



## DIVINE CONSCIOUSNESS OF HUMAN CONSCIOUSNESS

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper goes through a series of theses about God and consciousness from the most certain to the least certain. I begin with the thesis that I am more certain of the existence of my currently occurring consciousness state than of anything else. I then move to the thesis that every conscious state includes a relation to a subject, which is internal to the state. I continue with models of divine omnisubjectivity and conclude that God is a co-subject of every conscious state I have. This position is a form of panentheism.

**KEYWORDS:** Omnisubjectivity; consciousness; the self; panentheism; co-subjects

### Introduction

What I mean by omnisubjectivity is the property of having a complete and perfect grasp of the conscious states of every being who has such states from their first- person perspective as the subject of the state. After my book on omnisubjectivity was published (Zagzebski 2023), I continued to think about consciousness and its implications for divine consciousness, and I have moved in a radical direction, although not necessarily to a conclusion. I am going to present my thoughts in a series of theses, starting with the most certain, followed by those that are less and less certain, and finally getting to one that is admittedly extreme, but I hope that readers will find it interesting.

### My theses about consciousness

My first thesis is this: **At any given moment, I am more certain of the existence of my currently occurring conscious state than of anything else, including the existence of what we call the physical world.** Descartes was right, with qualifications. I know with

certainty that my conscious experience is occurring, but that does not mean that I know with certainty what words describe it or if any words can describe it, and I do not know with anything close to certainty what consciousness is and where the edge of my consciousness is. I just know that an example of it is whatever I am experiencing now. I am not even certain what the duration of “now” is. It is surely more than an instant. I am aware of myself as the subject of my conscious experience and I am certain of that, but I am not clear on what I am as subject or its boundaries. I am not prepared to say that I am a substance. All I know with certainty is that my conscious state exists with what I call “I” as the subject, whatever the *I* is.

It is common for philosophers who discuss consciousness to say that a conscious state has phenomenal qualities. If we follow Nagel, we express that by saying that *there is something it is like* to be in such a state. There is something it is like to see red, to feel fear, to decide to sit down. When we say that there is something it is like to see red, we imply that it is a shareable and repeatable experience. Many people know what it is like to see red, which means that the phenomenal content of my seeing red can be the same as the phenomenal content of your seeing red. But the experience of seeing red is always first-personal, meaning that there is something it is like *for me* to be in the state of seeing red, and the same point hold for all my conscious states and for all of yours. I am the subject of every conscious state I have. I call a conscious state subjective to emphasize the fact that it has a subject. I suppose that there are animals whose consciousness is not subjective, and dream research suggests that as we are going to sleep, we often have floating images without a sense of a subject having the images.<sup>1</sup> So it is likely that not all consciousness is subjective. But I am interested in ordinary human waking consciousness, which is experienced as having oneself as the subject. For us, a conscious experience is what it is in virtue of its existence for a subject.

So, my second thesis is this: **A conscious state includes (or usually includes) a relation to the subject.** It is not merely an awareness of red or fear or a belief or a decision, but of myself seeing red or feeling fear or having a belief or making a decision. Awareness of myself as subject is included in virtually every conscious state I have. This thesis has the consequence that if two subjects differ more than numerically, and they each have a conscious state with the same phenomenal content, their states differ more than numerically. Each state is attached to a different subject.

This thesis has implications for Frank Jackson’s (1986) Mary story. When Jackson says that Mary learns what it is like to see red when she leaves her uncolored room, does she learn something accessible to others? In his story, we are told that she finds out what it is like to see color when she sees in color for the first time. It is tempting to say that she finds out something that most other people already know. Maybe so, but she learns something else. She not only learns what it is like to see color, something you and I know; she learns what it is like for me – Mary – to see color. The conscious subject that existed before she left her uncolored room is now attached to colored

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<sup>1</sup> This feature of consciousness while going to sleep has been reported by Nir and Tononi (2010).

phenomena. Her conscious experience relates *her* to the phenomena of seeing color. The relation between Mary and colored phenomena is something new in the world that never existed before.

