

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Omnisubjectivity, counteractuals, and relating perfectly to subjectivity

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Abstract

The idea that God must relate perfectly to our subjectivity is central to Linda Zagzebski's work on omnisubjectivity. There is a hitherto undiagnosed tension, however, between different criteria one might use to judge what perfectly relating to our subjectivity consists in. God's relationship to what Zagzebski calls 'counteractuals', individuals that do not exist but that could have, brings this tension into focus. On the one hand, if God does not know what the subjective experiences of counteractuals would be like, then God's omnisubjectivity would appear to be unacceptably limited in scope. On the other hand, if God knows the subjectivity of actual creatures in the same way that God knows the subjectivity of counteractual creatures, then the motivation for omnisubjectivity ends up being undercut to a significant extent. This essay resolves this tension with a model that draws on interpersonal perception and divine introspection.

Keywords: omnisubjectivity; counteractual; subjectivity; perception; empathy

Linda Zagzebski's work on omnisubjectivity (2008, 2013, 2023) starts from the idea that, if there is something unique about experiencing something, this ought to have some impact on how we think about the divine perfections. In a great many contexts within philosophy, we are now used to the idea that the moral of Frank Jackson's thought experiment about Mary the colour scientist (Jackson 1986) is that experiential knowledge and propositional knowledge come apart (cf. Zagzebski 2023, 7–9).¹ Mary can know certain things about another person's experience of red (e.g., that they are having an experience, that it is of whatever colour tomatoes and fire engines have in common). There is a kind of experiential knowledge she lacks though, and much of what she does know about the colour red is indirect compared to what people know who can have the relevant experiences.

What is true about knowing what it is like to see red is true of knowing what it is like for someone else to see red. While Mary lives in a black-and-white world, she no more knows what it is like for someone else to see red than she knows what it is like for her to see red herself. Thus, if someone else were to have some experiential knowledge that one does not have oneself, this limitation in one's knowledge is among other things interpersonal. One cannot know other people perfectly unless one knows what it is like to be them. And, intuitively, it would seem that one cannot relate perfectly to another person if one does not also have perfect knowledge of them.

If God exists, God must be cognitively perfect. As standardly conceived, God is omniscient. Hence, God will not be like Mary the colour scientist in the black-and-white world. God will know what it is like to be me and to be anyone else. If God did not know what it is like for Mary to live in the black-and-white world, then God would not be omniscient, and we could imagine a being more cognitively perfect than God, namely one that knows what God knows but also knows what it is like to be Mary. That should not be possible. Hence, God needs to have perfect experiential knowledge of what it is like to be Mary or anyone else. Zagzebski's term 'omnisubjectivity' seems as good a candidate as any to capture the divine perfection that corresponds to this kind of knowledge.

It ends up, though, that it is hard to hold onto two commitments at the same time. The first is that experiencing something furnishes a unique way of knowing it. What makes it unique is its being maximally epistemically direct and requiring a relation to the experience being known. The second is that a being could have an exhaustive set, not only of all the experiential knowledge that is but also of all the experiential knowledge that ever could be. Bringing this tension into focus will allow us to argue for a novel model of how God relates to subjectivity via the equivalents of divine introspection and perception.

Omnisubjectivity and the matter of counteractuals

In her 2013 book, Zagzebski defines omnisubjectivity this way.

It is the property of consciously grasping with perfect accuracy and completeness every conscious state of every creature from that creature's first person perspective (10).

In her 2023 volume, she introduces the idea as follows.

I will argue in this book that subjectivity is something, that is not reducible to anything in the world of objective facts, and therefore, if God grasps everything, it is not that God grasps all the objective facts. God must also grasp all the subjectivity there is. I call this property omnisubjectivity.... What I mean by subjectivity is consciousness as it is experienced by the subject of conscious states.... (1).

So, for Zagzebski, God knows what it's like to be an aardvark and an orangutan, Mother Theresa or Hitler. In Zagzebski (2023), however, she stretches the extension of the concept of omnisubjectivity quite a bit farther. Zagzebski devotes a whole chapter (116–143) to the topic of 'counteractual' subjectivity. For her, an omnisubjective being's experiential knowledge must range over not only the subjective states of actual beings but also beings that could have existed but do not. Here we are concerned with God's knowledge of what it is like to be a unicorn or a chimera, but we are also concerned with alternative versions of actual persons. God knows not only what it is like for a chimera to experience indigestion but what it would be like for some actual person of modest demeanour to have electric blue hair.²

Zagzebski acknowledges that there is precedent in the tradition for thinking that God's knowledge of the actual differs from God's knowledge of the merely possible. Pursuing maximal extension on this topic is something of a departure from tradition. As Zagzebski states, 'It is usually assumed that God knows the possible in a different way than the actual' (2023, 123). She acknowledges that 'Aquinas makes a sharp distinction between the way God knows the merely possible and the way he knows the actual' (123).

