to become a different person. You want to remain yourself, the one person you have always been. You want only to take on the nature of a dog as an addition to your human nature, and to live for a time with dogs as one of them. And imagine that you do it. What would your life be like as a dog-human but with no interruption in your personhood? As the same person, you continue to be Steve or Maria. When you are born as a dog, you are, of course, given a dog name by whoever gives dogs their names. The dog-namer does not know who you really are, the person who pre-existed birth as a dog, but that's okay because that is the way you want it.

You would need to block from your human awareness features of dog life that would be disgusting to you as a human in order to make your life as a dog a real dog life. You do not think both as a dog and as a human at the same time. Unfortunately, your life as a dog has some very unpleasant aspects. Sometimes other dogs don't like you and even want to kill you. A few dogs recognize something supernatural about you (above the nature of dog-dom) and they flock to you and repeat your wise utterances. (I am assuming dogs can communicate with each other.) Eventually a pack of dogs kills you. You lose your dog nature but not your human nature and not your personhood.

In my fantasy I am leaving aside any motive to redeem dogs. I doubt that dogs need to be redeemed anyway. I am also not attempting any analogy with the Trinity. I am only attempting to find an analogy for the conjunction of two different natures in one distinct person. As a dog-human you have two distinct sets of natural powers, and you can will as a human in addition to willing as a dog. But as a single person, you do not exercise your will as a dog and your will as a human at the same time. When you will as a dog, you have an awareness, perhaps only a faint awareness, that as a human you would will a certain way, but you are free to go against that will in your dog will. However, we can imagine that as a dog you never will anything that conflicts with your human will. You are a perfect dog.

If I am right that a person has a single sequence of coherent subjective states, then you have a single continuous sequence of subjective states before, during, and after your life as a dog-human. We can imagine that even before you assumed dog nature, you were able to grasp your pet dog's subjective consciousness perfectly. But your dog did not know that. If your pet and other dogs learn what you have done, you would have shown them the possibility of a transfiguring life in intersubjective experience between the race of humans and the race of dogs.

The debates about the Trinity and the Incarnation in the early centuries of the Christian era led to the important distinction between a person and an instance of a nature. I have claimed that if a person is necessarily unique, that cannot be grounded in anything qualitative since a quality is in principle duplicable. Uniqueness must be grounded in the non-qualitative aspect of a person – their inside, their subjectivity. In

contrast, a nature is objective. In the centuries since Descartes, the mystery of what a human being is has taken the form of the mind/body problem. Descartes thought that a human being is two substances, and that led to the problem of how they connect and interact as one. Even philosophers who gave up the idea of a soul or mind as a separate substance are still left with the same problem. Consciousness seems to resist analysis as long as it is treated as an object in a world of objects, and the nature of conscious beings slips away from our investigations. The deeper problem, in my judgement, is not the connection between mind and body, but the connection between subjectivity and objectivity. Human persons combine unique subjective consciousness with an objective nature. Even though the Church Fathers did not have the idea of subjectivity, they made an important conceptual distinction. I believe that the separation of person from nature in the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation applies to every being in the universe.

Notes

1. Aquinas argues that the creator must fully grasp everything he creates, and it exists because of his knowledge. (ST I q. 14 a. 8).
2. This article is taken from Zagzebski (2023), ch. 6, sections 1 and 3.
3. Rheinfelder (1928) is my source for this historical point on how the word ‘*persona*’ entered Western discourse.
4. It is interesting and somewhat ironic that the distinction between a person and a human being has been used by some philosophers such as Tooley (1983) in defending abortion, and by others (such as Wise (2002)) in arguing that certain animals are persons. Tooley’s argument is that there are human beings that are not persons; Wise’s argument is that there are persons who are not human beings.
5. See Crosby (1996, ch. 2) for a valuable treatment of the idea of incommunicability as it applies to persons both human and divine, and its relationship to subjectivity.
6. I argue in Zagzebski (2016b) that Kant attempts to combine the sense of dignity as supreme value with the sense of dignity as irreplaceability without noticing that they are two different kinds of value. In Zagzebski (2021, ch. 4) I offer a historical explanation for the two different grounds of the value of dignity.
7. I think that the impossibility of the duplication of persons due to the possession of something non-qualitative can solve puzzles discussed in recent decades about the putative duplication of consciousness and the identity of a person over time.
8. For an impressively detailed and authoritative account of Aquinas’s theology of the Trinity, see Emery (2007).
9. Why three? Swinburne (2018) argues that three persons are necessary for the existence of unselfish love. Swinburne argues further that any fourth divine person would be produced by an act which none of the three needed to produce. That person would not exist necessarily, and so could not be divine.
10. I have heard the worry that this position on omnisubjectivity within the Trinity leads to an infinite regress. The Father is aware of the Son’s awareness of the Father’s awareness of the Son’s awareness, *ad infinitum*. The problem arises under the assumption that there is a distinction between subject and object in every act of awareness. I doubt that that is the case when we are speculating about intersubjective awareness among the persons of the Trinity. In any case, even if there is an infinite regress of awareness, I do not see that as a problem. If God has an infinite mind, God can grasp an infinite regress.
11. I thank John Crosby for referring me to this example.
12. See Hunt (2010) for a description and commentary on the Trinitarian insights of Christian mystics.
13. This point has been made by Sarot (1991) and Buckareff (2012).
14. This means that I disagree with Stump (2019, 355), who writes: ‘through the assumed human nature of Christ, God can have empathy with human persons and can also mind-read them, since God can use the human mind of the assumed human nature to know human persons in the knowledge of persons way’.
15. Translation from Coakley (2002), 143.
16. The teaching that Jesus Christ had two natures but one will was the Monothelism heresy condemned in 681 at the Sixth Council of Constantinople.