It follows that what it is like for me to see red is not the same as what it is like for you to see the same red apple. What it is like for me to be in a state of tasting chocolate is not the same as what it is like for you to taste the same chocolate, even if what I taste and what you taste is phenomenally identical. And what it is like for you or me to taste the chocolate is not the same as what it is like for somebody or other to taste the chocolate. A conscious state is not fully identified by phenomenal qualities. The connection between the subject of the experience and the phenomenal content of the experience is a constituent of the experience. The same point holds if the conscious state has an intentional object. When I am aware of desiring chocolate or believing that chocolate tastes good, I am not aware only of a desire or a belief, but of myself desiring or believing. The connection between myself as subject and the intentional object of my conscious state is a component of the state.<sup>2</sup>

Husserl argued that every conscious state, whether it is a perception, an emotion, a memory, or an abstract belief, has a certain phenomenal quality, but my point here does not depend upon that position.<sup>3</sup> Whether I am tasting chocolate, thinking about chocolate, desiring chocolate, intending to buy chocolate, or believing that there are numerous chocolate shops in Santa Fe, I as subject am a component of each conscious state I have. I will not address disputes about whether every conscious state is phenomenal, nor disputes about whether every conscious state is intentional. My point here is that every conscious state of the kind we normally experience has us as the subject of the experience in it.

What does this mean for omnisubjectivity? I have previously argued (Zagzebski 2013, 2023) that it follows from divine omniscience and omnipresence and the practices of prayer that God perfectly grasps each conscious state of every creature who has such states as that state is experienced by the subject. That is because the way a conscious state is experienced by a subject is an aspect of the experience. It is something that exists, and God knows that it exists and is present in it. When Mary leaves her black and white room and sees in color for the first time, something new occurs that is real and therefore knowable by a being who knows everything. If God knows everything, God knows all subjective states, and if God knows all subjective states, God must know them as they attach to their subjects since their attachment to subjects is part of what they are. The relation between Eve and that particular taste of apple is something real, and therefore, something that God must fully grasp. Perhaps someone thinks that it is enough that God says to himself, "I know what it is like to be Eve, and

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<sup>2</sup> It might seem that we can have identical conscious states since we both are aware of what we call "myself." But when I think "myself" and you think "myself," we are not experiencing the same self. If we *are* the same self, that would need to be defended, perhaps by the metaphysics of the Upanishads, or by Paul Draper's panpsychotheism (2017). Draper argues that there exists exactly one mind or self, the subject of all experience, and that subject is God.

<sup>3</sup> See Zahavi (2005), 116-119, for a discussion of this point in Husserl and Strawson.

I know what it is like to have such-and-such-*qualia* since I invented them, so I know what it is like for Eve to be in a state with that *qualia*." Even if God invented *quale*, that would be ruled out if we assume that God does not know anything by inference or by imagining putting two ideas together like we do when we imagine a purple horse. Furthermore, if God is omnipresent, God not only knows each conscious state as it exists for a particular subject, but God is *present in* every conscious state. God is present in Eve's tasting of the apple and your desire for the chocolate and Mary's first experience of red.<sup>4</sup>

I have surmised that there are probably creatures that are conscious but do not have subjectivity. They are aware but are not aware of themselves being aware. Maybe they have states with phenomenal content, but they are not aware of those phenomenal qualities attached to themselves as subject. I have also raised the possibility that there are times when humans too can be aware only of the phenomenal content of an experience and not herself as subject, as when we are going to sleep. So maybe we can be conscious without being conscious of the *I* being conscious. But whether or not that is possible, we clearly are conscious of ourselves being conscious most of the time, even though it is usually not part of our attention. It is that kind of consciousness that is most interesting and which raises interesting issues for understanding how God can grasp it.

I think that most writers on consciousness recognize that experiences are first-personal, so they agree that there must be a special relation between the subject and the phenomenal content of her experience, but that relation can be interpreted as merely epistemic. That is suggested by the expression "first-person perspective" or "first-person viewpoint." According to that position, an experience is totally comprised of phenomenal or intentional qualities, but they are epistemically accessible to only one subject. Your experience of red is an instance of *qualia* of a certain type with you having an exclusive window into it. Other persons can have an experience with phenomenal content of that type with their own exclusive window into it. I find that position puzzling and implausible. It identifies your conscious experience of red with the phenomenal content alone, adding that it is epistemically blocked off to all subjects but you, whatever "you" refers to. That turns you into a viewer of something that other people cannot view. But why can't they view it? Presumably it is because you as subject are attached to it and they are not. What it is like for you to see red and what it is like for me to see red is different because you and I are different, even if the phenomenal quality of seeing red is identical. The phenomenal quality of your

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<sup>4</sup> Not every Christian philosopher interprets omnipresence the way I do. Aquinas reduced omnipresence to other attributes, saying that God is in all things in three ways: by his power, since all things are subject to his power; by the presence of his knowledge, since "all things are bare and open to his eyes"; and by his essence, because he is present to all as the cause of their being (ST I, q. 8, a. 3). That approach eliminates omnipresence as a distinct attribute. I find the position of Anselm more plausible. Anselm says "The supreme nature exists in everything that exists, just as much as it exists in every place. It is not contained, but contains all, by permeating all. This we know. Why not say, then, that it is 'everywhere' (meaning in everything that exists) rather than 'in every place.'" (*Monologion* 23).

experience is not detached from you as subject. If it were, your experience would be an object to you which for some reason cannot be an object to me.