After citing a passage from the *Summa* where Aquinas articulates that distinction,³ she explains her disagreement as follows.

This passage distinguishes the way God knows what is actual at any point in time from the way God knows the merely possible but nonactual. God knows the actual, including the past and future, by a form of vision; God knows the merely possible by what Aquinas calls ‘simple intelligence.’ If I am right about the nature of subjectivity, God cannot know counterfactual subjective states by simple intelligence, and as I have said, there is not a sharp line separating actual and counterfactual in the imagination. If there is not a precise line between them, it is unlikely that there is a precise line in the way God knows them (Zagzebski 2023, 124).

It is not entirely clear what Zagzebski means in saying that God cannot know counterfactual subjectivity by simple intelligence, but I take it this is likely related to Zagzebski’s thought that feelings are the way they feel (e.g., ‘the way pain feels is what it is’, 72) and feelings are concrete, not abstract. Thus, although we are not told what simple intelligence is, it is suspect if it does not traffic in concrete particulars and generate feelings. Furthermore, what is clear from the quotation is that there is an interaction here between what Zagzebski thinks we should affirm concerning God’s knowledge of counterfactuals and one’s model of omniscience. This is a matter we will return to at length in the next section. For now, it is sufficient to note that she is here treating imagination as the preferred mechanism for generating knowledge of another’s subjectivity, and she points out that it isn’t clear there is much of a difference in how imagination operates when it imagines an actual vs a counterfactual scenario.

Interestingly, this position is something of a reversal for Zagzebski.

In my first paper on omniscience (Zagzebski 2008), I ended with the speculation that only the actual world contains subjective states. My reason was that there is a puzzle about what actuality is that is solved if there are not counterfactual subjective states, and if there are not counterfactual subjective states, the actual world is clearly distinguishable from other possible worlds (Zagzebski 2023, 128).

In other words, it looks at first glance as if counterfactual subjectivities and the alternative worlds to which they belong are abstract in a way that the actual world is concrete. They aren’t just different worlds. They are not real. They don’t exist except as a description of a different way things could be.

My conjecture in my first omniscience paper is that there is a difference in content. Only the actual world is concrete and alive. It alone has thoughts, feelings, and sensations. Only the actual world has conscious subjects because only the actual world exists. All other worlds are mere abstractions. They are bloodless and soulless. They are merely sets of propositions. They lack anything interior to consciousness.... Everything else is merely ideas in minds (Zagzebski 2023, 129).

She changes her mind. The reason is that these alternative worlds would have ‘blood and soul’ if they had been chosen to be actual, and apparently, Zagzebski does not think they could acquire concreteness and something ‘interior to consciousness’ upon being selected for actualisation. They must have already had it in some relevant sense.

I think now that we must reject this idea. We can think of possible worlds as sets of propositions, in which case the actual world is just as abstract as other possible worlds. But other possible worlds are alternate histories of our world. If some other

possible world containing conscious beings had been actual, it would be just as concrete and alive, and would have subjectivity just as much as the actual world has (Zagzebski 2023, 129).

The use of the subjunctive mood in Zagzebski's passage above is important.⁴ Blue-haired Harold *would* be cooler than the actual Harold, but he is not because blue-haired Harold does not exist, not as a thing that literally has blue hair anyway. Blue-haired Harold is just an idea, an idea in God's mind. Maybe he's not a proposition but rather a particular, concrete idea. He is still something that does not literally have blue hair and does not literally have feelings about having blue hair.

If Zagzebski means to preserve a robust distinction between what actual and counterfactual persons are, then there is still a robust metaphysical difference between what is being understood when God understands what it is like to be a particular actual being and what God understands when God thinks about counterfactual beings. Blue-haired Harold is an idea that would have a subjective perspective if he had been actual (which he isn't). Actual Harold is a person with a conscious interior and a disinclination to dye his hair.

Zagzebski acknowledges that putting God's relationship to counterfactual beings on a par with God's relationship to actual beings threatens something she values in her account of omnisubjectivity, namely, the idea that God is with us, sharing our pain, understanding and emotionally supporting us through every season of life. One might well think this feature of omnisubjectivity is put into question if God's relationship to my subjectivity is the same as God's relationship to blue-haired Harold, a mere idea.

