

Omnisubjectivity as a Divine Attribute from an Islamic Perspective

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Abstract: The paper aims to demonstrate how the concept of omnisubjectivity can be drawn upon in an attempt to solve philosophical problems pertinent to the divine attribute of omniscience in the Islamic context. Notably, we will address the charge that the concept of omniscience is logically impossible and incoherent. We will argue that omnisubjectivity could be an attribute of God in the Islamic paradigm. Furthermore, we will show that this attribute can be inferred from the primary Islamic source; the Qur'an, and that it sufficiently responds to the historical problems in terms of understanding omniscience faced by Islamic philosophers and theologians. We will argue that omnisubjectivity fulfills the conditions of both groups without facing common problems. Lastly, we will mention the benefits of adopting this model and show some philosophical and theological implications within an Islamic framework.

Keywords: Islam, Linda Zagzebski, Omnisubjectivity, Omniscience, Empathy

Introduction

Throughout the history of understanding God's attributes until the present day, the concept of omniscience has been a controversial topic and a subject of many disputes between thinkers, theologians, and philosophers. In Islamic Medieval Times, this debate took the form of a question of whether God can know particulars. It is generally held that Islamic philosophers (*falasifa*) believed that God could not know the particulars since they are subject to time and change. However, God is pure, simple, indivisible, and immutable (al-Ghazali 1997, 57–

89). Therefore, if God is to know the particulars, this would imply a change in God, but this is impossible.

The rationale for such a position is based on Plato's and Aristotle's argument that a perfect "being" must be unchanging in nature and essence because if there is any change, it implies either improvement or deterioration. Since God is perfect, He cannot be either better or worse.¹ Hence, the conclusion that God could know only universals since they are stable and incorruptible by time and space.² One of the most notable Islamic philosophers, Ibn Sina (Avicenna), argued that the subject and object of knowledge are not distinct in the epistemological process following the Aristotelian epistemology. Ibn Sina concluded that because God is not subject to time, He does not know the particulars in time and space as we humans do; instead, He knows the particulars and individuals in a general way insofar as they are universal (Marmura 1962). In this way, Ibn Sina attempted to make other divine attributes like omniscience supervene on immutability (Azedagan 2022). Unsurprisingly, this argument gave birth to numerous controversies, condemnations, disputes, and debates. Probably the most famous example of this controversy is al-Ghazali's response to this argument in his work *Incoherence of the Philosophers*.

In this work, al-Ghazali attempts to show that philosophers fail according to their own requirements and rules and that their teachings are against Islam and the Qur'an, especially when it comes to the issue of God's omniscience. This objection is understandable because Allah describes Himself in the Qur'an as the all-knowing, all-hearing God from whom nothing is hidden, not even our thoughts, who is always near and answers our prayers. Besides, if God does not know the individuals, how can He differentiate humans from one another and pass His divine judgment on them (al-Ghazali 1997, 274)? Al-Ghazali's work gained popularity, but it was not exempt from criticism. The Andalusian philosopher Ibn Rushd responded to al-Ghazali's work in his *Incoherence of the Incoherence*. Firstly, Ibn Rushd rejected Ibn Sina's argument that God's knowledge of particulars is universal, and then he criticized al-Ghazali's account. The reason is that God's knowledge cannot be characterized as universal or particular. This follows from the fact that neither Ibn Sina nor al-Ghazali respected the distinction between the knowledge of God and humans. According to Ibn Rushd, knowing universals leads to abstraction from the particulars, while knowing particulars entails sense experience, and God cannot

¹ Plato argues something along these lines in a dialogue with Adeimantus (Plato 1992, Book 2, 380d–381c). Aristotle argues for it from pure actuality (Aristotle 2016, Book 12, Ch. 7).

² This does not mean that only philosophers affirmed immutability. There are some notable theologians (mutakallimun) who share this view. For example, see al-Shahrastani (1934, 38).

have either (Ibn Rushd 1987, 274, 280, 284). Today, the most dominant view among Muslims follows al-Ghazali's line of thought.

The contemporary debates in the Philosophy of Religion slightly differ when it comes to omniscience, which should affect how Muslim thinkers respond to challenges. The differences start from the very definition of omniscience. Does omniscience entail knowing everything there is, including propositional knowledge, knowledge of acquaintance, and knowledge of *how*? Is there any other type of knowledge that should be added? The discussions also encompass the question of whether omniscience is compatible with other divine attributes such as omnipotence and omnibenevolence. Another related issue frequently raised is the possibility of having omniscience and free will together: Does infallible knowledge of everything that is, was, or will happen exclude the attribute of free will where choices are predetermined and already made? Lastly, is the concept of omniscience logically incoherent in itself, and is it logically possible for a being to be all-knowing?

Here, we will mainly discuss the last point of the abovementioned issues. We think that it is logically possible for God to be omniscient, meaning that He has propositional knowledge, knowledge of *how*, and knowledge by acquaintance altogether. We will attempt to show that this is possible by ascribing and adding omnisubjectivity to God's divine attribute of omniscience. To do this, we will use the work of Linda Zagzebski, who has proposed several models of omnisubjectivity.³ Furthermore, we will show that omnisubjectivity is consistent and compatible with Islamic sources, such as the Qur'an and Hadith, and can be inferred from them. Lastly, we will present the benefits and reasons for accepting omnisubjectivity as a divine attribute of God and its implications in Islam.