I think that the problem here is that subjectivity is usually contrasted with objectivity, where they are construed as different points of view. Often subjectivity is described as a way of thinking about things, and it is opposed to objectivity, which is a different way of thinking about things. Subjectivity is the point of view of the subject, whereas objectivity is a point of view of nobody in particular, a view from no subject, or the view from nowhere, as Thomas Nagel (1986) puts it. The objective viewpoint is allegedly unbiased, detached from anything about the conscious subject that differs from the viewpoint of any other conscious subject and is, ideally, detached from the viewpoint of all possible conscious subjects. I am not using the term “subjectivity” for a point of view, although a point of view can be derived from it. I want to make it clear that what I am calling subjectivity is consciousness attached to a subject, and since consciousness in humans and probably some other animals is always or almost always attached to a subject, consciousness is almost always subjectivity, at least in its most interesting instances. Subjectivity is something that really exists, and the subject knows that it exists with certainty.

These reflections lead to my third thesis: **The relation between me, the subject, and the content of my experience in a conscious state is internal to the state.** I do not merely have a window into the content of my state; it is what it is because I am attached to it. The subject is a constituent of the experience. The phenomenal content is a constituent of the experience. The subject is aware of being distinct from the phenomenal content of her experience. The subject is not identical with the phenomenal content or any part of it. The same point holds when the content of an experience is intentional—directed towards something in the internal or external world.

St. Augustine does not use the term “phenomenal content,” but he speaks of “images” in the mind, which presumably are one kind of phenomenal content, and he asks why the mind must seek itself when nothing can possibly be more present to itself than itself. His answer is that the mind associates itself with the images of corporeal things that it loves, and it cannot separate itself from those images. So, when it is bidden to become acquainted with itself, it should seek itself within by withdrawing from itself the images that have been added. He writes:

When, therefore, it is bidden to become acquainted with itself, let it not seek itself as if it were withdrawn from itself; but let it withdraw that which it has added to itself. For itself lies more deeply within, not only than those sensible things, which are clearly without, but also than the images of them; which are indeed in some part of the soul.  
(*De Trinitate* 10.8.11)

Using a contemporary conceptual framework, I interpret Augustine as saying that

awareness of oneself as the subject of experience is different from the awareness of anything else. The problem is that the mind confuses itself with its images. Augustine is focusing on images of physical objects, but I think that his point applies to all the phenomenal contents of conscious states. To know itself, a subject must withdraw the phenomenal content; the subject lies more deeply within than any phenomenal content in a conscious state.

It was another thirteen hundred years after Augustine before the post-Kantian philosopher, Johann Fichte, presented arguments that support Augustine's position, but as far as I can tell, without mentioning Augustine. Fichte made self-consciousness the focus of a systematic account of subjectivity, the first philosopher in Western history to do so. He argued that unless we possessed an immediate acquaintance with the self, we would never know that when we turn our attention to ourselves in reflection, what we are aware of is *our own self*. (see Henrich 1982, 21). We know that we are reflecting on a conscious state of ourselves rather than a state of another bearer of consciousness. Furthermore, he remarks, unless the self were always acquainted with itself, there would be no explanation for what would motivate the self to turn to itself in self-reflection. Why would we think of the possibility of reflecting on a conscious state we just had or had last week or ten years ago unless we knew that we would be reflecting on our own conscious state? There would have to be some awareness that the state we are reflecting upon is a state of our self in order to know that there is something there to look at and where to look (Henrich 1982, 20).<sup>5</sup>

That leads to my fourth thesis: **The self – the subject of experience, is continuously present in its sequence of experiences over time. The phenomenal content of an experience, in contrast, changes over time.** To make the point in Augustine's way, the self is what is left when the phenomenal content of an experience is removed, and it is always present to itself in consciousness and is retained in memory. I would not deny that there are temporal periods of unconsciousness, but there is a continuous conscious sequence in which the self is contained.

What makes one self different from another? Given what I have proposed, the difference cannot be due solely to differences in the phenomenal content of the experiences of one self and another. Of course, there are many differences in the phenomenal contents of the experiences of two different persons, but that difference is not enough to explain the difference of selves. If I am right that each self is included in each conscious experience, it follows that philosophical positions on personal identity that proceed by assuming that the sequence of phenomenal contents of experience is sufficient to make a self who she is are mistaken. As we know, that assumption leads to puzzles about replicas that seem to be insurmountable. But if I am right that each self differs from every other, and I would add, necessarily differs from every other, and if each self is *in* each conscious experience, these puzzles do not arise. It is not possible for two distinct selves to have identical conscious states.