I have thought of a worrisome feature about this model. One reason the empathy model is appealing is that it is comforting to believe that God is always with us. Divine empathy means that we are never alone in our suffering, and we are always sharing our joy. We can have a deep relationship with God. But suppose that God does exactly the same thing with somebody who does not even exist. Am I on the same level as a nonexistent being? (Zagzebski 2023, 132)

Zagzebski attempts to blunt the force of this objection by reminding us that how she thinks about empathy is grounded in imagination, and 'what it is like to have a certain feeling in the imagination is not the same as having the feeling' (133). Thus, the thought is that the care and love God has for me is not what God has towards blue-haired counterfactual me. Maybe God likes the idea⁵ which just is me with blue hair. But God does not have the distinctive attitudes towards blue-haired me that should only hold towards a person. Perhaps God *would have* loved and wanted union with blue-haired me if blue-haired me had been actual, but there is a large gap between having an un-activated disposition to love a person that does not exist and loving an actual person.

Now, of course, we have been pursuing this line of inquiry due to the idea that God's perfection would be compromised if God related to actual and counterfactual beings differently. They are now being treated differently anyway. One might counter that the epistemic relation to subjectivity is being kept the same and it is only other ways of relating to actual and counterfactual beings that diverge downstream of that. That sword cuts the other way too though. Extending God's omnisubjectivity to include counterfactuals may seem desirable because we do not want God's knowledge of subjectivity to be in principle surpassable, but bringing God's relation to the counterfactual, mere ideas, to the same level as God's relationship to persons threatens to depreciate the value of how God relates to persons. If God can have all experiential knowledge even if no creatures exist, then it looks like my having experiences is irrelevant to the processes that generate God's knowledge and downstream

affective attitudes. This is at minimum troubling given how differently God is supposed to relate to actual persons and ideas in God's head.

This choice between restricting omniscient subjectivity to actual creatures or including counterfactual beings as well is only made the more pointed when we turn to the possible models of how omniscient subjectivity works.

Zagzebski on the models of omniscient subjectivity

Zagzebski is somewhat ambivalent about what the best model is for how omniscient subjectivity works, which might be surprising given Zagzebski's reliance on her imagination-based model in her discussion of counterfactual subjectivity. What seems clearest in Zagzebski's work as it has developed is not that she prefers her imagination-based account to all other possible accounts but that she disprefers perception-based accounts in particular. This is important because, as I will argue, her reliance on an imagination-based account is what leads her to put counterfactual subjectivity on the same level as actual subjectivity. Finding a motivated difference between relating to the two kinds of subjectivity requires making room for an ability to register the presence and states of something that is actual, in other words, perception.

In her 2008 and 2013 publications, she draws on simulationist accounts of the knowledge of other minds to suggest that God models the subjective experience of creatures by way of imagination. The result she calls the 'total empathy model', though using empathy in the label is unhelpful as the relation of empathy to simulation and imagination is contestable.⁶

Here is a description of the kind of process she has in mind.

Suppose you imaginatively project yourself into another person's perspective and 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.... (Zagzebski 2013, 27; see Zagzebski 2023, 65).

This generates the following model of what a perfect such process would produce.

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 copy of all of a person's conscious states (Zagzebski 2013, 29; see Zagzebski 2023, 66).

Yet, as of the 2013 version of the model, Zagzebski qualifies her view out of concern with the indirectness of simulation⁷ and does so through the use of perceptual language.

Since I also accept the traditional view that God knows everything directly, I propose that omniscient subjectivity 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.... (Zagzebski 2013, 29–30; the italics is my own).

By the time of Zagzebski (2023), she has come to see models grounded in imaginative simulation and perceptual models as rivals. For instance, the parallel passage to that above in her 2023 work emphasises the importance of directly grasping but does not express this contrast between the direct and the indirect through the language of perception (67).⁸

Turning to the perceptual account, while acknowledging the pedigree of a perceptual account of God's relation to our minds (e.g., in Aquinas), Zagzebski (2023) is more straightforwardly pessimistic about perceptual accounts. She acknowledges that a perceptual account might be able to make sense of God's knowledge of our sensory imagery and inner speech (71), but she draws the limit at our feelings. Observing a pain and feeling it are two different things (71–72), but to know what a feeling is like just is to have that feeling.⁹

The problem here is the separation of the knower and the known, a separation that Aquinas argued does not apply to God. That problem comes up repeatedly in this book. The problem is not solved by making the knower closer to the known. Provided that there is any distance at all, God as knower does not really grasp what you are experiencing in the way you experience it as the subject of the experience (Zagzebski 2023, 72).

One might phrase this first complaint as that Zagzebski thinks the perceptual account does not have the requisite epistemic directness to capture what feelings are like. Interestingly, her second complaint concerns counterfactual subjectivity. The claim here is that a perceptual account would leave the scope of omnisubjectivity too thin because it appears to be inapplicable to counterfactual beings.

We can imagine God 'seeing' the nonexistent, but the perceptual analogy is almost always built out of perceiving actual and occurrent events. In addition, we usually speak of perception to express our contact with something outside of us, but I doubt that it makes sense to think of God perceiving possible subjectivities as if they were outside of him (Zagzebski 2023, 131).

