

THE EYE OF OUR SOUL AND ITS 'ONTOLOGICAL GAZE':
THE ICONIC FUNCTION OF THEOLOGICAL *EPINOIA* IN THE
PHILOSOPHY AND SPIRITUALITY OF GREGORY OF NYSSA

By

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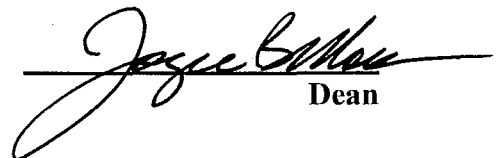
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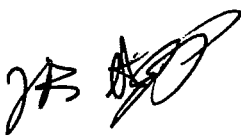
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ABSTRACT

The relationship between Gregory of Nyssa's theological conclusions and his philosophy and spirituality demonstrates how he views the function of theological *epinoia* iconically. This iconic function of theological *epinoia* can be analyzed by monitoring one's gaze from its inception in relation to sensible objects through to its culmination as the ontological transformation of the soul into the image of God.

Theological *epinoiai* develop as a result of the noetic process. This process begins when one accumulates information from material objects through the senses. This information is relayed by the soul to the mind where a conceptual image is formed. However, since the divine essence is invisible and imperceptible, this image is formed in the mind using categories from the sensible realm, which are subsequently conferred onto the divine essence. This is the apophatic problem. The divine essence is therefore contemplated using social analogies and spoken of using a universally acknowledged grammar of divinity.

It can be determined that Gregory views theological *epinoia* iconically not only because of the prevailing sight motif occupying much of his thought, but also because his epistemology ensures the limited yet necessary function of concepts in theology. Because theological *epinoiai* are formed by observing God's operations in the sensible realm, they can enable a human to extend beyond conceptual interpretations by transforming into the divine likeness.

The 'ontological gaze' thus emerges as a result of the soul transforming into the image of God. To the extent that this occurs, the 'ontological gaze' from the 'eye of the soul' is positioned on and directed towards the external divine essence.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- NPNF Schaff, Philip and Henry Wace. eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series II, vol. 5, *Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic Treatise*. Translated by William Moore. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2004.
- Glory Musurillo, Herbert (trans.). *From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa's Mystical Writings*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2001.
- FC Woods Callahan, Virginia (trans.). *Fathers of the Church*, vol. 58, *St. Gregory of Nyssa: Ascetical Works*. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1967.
- ACW Graef, Hilda C. (trans.). *Ancient Christian Writers*, vol. 18, *Gregory of Nyssa*. New York: Paulist Press, 1954.
- Ag. Apol.* *Against Apollinaris*
Ag. Eun. *Against Eunomius*
Ans. Eun. *Answer to Eunomius' Second Book*
Com. Eccl. *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*
Com. Inscr. Ps *Commentary on the Inscription of the Psalms.*
Com. Song *Commentary on Song of Songs*
Let. 2 *Letter 2: To the City of Sebasteia*
Let. 38 *Letter 38*
Perf. *On Perfection*
Thr. Gods *On 'Not Three Gods'*
Beat. *On the Beatitudes*
Chr. Life *On the Christian Mode of Life*
Faith *On the Faith*
Holy Spirit *On the Holy Spirit*
Trin. *On the Holy Trinity, and the Godhead of the Holy Spirit*
Mak. Man *On the Making of Man*
Soul Res. *On the Soul and the Resurrection*
Vir. *On Virginitiy*
What Chr. *On What it Means to Call Oneself a Christian*
Cat. *The Great Catechism*
Life Mac. *The Life of Macrina*
Life Mos. *The Life of Moses*
Pr. *The Lord's Prayer*
Gr. *To the Greeks: Concerning the Commonality of Concepts*

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Gregory of Nyssa's apophatic outlook plays a significant role in how he understands the function of theological *epinoia*. The incomprehensibility of the infinite divine essence requires an alternative means to approaching and ultimately 'seeing' God; the apophatic problem requires an ontological solution. Within this dichotomy Gregory maintains that theological *epinoia* functions like an icon, which therefore includes a mediatory responsibility; the noetic process used to formulate the theological *epinoiai* resides to one side, while the 'ontological gaze' projects beyond theological *epinoia*. Intrinsic to the iconic function of theological *epinoia* is a sense of motion created by the gaze. Initially, sensory objects emanate 'accidents', which are subsequently absorbed by the senses.¹ The soul relays these 'accidents' upon their entrance through the senses to the mind.² The mind is responsible for forming concepts, which result from the organization of sensory information.³ These concepts, however, have their origin in sensory objects; since the divine essence is incomprehensible, imperceptible and invisible, these concepts can only be cautiously conferred on the divine essence. Herein lies the apophatic problem of the noetic process just described. Because the divine essence cannot be perceived or sensed, no concepts can be

¹ *Mak. Man*, NPNF, 396. "We find, then, by experience, both the bitterness of gall and the pleasant character of the quality of honey; but when these facts are known, the knowledge is one which is given to us...by taste, smell, hearing, and often by touch and sight."

² *Soul Res.*, NPNF, 433. Gregory defines the soul as "an essence created, and living, and intellectual, transmitting from itself to an organized and sentient body the power of living and of grasping objects of sense, as long as a natural constitution capable of this holds together."

³ *Mak. Man*, NPNF, 393. Gregory claims that sensory information is "ordered by the mind."

derived from its sensory information. Therefore, conceptualization and discussion about the divine essence is reduced to invoking social analogies.⁴ Among other metaphysical categories, these analogies include references to numeration and relation. Therefore, triadological and christological concepts are ineffective to depict literally the divine essence. Consequently, theological *epinoia* contains a mediatory and iconic function.⁵ Accordingly, theological *epinoia* is exceeded not noetically, as in the process through which triadological and christological conceptions are formed, but instead ontologically. One is able to ‘see’ God by becoming like him.⁶ This is the ‘ontological gaze’. The soul progressively transforms into the image of God through imitation, the archetype of which is the Incarnated Christ.⁷ To the extent that this occurs, the ‘ontological gaze’ from the ‘eye of the soul’ is thus projected towards the external divine

⁴ *Beat.*, ACW, 147. Gregory claims that “we form in our mind an image *not* of the essence.” Instead, the image in our mind is a reflection of “the things that are referred to Him” so that He is thus “known by analogy.”

⁵ *Ans. Eun.*, NPNF, 265. “In applying such appellations to the divine essence, ‘which passes all understanding’, we do not seek to glory in it by the names we employ, but to guide our own selves by the aid of such terms towards the comprehension of things which are hidden.”

⁶ *Beat.*, ACW, 144. “God is promised to the vision of those whose heart has been purified...For according to Scriptural use, to ‘see’ means the same as to have.” Elsewhere, Gregory clearly demonstrates the mediatory function of theological *epinoia* and the superiority of the ‘ontological gaze’: “But since the promise of *seeing* God has a twofold meaning, on the one hand, that of knowing the Nature that is above the universe, on the other, that of being united to Him through purity of life, we must say that the voice of the Saints declares *the former mode of contemplation to be impossible, whereas the second is promised to human nature in Our Lord’s present teaching*, Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall *see* God” (italics mine). *On the Beatitudes*, 151.

⁷ *Soul Res.*, Translated by Catharine P. Roth (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002), 78. “[The soul] will go back to itself and see clearly what it is in its nature, and through its own beauty it will look upon the archetype as if in a mirror and an image. We can truly say that the accurate likeness of the divine consists in our soul’s imitation of the superior Nature.”

essence.⁸

The sense of motion created by the gaze from sensory objects to the external divine essence is replicated in the structure of this thesis. However, an analysis specifically of the function and expediency of theological *epinoia* in Gregory's philosophy will be given primary consideration. As will become evident, a number of scholars have illuminated the role of Gregory's apophysis, phenomenology, epistemology and spirituality with respect to how he did theology; however, no scholarly research has been devoted to deciphering how Gregory understands the purpose or *function* of his triadological and christological concepts in light of his spirituality and philosophy. In reference to his view that trinitarian language was employed analogously by Gregory in *On 'Not Three Gods'*, Lewis Ayres recommends further scholarship on the matter:

To describe how Gregory does consider that we should analogously talk about the distinction between the persons and their unity, we would need to see how he combines together distinct analogical fields in particular texts, adapting analogical traditions to serve within his overall grammar of the divine and of theological language. Demonstrating how this is so – and thus coming to provide a more detailed answer to particular ways of presenting Gregory's analogical preferences – is the subject of much other work. Indeed, I suggest that such research should be seen as an urgent need in the study of classical Trinitarian theology. However, on the basis of my argument here I can say that in every case we will only read Gregory well if we constantly bear in mind how those analogical discussions are intended to play a part within a particular *askesis* of the soul and of the imagination, and in every case we would need to bear in mind the ontological foundations for such talk. Only if we learn to do this

⁸ *Beat.*, ACW, 150. "The darkness caused by material entanglements has been removed from the eye of your soul, and so you see the blessed vision radiant in the pure heaven of your heart." Additionally, Gregory claims that, "true sight of God consists in this, that the one who looks up to God never ceases in that desire." *The Life of Moses*, II: 233, Translated by Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 115.

would we really learn, at last, to appreciate Gregory as a pro-Nicene theologian.⁹

This thesis is, in essence, providing ‘a more detailed answer to particular ways of presenting Gregory’s analogical preferences’, and the answer does indeed draw on the ‘*askesis* of the soul’, while containing an ‘ontological foundation’.

However, implementing theological *epinoiai* is not merely a way to speak analogously about the trinity and about Christ and his position in the trinitarian economy. The ‘more detailed answer’, which is the most consistent with Gregory’s own thought, identifies the function of theological *epinoia* as iconic. Theological *epinoia* serves a temporary function in the ‘sensible’ and ‘created intelligible’ realms, but must ultimately be surpassed by the ‘ontological gaze’.¹⁰ Therefore, Gregory understands the function of theological *epinoia* to be iconic.

The term ‘icon’ as it is employed throughout this thesis denotes a sense of movement beyond a static image of necessary yet limited function. Whereas an idol functions as an end itself, an icon directs the gaze beyond the initial image toward the actual thing it depicts. It is a gateway. Gregory desired that his audience understand the function of theological *epinoiai* as iconic rather than as idolatrous. Triadological and christological conclusions are not themselves God and do not literally and completely depict the incomprehensible and ineffable divine essence; theological *epinoiai* are incomplete representations of God and

⁹ Lewis Ayres, “On Not Three People: The Fundamental Themes of Gregory of Nyssa’s Trinitarian Theology as Seen in *To Ablabius: On Not Three Gods*,” In *Re-Thinking Gregory of Nyssa*, ed. Sarah Coakley (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 39.

¹⁰ *Life Mos.*, Translated by Malherbe, Abraham J. and Everett Ferguson (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), II: 157. “He must wash from his understanding every opinion derived from some sense perception and withdraw himself from his customary intercourse with his own companion, that is, with his sense perceptions, which are, as it were, wedded to our nature as its companion. When he is so purified, then he assaults the mountain.”

should be exceeded by alternative means. Although it is possible to accuse Gregory of a double-iconic philosophy where both theological *epinoiai* and the role of the internal image of God in the ‘ontological gaze’ function as an icon that must be surpassed, this would be a gratuitous assessment. Theological *epinoia* is surpassed in a similar fashion to that of an icon because it is static; it does not change, but is instead a permanent gateway toward the divine essence. The internal image of God does not function like an icon because it is dynamic and ever-evolving; in fact, for Gregory, to the extent that the image of God is present within a person, that person’s ‘gaze’ is positioned on the external divine essence. It is precisely the mutability of the image of God which designates it as the means by which theological *epinoia* is surpassed. It indicates the trajectory of the ‘ontological gaze’, and thus acts like a gauge when viewed in the ‘mirror’ of the soul.