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<sup>5</sup> See also Neuhauser (1990), chap 3.

This brings me to my fifth thesis: **Subjects differ from each other in a non-trivial way.** I prefer to avoid the term “qualitative” to describe the difference between one subject and another because I think of a quality as a property that can be expressed by a general term like “sad” or “clever” or “confused,” and it potentially has more than one instance. We use qualitative terms to describe things we are treating as objects – things we observe or reflect upon from the outside, and which we classify with general terms. But the subject is a subject because he or she is inside an experience, and I propose that the inside of one subject necessarily differs from the inside of another and cannot be exhaustively described by any general term. The differences can be experienced, but not described. I think that the best evidence for this is the way we experience other subjects. Our experience of others vastly outstrips any objective description of them. Since what I mean by a self is the bearer of subjectivity, my fifth thesis means that each self differs from every other self in a way that cannot be expressed by any objective mode of classification. My sixth thesis is therefore this: **Each self is necessarily unique. A self is not an object. It cannot be comprehended by any objective mode of classification.** That is why selves are interesting.

Let’s go back to omnisubjectivity. If each subject can only be accurately known as a subject, not as an object, and if I am right that each subject is unique, God must know each individual subject as a subject, and if the subject exists within each of her conscious states, making each subject’s conscious state different from every other conscious state, God must know each and every conscious state as it is attached to its unique subject. Otherwise, God is not omniscient. Furthermore, if God is omnipresent, God must be present in each and every conscious state with its creaturely subject.

How is omnisubjectivity possible? In my omnisubjectivity book, I proposed three models and a metaphor, none of which is completely satisfactory. My favorite model was the empathy model. That works well up to a point. A problem I was concerned about is that in human empathy, the empathizer represents the psychic state of another person in her imagination. She is able to grasp what it is like for her friend or a character in a movie to have a certain conscious state by forming an imaginative copy of it. However, I assume that God does not know anything representationally. God knows directly, in a non-mediated way. So, I proposed that omnisubjectivity on the empathy model would be something like direct, non-representational, total empathy. But if empathy is direct, is it empathy or something else? Direct empathy is not what we experience, and it takes an imaginative leap to use it as a model of God’s knowing.<sup>6</sup>

If we want to emphasize the directness of divine knowing, that leads people to think of the perceptual model for omnisubjectivity. Many passages in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures and in the Qur’an suggest that God knows us in a way that is very close perception. For example, in the Qur’an we read: “And We have already created man and know what his soul whispers to him, and We are closer to him than [his]

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<sup>6</sup> Tasia Scrutton has pointed out to me that it can happen that a human person directly perceives another person’s feeling and takes it on herself. There is a direct transfer of feeling from one person to another. Some readers might like this idea as applied to God, but it has the disadvantage of implying that your feeling causes God to feel a certain way, making God a passive recipient of your state.

jugular vein.”<sup>7</sup> God could overhear our speculations, thinking processes, the formation of our beliefs, our deliberations, and what we tell ourselves when we make up our mind to act in a certain way. We do much of that verbally, and so it would be accessible to a being who overhears us. When we think in pictures, as I do when designing room décor or our landscape, those pictures should also be accessible to a being who can see the same pictures. When you see and hear, does it seem like watching a movie in your mind? If you think so, God could perceive the visual and auditory content of your experiences by watching the same movie. If there could eventually be movies that convey the scent, taste, and touch of scenes in the movie, God could perceive all the sensory features of your experience by watching the same movie.

But there are at least two problems with this model. First, even if you think God can grasp some of the phenomenal contents of your states perceptually, this model will not work for feelings. We *can* observe our feelings, but observing a feeling is not feeling it. Pain is an obvious example, but not the only one. The second problem is that the perceptual model makes God’s grasp of us the grasp of an object. It does not explain how God can be in our experience with us as subjects. This problem extends even to those conscious states that are visual. Maybe God can watch the same movie I am watching in my mind, but God must be watching *me* watching the movie, and that makes me an object to God.

To help overcome that problem, I have explored the metaphor of light. What I like about the light image is that light bathes and infuses objects without being identical to them. Can we imagine divine light powerful enough to infuse everything it creates, thereby knowing a subject as a subject because it is in the subject? This idea suggests a Dionysian theology. Everything emanates from divine consciousness, including all creaturely consciousness. I find this image helpful, but while the metaphor of light is imaginatively stimulating, it is metaphysically thin. When light infuses a transparent object, each photon of light is still distinct from the molecules of the object. There is separation, even if only at the microscopic level. The separation of subject and object is a persistent problem with the attempt to get a model for omnisubjectivity that fully respects the fact that the subject of a conscious state cannot be fully known except as a subject, and in addition, our model must respect the omnipresence of God.