Challenges to Omniscience

The less popular view of divine knowledge in the Islamic world is the view of Nazzam, who argued that knowledge is the eternal and essential attribute of God, not superadded to His essence, which does not change and is free from contingent *things*. While changes occur in the world and human knowledge is changeable because senses acquire it, this is not the case for God, whose knowledge is not changeable and who does not learn through senses but knows all the things in the past, present, and future (al-Ashari 2019, 238, 248, 272, 278). This contradicts the widely accepted view of omniscience, which is that God

³ The original and main model proposed by Zagzebski is that of perfect empathy. However, recently Zagzebski proposed two additional models; "The Perceptual Model" and "Panentheism" (Zagzebski 2023, 70–87).

knows everything, which includes all objects of knowledge, existing and non-existing insofar as they are possible, where existing things are divided into eternal (meaning God's essence and attributes), and contingent, which corresponds to everything apart from Him. When asked whether God's knowledge has any limitation, al-Ghazali states: "No, even if things existing at present are limited, the possible things in the future are infinite. He knows the possibles which are non-existent, and whether He shall create them or not and these are infinite" (Abu Zayd 1970, 25). It is evident that the latter account of omniscience does include particulars; however, the question is, does it contain all the knowledge there is? Is it capable of accounting for a subjective knowledge of how it feels to have a body or how it is to see a specific color?

Furthermore, can it explain how it feels to be a human or a lion? How does it feel to be afraid of death, or how is it to envy your rivals who are successful in life, be angry with your girlfriend, or feel lust towards a beautiful woman? It seems it does not because, according to al-Ghazali and Sunni views, God is a necessary being, and so are His attributes, which are essential to Him and not accidental. This could lead one to argue that it cannot be the case that God has feelings like humans do because feelings are changeable, and they differ from time to time. One day, Kemal is cheerful; another day, he is sad because of the fight he had with his girlfriend. The next day, he is angry because his friend told his secret to other people. Since attributes describe God, these changing states cannot explain Him. The usual approach to changing the states of God is to say that some of His actions seem to us to be angry, while others might *appear* merciful. However, this stays in the domain of His actions and not his essential attributes.⁴

However, we should point out that this does not mean that emotions are necessarily reducible to feelings and that Muslims *must* defend that God cannot have emotions altogether, or that God *must* be immutable in the strong sense. In the literature, emotions are described in different ways, but usual approaches include the description of emotions as feelings, some sort of motivation, or different kinds of evaluations (Scarantino 2016). We think that it could be possible for Muslims to accept the qualified immutability of God (immutability in perfect character, for example) and to affirm that God has rational emotions, like evaluative judgments, (Solomon 2003) and that this makes God arguably greater. This is important because omnisubjectivity as a divine attribute may be an option for both approaches to divine immutability. Nevertheless, it is understandable why traditional theologians would be reluctant to accept that

⁴ Usually, the attributes that are deemed as essential or the most important are power, knowledge, will, hearing, and sight see Abu Zayd (1970, 1–64).

God has feelings. But this rejection could lead to a challenge that God cannot be omniscient because one aspect of knowing emotions or feelings is to have them.

The prevailing view among Muslims holds that God must have all the knowledge there is. In Contemporary Analytic Philosophy, knowledge is usually divided into three types: propositional knowledge or knowledge of facts, definitions, and the kind of knowledge that contains true beliefs. The second type differs from the first type as it cannot be reduced to propositional knowledge and is some kind of ability or skill that one possesses. An example of this knowledge would be riding a bicycle, playing football, swimming, or doing a backflip. The last type of knowledge is knowledge by acquaintance, which is the knowledge by direct experience or acquaintance with a person or an object.⁵ For instance, the sentence "I know Bertrand Russell" means that I have a direct experience of this person and I am directly acquainted with him, and it is not the case that I only know all the facts about him. While there is no problem with God knowing all true propositions, the first complication appears in knowing how. One could argue that only a being with a body knows how to do a backflip. However, God cannot know how to do a backflip because He does not have a body. Therefore, there is something that humans can know which God cannot, and it follows that God does not have all the knowledge there is. It is not enough to know all the details and facts about the body's mechanics, how the muscles react, or how much force is required to do a backflip. One must be able to do it by herself.⁶ Another complication arises from the knowledge by acquaintance. Omniscience in the Islamic sense would imply that God also has this knowledge, which means He would know wrath, envy, lust, pride, and greed in all their aspects. It is possible that one of the aspects of knowing these is *feeling* wrath, lust, envy, pride, and greed. However, this would conflict with the assertion stated above; God cannot have feelings since they are accidents and changeable from time to time. But then again, this would

⁵ For a more detailed account of these three types and other possible kinds of knowledge see Musgrave (1993, 6–10).

⁶ One possible way to argue against this objection is to posit that God could have this kind of knowledge by having a perfect imagination of how it feels to have a body and do a backflip. Of course, in this case, one would have to argue against empiricists who hold that imagination is a deficient and imperfect way of knowledge that depends on experience. Such position is stated by David Hume: "It is evident at first sight, that the ideas of the memory are much more lively and strong than those of the imagination, and that the former faculty paints its objects in more distinct colours, than any which are employed by the latter. When we remember any past event, the idea of it flows in upon the mind in a forcible manner; whereas in the imagination the perception is faint and languid, and cannot without difficulty be preserved by the mind steady and uniform for any considerable time" (Hume 2009, 28).

mean that there is at least one aspect of knowledge that God cannot have, and therefore, omniscience is impossible and logically incoherent.