Without identifying the context and precise manner in which Gregory integrates this terminology into his own philosophy and spirituality,¹¹ it is important to achieve at least a basic understanding of *epinoia* and Gregory’s threefold philosophy of reality. The Greek word *epinoia* means ‘conception’. Henry A. Wilson states, “Both conception and *epinoia* represent some regulated operation of the mind upon data immediately given.”¹² Lewis Ayres states, “By *epinoia*...we reflect on things, actions, events and words to break them down into their constituent parts or assumptions.”¹³ *Epinoia*, therefore, emerges through the

¹¹ This, of course, will be accomplished in the appropriate chapters.

¹² Henry Austin Wilson, *EPIINOIA*, NPNF, 249.

¹³ Lewis Ayres, “On Not Three People: The Fundamental Themes of Gregory of Nyssa’s Trinitarian Theology as Seen in *To Ablabius: On Not Three Gods*,” 26.

perception of material objects in the ‘sensible’ realm. Concurrently, Ayres asserts that since “God is unknown to direct human perception we make use of the mental act of *epinoia*, which we can perhaps gloss as ‘abstracted conception’.”¹⁴ Theological *epinoiai*¹⁵ are thus conceptions about God which have their origin in material objects, but that are subsequently conferred onto the invisible and imperceptible divine essence by necessity. The genuine essence of anything is even inaccessible through *epinoia*; a human is only able to form “a conception (*epinoia*) of that reality on the basis of analogy with human experience.”¹⁶

Gregory’s threefold philosophy of reality warrants a brief description as well. A comprehensive explanation of Gregory’s philosophy is provided in *Against Eunomius*.¹⁷ Essentially, Gregory divides reality into three realms, the ‘sensible’, ‘created intelligible’ and ‘uncreated intelligible’. The ‘sensible’ realm is where material and perceptible objects are located. The ‘created intelligible’ realm is where conceptions reside. Sensory information is relayed by the soul to the mind where the data is organized into conceptions. Both of these realms are created. The ‘uncreated intelligible’ realm is occupied only by the Trinity because it alone is uncreated.

Primary Sources

The primary sources used to conduct this study are all English translations. Several of Gregory’s works appear in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series II, volume five, while other more specialized treatises, in addition to some

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ *Epinoiai* is the plural form of *epinoia* and therefore means ‘conceptions’. Ibid., 26.

¹⁶ Robert S. Brightman. “Apophatic Theology and Divine Infinity in St. Gregory of Nyssa.” *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 18, no. 1-2 (1973): 99.

¹⁷ *Ag. Eun.*, NPNF, 60-61.

duplicates, exist in the *Fathers of the Church* series volume fifty-eight. Various sections representing Gregory's spiritual inclinations are presented in the single volume *From Glory to Glory*. A number of sections in this volume are extracted from works that do not appear in the two aforementioned volumes, most notably from Gregory's *Commentary on Ecclesiastes* and *Commentary on Song of Songs*. Gregory's works are also represented in *Ancient Christian Writers* volume eighteen. All other works by Gregory appearing in English exist separately as single volumes or publications in scholarly journals.¹⁸

This thesis draws from the full spectrum of Gregory's works including his ascetic and theological or 'dogmatic' treatises. Additionally, the significance of when he wrote each work within the context of specific notable occurrences in his life is determined and the relevance to this thesis is concurrently established. Although the dates of most treatises from Gregory's pen cannot be ascertained, it seems that many of his ascetic works such as *On Virginity* and *The Life of Moses* were written either before or after his tenure in Church leadership. However, Gregory began to develop his theology in such 'dogmatic' treatises as *On the Faith*, *On the Holy Spirit*, *On the Holy Trinity*, *Against Eunomius* and *The Great Catechism* solely during his reluctantly accepted appointment to the Bishopric of Nyssa. During the final stages of Gregory's life, when his influence was in decline, he reverted back to the ascetic content he was naturally concerned about before his theological career was initiated by his brother Basil. Nevertheless, relevant portions from a wide range of Gregory's writings contribute to the

¹⁸ For a comprehensive list of English translations of Gregory's works see the bibliography on p. 145-147.

specific agenda of this thesis. Consequently, Gregory's spiritual works are analyzed in order to expose his ascetic tendencies specifically as it pertains to his soteriology. Conversely, Gregory's theological contributions are evaluated in view of his spirituality and epistemology. This is to say, the purpose of Gregory's theology can be deciphered when it is assessed in conjunction with his spiritual presuppositions and the apophatic qualifiers stipulated in tandem with his triadological and christological exposition. However, four of Gregory's works receive substantial attention in this study for unique reasons. Gregory's magnum opus *Against Eunomius* demonstrates his epistemological concerns and provides the basis for his apophaticism especially as it relates to language and theological concepts. In *On the Making of Man* the human empirical situation and the relevance therein is explicated within the context of Gregory's threefold explanation of reality and his understanding of the human composition. Gregory's soteriology is described as an apophatic ascent in *The Life of Moses*, while the context for God's incomprehensibility and ineffability is established. Additionally, the futility of knowledge as a means to evaluating the divine essence is addressed. Gregory's sermon on the sixth beatitude in *On the Beatitudes* accentuates the 'sight' motif and ontological method for 'seeing' God that is so vital to the successful defense of this thesis.

Modern Scholarship on Gregory of Nyssa

Robert Brightman's scholarship on Gregory's apophaticism lays the foundation for how Gregory develops the idea and method by which theological *epinoia* ought to be viewed iconically. Brightman claims, "The fact that man

cannot know the essence of God is at the heart of St. Gregory's theology."¹⁹

Since apophasis is central to his theological methodology, Gregory acknowledges the need to surpass the inadequate theological *epinoiai* and ontologically 'see' God with the 'eye of the soul'.

Jean Danielou, a well-known and prolific writer on Gregory, lays emphasis on the significance of divine infinity in Gregory's thought. The ontological progression of a human coincides with the infinity of the divine essence, and is thus also infinite. Danielou uses the Greek word *epektasis* to denote this infinite progression towards the divine. Because the ascension is infinite, the goal, the 'seeing' the divine essence, is in the ontological advancement itself.²⁰

Hans Urs von Balthasar recognizes the paradoxical goal in Gregory's thought where God's infinity limits apprehension to the striving after the goal rather than to the goal itself. Balthasar's comprehensive interpretation of the internal image of God in Gregory's thought leads him to another paradox. The 'eye of the soul' can view a divine representation in the internal image of God, but must also extend beyond toward the external divine essence itself.²¹ In this scenario, the transformation of the soul which seeks to replicate the image of God

¹⁹ Robert S. Brightman. "Apophatic Theology and Divine Infinity in St. Gregory of Nyssa," 106.

²⁰ Jean Danielou, (Introduction), *Glory*, 59. Danielou demonstrates this paradoxical understanding of the goal of perfection where the goal is in the *striving* for the goal rather than in the unattainable goal itself: "It is clear that the Greek word *epektasis* is very suitable to express the double aspect of the soul's progress. On the one hand, there is a certain contact with God, a real participation, a divinization (Greek *epi*: 'at' or 'towards'). The soul is, in a true sense, transformed into the divine; it truly participates in the Spirit, the *pneuma*. But God at the same time remains constantly beyond, and the soul must always go out of itself (Greek *ek*: 'out of') – or, rather, it must continually go beyond the stage it has reached to make a further discovery."

²¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought: An Essay on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa*, Translated by Mark Sebanc (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 127. Balthasar describes this paradox as "being at once 'in self' and 'outside self'."

functions as the ‘ontological gaze’. Through this ‘ontological gaze’, therefore, the soul is able to ‘see’ the external divine essence.

In his thoughtful analysis of *On ‘Not Three Gods’*, Lewis Ayres demonstrates the extent to which Gregory seeks to regulate the function of theological *epinoia*. In this sense, Ayres examines the reason *why* Gregory believes one ought to extend beyond theological *epinoia*. Ayres explains that the process of conversation about Christ and the Trinity within theological circles is dependent on a pre-established ‘grammar’ of divinity, which is ultimately derived from universally recognizable social constructs.²² Because this ‘grammar’ of divinity originated in the ‘sensible’ realm, it is incapable of extending toward the divine essence itself. Therefore, an alternative method, which this thesis identifies as the ‘ontological gaze’, must be espoused.

A Biography of Gregory of Nyssa

William Moore declares that among the Nicene Fathers “there is no more honoured name than that of Gregory of Nyssa.”²³ Moore’s assessment of Gregory is unique as, until more recently, Gregory’s influence and contributions have either been criticized or have gone virtually unacknowledged. Regardless of whether or not previous negative evaluations of Gregory are fair, a number of events in his life indicate that Gregory’s own contemporaries placed a lot of trust in his abilities as an orator, exegete, rhetorician, philosopher, theologian and spiritual advisor.

²² Lewis Ayres, “On Not Three People: The Fundamental Themes of Gregory of Nyssa’s Trinitarian Theology as Seen in *To Ablabius: On Not Three Gods*,” 16-21.

²³ William Moore, “The Life and Writings of Gregory of Nyssa,” NPNF, 1.

The third son and one of the youngest of ten children, Gregory of Nyssa was born around AD 335 or 336 probably at Caesarea.²⁴ His father, Basil, was a well-known rhetorician who apparently died at an early age leaving five boys and five girls to the care of Gregory's grandmother, Macrina, and mother, Emmelia. Gregory was from a wealthy aristocratic Christian family whose influence and social distinction aided his transition, and that of his brothers, into leadership positions within the Church.²⁵ All of the children seem to have been of high character, but Gregory's sister, Macrina, appears to have had a significant effect on his life and that of his brother, Basil. She and her mother were devoted to a life of asceticism and established a female conventual society on the family estate in Pontus at a place called Annesi along the Iris River. Unlike Basil, Gregory did not receive any formal education. However, Macrina may have been responsible for Gregory's religious upbringing, while Basil's instruction seems to account for Gregory's notoriously philosophical disposition. Reverend Canon E. Venables mentions that Gregory possessed a natural shyness, which might explain his avoidance of formal education.²⁶ Moore further illuminates Gregory's character and personality in light of his shyness:

Certain it is that Gregory had not the benefit of residence at Athens, or of foreign travel. It might have given him a strength of character and width of experience, in which he was certainly deficient. His shy and retiring disposition induced him to remain at home without choosing a profession,

²⁴ Unless otherwise indicated, the majority of this account of Gregory of Nyssa's life is derived from the comprehensive interpretation by William Moore, "The Life and Writings of Gregory of Nyssa," NPNF, 1-8.

²⁵ Roth, Catharine P. (trans.), *On the Soul and the Resurrection* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002), 7.