My third model in the book was panentheism. This model is not the classical position, but it has some advantages. Loosely, panentheism is the position that the world is in God. Most traditional philosophers accept this claim in at least a metaphorical sense. For instance, Aquinas worries about the problem that there is a sense in which all things are in God, yet at the same time, God is in all things, but that seems to imply that God is contained by things. He replies:

Although corporeal things are said to be in another as in that which contains them, nevertheless, spiritual things contain those things in

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<sup>7</sup>Surat Qaf. Qur’an C:50 V.16. <https://legacy.quran.com/50/16>.



which they are; as the soul contains the body. Hence also, God is in things containing them; nevertheless, by a certain similitude to corporeal things, it is said that all things are in God; inasmuch as they are contained by Him. (ST I q. 8, a.1, reply obj. 2).

Other writers interpret the idea that all things are in God more literally, but not necessarily interpreting the word “in” as a spatial relation. The word “in,” like the word “omnipresence,” can be interpreted in many different ways. This is one reason that there is a vague border between panentheism and classical theism.

A particularly interesting version of panentheism is the theory of Robert M. Adams in his recent book on ontology, *What is and What is in Itself* (2022), which I did not read until after my omnisubjectivity book was published. Adams rejects the idea that God has imaginative copies of our conscious states, and he rejects that as a model of omnisubjectivity, mistakenly thinking that that was my proposal in my Marquette Aquinas Lecture (Zagzebski, 2013). I agree with Adams about that. Adams then offers the intriguing idea that there is more than one subject of each conscious experience. God is a subject of all creaturely conscious states in addition to the creaturely subject. Let us see how that idea might work.

Adams first offers a carefully constructed ontological theory in which he argues that if there is any reality at all, there must be things that are intrinsically real, where something is intrinsically real just in case its existence does not consist, even in part, in anything external to it (79). Consciousness is our surest example of intrinsic reality, he says. Everything essential to it exists within it. (81). On the other hand, we do not know of anything internal to physical systems that permits us to think that it is a sufficient ground of intrinsic reality for physical objects (95). Properties of consciousness are most clearly qualified for the role of intrinsic properties. (100). Relations, including relations of cause and effect, cannot be intrinsically real unless the whole causal relationship is grounded in something internal, which he later argues must be a single subject of both the cause and effect (177). Since there is a whole system of causes and effects, if that system is intrinsically real, it must have a single subject in a conscious being (179-80). An intrinsically real relation can have two or more subjects as long as one of the subjects contains all the others (188). He proposes that the single subject is God, and he defends panentheism. He says that we are not exactly parts of God, but we exist *in* God.

Ontologically, I say, God is a subject of all my experience, a subject of my consciousness; and so am I. But God and I are persons, and neither of us is the same person as the other. And though my conscious experience is part of God’s conscious experience (so to speak), that does not make me part of God.... A *person* is not a *sum* of temporal stages of a life, but an *owner* of them, as a *subject* of them. Similarly in the present context experiences are not *parts* of persons but *belong* to them. And, I

submit, they can belong to more than one person. And ownership is something that can be shared, and often is. (190-1).

He continues: "I am a subject and owner of my consciousness and my experiences only; God is a subject and owner of all experience".

A bit further on Adams writes:

It also matters in this context that concepts that apply to *attitudes* that persons have are somewhat different from those that apply to experiences, although it is easy to fail to distinguish them. Thus if I, as a person, facing an unknown future, have a conscious feeling of fear, I am afraid. However, we may suppose that God, being a subject of my experience too, has the *feeling of fear*, but knowing the future as I don't (and being God!), is *not afraid*. That is, the attitude which God owns toward the situation that gives rise to the feeling is not one of fear. (191).

Adams makes a number of claims in these passages that are relevant to omnisubjectivity. He argues that a person is the subject of an experience, but the person is not the sum of temporal stages of a life, and I agree with that. He also argues that a subject of an experience *owns* the experience, and is responsible for it, and he points out that ownership and responsibility can be shared, so there is no reason in principle why ownership of an experience cannot be shared between two subjects. It is true that ownership can be shared, but that does not make it easier for me to accept the claim that a single conscious state can have two subjects. Your relationship to your conscious state is not the external relation of ownership. You own your pet and your car, and you are responsible for them. If you had the same relationship of ownership of the content of your conscious state, you could in principle hand it over to someone else. Experiences are not objects to which the subject of the experience can be related by ownership or any other external relation.