These two objections are in tension with each other. The process of imagining what an actual person feels in an actual situation is not different from imagining what a being who does not exist would feel if they did exist. If a direct epistemic link to a feeling is necessary to have subjective experiential knowledge, it looks like appealing to imagination is a curious move. The same thing happens whether there's a real thing with feelings there to imaginatively simulate or not. Perception, at least, requires something to be there to perceive.¹⁰

Something interesting about the evolution of Zagzebski's views, then, is that, in her 2013 article, perceptual language is added to the empathy model to assuage concerns about the indirectness of imaginative projection. In her 2023 book, she has distinguished empathic uses of the imagination and interpersonal perception and ranks the former over the latter because perception is thought to be too indirect a link to another person's feelings to really understand them. Indeed, if anything she seems to rank even a panentheist option on which God is our co-experiencer ahead of perceptual variants. Moreover, imaginative projection is treated as the default in her treatment of counterfactual subjectivity, which seems to have the payoff of guaranteeing that God has a complete set of experiential knowledge that encompasses all the experiential knowledge that ever could be.

Assessing the simulation model

There are important trade-offs that come with choosing between a wide scope account of omnisubjectivity that includes counterfactual subjectivity, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, choosing one that in privileging the directness and relationality of relating to experiencers thereby privileges the uniqueness of experience. These trade-offs take on determinate shape when looked at in terms of weighing the imaginative simulation model against perceptual alternatives. In the remainder, I will be treating relationality, epistemic directness, and scope as a scorecard of desiderata¹¹ for these models, beginning with a somewhat critical evaluation of the simulation model. I will not be offering an argument that God could not be the sort of being that uses imaginative simulation. Instead, I will be arguing that a hybrid perceptual option offers an acceptable return on the three criteria on the scorecard and that perception performs better than an imaginative simulation model.

Let us start with a human parallel. Suppose that a five-year-old child falls off a trampoline and breaks her arm. The father observes the event and describes it to the mother over the phone. The mother imagines what it is like to be five years old and to fall and break your arm. By doing so, she is able to gain a measure of understanding of what the child has experienced. She also runs through simulations of various ways in which the situation could have unfolded differently, situations where the break could have been worse or been avoided. She thereby gains a measure of understanding of what these other situations would have been like for the child. There is no epistemic difference for the mother between the standing of the actual scenario where the child breaks her arm and the counterfactual scenario where the child falls on her head. That is, there is no other difference than this. The mother knows via a source other than simulation which one of the imagined scenarios is what happened. In fact, if instead of responding to a phone call about what happened, the mother had been thinking through whether or not to allow her child to go jump on the neighbour's trampoline, she might have done all the same imaginative simulations.

By contrast, for the father who sees the fall, there is a big difference between seeing the event and being able to imagine a scenario. It is not just that the father knows that, of all the ways this event could have unfolded, this is the one that happened. Rather, the father has an experience of the event itself, and this makes the father's epistemic connection to what happened more direct than the mother's. Moreover, the father can have this direct connection to what happened even if he has trouble with counterfactual reasoning or simulating different kinds of events. Because perceptually experiencing the fall of the child is a different kind of process, the father being unable or unwilling to run through a related simulation is irrelevant. The father detects the presence of the child's fall with the senses and registers it as emotionally affecting for the child through the child's manifestation of emotion in the father's perceptual field.

But of course, even though the father's perceptual access to the event is a more direct epistemic connection that is dependent on what actually happens, there is a more direct connection possible. The child's relationship to her own fall is more direct than the father's. Even though perception is a direct connection to an actual event, it is also a direct connection from the outside. Furthermore, just as it is different to see your child fall than to imagine them falling, so too imagining a fall is different from the experience of actually falling. The child might be less surprised by her experience if she has seen someone else fall or if she has imagined what it is like to fall beforehand, but it is not the same as having it happen to you. In the creaturely case, having an experience is more direct than witnessing someone have an experience, which is in turn more direct than imagining having the experience.

When we make the move from the normal state of affairs for us to the divine, one might wonder whether the uniqueness of the divine allows God to circumvent the limitations

these options have in the natural realm. For instance, if God were to imagine a human scenario unfolding, God would, presumably, be a perfect simulator due to having a perfect imagination. One might, then, suppose that someone who has a perfect imagination could make up for whatever we lack when we imagine things. After all, a perfect imagination would be more vivid than an imperfect one, more coherent, more exhaustive. For this move to work, of course, imagination needs to be the right kind of tool for the job. A screwdriver than which no greater screwdriver could be conceived is still a poor tool for doing one's taxes. Being perfect at deductive reasoning would not help black-and-white world Mary figure out what seeing the colour red is like.