Furthermore, as Michael Martin put it, if we are to assert that God somehow can know such things in all their aspects, it would be inconsistent with His divine attribute of moral perfection (Martin 1992, 288). A being that is morally perfect cannot have these feelings because to know them would imply experiencing them, and this is contradictory to moral perfection. Even if this is somehow solved, it would still contradict God's omnipotence. The feelings of fear, wrath, and lust are the attributes of a being that is limited in power. However, this cannot be the case for God since He is all-powerful, and because He is omniscient as well, He knows that His power is unlimited. Therefore, it follows that omniscience is incoherent in itself and with other attributes and hence logically impossible.

In addition to these issues, there is a problem of subjectivity, which means the subject's experience is realized in her consciousness. This view presupposes that the individual's experience cannot be reduced to the objective point of view and cannot be known in its totality outside of that individual's consciousness. One of the most famous pieces related to the problem of subjectivity is "What Mary Did not Know" by Frank Jackson (Jackson 1986). The purpose of Jackson's thought experiment is to refute the claim that all knowledge is physical and reducible to facts. The thought experiment concerns Mary, the girl who spent all her life in the black-and-white room. The experiment asks us to imagine that Mary knows all there is to know about the physical world. However, although she knows all about what happens when we see the color red, she has never experienced seeing the color red. When she leaves this room and experiences the colors, she will learn something new, and therefore, physicalism is false. Although it does not follow that physicalism is false,⁷ it does show that Mary's mental state will be different from when she was in the black and white room and once she left it.

Furthermore, if the persons and the contents of their experiences are unique to them, and subjectivity is an intrinsic property of the individuals, then it means that it cannot be grasped by others. If this is true, I could not know how it feels to be my friend Kelly, and no science could tell us how it feels to be a bat.⁸ All these problems could show that omniscience is logically impossible, but there are various ways to challenge this argument.

⁷ In later work, Jackson also changed his original opinion. See Jackson (2003).

⁸ This example refers to Thomas Nagel's famous work, where he argued that it is impossible for humans to take the bat's point of view in the sense that although we could imagine what is it like to be a Bat, we could never know what is it like to be a bat for a bat (Nagel 1974).

The approaches to respond to the arguments above differ in the way that can involve the modification of the definition of omniscience as knowledge of everything that is logically possible for God to know, or dismissing the knowledge of *how* and knowledge by acquaintance as a piece of genuine knowledge, but describing them as mere skills and deficiencies, or by positing that God could know how it is to have a body and feelings because He could incarnate Himself in the human form, etc. These kinds of responses would not solve the problem entirely because they would raise questions like how it is logically possible for humans to have some knowledge while it is logically impossible for God. Is it not the case that this implies a situation where we know something God does not know? It seems this kind of answer would beg the question, and it would need further argumentation on why knowledge by acquaintance is not considered a genuine type of knowledge.

Also, God incarnating into a human would only give Him the potential to know, but there would still be things He would not know until the moment of the incarnation. Even in this approach, God will lack the knowledge of what it is like to be a bat. Most importantly, it would not solve the problem of subjectivity. Besides, since Islamic tradition explicitly denies the incarnation of God, this approach is ultimately unattractive to Muslims.

Although it might be possible to defend these arguments, we will not follow these lines of thought. For this paper, we will maintain the most prominent Islamic opinion of omniscience, which includes all types of knowledge specified. We will argue that it is logically possible to have this type of omniscience by adding the divine attribute of omnisubjectivity. More specifically, we will use Linda Zagzebski's Perfect Empathy Model (PEM) and attempt to show how it solves specified problems while also arguing that her model is compatible and fits well with the Islamic concept of God.

Omnisubjectivity

Omnisubjectivity is developed and argued by Linda Zagzebski, who defines it as: “. . . the property of consciously grasping with perfect accuracy and completeness every conscious state of every creature from that creature's perspective, a perspective that is unique” (Zagzebski 2016). In the earlier paper on this issue, Zagzebski accepts the assumption that an individual's consciousness cannot be reduced to the objective aspect that is external to the individual in question (Zagzebski 2008).⁹ Zagzebski presumes that persons are

⁹ The distinction between objective and subjective is reaffirmed by Zagzebski in her latest work, and she starts it by stating that subjectivity cannot be reducible to objective facts. For a historical analysis of how this division arose see Zagzebski, (2023, 14–20).

unique, and such are their perceptions and contents of apprehension. Nevertheless, if this is the case, if the first-person perspective is intrinsic to the subject only, then how is it possible for this intrinsic state to be shared with other persons? Zagzebski argues that while it might be impossible for humans to achieve this in its totality, it is questionable to argue that it is the same for God. Zagzebski attempts to solve the problem of subjectivity by ascribing the attribute of omniscience to God and argues that this attribute is entailed by two other divine attributes: omnipresence and, more importantly, omniscience.¹⁰ Zagzebski thinks that omniscience solves the puzzles and problems arising from these attributes because it arguably answers how a God, the Creator, knows what it is like to be one of His creatures.

In Medieval times, there were many efforts to solve the problem of particulars. For the *falasifa*, the answer usually went in the direction of complete knowledge of the cause, which would then result in the knowledge of everything that is caused by that cause. One such example is Ibn Sina:

“God thinks of his essence and understands that he is the basis of every existing thing. He thinks of the principle behind existing things that come from him and everything which comes from them. So nothing which exists is not in some way brought about necessarily by God the First knows the . . . causes and their effects, and what they necessarily produce” (Ibn Sina 1960, 326, 359).

Later on, a similar argument was formulated by Thomas Aquinas: Since God is the ultimate cause for everything to exist and God knows Himself entirely, it follows that God will know all the effects that come from Him, including the particulars (Aquinas 2014, 108–110).