In addition, if God is omnipresent, God does not simply own a feeling; he is in the feeling. God is *in* someone's feeling of fear, and their experience of red, and their feeling of hate, and the pain in their head. Adams does not mention hate or pain, but he agrees that God feels fear, and so I assume he would say that God feels hate and pain. He probably did not want to go into that at the end of a complicated book written at the end of his life, but perhaps we should.

Adams says that God does not have the same attitude towards our conscious states as we have. God is not afraid even though he feels our fear. I assume he would also say that God feels hate even though he does not hate anybody. But if God is another subject of Cain's state of hating Abel, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that God hates Abel along with Cain. That is because the intentional object of a conscious state is part of the state.

I will leave that problem aside for now because there is a more serious problem with Adams's view if what I have said about the subject of consciousness is correct. If God is a distinct subject of my conscious state, it must be clear that God is not the subject of only the phenomenal content of my conscious state since that is not the complete state. It should not turn out that God and I merely have a series of states with the same phenomenal content. That would mean merely that God and I experience parallel lives. To be a subject of my conscious state, God must be the subject of a state with me as subject in it, the way it is experienced by me. When I feel pain or think a thought, what God as subject is aware of must be a state of *me* feeling the pain or thinking the thought. Given that the subject is in a conscious state, two separate subjects of the very same conscious state is not possible.

That leads to the conclusion that God's consciousness is directed at my conscious state with me as subject in it. Perhaps that is what Adams intends. It is suggested by his position that there can be two subjects of a conscious state provided that one subject contains the other. But there are problems with that proposal also. The problem is in the interpretation of the word "of." God must be aware of me being aware of pain. When I am aware of myself feeling pain, I doubt that my pain is an intentional object for me,<sup>8</sup> but even if it is, I as subject am not an intentional object to myself. My awareness of myself in my state of pain is not directed at myself as an intentional object. If God's awareness of me feeling pain is a state in which I am an intentional object to God, God is not grasping my state the way I grasp myself as subject of my pain.

This problem has an ancient history in the form of the puzzle, "Can the eye see itself," which Plato addresses in *First Alcibiades*,<sup>9</sup> and which has worried philosophers for millennia. St. Augustine's solution to the puzzle is to distinguish the way the mind is continually present to itself from the way the mind grasps anything else. We find a similar idea in 20<sup>th</sup> century phenomenology in the position that there is pre-reflective self-consciousness that is not directed towards the self; rather, the self is what is doing the directing. The way I would put it is that the experience of my eye seeing is not the same as the experience of seeing my eye. That is the case even though the eye that sees is the same eye as the eye that is seen. The awareness of *I* when I am aware of anything is not the same as the experience of *me* as an object of my awareness even though *I* and *me* are the same thing.

Why do I say that God must know our conscious states exactly the way we do? Does it matter if our state is an intentional object to God when our own mode of knowing our state is subjective? Yes, it matters because for a subjective state *the mode of knowing is what it is*. The attachment of the subject to the phenomenal content of a conscious

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<sup>8</sup> In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Franz Brentano (1981) argued that intentionality characterizes all conscious states, including pains. That is controversial, but a position on that issue is not necessary for the arguments of this paper.

<sup>9</sup> There is disagreement about whether Plato was in fact the author of *First Alcibiades*. Whether he was or not, the puzzle is as ancient as the ancient Greeks.

state is something real that exists in a different way than anything else and cannot be known accurately except in the way it exists—as a subjective state. Subjective consciousness is a real phenomenon, and therefore must be knowable by the being who knows everything that exists.

I have given two interpretations of Adams's proposal, and I believe that both of them are problematic. If Adams is proposing that God is another subject of only the phenomenal content of my state, God is not grasping my state fully because as subject, I am always in my state of consciousness as an intrinsic component of it. On the other hand, if God is subject of a state of grasping me as the subject of my pain, my state would be an intentional object to God. God would not be aware of my state the way it exists with me as subject. In addition, God would not be present in the state, as the doctrine of omnipresence requires.

This line of thought leads me to my seventh thesis: **God cannot be another subject of a creaturely conscious state.** The only way God can succeed in grasping me as a subject, as far as I can see, is if God's subjectivity is not separate from mine. Although Adams says we are two subjects, he also says that my subjectivity is part of God's. I am the little subject of some part of the system of conscious relations. My subjectivity is contained within divine subjectivity, yet Adams wants to say that God and I are distinct subjects of the same state. It is hard to find an unproblematic interpretation of that position.