If relating to an actual subjective state is categorically different from simulating it or imagining it, then having a perfect imagination will not be sufficient. Running imaginative simulations surely does get one closer to an actual experience, so they could not be wholly unrelated. In fact, in humans, they recruit some of the same brain regions and, within those specific regions, primarily differ in the strengths of activation elicited (cf. O'Craven and Kanwisher 2000). So, it is not an accident that simulating an event can prepare one for an experience one has never had better than not doing so. It still is not the same.

Perhaps the best analogy for what it would be like for a perfect cogniser to imaginatively simulate another mind is that it would be like building an exquisitely detailed 3D replica. It makes sense that the more detailed one makes a replica of, say, the church of Notre Dame, the more inclined one might be to say that any epistemic state one could get by actually being in Notre Dame is something one can get from engaging the replica. Yet, at the same time, even if the difference is made more plausibly trivial, we do think that an experience of a replica, no matter how painstakingly exact the replica may be, does not allow one to say that one has thereby experienced the original. Experiencing Notre Dame is a relation to just the actual Notre Dame and no other object. Furthermore, Zagzebski has already given us one reason for thinking that imaginative simulations of subjectivity cannot quite be an exact replica of an actual subjectivity. After all, recall that she says that imagining a feeling is not the same as having a feeling, but she also says that a feeling just is how it feels.

So, here we have given up a significant degree of directness because experiences are of replicas of subjectivities, whether actual or counteractual. Furthermore, since the process works the same way whether the object is actual or counteractual, the process itself is not relational in the interpersonal sense. It may be employed unto a relational end when it is undertaken for the purpose of learning about an actual person, but the process itself is not interpersonal because it works just as well whether or not the object is a person. Yet, because the process can be directed at actual or counteractual beings, it lends itself to a maximally wide extension.

Hence, I assign the imaginative simulation model low marks on directness and relationality but high marks on the width of omnisubjectivity's extension.

Arguing for a perceptual option

The key issue in evaluating a perceptual account of omnisubjectivity is whether it is too direct in one sense and not direct enough in another. On the one hand, the perceptual option seems less than maximally direct because it is 'from the outside'. One would never confuse the father seeing his child break her arm with the child's experience of breaking her arm. On the other hand, perception privileges the actual and will not furnish the same epistemic goods vis-à-vis counteractual creatures.

Consider again perception in the creaturely case. Out of the corner of his eye, the father sees motion and attends to his child falling off the trampoline. Immediately upon hitting the ground, he is confronted by sounds, posture, and an emotional contortion of the face

that at a moment and over time are immediately registered as pain and shock. The father could try to imagine himself in the shoes of the child to be sure, but that is not normally how his understanding of the situation begins. Rather, stimuli act on the father's senses so as to produce an awareness of a person and a state, his child manifesting pain and shock. This is in part due to having the cognitive equipment, thanks to the mirror neuron system, to register the lines, contours, and tones of the child at a higher level of processing in some of the same systems that are activated when one is similarly afflicted. The process is not one that evolves a set of inputs guided only by the imagination. It is not simulation in that sense and probably is not well characterised as simulation at all (Green 2012). It is rather a way an embodied processing path naturally leads to the representation of exogenous stimuli in an endogenous format. Because of how our neuroanatomy is structured, one registers sensory stimuli like a contorted face immediately as a display of certain affective mental states in a process that is more like *seeing as* than *imagining as*. Moreover, this system can be trained up through not only continued perception of others but also through personal experience. For instance, mirror neuron activation levels in dancers to viewing others dancing is sensitive to one's personal familiarity with doing the dance steps in question (Calvo-Merino et al. 2005). Expertise in the doing of an activity puts you in a privileged position to have epistemic expertise in the perception of that activity.

Consider then how one might develop a quasi-perceptual model of omnisubjectivity akin to the interpersonal perception ascribed to the father above. Now, of course, God does not have mirror neurons. Presumably, though, God does have self-knowledge, and God's self-knowledge is not cognitively insulated from God's knowledge of creatures. If God has the means to detect the presence and properties of a creature and if God can relate God's experiential self-knowledge to the relevant first-person experiences of creatures, then God would be in a position to have an appreciation of what creatures experience that is particular to there being actual creatures with actual experiences. To fill out the model a bit, I am going to borrow some Thomistic metaphysics. It is not strictly required for this strategy to be successful, but it is useful as a precedent within theistic thought for how our experiences and those of the divine might relate.

On Thomism and various related positions within classical theism, God is not only the creator and sustainer of all that exists. Everything that exists, insofar as it has being, reflects and participates in Being. That is, everything reflects and participates in the nature of God.¹² There is, of course, more than a little mystery here. It is not, for instance, obvious how the purple hue of a delphinium is reflective of the being and goodness of a God who is spirit. It is a little easier with people, however, since, if God exists, God would be an inherently personal being, perhaps even an interpersonal one if social trinitarians are to be believed.¹³ Human love is a partial reflection of and participation in a God who is love. Human lust is an even more partial reflection and a kind of twisted participation in God's love and so on. Although God does not have mirror neurons, God has experiential self-knowledge via the equivalent of introspection of what it is like to be what persons and their subjectivity imperfectly are. On Thomism, our actions and mental states are more or less faded, more or less smudged copies of a perfect and complete original. Despite the transcendence and otherness of God, there is still a relation between the mental states we exemplify and the content of the divine mind. Likewise, the value we find in those mental states, including their value as experiences, is supposed to be derivative from the way they exemplify qualities found perfectly in the divine life.