Even today, the standard answer to the problem of knowing the particulars follows this pattern. It is commonly stated that since God is the Creator and the cause of His creatures, He can know them just like they know themselves. While there is no disagreement between Christian and Muslim theologians that God knows all the facts and true propositions in the greatest detail, this does not suffice to solve subjectivity. As stated above, subjectivity cannot be reduced to objective facts. Moreover, appealing to the first cause explanation is not a satisfactory answer or sufficient argument to resolve subjectivity. Our experience does not show us that a cause can know its effect entirely.

Consider a computer engineer (E) making a computer (C). E is the cause of C, and E knows that the C he made can be instructed to carry out sequences of

¹⁰ In the latest work, Zagzebski expands on this and argues that omniscience is not only presupposed in prayer but also a requirement for divine love and justice (Zagzebski 2023, 49–57).

arithmetic and logic operations by programming. E also knows that C follows the sets of rules and operations because, after all, it is E who sets up these rules. Additionally, E knows that C has hardware and software, which includes the operating system. However, all this example shows us is that E can know all the facts about the C he made, how it works, how it reacts given certain conditions, etc. However, it does not show that E knows how it is to be C (assuming that C has internal states). It is impossible for E to know this because E is presumably human and therefore wholly different from C.

If the reader is skeptical of the possibility of the subjective states of the computer, one can replace it with a synthetic life form. Either way, we can extend this problem and say that using the argument from the knowledge of the first cause, we are capable of showing that God knows all the facts about His creatures, but He cannot know what is like to be these creatures, and more significantly, how it is to be every single creature because they are all unique. This again raises the problem of omniscience because maybe only E knows how frustrating it was *for him* to build the machine and it does not operate well; maybe only E knows how anxious it is to attempt to make the computer before the requested deadline, perhaps only E knows how it feels for him to get praised by the common people for this wonderful new model, etc.

If this is the case, is there any way that someone besides E would know what it feels like to be E? In other words, can E share his conscious experiences? Even if there is an engineer (Y) who is also building a computer, and also has the same difficulties and goes through similar circumstances, she still does not know and cannot know how it is for E to go through anxiety and pride, although she might have similar emotions. Even if the anxiety and tension of E and Y might be similar, Y cannot know the *exact* feelings of E from his own perspective, and vice versa.

This problem is raised as an argument against omniscience by Patrick Grim in the form of essential indexicals (Grim 1983, 265). Considering this problem, Zagzebski does mention the opinion of some philosophers who argue that even if this were the case, it would not create a problem for knowledge of God because His knowledge is directed at propositions only, and if God grasps the truth value of the propositions, there is no problem at all. God would still be omniscient because there would be nothing else to know. However, this response does not solve the problem. Even if the subjectivity and mental states of conscious beings are not knowledge, God would still lack something, which is, in this case, a cognitive or epistemic state.¹¹ If this is the case, it will follow

¹¹ “. . . subjectivity is something, that it is not reducible to anything in the world of objective facts, and therefore, if God grasps everything, it is not enough that God grasps all the objective facts. God must also grasp all the subjectivity there is” (Zagzebski 2023, 1).

that God does not fully grasp what happens with His creatures, mainly what happens in their consciousness. However, if God is omniscient and has perfect knowledge, then this cannot be the case, as He cannot lack this understanding. Instead, God must know everything E knows and experiences through his life. Additionally, He must know not only the experiences of E but also all the experiences of all living beings that have them. He must know how it is to be a human, raven, lion, snake, or rabbit *through* their eyes.

Suppose one desires to defend and maintain the position that God can somehow share our mental states. In that case, it is reasonable to request at least one possible way, preferably confirmable with experience, where we can share our mental states with other persons or the means for others, which are unique and possibly have inherently different experiences, to somehow acquire the emotions of people other than themselves from the perspective of other people, without confusing the knowledge of self and others. Zagzebski argues that this task is attainable with different models.

Perfect Empathy as a Model of Omnisubjectivity

The first and original model developed by Zagzebski is the PEM. Empathy is usually described as one's ability to access the content of another person's feelings and thoughts or to share their thoughts and feelings, emotionally engage with the other, and care for their well-being (Stueber 2019). It is not just an ability to understand the other but also to sense, recognize, and discern what the other person is thinking or feeling. If correct, this means that the person exercising empathy can, to a certain degree, take the perspective of the other and understand it from the first-person perspective of that other without being or confusing himself with that other person. Zagzebski presupposes this position and understands empathy in the same manner: "... a way of acquiring an emotion like that of another person" (Zagzebski 2016, 440).

Besides this central characteristic of empathy, Zagzebski adds other features commonly agreed upon; the person's (one exercising empathy) assumption that it has the same emotion as the target with whom is empathized, taking on the perspective of the target, person empathizing is motivated to do so from his perspective to assume the target's perspective, the emotion that is produced is representational, and it being meaningful as long as the target emotion does not disappear (Zagzebski 2008, 240–243).