I am convinced that the hardest problem for this topic is how one subject can perfectly grasp another subject as a subject without being identical to the other subject.<sup>10</sup> I think that I am left with only one option. But before I get to that, let me review the positions that I believe will not work. First, God is not grasping my conscious state accurately and in its entirety if God's grasp makes me an object in God's conscious state. That rules out the perceptual model of omnisubjectivity. Second, if God's knowledge is direct, and if God is omnipresent, it is not sufficient that God grasps our conscious states by making an imaginative copy of them. That rules out a model based on human empathy. Third, God is not grasping my state with myself as subject in it if God grasps only the phenomenal content of my state. That rules out the interpretation of Adams in which God is another subject of a state with the same phenomenal content as the one I have. I have also ruled out a fourth move, one in which God is the subject of an experience of being aware of me as the subject of a state with certain phenomenal content. That is another move that separates God from me as subject, making me an intentional object to God. Given the doctrine of omnipresence, I have previously used the metaphor of light to express the idea of God permeating each subjective state as it exists, not just as a copy in God's imagination. But this metaphor has its limits because the light permeating a transparent object is still separate from it.

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<sup>10</sup> Husserl wrote: "Had I the same access to the consciousness of the other as I have to my own, the other would cease being an other and instead become a part of myself." (*Cartesian Meditations* 139, translated and quoted in Zahavi (2005), 154).

I think, then, that this leaves me with only one option. My eighth and final thesis is this: **God and a conscious creature are a joint subject of every creaturely conscious state. We are the subject of every conscious state I have.** I am not yet willing to endorse this thesis, but I think that it is defensible, and it is as close as I can get to fully respecting both subjective consciousness as something real and knowable, and the attributes of God, including omniscience and omnipresence.

How much do we know about the boundaries of ourselves as subjects of our conscious states? Is there always a barrier between one self and another in intersubjective exchanges? The term “intersubjective” implies two separate subjects in communication with each other. As I described the common experience of empathy, I as empathizer take on in my imagination the first- person perspective of someone else’s conscious state. But the connection between the two selves can be closer than that. Recent neurological research reveals that when people converse and share experiences, their brain waves synchronize. As the study is described in an issue of *Scientific American* published in summer 2023 (Denworth, 2023): “Neurons in corresponding locations of the different brains fire at the same time, creating matching patterns like dancers moving together.” Researchers have discovered synchrony in other species as well, including mice and bats. When two brains are synchronized in this way, the two creatures clearly are not aware of what is happening in their brains, but it is interesting that two people sometimes remark that they are “on the same wavelength,” so there is something close to conscious awareness of intersubjective union. One of the researchers in the brain synchronicity project discussed by Denworth went so far as to suggest that when we’re talking to each other, we can create something like a single überbrain that is not reducible to the sum of its parts.

What happens at the neurological level raises lots of possibilities about what happens at the conscious or subconscious level. In the early decades of the twentieth century, Max Scheler (2008, 12-13) offered the striking possibility 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 say. What they mean by “we” is a new subject of grieving, and Scheler proposes that they share a single subjective state created through intersubjective consciousness.<sup>11</sup>

I have no idea how we could know whether that happens, but I think that even if the experience Scheler describes does not literally happen in humans, it can illuminate divine intersubjectivity with creatures. Given my position on subjective consciousness, I argued in my omnisubjectivity book (Chapter 6) that each person of the Trinity is a separate self with his own set of subjective states, but like Scheler’s parents who grieve together in one act of grieving in which the two of them together are a single subject,

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<sup>11</sup> I thank John Crosby for referring me to this example. He discusses it in Crosby (1996), 120-121. The passage is also discussed by Joel Krueger (2016).

the divine persons can think, grieve, love, and will together in one act in which the three of them are the collective subject. In fact, the possibility of a collective subject in which *we* are the subject is easier to imagine for God than for two humans.

The possibility that the three persons of the Trinity can be a single subject of a conscious state leads me now to think of the possibility that God and a human person can be a single subject of the human person's conscious state. Each person of the Trinity fully grasps each other person through perfect intersubjective union. In the model of omnisubjectivity I am proposing here, God perfectly grasps each creature's conscious state the way one person of the Trinity grasps another when they join together in a single emotion, thought, or act of will. This model is a version of panentheism.