Suppose one thought that some relationship like that the Thomist posits holds between the being and goodness of God and that of creatures such that there is a relationship between the subjectivity of creatures and that of the divine. The question then is whether God can register the existence and nature of a creature's subjective state and if so, whether

God can also register the equivalence of the state of a creature with the aspect of the divine life it imperfectly reflects.¹⁴ This seems like a smaller gap to posit God as bridging than the gap between imagining something and actually experiencing it. After all, if God cannot register the existence and states of a creature, then this would similarly impoverish an option grounded in imaginative simulation because God would not know how to pair particular simulations with particular people. When one successfully simulates the mental state of a loved one, one does not simulate at random. If I see a child exulting over a shiny toy with bits of wrapping paper strewn about and I use my imagination to simulate what the child is feeling, that imaginative simulation is only successful if I have the ability to detect the affectively laden behaviour of the child. If I then model my psychology on the child's in a simulation, it is because something else provided me a cognitive contact point with what I'm simulating. The same holds for the divine. A being who cannot so much as register the existence and states of creatures would seem to be very far indeed from cognitively perfect no matter how vivid their imagination.

If, however, God has the equivalent of introspection and everything has being and goodness only insofar as it reflects the divine, I see no reason why any theorist would want to deny that God could draw on God's experience of the divine life so as to derive relevant experiential knowledge for what it is like to partially reflect that divine life. On my model, God is both a perfect perceiver able to detect every facet of our life and experience, and a perfect introspector able to match what God perceives to the aspects of the divine life they reflect. God does not need to perform a simulation because God already perceives the exact contours of the being and goodness exemplified in the state of the creature and has introspective access to the perfect model the creaturely state imperfectly realises. God does not need to be a co-experiencer of creaturely experiences because God already has qualitative first-person access in Godself to the perfect instance of the kind of experience creatures are having, and God has perfect perceptual access to the exact ways in which the creature's subjective state is a limited reflection of the divine state.¹⁵

What about knowledge of what counterfactual beings would have experienced if they had been actual? On this model, there is a very real difference between how God relates epistemically to actual and counterfactual beings, and I embrace that difference. I think we should preserve the idea that God relates in a unique way to actual subjectivity. Nonetheless, this does not leave the model with nothing to say about God's relationship to counterfactual subjectivity.

God knows which aspects of the divine life *would* be partially reflected by the creatures that do not exist, and, moreover, God has experiential self-knowledge via the equivalent of introspection of these corollaries in the divine life of what counterfactual creatures *would* experience. Now, God does not have interpersonal perception of a counterfactual creature having a subjective state. God lacks that. The reason God lacks that, however, is that counterfactual creatures don't have subjective states to relate to epistemically or otherwise. They just have the un-actualised recipe for such states. Therefore, because perception is not made less perfect by failing to register as existing something that does not exist, it does not lessen the divine perfection to affirm an epistemic asymmetry between actual and counterfactual creatures nor does affirming this asymmetry leave God epistemically in the dark about counterfactual creatures. God has perfect introspective knowledge of God's own ideas, which includes a knowledge of what aspects of the divine life they would reflect were they actual. God knows what it would be like to be a unicorn because God knows what it is like to be God, and being a unicorn is to partially reflect some of what it is like to be God just as humans partially reflect the divine.

If we turn to our scorecard, then, I claim that the perceptual model outperforms the imaginative simulation model on both epistemic directness and relationality.

God relates to persons by being attuned to what they are going through by interpersonal perception. The manner in which God knows our subjectivity requires a person, an actual person with actual feelings, to be related to. Imaginative simulation does not require that. As the case of counterfactuals shows, imaginative simulations in and of themselves do not presume the reality of what they are related to. They do not have to be about persons. When you simulate Sherlock Holmes, you are related to an idea or an abstracta or a fiction of some sort. You are not related to a person in a process that is misfiring if it is not a person who has entered into a relation with you.