²⁶ Rev. Canon E. Venables, "Gregorius Nysenus" In *A Dictionary of Early Christian Biography*, ed. Henry Wace and William C. Piercy (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1999), 417.

living on his share of the paternal property, and educating himself by a discipline of his own.²⁷

Gregory endured a constant struggle between the secular life of a rhetorician and the religious life advocated by his sister, Macrina, his brother, Basil, and his friend and fellow 'Cappadocian Father', Gregory of Nazianzus. Gregory's first public confession of Christianity was prompted by a terrifying dream. His mother, Emmelia, exhorted him to participate in the forthcoming religious ceremony in honour of the Forty Christian Martyrs. He unwillingly accompanied his mother, but weary from the journey and the length of the service he retired to a garden and fell asleep. There, he had a dream in which the forty martyrs appeared to him, reproached him for his indifference and beat him with rods. When Gregory awoke, he was filled with remorse and earnestly sought to reconcile himself to the Christian faith by undertaking the office of reader in the Church. However, he soon reverted back to his life as a rhetorician for which he was reprimanded by Basil and Gregory of Nazianzus. The latter accused him of a desire for vanity and public notoriety. As Moore so aptly observes, this is not altogether consistent with Gregory's personality and character. It seems more probable that Gregory was drawn back to that which he was familiar.

Eventually Gregory did return to the Christian faith after the powerful persuasion of his sister, Macrina. It is then that Gregory retreated to his brother's monastery in Pontus near the pre-existing female monastery established by Macrina and her mother. During this time Gregory devoted himself to an allegorical study of Scripture and the works of Origen. A notable distinction in

²⁷ William Moore, "The Life and Writings of Gregory of Nyssa," NPNF, 2.

Gregory's writings from this time centre around his love of natural scenery and beauty, an element almost altogether absent from Greek literature as a whole. Both his allegorical view of Scripture and appreciation for God's creation illuminates Gregory's spiritual proclivity to which he gains access through the 'sensible' realm.

Surrounded by numerous taxing altercations with the Arian controversy, Basil was at last elected Bishop of Caesarea. In an effort to maintain orthodoxy, Basil appointed likeminded Bishops to certain sees. Gregory himself was appointed Bishop of a little-known Bishopric, Nyssa. It is noteworthy that Gregory vehemently opposed this appointment. Whereas Basil's concern appears to be more with maintaining orthodoxy, Gregory's hesitation causes one to consider his indifference towards the necessity of such an endeavour. Nevertheless, Gregory did not see any reason why he could not incorporate the spirituality he so enthusiastically embraced into his theological approach and methodology.

Gregory is at one point charged with simplicity by his brother Basil after Gregory forges a letter in an effort to reconcile differences between Basil and his uncle, another Gregory. Venables delineates the content of Basil's letter to Gregory: "He first ridicules him with his simplicity, unworthy of a Christian, reproaches him for endeavouring to serve the cause of truth by deception, and charges him with unbrotherly conduct in adding affliction to one already pressed out of measure."²⁸ Basil even thought that Gregory was vulnerable to schemes

²⁸ Rev. Canon E. Venables, "Gregorius Nysenus" In *A Dictionary of Early Christian Biography*, 418.

that would essentially make him a pawn during a time when theological and political partisanship determined the definition of orthodoxy. Moore accurately observes: “Sad was the contrast to one of [Gregory’s] gentle spirit, more fitted for studious retirement and monastic calm than for controversies which did not end with the pen, between the peaceful leisure of his retreat in Pontus and the troubles and antagonisms of his present position.”²⁹

The aforementioned sentiment is further affirmed when considering the events surrounding Gregory’s banishment by the emperor, Valens. After a charge of uncanonical irregularity in his ordination and accusations that he stole Church funds, Gregory was deposed from his Bishopric and banished. He retired to Seleucia where he was exposed to bodily discomfort and persecution. “From the consoling answers from his friend Gregory of Nazianzus (for his own letters are lost), we learn the crushing effects on of all these troubles upon his gentle and sensitive spirit, and the deep despondency into which he had fallen.”³⁰

Soon, however, the emperor, Valens, died and was succeeded by Gratian, a disciple of Ambrose. All orthodox Bishops, including Gregory, returned to their see and the process of restoring orthodoxy was initiated. The death of both Basil and Macrina, unfortunately, overshadowed this triumphal return of orthodoxy. Gregory subsequently took the place of Basil as defender of orthodoxy. It may be that Gregory’s focus on theological description was initiated externally rather than by his own personal priorities. This by no means indicates definitively that Gregory had absolutely no interest in preserving orthodoxy, but the external

²⁹ William Moore, “The Life and Writings of Gregory of Nyssa,” NPNF, 5.

³⁰ Ibid., 6.

source of his vocational decisions renders its origin at least somewhat suspect. The high standard to which he placed both Basil and Macrina provided further motivation for Gregory to defend that which his brother and sister both advocated during life.

In order to suppress the Galatian heresy, Gregory was elected Bishop of the vacant see in Iborra on the border of Pontus. He was commissioned by the synod in Antioch, of which he attended in AD 379, to visit the churches of Arabia and reform its scandalous behaviour. Moore claims that Gregory was appalled at the immoral conduct associated with the pilgrimages to Jerusalem and spoke of the “uselessness of pilgrimages as any aids to reverence and faith, and denounce[d] in the strongest terms the moral dangers to which all pilgrims, especially women, are exposed.”³¹ Venables provides additional insight into the behaviour of the Arabian churches: “[Gregory] found the state of the church there even worse than had been represented. The people had grown hardened in heresy, and were as brutish and barbarous in their lives as in their tongues.”³² After his failed attempts to reform the Arabian churches with the help of Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory returned to Cappadocia saddened and depressed. Considering the interdependence of ‘heresy’ and immorality in what Gregory witnessed at Jerusalem, is it any wonder that he defended the theological *epinoiai* that appeared to facilitate Christ-like behaviour most?

Because of his proximity to Basil and his externally prescribed involvement in theological matters, the new emperor, Theodosius, found favour

³¹ Ibid., 6-7.

³² Rev. Canon E. Venables, “Gregorius Nysenus” In *A Dictionary of Early Christian Biography*, 419.

with Gregory. While in Jerusalem, Gregory was provided with an Imperial carriage to ease the burden of extensive travel. He was one of one hundred and fifty Bishops summoned to the Ecumenical Council of Constantinople in AD 381 where he gave the inaugural address and where he preached the funeral oration on the death of Meletius of Antioch, the first President of the Council.³³ Here he also presented his treatise against the “rationalist of the fourth century, Eunomius,”³⁴ in defense of his brother, Basil. Before the close of the Council, Theodosius commissioned “Gregory’s name [to] join those of the Bishops of Constantinople and Alexandria as standards of belief.”³⁵ Furthermore, two years later he preached the funeral oration on Princess Pulcheria and later on the Empress, Flaccilla, which again demonstrates the extent to which the Imperial court found favour with Gregory. In response to the distinctions bestowed on Gregory, Venables aptly points out that he “was not made for the delicate and difficult business of restoring the unity of the faith. He was more a student than a man of action. His simplicity was easily imposed upon. Open to flattery, he became the dupe of designing men.”³⁶ This assessment seems to agree with the external origin of Gregory’s role in maintaining orthodoxy.

Little is known from Gregory’s final years, but he did attend the synods in Constantinople during the years AD 383, 385 and 394. It is noteworthy that during this time it appears Gregory again began to develop a “philosophical

³³ Socrates Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History from AD 305-439*, V, 9, In *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. II, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2004), 122.

³⁴ William Moore, “The Life and Writings of Gregory of Nyssa,” NPNF, 7.

³⁵ Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson, (Introduction), *Gregory of Nyssa: The Life of Moses* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), xvi.

³⁶ Rev. Canon E. Venables, “Gregorius Nysenus” In *A Dictionary of Early Christian Biography*, 420.

theology of the spiritual life,³⁷ in essence reverting back to his first true love. This is especially significant when considering Gregory's declining influence, which opened the door for a new generation of emerging Bishops such as Nectarius, president of the synod in AD 394, among others. It is probable that Gregory did not survive long after this last synod, and in all likelihood died around AD 395.

The events of Gregory of Nyssa's life and the perception others had of him clearly indicate a hesitancy to get involved in theological controversies and a desire to instead nurture a religious life; even when attempting theological description, he cannot altogether abandon a deeply spiritual outlook that invariably alters his perspective of theological *epinoia* and its purpose. The mention of Gregory's 'simplicity' in an earlier quote is a common misinterpretation of his intentions and priorities. Some scholars who currently overlook his theological aptitude often fail to acknowledge Gregory's gentle, sensitive, reclusive, compassionate and deeply ascetic character. Without taking these elements into consideration, current scholarship is doomed to equate Gregory's motives with those commonly held among theologians, past and present. The intricacies of Gregory's life must be acknowledged and accounted for when assessing precisely how he understood the function of theological *epinoia*.

³⁷ Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson, (Introduction), *Gregory of Nyssa: The Life of Moses*, xvi.

Gregory clearly desired to defend his brother Basil's reputation specifically against Eunomius of Cyzicus.³⁸ This attempt was made in order to preserve Basil's distinguished reputation rather than for concern over the veracity of Basil's theological conclusions themselves.³⁹ Gregory was additionally forced against his will to accept a leadership position in the Bishopric of Nyssa. It appears, then, that the Emperor found favour with Gregory and elevated him to a more significant role within the Church upon Basil's death because of his position in Nyssa, his proximity to his brother and the vehemence with which he defended Basil, a defense instigated more in order to maintain his brother's reputation than for theological reasons. If Gregory was so concerned about theology as such, why did he wait until called upon to leave his monastic life and enter in theological controversy? If he was so concerned about the Arian heresy, why was he not enthusiastic about becoming Bishop of Nyssa, a move that would have contributed to the preservation of orthodoxy within the empire? Why did he not

³⁸ Eunomius, Bishop of Cyzicus (c. 360-364), taught the subordination of the Son to the Father within the trinitarian economy. He accomplished this by distinguishing between unbegotten and begotten rather than uncreated and created as Gregory did. In the former dichotomy the Son is begotten and the Father is unbegotten thus demonstrating the Son's subordination to the Father. However, Gregory insisted that both the Son and the Father are uncreated and should therefore be equally honoured within the Trinity. Additionally, "in resisting Eunomian doctrine, the Cappadocians first attacked the view that the essence of God can be perfectly known. Eunomius held that in theology words mean what they say: God is unbegotten because by definition he has no originator; since that is not true of the Son, he is essentially distinct and different." Stuart G. Hall, *Doctrine and Practice in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991), 157. It is not difficult to see how this view would conflict with Gregory's apophasis and theory of language as well as his threefold philosophy of reality.