To understand these features, consider a real-life example: On July 11th, 2006, Sumejja's father passed away due to cancer that he was fighting for a long time. Sumejja is devastated and anguished over her loss. She has a very close friend, Selma, who has known her since childhood. Consciously, Selma empathizes with Sumejja's pain, and in this process of taking Sumejja's

perspective, Selma obtains a mental state similar to hers. She does it by *imagining* how it would be if she were Sumejja and suffered the same loss. It is important to note that empathy is not just any spread of emotions; there needs to be a focus of attention, where Selma focuses her attention on Sumejja's emotions and is aware of the likeness between Sumejja's emotions and her own. Furthermore, there is a reason for Selma to empathize with her friend. Since she is her closest acquaintance besides her family, it is apparent that she cares for her and loves her. In this sense, empathizing with Sumejja and making her emotions intelligible makes Selma closer to Sumejja. Another critical thing to note here is that it is not the case that Selma takes these emotions from her perspective and imagines how it would be for her if she had lost her father; instead, she is actively attempting to imagine herself being Sumejja and feeling the same emotions Sumejja feels. The last important thing to notice here is that Selma has to obtain Sumejja's perspective in order to realize her desire to understand her friend's feelings. However, while doing so, she is aware that she is not Sumejja but that she imagines what it is like to be Sumejja, and at the same time, she is aware of her own perspective. This is why Selma ends up with two distinct perspectives: hers and the perspective she imagines. This example covers and explains all the features Zagzebski mentioned and attributed to empathy.

We can see from the discussion so far that the primary purpose of empathy is to imitate or copy another person's mental state with the intention of accurate representation, and ". . . it seems to follow that the more accurate the copy, the better the empathy, and that includes accurately copying the strength of the target emotion" (Zagzebski 2008, 243).

However, humans copying another's emotions is not perfect. Selma's pain, which is the product of her empathizing, is not the same pain Sumejja feels, probably because it is just a copy. Humans are incapable of producing a perfect copy because of their limitations. The other difference is that Selma's mental states are representational, whereas Sumejja's are not. This does not mean that a person empathizing cannot know anything about others; she does know something, but not in perfect detail. Nevertheless, Zagzebski's intent was not to show that humans can acquire a perfect copy. Instead, Zagzebski aimed to demonstrate that there is a possible way to acquire another person's emotion to some degree. Since humans are limited, they will have limited empathy, but this is not the case for a perfect, infinite, and maximally excellent being such as God. This is why Zagzebski proposes:

[. . .] that God has total perfect empathy with all conscious beings who have ever lived or ever will live. That is the property I call omniscience. Since I also accept the traditional view that God knows everything directly, I propose

that omnisubjectivity is direct acquaintance with the conscious states of creatures—like direct seeing, only without any physical distance between perceiver and perceived. (Zagzebski 2016, 442).

In this case, God does not have to imagine our mental states as we do while we are empathizing; instead, He has a direct approach to comprehend our mental states and emotions. Since a person experiences things instantly, God also understands them immediately from the first-person perspective of that individual. God can do this through empathy, where there will be no need for Him to become the individual He is in contact with. Furthermore, God does not need to be merged or unified with the person because He will also know that the individual and Himself are distinct and that the emotions of that person are not His emotions. At the same time, He will be able to understand the mental states of another completely. This is because He has the perfect copy of those mental states.

We think Zagzebski successfully demonstrates that this concept is logically coherent and that, if it is true, it solves the problem of omniscience. Recall the challenges and arguments against omniscience we mentioned in the relevant section. We believe that the attribute of omnisubjectivity solves them all. In case God is omnisubjective, He does not have to have a body or become a human in order to possess the knowledge of how or the knowledge by acquaintance. He can know the persons directly in the most significant detail and know the way they know themselves without being merged with them. He can know how to do a backflip simply by being directly connected with the beings who perform it. More importantly, God could know all the feelings, including fear, lust, greed, pride, sloth, wrath, etc., without feeling them Himself.

Additionally, God does not even have to have feelings to know them in detail and understand them in the way we do. Since He can perfectly grasp every mental state a human or any conscious being is in, He has the perfect copy of that feeling without feeling the fear Himself, He can know it and understand it perfectly on every level. We think that this model of omnisubjectivity is also a good fit for the Islamic understanding of God. Furthermore, we also believe that the attribute of omnisubjectivity can be inferred from Islamic sources, and therefore, we encourage it to be adopted. In the next section, we will discuss this particular model of perfect omnisubjectivity in the Islamic framework.

Omnisubjectivity in the Islamic Framework of God

The primary sources of Islam, the Qur'an and Hadith,¹² are apparent when it comes to God's knowledge. His knowledge is absolute, and nothing is hidden from Him. According to the Qur'an, God's knowledge encompasses everything, no matter how insignificant the thing is. In surah Saba (34:3) it is stated: ". . . (Allah is) the Knower of the unseen." Not absent from Him is an atom's weight within the heavens or within the earth or (what is) smaller than that or greater, except that it is in a clear register."¹³ This divine knowledge also includes the most personal and intimate thoughts humans have. It is stressed in numerous places in the Qur'an that God knows what is hidden inside human hearts and thoughts: "And indeed, your Lord knows what their breasts conceal and what they declare. And there is nothing concealed within the heaven and the earth except that it is in a clear Register" (al-Naml, 27: 74–75).

More interestingly, in another verse, the Qur'an speaks about how God is with those who are hiding their true intentions from the people and that He understands them: "They conceal (their evil intentions and deeds) from the people, but they cannot conceal (them) from Allah, and He is with them (in His knowledge) when they spend the night in such as He does not accept of speech. And ever is Allah, of what they do, encompassing" (al-Nisa, 4:108). After reading similar verses, it becomes evident that arguing for the *falasifa's* position is hard. The verses seem clear, and the Qur'anic language unambiguously says that God's knowledge surrounds all things, including direct knowledge of human feelings, thoughts, and consciousness. This is why we think the Qur'anic case of God's omniscience gives good reasons to accept that He is omnisubjective. This is especially evident from the verses where it is stated that God is very *close* to His creatures: "And We have already created man and know what his soul whispers to him, and We are closer to him than (his) jugular vein" (Qaf, 50:16). This verse clearly implies that God knows and understands humans directly because being closer than the jugular vein can mean mental closeness. At least, we do not see any implausibility in this interpretation. Mental closeness is undoubtedly closer and more intimate than physical closeness, providing a better grasp and understanding of a person. Physical closeness could only cover the observation and propositional knowledge, where the knowledge of acquaintance would be left out. Since the verses speak about God's direct and all-encompassing knowledge, which does not leave out a single atom, nor human thought, it follows that God in Islamic understanding can be omnisubjective.