The hybrid nature of the model is important for assessing whether it is epistemically direct enough. Zagzebski's worry in this regard is that some mental states, feelings in particular, do not seem like they could be known as experiences without first-person access to those feelings. It is worth noting, though, that it may be possible to be too epistemically direct. One way of thinking about the 'creepy emotions' problem (e.g., Mullins 2022) is that God knowing what it is like to be a paedophile by having in God's self a mental state with the tainted content and phenomenal character of paedophilic mental states is too much of a cost to pay. On the model here argued for we have enough epistemic directness for God to be able to properly weigh the extent to which a mental state is good on experiential grounds. God has maximally direct access to any aspect of a mental state type that is good through self-knowledge, and God has precise perceptual knowledge of exactly the ways the mental state of the target falls short of being good. This is reason to think that God can relate perfectly to us in our subjectivity because God has cognitive perfections specific to experiential knowledge. It does not, however, run the costs of actually hosting emotions or other mental states that are not worthy of the divine.

God's relationship to actual subjectivity is grounded in perception and thus does not run through an abstract stand-in for the particular person God knows. This aspect of the model is not maximally direct in that God is a separate subject from the creature, yet God's access is not restricted to the physical, outward manifestation of a mental state as ours is. Furthermore, God's perceptual knowledge is informed by God's introspective knowledge of God's own being, which these states reflect, and God's self-knowledge is maximally direct. While I do not affirm that counterfactual subjectivity is known in all the ways that actual subjectivity is, I do affirm that God can know what it would be like for counterfactual beings to be actual in a robust sense using just the resources internal to the account via processes that parallel God's knowledge of actual subjectivity while preserving the crucial difference between the two. God's introspective self-knowledge combined with God's awareness of the idea of a counterfactual creature is sufficient to know what aspects of the divine being would be reflected by the creature, and, once again, God has experiential knowledge of God's self.

As a result, I conclude that the modified perceptual model I have presented gives one the better balance of the relationality, epistemic directness, and scope one desires in an account of God's relation to creaturely subjectivity.

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Notes

1. Other prominent applications of Jackson's thought experiment within the philosophy of religion include Nagasawa (2008) and Stump (2010), 50ff.
2. As a referee notes, this has implications for middle knowledge. God's knowledge of what the experience of actual creatures would be like if the world had been different does not entail that there is such a thing as middle knowledge. If, however, there is such a thing as middle knowledge, it would not be complete if it did not encompass the experiential dimensions of alternative free creaturely choices.

3. Here is the passage: 'Now a certain difference is to be noted in the consideration of those things that are not actual. For though some of them may not be in act now, still they were, or they will be; and God is said to know all these things with the knowledge of vision; for since God's act of understanding, which is His being, is measured by eternity; and since eternity is without succession, comprehending all time, the present glance of God extends over all time, and to all things which exist in any time, as to objects present to Him. But there are other things in God's power, or the creature's, which nevertheless are not, nor will be, nor were; and as regards these He is said to have knowledge, not of vision, but of simple intelligence. (ST I q. 14.a. 9 corpus)' (Zagzebski 2023, 123–124).

4. It is important to distinguish this reasoning from Lewisian realism about possible worlds (cf. Lewis 1986). One could imagine someone arguing that other ways some concrete individual Harold could be must themselves be concrete (e.g., his having blue hair) and that nothing abstract is concrete. Therefore, blue-haired alternate Harold exists. He just exists in an alternate world that does not causally interact with ours. Whatever else might be said about this kind of argument, it would not be an argument that counterfactual beings in Zagzebski's sense have subjectivity. Instead, it would be an argument that the set of beings who realise experiences is a bit more diverse and metaphysically spread out than one might have thought.

5. Insofar as it is clear how ideas in God's mind might relate to a divine imagination, it is convenient to talk as if counterfactuals are ideas in God's mind. This is how Zagzebski talks. The position is not inevitable. One might think, for instance, that they are abstracta and that abstracta are not ideas in God's mind. What is important, though, is that Zagzebski thinks there is a difference between the subjectivity of actual creatures and that of counterfactuals. Counterfactual subjectivity is not actual; it is subjunctive.

6. I will not be referring to this model with Zagzebski's term because I do not agree that empathy and a simulative use of the imagination have a tight connection. I cannot do much more than signal my disagreement here. One can simulate another person's psychology via one's imagination without empathising with them (e.g., trying to anticipate the actions of a hated enemy), and, so I claim, one can empathise with another person without using one's imagination or performing a simulation. What is essential to empathy in my view is an end result, coming to have a mental state with the right sort of relation to the mental state of the target person, not arriving at that state through imagination or simulation in particular. There are multiple processes that can and do produce a mental state directed at another person that is affectively aligned with the experience of another person in the relevant way. Again, that is not an argument so much as an explanation for why I think referring to this model via 'empathy' rather than 'simulation' or 'imagination' would, at best, be misleading. A defender of any of Zagzebski's three models should hope to have thereby shown how divine empathy is possible. For a related critique, see Ratcliffe (2018).