³⁹ The initial chapters of Gregory's work *Against Eunomius* describes the conflict between Eunomius and his brother Basil when he was alive. Demonstrating Gregory's motivation for involving himself in the controversy after Basil's death, chapter two in Book I is entitled "We have been justly provoked to make this Answer, being stung by Eunomius' accusations of our brother." Gregory declares that to he himself "belongs this heritage of the departed [Basil]" and therefore designates himself as the one who must "appropriate the legacy of the controversy" between Eunomius and Basil. Gregory accepted this responsibility because of his proximity to the controversy and to his brother Basil; he did not therefore accept "this laborious task from any consciousness in myself of powers of argument superior to others who might be named."

get involved in theological controversy up until Basil's reputation was threatened? Why did Gregory not write about theological matters when he was free to write on any subject before he became the Bishop of Nyssa unless theology was not a natural concern for him? This does not seem like a person who is concerned about theological conclusions for the sake of preserving correct theology itself, but instead characterizes a person forced against his natural ascetic and spiritual inclinations in order to engage in theological controversy. Most importantly, this latter assessment of Gregory, as opposed to the former characterization, corresponds well with the thesis that Gregory viewed the function of theological *epinoia* as iconic. This is precisely why Gregory almost never discusses theology without explaining the philosophical and spiritual context, whether apophysis or *theopoiesis*, without which theology would empty, meaningless and misdirected.

PART ONE
THE NOETIC PROCESS

CHAPTER TWO

***THE APOPHATIC PROBLEM: PLACING LIMITS ON
FORMULIZING AND PUBLICIZING THEOLOGICAL EPINOIA******Apophasis: Denying Onto-theological Conceptions***

Often referred to as ‘negative theology’, the apophatic approach to theistic discourse is derived from the Greek word *apophatike*, which means ‘away from speech’.¹ To isolate an exact definition of apophasis would be an arduous task indeed. However, some basic elements exist in most classifications of apophasis. Deirdre Carabine asserts, “We may understand apophatic theology to begin with the assertion that God is unknowable to the human mind and that one must proceed by means of negations, ultimately, even to the negation of the negation in order to attain to some ‘positive’ knowledge of him.”² There appears to be a twofold succession of negative speech about God, which will invariably invoke a positive citation of God. Essentially, one is unable to adequately summarize God either linguistically or conceptually. Consequently, one must resort to negation in order to suggest an affirmative theistic ‘illusion’ by a kind of process of elimination. By determining what God is not, his confirmatory characteristics emerge bereft of the need to conceptualize such affirmations. However, Carabine also mentions a ‘negation of the negation’.

J.P. Williams corroborates with Carabine in this respect by further developing the historical and philosophical context out of which apophasis

¹ Deirdre Carabine, *The Unknown God: Negative Theology in the Platonic Tradition: Plato to Eriugena* (Louvain: Peeters Press, 1995), 2.

² *Ibid.*, 9.

emerged. The initial form of apophasis is represented in Middle Platonism and later medieval expressions particularly in Thomas Aquinas. Primarily a Western dichotomy, Aquinas distinguished between the *via positiva* and the *via negativa*. The former expression encourages theological discourse using analogies that are, thus, not univocally affirmed. The latter, in contrast, denies the sufficiency of analogy to summarize the divine essence on account of the equivocal nature of language. The second, more developed, apophatic expression has Neoplatonic origins, and seeks to deny confirmatory theistic discourse as well as its negative counterpart. Furthermore, for those loyal to this subsequent form of apophasis, the negation of negation is considered the only true apophatic attitude.³

Although Jacques Derrida affirms the initial, and less developed, apophatic approach to theistic discourse,⁴ euphemistically using an 'X' to represent God he nevertheless maintains that the negation of negation better represents true apophasis: "This, which is called X 'is' neither this nor that, neither sensible nor intelligible, neither positive nor negative, neither inside nor outside, neither superior nor inferior, neither active nor passive, neither present nor absent, not even neutral, not even subject to a dialectic with a third moment, without any possible sublation."⁵

³ J.P. Williams, *Denying Divinity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 3-4.

⁴ Jacques Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," In *Derrida and Negative Theology* eds. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), 74. Derrida states that "'negative theology' has come to designate a certain typical attitude toward language, and within it, in the act of definition or attribution, and attitude toward semantic or conceptual determination...Consequently, only a negative ('apophatic') attribution can claim to approach God."

⁵ *Ibid.*

Vladimir Lossky provides a definition that affirms Derrida's apophatic understanding, while possessing an apophatic primitivism indicative of the initial less developed form of apophasis:

The negative way of the knowledge of God is an ascendant undertaking of the mind that progressively eliminates all positive attributes of the object it wishes to attain, in order to culminate finally in a kind of apprehension by supreme ignorance of Him who cannot be an object of knowledge. We can say that it is an intellectual experience of the mind's failure when confronted with something beyond the conceivable.⁶

Lossky seems to concur with Derrida since 'supreme ignorance' could constitute a negation of any description, both positive and negative. However, Lossky does supply some qualifiers such as the elimination of 'all positive attributes', which may place him in the initial camp, that of the negation of confirmatory theistic expressions only.

The apophatic approach that identifies the negation of negation as its epitome is primarily an Eastern expression of philosophical and theological speculation.⁷ The reason why it may be more appropriate to approach theistic discourse in this manner is, of course, because "God is without shape, form, colour or proportion; he is free from passion, has no contrary or boundary and is not subject to the limitations of space and time. Since nothing else can be attributed to this nature, it cannot be perceived by the senses of the intellect; therefore, it is unknowable."⁸ The impetus of this theistic understanding lies in the distinction between humans and the divine. The former resides in the

⁶ Vladimir Lossky, "Apophasis and Trinitarian Theology," In *In the Image and Likeness of God* eds. J.H. Erickson and T.E. Bird (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974), 13.

⁷ Deirdre Carabine, *The Unknown God: Negative Theology in the Platonic Tradition: Plato to Eriugena*, 4.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 240-241.

'sensible' and 'created intelligible' realms, while the divine essence itself alone resides in the 'uncreated intelligible' realm. Consequently, humans are epistemologically limited, especially when approaching God who evidently cannot be physically or intellectually 'sensed'. Gregory of Nyssa recognized these human epistemological limitations and the corresponding 'otherness' of God. Necessarily, therefore, Gregory possessed a clear, yet not explicitly stated, apophatic approach to theistic discourse. Where Gregory is located in the twofold succession of negative speech, however, is still up for debate.

Silence and the Divine Essence: Gregory of Nyssa's Apophatic Attitude

One need not search long through Gregory's writings before recognizing the centrality of his apophatic outlook. The incomprehensibility and ineffableness of the divine essence is *the* most prominent element in Gregory's philosophy. Furthermore, Gregory acknowledges the epistemological limitations imposed on humans. Robert Brightman claims that "apophaticism is central in the theological approach of St. Gregory of Nyssa,"⁹ while insisting "the fact that man cannot know the essence of God is at the heart of St. Gregory's theology."¹⁰ Brightman also contends, "Any study of St. Gregory of Nyssa which does not give adequate treatment to his apophaticism is *ipso facto* defective."¹¹ Anthony Meredith makes the claim, "To most people Gregory is thought of as the apostle of

⁹ Robert S. Brightman, "Apophatic Theology and Divine Infinity in St. Gregory of Nyssa," 111.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 106.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 111.

apophaticism.”¹² Carabine affirms Gregory’s uniquely “radical apophasis.”¹³ She additionally maintains that “the notion of the unknowability of the divine essence comes to prominence in Christian theology in the fourth-century Cappadocian Fathers, Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory Nazianzus,”¹⁴ while with respect to negative theology Carabine designates Gregory of Nyssa himself as “undoubtedly its greatest exponent among the early Christian philosophers.”¹⁵

Where, however, is Gregory located in the twofold succession of negative speech? Williams, who himself delineates the configuration of this two-tiered apophatic structure, seems to place him somewhere in the middle, although this might be an injustice to Gregory’s individuality. He does not appear to operate within either of the two apophatic outlooks exclusively or comprehensively. Gregory is unique in that he allows for negation of confirmatory theistic expressions on the semantic level, while additionally denying the sufficiency of all theological *epinoiai*, either positive or negative, on account of his unique soteriological contribution. Williams does indeed state that the Cappadocians belong in the initial, less developed, apophatic camp along with the Alexandrians, Middle Platonists and Thomistic philosophers.¹⁶ However, he elsewhere indicates, “Gregory of Nyssa deepens the Alexandrian negation and produces the

¹² Anthony Meredith, *The Cappadocians*, (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2000), 90. Meredith continues, “...both in himself and in the writings of Denys the Areopagite, whose treatment of the divine darkness in his *Mystical Theology* owes much to Gregory’s *Life of Moses*.” It is often thought that Pseudo-Dionysius presents the most explicitly apophatic approach among Patristic and medieval Christian writers. His apophaticism additionally leads him to denounce either ‘one’ or ‘three’ to represent the Godhead, as Gregory also does in *the Great Catechism* and other works, which will be examined later.

¹³ Deirdre Carabine, *The Unknown God: Negative Theology in the Platonic Tradition: Plato to Eriugena*, 245.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 223.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 224.

¹⁶ J.P. Williams, *Denying Divinity*, 4.

spirituality of perpetual progress which has so much in common with apophasis.”¹⁷ This soteriological emphasis on an ontological perpetual progression corresponds with the epistemological implications surrounding the infinity of God. “While Gregory is not original in seeing God as infinite, he is the first to draw out the epistemological consequences of this. Infinity is another reason for incomprehensibility, of course, but Gregory treats this not as an obstacle to knowledge, but rather as a resource.”¹⁸ The infinity of God is a resource because it allows Gregory to advocate the necessity to surpass ontologically theological *epinoiai*, either positive or negative, by imitating the virtues emanating from God, thus enabling humanity to ‘see’ the external divine essence with the ‘eye of the soul’. Gregory, therefore, does not only prefer silence as the inherent corollary of the negation of negation, but also uses this silence as a means to participating in the divine essence. “For Gregory, then, the soul’s ascent to God is never-ending: ‘The good is in its nature infinite and so it follows that participation in it will also be infinite.’”¹⁹

Hans Urs von Balthasar, however, does point out that Gregory refuses to deny God’s true Being in contrast to most supra-apophatic theologians and philosophers. Whatever God is not, he is ‘is’. Gregory “is able to give God the fundamental attribute of Being, instead of exalting him, like Plotinus, above the Idea of Being. For being is for Gregory precisely not an idea. It is first and foremost the negative residue of all of God’s qualitative attributes. In the

¹⁷ Ibid., 15.

¹⁸ Ibid., 31.

¹⁹ Ibid. The quote provided by Williams is from *Against Eunomius*.

impossibility of knowing ‘what’ God is, it becomes clear ‘that’ God is.”²⁰ By employing the designation of Being for God, Gregory is in fact acting apophatically since the negation of certain theistic attributes indicates the existence of a ‘something’ that is not ‘something else’. Again, this demonstrates the uniqueness of Gregory’s apophaticism, and exhibits his priorities. While acknowledging the inability to circumscribe God using semantically or conceptually affirmative expressions or the opposing negations, Gregory elevates the Scriptural assertion that God ‘is’, or rather he ‘is who he is’ (Ex. 3:14).

In order to determine precisely the extent to which Gregory employs an apophatic outlook, it is, of course, best to let him speak for himself. Gregory declares:

The Divine Nature, whatever It may be in Itself, surpasses every mental concept. For It is altogether inaccessible to reasoning and conjecture, nor has there been found any human faculty capable of perceiving the incomprehensible; for we cannot devise a means of understanding inconceivable things. Therefore the great Apostle calls His ways unsearchable, meaning by this that the way that leads to the knowledge of the Divine Essence is inaccessible to thought. That is to say, none of those who have passed through life before us has made known to the intelligence so much as a trace by which might be known what is above knowledge.²¹

Gregory equates this acknowledgement of the incomprehensibility of the divine essence with ‘darkness’: “When, therefore, Moses grew in knowledge, he declared that he had seen God in the darkness, that is, that he had then come to

²⁰ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought: An Essay on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa*, 21. In note 32 Balthasar provides specific quotes to demonstrate Gregory’s conviction that God ‘is’: “The particular mark of divinity, namely, true being.” “Really existing.” “He underlies that which is.” “Truly he is one and only.” Being is “some such character of true divinity.”