¹² In this paper we adopt the Hadith sources only from Sunni Islam.

¹³ Unless specified differently, we will be using Saheeh International's edition of *The Qur'an: English Meanings* (2004).

Possible Metaphysical Mechanisms of Omnisubjectivity in Islamic Thought

In the previous portions of this paper, we endorsed Linda Zagzebski's PEM as the most satisfactory *epistemic* description of how God can share every creature's first-person perspective without undergoing temporal change. However, PEM is a *functional* account; it still needs a deeper metaphysical rationale. In this section, we propose two complementary mechanisms drawn from within the Islamic intellectual tradition that may render the operation of omnisubjectivity intelligible: one grounded in Sufi metaphysics, particularly the concept of *tajalli* (self-disclosure), and the other in classical Islamic theology, particularly the doctrine that God continuously sustains the existence of all mental states. Either of these can underwrite PEM without compromising divine transcendence or creaturely distinction. These approaches not only offer plausible explanatory models but also demonstrate that the structure of omnisubjectivity finds theological precedent within Islam.

Let's start with the first mechanism which is based on Sufi metaphysics, particularly of Ibn Arabi and Akbarian tradition. Ibn Arabi begins with the Qur'anic intuition that "wherever you turn, there is the face of God" (al-Baqarah, 2:115). For him, every "face" is a locus where one or more Divine Names (*al-asma al-husna*) show themselves, while simultaneously veiling other Names. The Names—Life, Knowledge, Power, Mercy, Justice, and infinitely more—are not verbal labels but ontological relations (*nisab*) between the absolutely transcendent Essence (*al-Dhat*) and the world. They "suffuse existence," lighting up each creature according to its unique capacity (*istidad*) to receive theophany. Hence, "each thing is both God's face and God's veil", a *barzakh* that reveals certain attributes while concealing others (Chittick 2020).

Because the contingent possibilities are endless, the Divine Names are likewise without limit; every novel state in the cosmos corresponds to a fresh relational Name. Creation is thus nothing but the ever-renewed articulation of these Names, "words" in the All-Merciful Breath, appearing through the colored glass of finite forms (Chittick 2020).

Ibn Arabi extends *tajalli* from the outer cosmos to the inner theatre of consciousness. All cognitive, emotional, and volitional states manifest specific Names. For instance, perception and recollection arise through *al-Nur* (Light); insight through *al-Alim* (the All-Knowing); compassion through *ar-Rahman* (the All-Merciful). In a celebrated passage, Arabi writes;

"Were it not for Light, nothing whatsoever would be perceived . . . smell, taste, imagination, memory, reason, reflection—everything through which perception takes place is Light . . . Hence every known thing has a relation with the Real, for the Real is Light. It follows that nothing is known but God" (Chittick 2020).

The upshot is that every flicker of first-person awareness is already a miniature self-disclosure of the God. Our subjectivity is not a private chamber hidden from the divine gaze; it is the mirror in which particular Names are momentarily reflected. Each joy, fear, doubt, or intention is, ontologically speaking, a *tajalli* of the corresponding attribute seized within the limits of human receptivity.

This metaphysics supplies a ready-made mechanism for Zagzebski's PEM. If a creature's mental state arises as a disclosure of a Divine Name, God's knowledge of that state is simply His self-recognition of the Name's radiance. There is no representational gap, no need for inferential access: the divine subject "reads" the creature's interior life as effortlessly as light reads its own color in a prism. Empathy, therefore, is not an added divine achievement. It is the intrinsic logic of creation itself, to manifest a Name is simultaneously to be known by the One whose Name it is. Thus, it seems that omnisubjectivity is already built into the Akbarian metaphysics.

Before moving to the next mechanism, it is important to address a classical objection. Because every mental state is described as a theophany, critics often worry that Ibn Arabi collapses Creator and creation into a single substance. He explicitly rejects that inference. Although Ibn Arabi describes the cosmos as God's self-disclosure, he sharply distinguishes the transcendent Essence (*al-Dhat*) from its manifest Names. The Names are "relations" (*nisab*) that come into play the moment the Real (*al-Haqq*) addresses something other than Himself; the Essence, by contrast, "remains unknown" even while it undergirds every disclosure. In this light, each creature is simultaneously a "face" of God and a "veil" that hides the inexhaustible Reality. Ibn Arabi captures the paradox with the formula "He/not-He" (*huwa la huwa*): insofar as a thing exists, it is nothing but Real Being; insofar as it is limited and contingent, it is other than the Real. He therefore denies any literal identity between Creator and creation. Created things are "possible" beings, "the non-existents" that borrow existence at every instant from the Necessary Being and can never exhaust or circumscribe it. The relationship, Ibn Arabi says, is like light shining through colored glass: the ray is wholly dependent on the source, yet the source transcends every tinted appearance it assumes. Just as colored glass is neither the sun itself nor part of it, similarly, we are neither God nor part of Him.