References

Aquinas T (2012) *Summa Theologiae* (Latin and English). Shapcote L (trans.). Lander, WY: Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine.

- Blankenhorn B (2016) Response to Linda Zagzebski's 'Omnisubjectivity: why it is a divine attribute'. *Nova et Vetera* 14, 451–458.
- Boethius (1973) *The Theological Tractates and The Consolation of Philosophy*. Stewart HF, Rand EK, and Tester SJ (trans.). Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Buckareff AA (2012) Omniscience, the incarnation, and knowledge *de se*. *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 4, 59–71.
- Coakley S (2002) What does Chalcedon solve and what does it not? Reflections on the status and meaning of the Chalcedon 'definition'. In Davis ST, Daniel Kendall SJ and Gerald O'Collins SJ (eds), *The Incarnation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 143–163.
- Crosby J (1996) *The Selfhood of the Human Person*. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press.
- Emery G (2007) *The Trinitarian Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas*. Murphy FA (trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Green A (2017) Omnisubjectivity and incarnation. *Topoi* 35, 693–701.
- Hunt A (2010) *The Trinity: Insights from the Mystics*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press.
- Nagel T (1986) *The View from Nowhere*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rheinfelder H (1928) *Das Wort 'Persona': Geschichte seiner Bedeutungen mit besonderer Berücksichtigung des französischen und italienischen Mittelalters*. Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie 77. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Richard of St Victor (1959) *La Trinité. (De Trinitate)*. Gaston Salet, S.J. (ed.). Paris: Éditions du Cerf.
- Sarot M (1991) Omniscience and experience. *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 30, 89–102.
- Scheler M (2008) *The Nature of Sympathy*, rev. edn. New York: Routledge.
- Stump E (2019) Union and indwelling. *Nova et Vetera* 17, 343–362.
- Swinburne R (2018) The social theory of the Trinity. *Religious Studies* 54, 419–437.
- Tooley M (1983) *Abortion and Infanticide*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Weinandy TG (2019) The hypostatic union. *Nova et Vetera* 17, 401–424.
- Wise S (2002) *Drawing the Line: Science and the Case for Animal Rights*. New York: Basic Books.
- Zagzebski L (2000) The uniqueness of persons. *Journal of Religious Ethics* 29, 401–423.
- Zagzebski L (2008) Omnisubjectivity. In Kvanvig J (ed.), *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 231–248.
- Zagzebski L (2013) *Omnisubjectivity: A Defense of a Divine Attribute*. Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press. Reprinted in an expanded version in Zagzebski (2022).
- Zagzebski L (2016a) Omnisubjectivity: why it is a divine attribute. *Nova et Vetera* 14, 435–450.
- Zagzebski L (2016b) The dignity of persons and the value of uniqueness. *Presidential Address to the American Philosophical Association Central Division, in Proceedings of the APA* 90, 55–70.
- Zagzebski L (2021) *The Two Greatest Ideas: How Our Grasp of the Universe and Our Minds Changed Everything*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Zagzebski L (2022) *God, Knowledge, and the Good: Collected Papers in the Philosophy of Religion*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Zagzebski L (2023) *Omnisubjectivity: An Essay on God and Subjectivity*. New York: Oxford University Press.