²¹ *Beat.*, ACW, 146.

know that what is divine is beyond all knowledge and comprehension.”²² The reason why the divine essence is inaccessible through knowledge is its infinite nature: “Now the Divine Nature is without extension, and without extension, it has no limit; and that which is limitless is infinite, and is spoken of accordingly.”²³ Consequently, to speak of the divine essence accordingly is to deny the sufficiency of finite terms to signify an infinite divine essence.

Although Carabine maintains that “Gregory does not use the principles of negation in any systematic fashion,” it is at least true that he employs negative terminology to a significant extent, as Robin Margaret Jensen also insists.²⁴ In response to Eunomius’ claim that the word *ungeneracy* affirmatively denotes the divine essence, Gregory maintains,

It is plain to everyone who has given any attention to the use of words, that the word incorruption denotes by the privative particle that neither corruption nor birth appertains to God: just as many other words of like formation denote the absence of what is not inherent rather than the presence of what is; e.g. harmless, painless, guileless, undisturbed, passionless, sleepless, undiseased, impassible, unblamable, and the like. For all these terms are truly applicable to God, and furnish a sort of catalogue and muster of evil qualities from which God is separate. Yet the terms employed give no positive account of that to which they are applied. We learn from them what it is not; but what it is, the force of the words does not indicate.²⁵

²² *Life Mos.*, II: 164. Hans Urs von Balthasar associates this “darkness” or “divine night” with faith: Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought: An Essay on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa*, 103. Martin Laird acknowledges von Balthasar as perhaps the first scholar to do this: Martin Laird, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith: Union, Knowledge and Divine Presence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 16. Laird additionally affirms von Balthasar, Danielou, Volker and Canevet in their assessment that Gregory affords faith an apophatic role (19). Desalvo’s evaluation that “faith does not constitute a cognitive step towards the divine but rather a renunciation of knowledge” is also affirmed by Laird (25).

²³ *Ag. Eun.*, NPNF, 215.

²⁴ Robin Margaret Jensen, *Face to Face: Portraits of the Divine in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2005), 105.

²⁵ *Ans. Eun.*, NPNF, 264.

Despite possessing a confirmatory, albeit fluctuating and contextually evolving, triadology and christology, Gregory's theological *epinoiai* evidently do not provide a positive account of that to which they are applied' since whether positive or negative 'what [God] is, the force of words does not indicate'.

Gregory's use of apophatic language is equally apparent in *On the Beatitudes*:

For what human thought can search out the nature of what we seek? What names or expressions can we invent to produce in us a worthy conception of the light *beyond*? How shall I name the *invisible*, how describe the *immaterial*? How shall I show what *cannot be seen*, or comprehend what has *neither size nor quantity, neither quality nor form*? How can I grasp what is *neither in place nor in time*, which *eludes* all limitation and every form of definition (italics mine)?²⁶

Clearly Gregory has in mind the priority of negation over confirmatory theistic expressions. It is at this juncture that Gregory recommends an ontological participation in the divine nature, which evidently is superior to both positive and negative theistic terminology: "The Lord does not say it is blessed to know something about God, but to have God present within oneself."²⁷ However, Gregory does seem to acknowledge the ultimate insufficiency of negations as well. Referring to words such as 'unending', 'inalterable', 'incorporeal' and 'imperishable', Gregory asserts,

The sense inherent in each only informs us of *the privation of that which is obvious to our perception*, but does not interpret the actual nature of that which is thus removed from those abhorrent conditions. *What the Deity is not, the signification of these names does not point out; but what that further thing, which is not these things, is essentially, remains undivulged* (italics mine).²⁸

²⁶ *Beat.*, ACW, 111-112.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 148.

²⁸ *Ans. Eun.*, NPNF, 308.

Gregory brilliantly recognizes the social restrictions placed on both positive and negative expressions. Essentially, the negation only functions in relation to the social constructs they reflect and negate, but nevertheless fails to summarize adequately anything related to the divine essence itself. This is the case precisely because the Godhead resides in the 'uncreated intelligible' realm and cannot be sensed in the manner that created objects in the 'sensible' and 'created intelligible' realms can. Consequently, even the negations do not divulge anything about the essence because that which is left over, in a kind of process of elimination, resides in the 'sensible' or 'created intelligible' realms. Nothing can point to God except God himself. This conclusion leads Gregory to an ontological solution where humans participate in the divine essence rather than noetically approach it, the elucidation and full implications of which will be explained in the subsequent chapters. By perfecting the soul, the 'ontological gaze' from the 'eye of the soul' effectively becomes a reflection of the divine essence represented in the quality of the human 'mind' or image of God, and is thus permitted to point to God as God does to himself.

Due to the extensive apophatic language employed by Gregory in virtually all of his writings, and the scholarly consensus that Gregory at least possesses an apophatic outlook to a significant degree, it is not necessary to further demonstrate that Gregory does indeed maintain that the divine essence is incomprehensible and ineffable. It is important, however, to illuminate the extent to which he applies his apophatic outlook in relation to Trinitarian metaphysical categories. But before this element of Gregory's theological philosophy is

examined, the human condition of the epistemological deficiency dictating why he approaches theistic discourse apophatically must first be adequately ascertained.

In conjunction with the aforementioned discussion, Paulos Mar Gregorios identifies the opposing basis for apophatic language about God. The divine essence cannot be known not only because it is itself infinite and uncreated, but also because of the epistemological limitations placed on humans. Within an explanation of the epistemological implications inherent in the Eunomian controversy, Gregorios observes that “the Eunomian view of the human mind as potentially capable of knowing everything including the *ousia*²⁹ of God can be a temptation for theologians today. The Gregorian view of the limits of the capabilities of the human mind seems at first defeatist and lazy. But...Gregory has a higher and yet saner view of the human mind than that of Eunomius.”³⁰ Gregorios’ critique of contemporary theology aside, it appears that Gregory places limitations on the ability of the human mind. These limitations additionally do not merely correspond to noetic access to the divine essence alone. Rather, the mind is generally incapable of comprehensively determining the essence of any object. Carabine accurately maintains that according to Gregory “the human intellect cannot know the essential substance of *any* entity

²⁹ Or essence.

³⁰ Paulos Mar Gregorios, *Cosmic Man: The Divine Presence* (New York: Paragon House, 1988), 29.

(italics mine).”³¹ Gregory description of the empirical process resembles

Carabine’s explanation of the ‘accidents’ which are received through the senses:

We find, then, by experience, both the bitterness of gall and the pleasant character of the quality of honey; but when these facts are known, the knowledge is one which is given to us...by taste, smell, hearing, and often by touch and sight. For when one sees honey, and hears its name, and receives it by taste, and recognizes its odour by smell, and tests it by touch, he recognizes the same thing by means of each of his senses. On the other hand we get varied and multiform information by some one sense, for as hearing receives all sorts of sounds, and our visual perception exercises its operation by beholding things of different kinds for it lights alike on black and white, and all things that are distinguished by contrariety of colour,—so with taste with smell, with perception by touch; each implants in us by means of its own perceptive power the knowledge of things of every kind.³²

Quite simply, then, the empirical situation that humanity must abide by permits only a limited amount of an object’s attributes to be comprehended by the mind as commissioned by the senses themselves. In essence, a human can only know about an object to the extent that her or his senses receive sensory information from it. But since the ear ‘receives all sorts of sounds’ and the eyes behold ‘things of different kinds’, humans can only comprehend an object to the extent that the object itself ‘implants in us by means of its own perceptive power’ the ‘accidents’ that identify precisely what the object is. Thus, since ears are always hearing and eyes are always seeing, the number of ‘accidents’ from a material object can appear just as infinite as the divine essence itself. Furthermore, that

³¹ Deirdre Carabine, *The Unknown God: Negative Theology in the Platonic Tradition: Plato to Eriugena*, 239. Carabine elaborates on this point: “If we take from a body, colour, shape, weight, position, and so on, there remains nothing for us to perceive, for we do not know the essence of a thing without the ‘accidents’ which make it accessible to our senses. Therefore, if the lower creation, which we can see, remains unknowable to us in its hidden *ousia*, how much more is transcendent *ousia* unknowable to our intellect?”

³² *Mak. Man*, NPNF, 396. The multitude of sense information received by one sense, and the uniformity of sense information received by many senses Gregory refers to as the ‘city of our mind’ earlier in this section of this work.

which resides in the 'sensible' and 'created intelligible' realms are perpetually changing since mutability is the precise characteristic that designates creation; the act of creation itself is a change from non-existence to existence.³³ Therefore, the 'accidents' are always changing thus ensuring the inability of the mind to adequately comprehend any object. Knowledge, consequently, must never be equated with truth or literal and complete comprehension. Knowledge, as understood by Gregory, is merely the conceptual collection of sensory data, information of which is incomplete and received through an inadequate process. The divine essence is incomprehensible for an entirely different reason, however: "Wide, indeed, is the interval in all else that divides the human from the divine."³⁴ As mentioned earlier, the infinity of the divine essence guarantees that the finite perception of humans cannot gain access to the 'uncreated intelligible' realm where the Godhead alone resides. "The gulf between uncreated and created is such for Gregory that there is no possibility of the soul passing across it."³⁵ Human finiteness, therefore, cannot reach the end of that which has no end.

Conceptual Apophasis: The Trinitarian Economy and Christological Composition

It is, of course, very important to verify satisfactorily whether or not Gregory does indeed extend his apophatic outlook to included triadological and christological conceptions within which particular metaphysical categories operate. Thus far, how and why Gregory would view theological *epinoiai* in this

³³ *Life Mos.* II: 2.

³⁴ *Ag. Eun.*, NPNF, 93.

³⁵ Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 81.

manner has been adequately determined. But, despite the concurrent underlying logic, is it appropriate to place trinitarian metaphysical categories under the apophatic umbrella? Some scholars clearly believe that it is. While acknowledging the accuracy of orthodox theological *epinoiai*, Lossky nevertheless asserts, “Triadological terms and distinctions—nature, essence, person, hypostasis—still will remain inaccurate, despite their mathematical purity (or perhaps because of this purity), expressing above all the deficiency of language and the failure of the mind before the mystery of the personal God who reveals Himself as transcending every relation with the created.”³⁶ Rowan Williams asks, “Does this mean that there is a ‘something’ that makes God what God is, over and above the relation of Father, Son and Spirit?”³⁷ Similarly, Williams concludes that indeed

Apophatic observations about the divine nature are, as we said, ‘grammatical’ remarks about the impossibility of specifying what it is that makes God to be God. Apophatic accounts of the trinitarian persons and their relations are a way of expressing and evoking the particular theme of the endlessness and non-possession of trinitarian relation, gift or love. The two dimensions of negative theology here do not represent two objects under discussion (nature and persons), but simply mark the two moments of recognizing the radicality of divine difference that arise in the lived process coherently in the pattern of divine life as it is made concrete to us in the history of Jesus and made available to us in the common life of the Spirit-filled community.³⁸

Anticipating the discussion on Ayres’ contribution of the ‘grammar’ of divinity in the next section,³⁹ Williams observes that the words used to compose theological

³⁶ Vladimir Lossky, “Apophysis and Trinitarian Theology,” 16-17.