The second mechanism comes from traditional Islamic Theology. Unlike the previous Akbarian model, which naturally has built-in omnisubjectivity, we will need to modify the traditional view to accommodate omnisubjectivity. We will call this model Empathic Co-Creation. Classical Ash'ari and Maturidi theologians explain all change—indeed, the very persistence of anything—as the result of God's unceasing *takwin* ("bringing-into-being"). In the atomistic

worldview of early Islamic Theology, God “produces [the world] at an initial moment, and ... re-produces it at every subsequent moment in which it exists,” so that every accident (including a thought or emotion) is recreated moment-by-moment (Richardson 2020).

Nothing, therefore, subsists even for an instant apart from God’s direct volition. Building on this premise, we propose that every act of *takwin* is inherently empathic. When God wills, “Let Kaan now experience fear,” two inseparable facets of a single timeless volition flash forth:

1. Ontological positing—Kaan’s fear is actualised and sustained.
2. Perfect empathy—God concurrently instantiates within His own knowledge the very qualia of that fear.

Because the two facets are coextensive, there is no first create, then notice. The Kaan’s first-person state is born already transparent to God. Divine awareness is not mediated by representation, imagination, or inference; it is the knowing-from-within that necessarily accompanies continuous creative fiat.

The empathic “copy” arises within divine simplicity, not by psychophysical mirroring. God does not enter the creature’s temporal flux, merge with its identity, or acquire accidental states. Instead, the creature’s state subsists as a finite mode of the one timeless creative act. Hence God possesses each mental particular exactly as Zagzebski’s PEM requires—perfectly, immediately, and non-inferentially—while remaining immutable and transcendent.

Some Implications for Islamic Theology

Zagzebski argues that God surely has subjectivity because to grasp subjectivity, one must *have* subjectivity, and this means that there is something that is like to be God. Furthermore, since subjectivity includes an experiential aspect, God has experience, and then God must be a person (Zagzebski 2023, 24).¹⁴ Therefore, it would follow that if God can fully grasp the subjective mental states of all conscious beings from their own perspective, then God must be a person.

Some Muslims may have certain worries about this conclusion because they might view personhood as a limiting factor and deficiency that ought not to be attributed to God. Probably the best-known example of such an approach in current times is Muhammad Legenhausen, who argues from the complexity of connotations that it is not self-evident that personhood is an absolute perfection, and that it may involve certain unacceptable limitations

¹⁴ On the same page, Zagzebski argues that the personhood of God is further implied by a constant scriptural reference to God as having “I” or a first-person perspective.

(Legenhausen 1986). For example, although the term “muscular” connotes power, we cannot use it for God because it also connotes corporeal existence (Legenhausen 1986, 311).

In case Muslims see personhood as unacceptable, there is still an option of affirming God as *personal* but not as a person. This means that God would be able to grasp our subjectivity and even have subjectivity Himself, but He would still not be a person. The reason we see this approach attractive for this group of Muslims is because it is consistent with other personal descriptions of God present in the Qur’an, such as that God responds to our prayers (al-Baqarah, 2:186), takes prophets as His friends (al-Nisa, 4:125), acts freely (Ya-Sin, 36:81), etc. The recent approach following this reasoning in the Islamic tradition is Muhammad Saleh Zarepour, who argues that God is personal (in the sense that He can speak) and also not a person. Instead, God is even greater and more perfect because He has other attributes of perfection that are non-personal, like necessity, self-sufficiency, etc. (Zarepour 2022). Of course, we do not think it is necessary to deny divine personhood because this issue is highly ambiguous, and Muslims may affirm that God is a person without denying His transcendence. Based on personal attributes mentioned in the Qur’an, God could be a transcendent person without the limitations of finite and embodied beings. In other words, it is possible that personhood is a form of perfection that ought to be attributed to God. Therefore, we think both doors are open for Muslims.

Other interesting implications could arise from the question of God’s temporality and His relationship to time. One may think that omnisubjectivity is better suited for a temporal God because in this case, God can genuinely experience the events from our perspective and grasp our emotions as they arise in real-time.¹⁵ Because of this, time would be seen as dynamic where the events would follow successively (Rea 2014, 72), and the present moment would be ontologically unique when compared to the past and future.¹⁶ On the other hand, one may think that God does not experience events sequentially because He is not temporal, and He knows all events and experiences of conscious beings in a single, eternal act. Although God’s acts are eternal, they happen over time and we experience them as sequential *only* due to our frame of reference and not due to objective differences in the present moment (Leftow 1991, 222–228).

¹⁵ Recently, Ryan Mullins argued that timeless God, who is also simple and immutable cannot be omnisubjective (Mullins 2022).

¹⁶ This uniqueness means that only moments that belong to the present can be considered as existing (Emery, Markosian, and Sullivan 2024).

Although we, the authors of this paper, disagree about the nature of time and God's temporality,¹⁷ we do not see either of these two options as closed to Muslims. Both views have theological and philosophical merits, and each can be interpreted in ways that align with Islamic doctrinal principles, and this is why we can find traditional Muslim scholars defending both positions. Just to mention some examples, thinkers like Ibn Taymiyyah and Abu Barakat al-Baghdadi argued for a temporal God, whereas al-Shahrastani and Hanafi scholar Abu Shakur al-Salimi defended God's transcendence over time.¹⁸ We think that this historical diversity suggests that this question can be open to one's theological and philosophical preference, and the same is true concerning relating this issue to God's omniscience.