Panentheism conflicts with classical theism in more than one way, the most serious of which is its implications for the connection between God and evil states. My proposal here is that God is co-subject of Cain's state of hatred for Abel, and God is co-subject of Cain's intention to kill Abel. Does this bring God into evil any more than God is in traditional Christian theology? I doubt it. It is part of the tradition that God concurs with everything that happens in the sense that nothing can occur or even exist without God's permission. That is usually expressed as the idea that God's *will* concurs with a human will and the causes of natural events. The picture I get from that approach is that God stands aside from human and natural events and wills to let them be for his own reasons. That does not relieve God of responsibility for what goes on, so I doubt that the problem of evil is any worse for my panentheist proposal or Adams's panentheist proposal than the traditional position. What's more, divine concurrence is typically interpreted as the position that God is the ultimate cause of everything happening in the created world, a position that directly ties divine responsibility to every event, good or bad. But I also believe that the traditional view does not take the omnipresence of God seriously enough. Is God *in* everything in his creation, including every conscious state, or not? If he is, then he is in Cain's hatred of Abel. I have been arguing that God is not fully in it unless God is in Cain's consciousness as he hates Abel. That has brought me to my conclusion that God and Cain are co-subjects of Cain's state of hate. I do not see that that is any worse than saying that God is not actually omnipresent, but he concurs with creaturely goings-on. God is responsible either way. I believe that there are good theodicies, and I would conjecture that they can handle my proposed view as well as they can handle classical conceptions of God, but the attempt to modify existing theodicies in the way that would be necessary on my approach or Bob Adams's approach is another and much bigger project.

Obviously, God is an infinitely bigger subject than Cain is. When Cain hates Abel, that state may take up his entire consciousness, at least for a time. He might not be able to think of anything else. But on my proposal, God is co-subject with Cain in a state of hating Abel, is co-subject with Eve in a state of loving Abel; and loves Abel infinitely as himself, the single subject.

I now find this credible, not only because God is omnisubjective, but because God has infinite consciousness – consciousness infinite in depth as well as breadth. What I mean by infinite in depth is that it goes all the way to the bottom of every finite conscious state, preserving it in existence, which means co-actualizing it. What I mean by infinite in breadth is that it extends outward to include all conscious states, in fact, all possible conscious states. My proposal has the consequence that we and God are co-agents of our intentions and decisions. Our individual agency is not absolute. Each human self is not an ontologically pure and independent entity operating causally on the world. God does not dictate our choices, but accompanies us in forming perceptions, thoughts, intentions, and decisions to act. In Scheler's example of a joint feeling of grief, and in my example of joint agency in the Trinity, one or the other of the individual minds can take the lead. In his relationship with us, sometimes God takes the lead; sometimes we take the lead. When God permits us to take the lead, we call that free will, but in neither case is our agency pure.

Clearly, I am not offering a detailed proposal here, and I do not know whether it will ultimately survive, but I think that the model of God as co-subject with us in our conscious states does a better job than other models of explaining how God can perfectly grasp our subjective states as we do without being us. The proposal requires expanding the subject of our states from "I" to "we." We—each of us and God – are subjects of every creature's conscious state.

I realize that my proposal seems extreme, but one line of research that indicates that it is not so extreme is the ongoing research on collective subjectivity and emotion-sharing among humans. In the last couple of decades, there has been growing interdisciplinary research advocating some version of the Extended Mind Thesis, the claim that there are mental processes that extend beyond the boundary of individual human organisms. Some of this work also defends the position that an individual's emotional experience can extend to and incorporate another individual's emotional experience.<sup>12</sup> I am not yet able to offer an informed reaction to these theories, but I think it is revealing that hypotheses about collective consciousness suggest that our individualistic approach to the mind is mistaken. In any case, divine consciousness is capable of feats of consciousness-blending that humans might never fully accomplish. I don't think that the idea of a collective subject is incoherent, and it might actually exist even in the human realm.

An important difference between my proposal and Scheler's claim about the parents who grieve together is that the parents are aware of being a joint subject of their state of grief, whereas in my proposal, only God is aware of being a joint subject with us. But maybe we *can* be aware of it because it exists in our subconscious and can be brought into our consciousness. Many ordinary Christians say that they can be aware

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<sup>12</sup>See Leon, Szanto, and Zahavi (2019). This paper discusses how emotions fit into the literature on the extended mind, reviews recent proposals about shared emotions, and advocates the position that shared emotions involve constitutive integration that has a similar relational structure to joint attention. See also the set of papers edited by von Scheve and Salmela (2014).

of the Holy Spirit within them, and not as another subject intruding on their private space. I would not be surprised if people practicing other religions have a similar experience. I believe that the philosophical examination of meditation can be important for its possible support for my proposal that we are joint subjects with God in every conscious state, but that is obviously a very large and very daunting project.

When I offered my first thesis at the beginning of this paper, I said that while I am aware of myself as the subject of every conscious experience I have, I am not clear on the boundaries of myself as subject—where my *I* leaves off and another *I* begins. That means that I do not know whether another *I* can join my conscious state to form a single combined subject. I propose that that can happen and, in fact, always happens when we are conscious.

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