³⁷ Rowan Williams, “The Deflections of Desire: Negative Theology in Trinitarian Discourse,” In *Silence and the Word*, eds. Oliver Davies and Denys Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 116.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 134-135.

³⁹ See pages 43-45 and 49-50 in the section, *Linguistic Apophysis: Rudimentary and Contextual Social Analogies*.

epinoiai do not say anything about the Godhead, but is necessary for pragmatic reasons only. As for the trinitarian context of Gregory's own apophysis, Carabine believes that "it is, therefore, the stance of Eunomius which forces Gregory to insist so strongly upon the idea of the absolute transcendence and unknowability of the *trinity*. Indeed, so strong is his desire to refute Eunomius that he sometimes maneuvers himself into positions from which he is forced to argue very skillfully in order to extricate himself" (*italics mine*).⁴⁰ As will become apparent in subsequent chapters, Gregory is less concerned about theological consistency than he is with maintaining apophatic stability. More specifically Carabine states,

It is in Gregory's ruminations on the mysteries of trinitarian theology that we find him affirming Basil's teaching that all the qualities predicated of the Father must also, of necessity, be predicated on the Son and the Spirit. The consequences of this idea are immediately clear: if the Father's primary characteristic is unknowability, then the same must be true of the Son and the Spirit.⁴¹

Concurrently, she additionally asserts, "I would suggest that it is Gregory's underlying apophatic attitude which leads him to a position whereby his stress upon the relativity and unknowability of the three hypostases results in some loss of their economic characteristics."⁴² After discussing the relativity of numeration and relation in works by Gregory of Nazianzus and Basil, Lossky maintains that "a movement of apophysis therefore accompanies the Trinitarian theology of the Cappadocians and, in the last analysis, deconceptualizes the concepts which are

⁴⁰ Deirdre Carabine, *The Unknown God: Negative Theology in the Platonic Tradition: Plato to Eriugena*, 235.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 248.

⁴² *Ibid.* Carabine additionally claims that "Gregory sometimes sacrifices certain concepts which he might not have done had Eunomius not claimed to be able to characterize the essence of the Father."

ascribed to the mystery of a personal God in His transcendent nature.”⁴³

Although it is indeed safe to assume that Gregory of Nyssa would have complied with his Cappadocian contemporaries since no indication of dissension on this issue exists between Gregory and either his brother or his Nazianzen friend, an examination of Gregory’s own writings is nevertheless warranted and necessary.

Concurrently with the epistemological situation exemplified in the created and uncreated dichotomy, Gregory is aware of the limited function of trinitarian metaphysical categories:

And so one who severely studies the depths of the mystery, receives secretly in his spirit, indeed, a moderate amount of apprehension of the doctrine of God’s nature, yet he is unable to explain clearly in words the ineffable depth of this mystery. As, for instance, how the same thing is capable of being numbered and yet rejects numeration; how it is observed with distinctions yet is apprehended as a monad, how it is separate as to personality yet is not divided as to subject matter.⁴⁴

Gregory is thus conscious of the ineffableness of the divine essence, and therefore acknowledges the insufficiency of metaphysical categories to summarize adequately the trinitarian economy. “Neither diminution nor increase attaches to any nature, when it is contemplated in a larger or smaller number.”⁴⁵ Notice that numeration does not refer to the divine essence directly, but exists necessarily only when contemplated in the mind. Gregory is additionally aware of the paradox intrinsic to trinitarian conceptions: “The communion and the distinction apprehended in Them are, in a certain sense, ineffable and inconceivable, the continuity of nature being never rent asunder by the distinction of the hypostases,

⁴³ Vladimir Lossky, “Apophysis and Trinitarian Theology,” 24.

⁴⁴ *Cat.*, NPNF, 477.

⁴⁵ *Thr. Gods*, NPNF, 335.

nor the notes of proper distinction confounded in the community of essence.”⁴⁶

Gregory acknowledges the necessity to communicate the Godhead to others and conversely receive external interpretations of the Godhead. However, he also understands that communicating such an exalted and inaccessible essence is ultimately futile. So genuine is this recognition that Gregory refers to the Godhead as a “conjoined separation” and “separated conjunction.”⁴⁷

Furthermore, Gregory even abandons these paradoxical expressions, and eventually emerges at the logical conclusion:

There is not, neither shall there be, in the Church of God a teaching such as that, which can make One who is single and incomposite not only multiform and patchwork, *but also the combination of opposites*. The simplicity of the True Faith assumes God to be that which he is, viz., incapable of being grasped by any term, or any idea, or any other device of our apprehension, remaining beyond the reach not only of the human but of the angelic and of all supramundane intelligence, unthinkable, unutterable, above all expression in words, having but one name that can represent His proper nature, *the single name of being ‘Above every name’* (italics mine).⁴⁸

The validity of Gregory’s trinitarian teachings is not necessarily undermined by these words, but he does nevertheless offer this warning in reference to his triadology: “Yet receive what I say as at best a token and reflection of the truth; not as the actual truth itself.”⁴⁹ This theological humility is not uncommon to Gregory and is incited by the recognition that “the blessed and eternal substance of God, that surpasses all understanding, contains all perfection within itself and cannot be limited. Hence nothing that is limiting, whether *name*, or *concept* or

⁴⁶ *Let. 38*, NPNF, vol. 8, Translated by the Rev. Blomfield Jackson, 139. (Now attributed to Gregory of Nyssa; Anthony Meredith, *The Cappadocians*, 108. and, Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought: An Essay on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa*, 19.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ag. Eun.*, NPNF, 99.

⁴⁹ *Let. 38*, NPNF, vol. 8, 139.

thing, can be considered His attribute, as, for example, time, place, color, shape, form, mass, magnitude, dimension” (italics mine).⁵⁰ In addition to the metaphysical categories, Gregory even concedes, “It is plain that the title of Father does not present to us the Essence.”⁵¹ God cannot be semantically or conceptually identified because of the created origin of language and perception. The name ‘Father’ instead identifies his operation in conjunction with the Son and nothing more.

These metaphysical categories do not, however, pertain only to the trinitarian economy. Christ is similarly understood by using created concepts and terms. Of course, speaking about the trinitarian economy introduces the metaphysical composition of Christ by necessity, since the Son’s relationship to the Father and the Spirit effectively determines the degree to which he identifies himself with divinity and humanity. Gregory correspondingly does not only apply his apophatic outlook to the divine essence and the trinitarian economy, but also to each hypostasis separately as Carabine so aptly observed above.⁵²

Whatever your thought suggests to you as to the mode of the existence of the Father, you will think also in the case of the Son, and in like manner too of the Holy Ghost...For the account of the uncreated and of the incomprehensible is one and the same in the case of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. For one is not more incomprehensible and uncreated than another.⁵³

This is not surprising considering Gregory’s common reference to the divine and human relationship in Christ as a “mystery of the incarnation”⁵⁴ and “mystery of

⁵⁰ *Comm. Song*, Glory, 189.

⁵¹ *Ag. Eun.*, NPNF, 103.

⁵² See quote from footnote 41 above.

⁵³ *Let.* 38, NPNF, vol. 8, 138.

⁵⁴ *Life Mos.*, II: 159.

godliness.”⁵⁵ Although the composition of Christ is discussed by Gregory and his contemporaries, to envisage this ‘mystery’ beyond its pragmatic function is a mistake. “What is there, then, to prevent our thinking...of a kind of union or approximation of the Divine nature with humanity, and yet in this very approximation guarding the proper notion of Deity, believing as we do that, though the Godhead be in man, it is beyond all circumscription.”⁵⁶ Somehow this regularly discussed christological union is in reality ‘beyond all circumscription’. Admittedly, Gregory here is referring to the divine essence itself, but the designation of these metaphysical categories on Christ and his divine/human composition is just as incomplete as when they are applied to the trinitarian economy. The incarnation is ultimately a ‘mystery’ and no concept or social analogy can describe this mystery accurately and completely; theological *epinoiai* can only infer to it.⁵⁷

Despite all the negativity surrounding the limited function of theological *epinoiai*, Gregory does offer hope. The full expression of this hope will receive more attention in the chapter explicating the function of theological *epinoia* as well as in the final chapter. With respect to the immediate context, however, Gregory insists that theological *epinoiai* correspond to the *operations* of the Godhead as opposed to its essence. Gregory refers to God’s operations as his *energeia*. “Gregory in effect denies that the *ousia* of anything can be

⁵⁵ *Ag. Eun.*, NPNF, 101.

⁵⁶ *Cat.*, NPNF, 486.

⁵⁷ The inconsistencies in Gregory’s christological understanding also speak to his apophatic christology. This contributing element to Gregory’s christological apophysis is discussed further in the section, *Gregory of Nyssa’s Interaction with Heresies and the Ensuing Inconsistencies*, in the chapter, “Formulating Theological *Epinoia*: The Inability of Human *Epinoia* to Encounter the Divine Essence,” 67-71.

comprehended through its *energeia*. But in the case of God, it is only the *energeia* that we can know.”⁵⁸ After mentioning terms commonly used to characterize the divine essence, Gregory asks, “Do they indicate His operations, or his Nature? No one will say that they indicate aught but His operations.”⁵⁹ Since “that which is without quality cannot be measured, the invisible cannot be examined, the incorporeal cannot be weighed, the limitless cannot be compared, the incomprehensible does not admit of more or less,”⁶⁰ the *energeia* of the Godhead can be comprehended and applied instead. Theological *epinoiai* are reflections of divine actions in the created realm rather than of the divine essence itself. “When we look at the order of creation, we form in our mind an image not of the essence, but of the wisdom of Him who has made all things wisely.”⁶¹ Consequently, God is “invisible by nature, but becomes visible in His energies, for He may be contemplated in the things that are referred to Him.”⁶² This is precisely how God is “known by analogy,”⁶³ which will receive more attention in the next section. Numeration, relation and names are all jointly concerned with divine operations rather than with the divine essence. “Thus in speaking of God, when there is a question of His essence, then is the time to keep silence. When, however, it is a question of his operation, a knowledge of which can come down even to us, that is the time to speak of His omnipotence by telling of his works

⁵⁸ Paulos Mar Gregorios, *Cosmic Man: The Divine Presence*, 117.

⁵⁹ *Ans. Eun.*, NPNF, 265.

⁶⁰ *In Suam Ordin*, As quoted in, Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought: An Essay on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa*, 27.