These matters aside, it is evident that omniscience would also have further implications when it comes to our understanding of the relationship between God and His creatures. To be noted, with the acceptance of omniscience, we cannot view God as a mere observer of the facts and emotions experienced by us. He knows them directly as we know them from the first-person perspective. This attribute results in a much more intimate and close relationship than the case where God knows only the facts about when someone is feeling angry or sad. Instead, God would know these emotions just like we do by having a perfect copy of them without the need for Himself to go through the same states.

Another implication of this attribute that aligns well with the Islamic framework is that since God has a perfect grasp and understanding of humans, and He is compassionate and the most merciful of those who show mercy, God would not prescribe or request something from His creatures which they could not carry out or sustain. This is ideally in line with the Qur'anic verse, which states: "Allah does not charge a soul except (with that within) its capacity. It will have (the consequence of) what (good) it has gained, and it will bear (the consequence of) what (evil) it has earned . . ." (al-Baqarah, 2:286).

Since He perfectly knows how humans feel while exercising His commands, God would order the best prescriptions to benefit humans both physically and mentally. God would also be aware of some persons who cannot perform

¹⁷ The co-authors hold divergent metaphysical commitments on this point. Kikanovic defends an A-theoretic, presentist outlook in which temporal becoming is objectively real and God endures through a sequence of "before" and "after" moments. Doko, by contrast, adopts a B-theoretic, tenseless realism and maintains that God is strictly atemporal—i.e., wholly outside the temporal series while sustaining all times in a single, timeless act of being.

¹⁸ For Ibn Taymiyyah's position see Hoover (2022). For Shahrastani's and Barakati's positions see Lammer (2018). For Abu Shakur al-Salimi's position see al-Salimi (2017, 100). Furthermore, it might be possible to somehow affirm that God is both: temporal and atemporal in some sense. For such an approach, see Lala (2024).

certain obligations, like the pilgrimage or fasting for the whole month. In this case, one would expect that God gives the exemption to such persons. Again, we can find exactly this in Islamic sources that cover the issues of exceptions from some required practices, like the fasting of the old and weak people or the prayer of the traveler. Furthermore, another important consequence of omnisubjectivity is in the field of prayer. In the case of God knowing humans exactly from the first-person perspective, He would be aware of their prayers even before they open their mouths. So, God would not *become* aware of our prayers only when we verbally direct them to Him, but He would know them by having direct access to our thoughts, and He would grasp how it feels for humans to intend to ask for a certain petitionary object or how it is just to praise Him from their own perspective. We think that omnisubjectivity provides a good addition to traditional definitions of prayer because classical Islamic scholars usually define prayer as necessarily involving a verbal expression (al-Munawi 1990, 166). However, verbal expression is not a necessary element of petitionary prayer because it is conceivable that we pray exclusively by thought. Since God has direct access to our most intimate thoughts, He would hear and understand these prayers before they are even verbalized.

Depending on one's view on the nature of time, the prayer would not be our attempt in search to be noticed by God or to ask Him for help in times of trouble; rather, it would be the embodiment and realization of the intimate relationship between the Creator and creatures. God would hear and know our prayers in the most direct and personal way. In Islamic tradition, the concept of remembrance (*dhikr*) is essential, and it is also considered necessary, as the prayer, which is one form of remembrance. This means that while we are performing the prayer, we become aware of the closeness of God, and the words that are uttered are just the articulations that represent that awareness.

However, this attribute of God also entails that He knows the thoughts and feelings of wicked people, and that means that He would know the hatred, lust, and fear. One could have a moral objection to this because one may think that having such mental states can be morally wrong. When it comes to moral culpability in the Islamic worldview, mental states are important, but not as important as actions. So, if the person feels hatred and desire to kill and torture people, he is not responsible for having these feelings unless he actualizes those desires. If the individual can suppress the desires of such nature, he is promised a reward for it. Of course, it should be admitted that we cannot apply this to God analogically because it might lead to affirming that these feelings are derived directly from God's nature. However, Omnisubjectivity would solve this issue because with this attribute, God would know these feelings directly as humans do, but their origin would be from humans and not God.

Additionally, Muslims believe that God is the ultimate Judge, and He is the only authority who can judge people, as indicated in the opening chapter of the Quran: “Master of the Day of Judgement.” One can argue that judging a person necessitates having empathy with them because fair judgment requires understanding the situation of the person judged (Zagzebski 2023, 54–57). Zagzebski’s model of perfect empathy can explain why only God can be the ultimate judge of people, because no being besides God can completely empathize with the judged person. This also provides comfort to the judged person, as he knows that God perfectly understands his situation. This may also partly explain why, in the scenes described in the Quran, people seem to accept the judgments of God without any objection.

Conclusion

We think that the PEM of omnisubjectivity proposed by Linda Zagzebski satisfies all requirements of perfection mentioned throughout this work. The model has a great advantage because it offers a system where God can know things directly and where He is in an intimate relationship with humans and understands them from their first-person perspective, just as all Sufis want. At the same time, it assures God’s transcendence where God is not the same as humans and where He can distinguish between His thoughts and experiences from those of humans. Additionally, the PEM can explain how God knows emotions directly without experiencing those emotions Himself. Furthermore, this model would also satisfy the theologians who argue that God cannot have emotions. It seems clear that God’s attributes of omniscience, omnipresence, and transcendence would be explained and contextualized by the attribute of omnisubjectivity. We think that Muslims should consider this attribute as one of the divine attributes because if coherent, the being possessing it would arguably be greater than the being lacking it. Furthermore, PEM offers a good explanation and answers to the challenges and arguments against omniscience. It fits well and does not contradict the Islamic understanding of God in any way.

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