7. I will use simulation and imaginative projection interchangeably. There is no difference in this context. There are, though, simulation accounts of our knowledge of other minds that do not appeal to imagination, notably, those that depend on automatic mirror neuron activity below the level of consciousness. These two levels are, for instance, clearly distinguished in Goldman's simulation theory (Goldman 2006). Zagzebski's thoughts on the process involved, however, are more reminiscent of Gordon's simulation account in which the overt 'imaginative shift in the reference of indexicals' looms large (Gordon 1995, 734).

8. What there is, however, is a footnote (#8), which says the following, 'It can happen that a human person directly perceives another person's feeling and takes it on herself. The empathiser actually has the feeling of the other person. If this happens, the transfer of feeling is direct, but it is not empathy in the sense we want for God if we do not believe that God actually takes on all the feelings of his creatures in response to them. However, some readers might like this variation of the empathy model' (67). While Zagzebski is not here identifying with 'some people', she does not seem to have the same sort of problem with this model that she has with a purely perceptual one because it does produce a knowledge from the inside. I would note, however, that the process as described sounds like mere emotional contagion. One would need to add to it a means of identifying the feeling produced in God with that of the creature, of representing the creature's feeling state. Otherwise, we just end up with more feeling tokens of the same type.

9. The desire to root knowledge in first-person experience has caused critics to worry that God would know what it's like to lie, murder, lust, and so on. Mullins (2022) colourfully calls this the problem of creepy emotions. While an appropriate area to critique in favour of a perceptual model, since witnessing a morally tainted emotion second personally is different from instancing it, the problem of creepy emotions and the problem of counterfactuals come apart. For example, if we have a good account of how God could know what counterfactuals would experience that is consistent with God's access to actual creatures being direct and relational, we would be left with the problem of whether what God had direct access to was tainted. Likewise, suppose we had solved the problem of creepy emotions by appealing to the indirectness of imagination, an indirectness illustrated by God's imaginative knowledge of what counterfactuals would have experienced. That is consistent with worrying that treating counterfactuals and actuals as on a par sacrifices too much directness and relationality. I thank a referee for the invitation to clarify the relationship between the two problems.

10. In the interests of space, I am, with regret, setting aside engagement with panentheist models of omnisubjectivity for another time.
11. I am not assuming that these three criteria are the only possible desiderata. For instance, as a referee points out, one might think the capacity to handle the creepy emotions problem (footnote 9) is an issue that might be easier to handle on some models than others. Here what I claim is that these three measures of our models are centrally important to the question of whether one has adequately accounted for both actual and counterfactual subjectivity. Moreover, they are related enough that doing better on one measure often comes with doing worse on another; consequently, taking them together ensures that one has looked at the other side of the theoretical coin as one assesses the alternatives.
12. For instance, 'God is existence itself, of itself subsistent. Consequently, He must contain within Himself the whole perfection of being. For it is clear that if some hot thing has not the whole perfection of heat, this is because heat is not participated in its full perfection; but if this heat were self-subsistent, nothing of the virtue of heat would be wanting to it. Since therefore God is subsistent being itself, nothing of the perfection of being can be wanting to Him. Now all created perfections are included in the perfection of being; for things are perfect, precisely so far as they have being after some fashion' (ST Ia 4.2 co). For some contemporary analytic reconstructions of such claims, see Stump (2023); Hughes (2015).
13. For a social trinitarian view that emphasises not just the personhood of each member of the Christian trinity but also their interpersonal relations with one another, see Stephen Davis's perichoretic monotheism (Davis and Yang 2017, 222ff).
14. As a referee notes, some Thomists and other classical theists would deny that God has anything in the divine life that is like our mental states. To think otherwise is to engage in rank anthropomorphism. Thus, there is no matching God's states to ours. Notice, though, that such a stance would also exclude any other model of omnisubjectivity. Moreover, the Thomist who suspects the view advocated here is guilty of anthropomorphism should still be committed to the idea that the goodness and being distinctive of human mental states comes from and participates in the goodness and being of God. Even if it does not reflect the divine in some respects, say, by being composite or contingent, the Thomist should still be committed to the idea that God's knowledge encompasses the relation between human mental states and the divine. That should be enough for many of them to be able to be on board with my model.
15. It may bear commenting as to why God's first-person knowledge is not sufficient for omnisubjectivity on this view. I thank a referee for the invitation to clarify this matter. This is an introspection+perception model. The introspection half of the model secures the privileged, first-person access dimension of omnisubjectivity. The perceptual dimension of the model, however, makes it second-personal knowledge of the particular creature. God perceives the creature in all of its limitation and uniqueness. A perfect second-personal relation to the creature paired with God's perfect first-person relation to Godself allows God to cognitively relate to the subjectivity of a creature fully and perfectly while appreciating what it's like to be them. It is not enough for God to perfectly know what it is like to be Godself even if there is a relation between what it is like to be God and what it is like to be a human.

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