⁶¹ *Beat.*, ACW, 147.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

and explaining his deeds, and to use words to this extent.”⁶⁴ Gregory also admits, “Even the word God we understand to have come into usage from the activity of His seeing; for our faith tells us that the Deity is everywhere and sees all things, and penetrates all things, and then we stamp this thought with this name God.”⁶⁵ If the broad designation of ‘God’ is limiting, how much more restrictive are the particular metaphysical categories which are conferred on God? Gregory alleges that the tripartite operation of the Godhead is soteriological: “Salvation is confessed to proceed from the Holy Trinity.”⁶⁶ However, Gregory additionally acknowledges the temporary function of the name, ‘Godhead’: “That therefore which is without limit is surely not limited even by name. In order then to mark the constancy of our conception of infinity in the case of the Divine nature, we say that the Deity is above every name: and ‘Godhead’ is a name. Now it cannot be that the same thing should at once be a name and be accounted as above every name.”⁶⁷ Gregory resolves this anomalous situation by opposing his adversaries’ contention that names are associated with the divine essence itself, and instead asserts that the name ‘Godhead’ must refer to his operation only. Ayres adds that “Gregory then goes on to argue that names for the divine nature do not describe God directly, but each one describes the action of God: the divine nature remains unknown. ‘Godhead’ itself stems from our observation of God’s act of watching over, seeing or beholding, and in our observation of this action we see all three

⁶⁴ *Comm. Eccl.*, Glory, 129.

⁶⁵ *Ans. Eun.*, NPNF, 309.

⁶⁶ *Thr. Gods*, NPNF, 335.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

persons engaged in the same action.”⁶⁸ Therefore, God’s *energeia* is transformed into triadological and christological concepts, or theological *epinoiai*, for the purpose of socially discussing the role of Christ and the Trinity in God’s salvific plan and actions; God’s *energeia* is comprehended in order to decipher an appropriate soteriological outlook, for which Gregory’s triadology and christology provides substantiation. God’s *energeia* is additionally determined in order to identify what divine qualities must be appropriated and imitated for the soul’s transformation or one’s ontological progression beyond theological *epinoia*, the ‘ontological gaze’ and its trajectory.

Linguistic Apophysis: Rudimentary and Contextual Social Analogies

Triadological and christological social analogies function on two separate levels for Gregory. The first level is concerned with the rudimentary social constructs within the ‘sensible’ and ‘created intelligible’ realms. Since the divine essence is formless and cannot be sensed in the common and familiar manner in which created objects can, concepts such as numeration and relation cannot be derived from the divine essence itself. Therefore, concepts in the ‘created intelligible’ realm such as one, three, unity, division, person and the degrees within which these concepts co-operate, are derived from the created ‘sensible’ realm and subsequently conferred on the divine essence. However, the designation of these concepts for the divine essence is not arbitrary; this is precisely how the second level operates. The use of certain concepts is contextual and intentional, as they are based on other previously formulated trinitarian

⁶⁸ Lewis Ayres, “On Not Three People: The Fundamental Themes of Gregory of Nyssa’s Trinitarian Theology as Seen in *To Ablabius: On Not Three Gods*,” 22.

interpretations. Consequently, it becomes necessary to speak about Christ and the Trinity using pre-established metaphysical categories such as those mentioned above. These pre-established Trinitarian concepts are thus convenient for theological discussion purposes only, but ultimately fail to describe the divine essence itself.

In his analysis of *On 'Not Three Gods'*, Lewis Ayres introduces the notion of 'social analogies' which seek to regulate and identify human conceptions of God.⁶⁹ These particular 'social analogies' are rudimentary in nature and can include numbers and relationships or any other such categories humans appropriate in order to make sense of external realities. Without these 'social analogies' humans cannot function intellectually or comprehend received information. Nevertheless, the use of 'social analogies', while allowing humans limited access to that which is external, demonstrates finiteness and restraint. Within a discussion on the analogy of three men as representative of the Godhead, 'men' denoting a unified essence and 'three' representing plurality, Gregory asserts, "It would be much better to correct our erroneous habit, so as no longer to extend to a plurality the name of the nature, than by our bondage to habit to transfer to our statements concerning God the error which exists in the above case."⁷⁰ Gregory recognizes that when a person sees three men, the particularity of each man is initially determined, while it would be uncommon to identify immediately the one essence of 'man' as represented in the three men. Thus, socially constructed universal concepts like numeration confuse one's

⁶⁹ Lewis Ayres, "On Not Three People: The Fundamental Themes of Gregory of Nyssa's Trinitarian Theology as Seen in *To Ablabius: On Not Three Gods*," 17.

⁷⁰ *Thr. Gods*, NPNF, 332.

understanding of the Godhead. Therefore, human terminology can only denote human *epinoiai*, but not the external reality or essence itself. Ayres describes this process in greater detail: “All the terms human beings use for God work by creating a special or particular sense (idian dianoian [or *epinoia*—see footnote]). This particular sense takes as its point of departure some feature of our world that reflects the activity of God, and then negates or intensifies that core significance in the attempt to speak worthy of God.”⁷¹ Consequently, words describe human *epinoiai*, but not the essence itself which the *epinoiai* seek to represent.

Contiguous concepts are identified and subsequently employed in order to make sense of an external reality, but the external reality itself remains hidden. “Hence it is clear that by any of the terms we use the Divine Nature itself is not signified, but some one of its surroundings is made known.”⁷² Whatever metaphysical categories one may use to depict the Godhead, whether ‘three’, ‘one’, ‘unified’ or ‘divisible’, “in each of these terms we find a peculiar sense, fit to be understood or asserted of the Divine Nature, yet not expressing that which that nature is in its essence.”⁷³ It is therefore necessary to use words to signify theological *epinoiai*, but it must also be acknowledged that these *epinoiai* are fallible and restricted to personal immediate encounters. Therefore, in reference to the divine essence,

⁷¹ Lewis Ayres, “On Not Three People: The Fundamental Themes of Gregory of Nyssa’s Trinitarian Theology as Seen in *To Ablabius: On Not Three Gods*,” 26. Thus, Gregory asserts, “We...have learnt that that nature is unnameable and unspeakable, and we say that every term either invented by the custom of men, or handed down to us by the Scriptures, is indeed *explanatory of our conception* of the Divine Nature, but does not include signification of that nature itself” (italics mine). *Thr. Gods*, NPNF, 332. Ayres states that the term *epinoia* is synonymous with the term *idian dianoian* in *On ‘Not Three Gods’*. Ayres also defines *epinoia* as ‘abstracted conception’

⁷² *Thr. Gods*, NPNF, 332.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 333.

Gregory's apophasis takes over since God is actually conceptualized using mere 'social analogies'.

Rudimentary social analogies exist by necessity. The human empirical situation dictates that any concepts formed in the mind are as a result of sensory information.⁷⁴ Thus, rudimentary social analogies such as one, three, unity, division and person are not derived from the perception of the divine essence itself, but are reflections of sensory information from the created realm, which are subsequently conferred on the divine essence. These rudimentary social analogies culminate in a universally acknowledged speech about Christ and the Trinity. Words, of course, are concepts used to signify an empirical object. Lewis Ayres believes that a proper understanding of human speech and social analogy in Gregory's writings is essential:

Gregory...offers an ontological and epistemological foundation for human knowledge of God that he thinks fundamental to pro-Nicene theology and which sets the stage for any analogical description of the Godhead. These themes are the real core of Gregory's Trinitarian theology. In this light Gregory's statements about the irreducibility and yet unity of the divine persons can only be approached through first exploring his account of the nature of human speech about God and the cosmology that grounds that account. Only when we see how this account of divine creative power and ontological difference grounds vision of human speech about God will we begin to see what it means for Gregory to confess the incomprehensible unity of the incomprehensible and yet irreducible distinct divine persons.⁷⁵

Essentially, the division between created and uncreated ensures that human speech remains useful, although not comprehensively so, within the created realm only. Furthermore, Ayres identifies this semantic, and thus conceptual, hesitation as fundamental to Gregory and the pro-Nicene theological department. Williams

⁷⁴ See quote from note 32 above.

⁷⁵ Lewis Ayres, "On Not Three People: The Fundamental Themes of Gregory of Nyssa's Trinitarian Theology as Seen in *To Ablabius: On Not Three Gods*," 16.

also recognizes this linguistic hesitation: “Gregory in many ways anticipates Augustine’s analysis of time, concluding that since the whole Trinity is not ‘in time’, it cannot be comprehended, and further that since language itself is conditioned by time, the Trinity cannot be captured in language.”⁷⁶ In an even more unequivocal manner, Williams additionally insists that for Gregory “language is entirely a product of the human situation, and incapable of standing outside of itself in order to pinpoint God.”⁷⁷ Gregory concurs: “An analogy of the *separate* and the *conjoined* is found in *objects perceptible to the senses*” (italics mine).⁷⁸ Because these triadological and christological analogies are derived from the ‘sensible’ realm rather than the ‘uncreated intelligible’ realm, Gregory believes that the divine essence “transcends all cognitive thought and representation and cannot be likened to anything which is known.”⁷⁹ Consequently, language can be used to describe what we conceptualize about Christ and the Trinity, but it cannot depict the divine essence itself. “Every *term* either invented by the custom of men, or handed down to us by the Scriptures, is indeed *explanatory of our conceptions* of the Divine Nature, *but does not include the signification of that nature itself*” (italics mine).⁸⁰ The terms humans employ thus explain the triadological and christological *epinoiai* in the mind or ‘mind image’; they do not, however, explain the divine essence itself, but are implemented in conversation with others. On one level Gregory desires to escape conceptual and semantic restraints: “If it were in any way possible by some other

⁷⁶ J.P. Williams, *Denying Divinity*, 31.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁷⁸ *Let. 38*, NPNF, vol. 8, 139.

⁷⁹ *Life Mos.*, I: 47.

⁸⁰ *Thr. Gods*, NPNF, 332.

means to lay bare the movements of thought, abandoning the formal instrumentality of words, we should converse with one another more lucidly and clearly, revealing by the mere action of thought the essential nature of the things which are under consideration.”⁸¹ Gregory thus delineates precisely how one may achieve this escape from conceptual and semantic restraints by using Abraham as a paradigm:

By going...out of the realm of base and earthly thoughts, Abraham raised his mind as far as possible above the common limits of our human nature and abandoned the association which the soul has with the senses. Thus, unhindered by sense data, his mind was clear for the apprehension of the invisible, and neither the operation of his sight or hearing could cause his mind to err because of appearances...He was not guided in his knowledge of God by anything merely on the surface; nor was his mind ever overwhelmed by what he had already learned so as to stop in its progress towards that which transcends all knowledge...He went far beyond that which can be perceived by the senses...So too, all other qualities which are attributed to the divine nature, such as goodness, omnipotence, necessity, infinity and the like, Abraham understood them all as he advanced in thought; and he took all these as his provisions on his journey to heaven, using them as steps...And as he disposed all these things in his heart, he kept constantly transcending what he had grasped by his own power, for this was far inferior to what he sought...Abraham passed through all the reasoning that is possible to human nature about the divine attributes, and after he had purified his mind of all such concepts, he took hold of a faith that was unmixed and pure of any concept, and he fashioned for himself this token of knowledge of God that is completely clear and free of error, namely the belief that God completely transcends any knowable symbol.⁸²

Herbert Musurillo comments that the term he translated ‘symbol’ is *semeion*, and, “is borrowed from Stoic or Epicurean philosophy and refers to sense data which serve as the basis for an inference to the invisible or the metaphysical.”⁸³ This coincides precisely with what has been discussed thus far. All theological

⁸¹ *Ans. Eun.*, NPNF, 289.

⁸² *Ag. Eun.*, Glory, 119-121.

⁸³ Herbert Musurillo, Glory, 291.

epinoiai are derived from sensory information for the purpose of inferring to the divine essence, rather than for describing it. In this passage, however, Abraham desires to extend ontologically beyond this theological *epinoia* thus conferring on the concepts of the mind the responsibility and function of an icon, the soteriological elucidation of which will be provided in the final chapter.

However, Gregory admits the temporary necessity for these theological *epinoiai*:

No created being can go out of itself by rational contemplation. Whatever it sees, it must see itself; and even if it thinks it is seeing beyond itself, it does not in fact possess a nature which can achieve this. And thus in its contemplation of Being it tries to force itself to transcend a spatial representation, but it never achieves it. For in every possible thought, the mind is surely aware of the spatial element which it perceives in addition to the thought content; and the spatial element is, of course, created.⁸⁴

So, although Gregory does indeed desire to transcend the ‘created intelligible’ realm, he acknowledges the difficulty therein. It is, thus, necessary to work within one’s means; this includes theological conversation but ultimately the ‘ontological gaze’.

Denys Turner discusses the mirror image between theistic and atheistic onto-theological constructions based on isolated and agreed upon categories.⁸⁵ Those who defend their atheistic contentions do so in correspondence with the theistic constructions with which they are faced. Conversely, theistic definitions develop within the categories atheists use to discount the existence of God. Essentially, atheists are merely disproving the existence of an onto-theologically constructed God, but not God himself. By the same token, theists converse about God and form theistic conceptions based on the corresponding opposition, and

⁸⁴ *Comm. Eccl.*, Glory, 127.

⁸⁵ Denys Turner, “Apophaticism, Idolatry and the Claims of Reason,” In *Silence and the Word*, eds. Oliver Davies and Denys Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 15.

thus do not actually say anything about God himself. This contextualized discourse represents the second level of triadological and christological social analogies, that of contextual ‘social analogies’. Ayres elaborates on his previous observation concerning human speech, and observes, “Only in this context can any analogy serve a useful function and be properly deployed.”⁸⁶ This is what Ayres refers to as the ‘grammar’ of divinity.⁸⁷ A pre-established ‘grammar’ of divinity must be used to describe Christ and the Trinity if any coherence and unity is desired. This ‘grammar’ of divinity produces contextual social analogies that serve a practical function. Ayres elaborates:

Fourth century controversies are, in part, easily misunderstood if they are conceived as concentrating on the question ‘is the Son (and the Spirit) divine?’—some then answering ‘no’ while the ‘orthodox’ simply answer ‘yes’. In this simple form the question already seems to presuppose a complex understanding of ‘divinity’ that implies, for example, no possibility of degrees of divinity; in fact, dispute over the significance of the term and over the rules for talking about divinity was a constant (if sometimes hidden) factor in the debates.⁸⁸

Gregory thus identifies specific groups with which he argues by using certain metaphysical categories in order to frustrate opposing opinions. “The oneness...of the nature admits not division, so that the supremacy of the one *First Cause* is not split and cut up into differing Godships, neither does the statement

⁸⁶ Lewis Ayres, “On Not Three People: The Fundamental Themes of Gregory of Nyssa’s Trinitarian Theology as Seen in *To Ablabius: On Not Three Gods*,” 16.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* Ayres muses over the question concerning the ‘grammar’ of divinity from an exegetical perspective: “to understand the complexity of the questions involved here, it is more helpful to formulate the question offered in the first sentence of this paragraph in exegetical terms as ‘how can we speak of the Son as being one with the Father (John 10:30; cf. John 1:3) and as being the power and wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:24), while still asserting that the King of kings and Lord of lords alone has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light (1 Tim. 6:16)?” It appears that a biblical and hermeneutical discussion turned into a philosophical and metaphysical discussion; therefore, the latter needed to be used in order to speak to those who conceptualized in a similar way.

harmonize with the *Jewish* dogma, but the truth passes in the mean between these two conceptions, destroying each heresy, and yet accepting what is useful to it from each” (italics mine).⁸⁹ Similarly, Gregory asserts, “To extend the number of the Godhead to a multitude belongs to those only who suffer from the plague of *polytheistic* error, and on the other hand utterly to deny the Godhead would be the doctrine of *atheists*” (italics mine).⁹⁰ Therefore, metaphysical categories such as ‘oneness’, ‘division’, ‘number’ and ‘multitude’ are initially derived from social sensory information, but are selected and isolated for contextual use only. The social origin of human speech and its pragmatic function in theological discourse is acknowledged by Gregory:

We must recognize that in using the custom of the prevailing form of speech, it does not lay down a law as to the propriety of using the words in one way or another, nor does it say these things by way of giving us instruction about phrases, but uses the word according to the prevailing custom, with a view only to this, that the word may be profitable to those who receive it, taking no minute care in its manner of speech about points where no harm can result from the phrases in respect of the way they are understood.⁹¹

It appears that Gregory is hesitant about using universally accepted social analogies to describe the Godhead, but ultimately acknowledges their value within theological discourse, but with an appending caveat about its ability to authentically describe the divine essence.

⁸⁹ *Cat.*, NPNF, 477.

⁹⁰ *Trin.*, NPNF, 327.

⁹¹ *Thr. Gods*, NPNF, 335-336. This is discussed at greater length elsewhere in this thesis in the section, *Intermediary and Dialectical Orthodoxy*, in the chapter, “Formulating Theological *Epinoia*: The Inability of Human *Epinoia* to Encounter the Divine Essence,” 60-63.

CHAPTER THREE

FORMULATING THEOLOGICAL EPINOIA: THE INABILITY OF HUMAN EPINOIA TO ENCOUNTER THE DIVINE ESSENCE***The Threefold Reality within which Theological Epinoia is Formulated***

Aristotle wrote, “The soul never thinks without a mental image.”¹

Similarly, it is the human conception of God, or theological *epinoia*, which specifically has an iconic function according to Gregory. This is the ‘mind image’² formed for the “eye of our soul”³ to gaze transiently upon but ultimately gaze beyond. This is what is temporarily useful and necessary, but ultimately limited and ineffectual to depict God. But where is *epinoia* located in reality, and how does it correspond to the philosophy of icons?

Before determining a correct response to these inquiries, other Greek terms employed by Gregory which correspond to *epinoia* must be given brief and contextualized explanations. To denote the act of perceiving with the senses,

¹ Aristotle, *De Anima* III.7.431a. As quoted in, W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 14. For an enlightening discussion on the theme of mental conception as image within the context of Wittgenstein’s understanding on the same subject, see pages 14-19. As an aid to understanding why Gregory believes human *epinoia* to be incomplete and insufficient, Mitchell explains that although humans receive a mental image from sensory information, the mental image is not visible in the same way as is the material object. The physical boundaries and properties cannot correspond directly to those in the mental image. Consequently, one is able to say about a material image ‘there it is’, but is unable to do the same with a mental image. The lack of physicality in the mental image renders it less representative of the essence of the material object than the material object itself. The intellectual faculty constructs an interpretative image that cannot fully be identified and apprehended.

² *Beat.*, ACW, 147. Gregory claims that “we form in our mind an image *not* of the essence.” Instead, the image in our mind is a reflection of “the things that are referred to Him” so that he is thus “known by analogy.”

³ *Comm. Song*, Glory, 220. Gregory additionally explains the function of the ‘eye of the soul’ extensively in the sixth sermon in *Beat.*, ACW, 143-153.

Gregory uses the word *aisthesis*. This is the entrance to the ‘city of our mind’⁴ where *epinoiai* are formed. Gregory also employs the word *noema* in his writings to signify the intellect. In this sense, *noema* refers to the location of the *epinoiai*. The terms *logismos* and *theoria* are also used by Gregory in relation to *epinoia*. *Logismos* refers to the rational faculty and thus denotes the critical process towards forming the *epinoiai*. The meaning of the word *theoria* is contemplation, and suggests the organization of sense perceptions to form *epinoiai* in the mind. These words cannot be used interchangeably, but they are interlinked. Each term contributes to the general context surrounding conceptions. They all help to establish the contemporary notion of concept or ‘mind image’.

It is not necessary to establish the Platonic tendencies in Gregory’s thought other than in direct studies of the correspondence between the two, as Harold Cherniss does in *The Platonism of Gregory of Nyssa*.⁵ Gregory can adequately speak for himself, and the iconic propensity therein will make itself evident. It is therefore more beneficial to speak of a Gregorian philosophy than to refer constantly to Gregory’s Platonism as a sort of categorical crutch. That he contains Platonic inclinations is entirely true, but he seems to deviate from the prominent philosophy of his day just as much. Cherniss asserts that the “division of the whole into two worlds, phenomenal and intelligible, the basis of

⁴ *Mak. Man*, NPNF, 396. Gregory explains the act of receiving information from external matter with the senses by using an analogy of a city: “Just as if there were some extensive city receiving all comers by different entrances, all will not congregate at any particular place, but some will go to the market, some to the houses, others to the churches, or the streets, or lanes, or the theatres, each according to his own inclination,—some such city of our mind I seem to discern established in us, which the different entrances through the senses keep filling, while the mind, distinguishing and examining each of the things that enters, ranks them in their proper departments of knowledge.”

⁵ Harold Fredrik Cherniss, *The Platonism of Gregory of Nyssa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1930).

[Gregory's] whole theology and exegesis, throws him definitely upon Plato."⁶

This may be true to an extent, but Gregory makes an important alteration to this Platonic doctrine. The division between the 'sensible' and 'intelligible' realms certainly exists in Gregory's thought, but as Michel Barnes points out, "While Gregory is regularly described by scholars as a 'Platonist,' in fact he contrasts the inherent certainty of sense knowledge with the inherent uncertainty of abstract knowledge (or in Gregory's terms, knowledge of sensibles versus knowledge of intelligibles)."⁷ Effectively, "for Gregory intelligibles have a limited epistemological role—not true for the Platonist."⁸ Before elucidating this distinction further, it is best to let Gregory explain his own philosophical categories, after which the implications of his descent from Platonism will emerge in relation to the 'ontological gaze' towards the divine essence. Additionally, the similarity between Gregory's philosophy and that which regulates the implementation of icons will be outlined.

Gregory indeed distinguishes between 'sensibles' and 'intelligibles', but in addition to the aforementioned Gregorian epistemological assertion regarding these respective realms, Gregory also further divides the intellectual realm into 'created intelligibles' and 'uncreated intelligibles.' The resulting three-fold

⁶ Ibid., 36.

⁷ Barnes, Michel Rene, *The Power of God: Δυναμις in Gregory of Nyssa's Trinitarian Theology* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 254.

⁸ Ibid., (see footnote 117). In footnote 118, Barnes also explicates Gregory's epistemology within the Eunomian context: "In *Against Eunomius 2*, Gregory recognizes two kinds of objects of knowledge, the sensible and the intelligible. Sensible phenomena provide objects of knowledge that are available for all to know and can be known with certainty. By contrast, human faculties of knowledge are not always equal to the task of knowing intellectual phenomena, for frequently thoughts fail to comprehend and language fails to communicate. Gregory seems to believe that language about sensibles is intrinsically more accurate than speech about intelligibles. Speech about sensibles never stands in for the object since the object is directly available and is always connected by direct knowledge of the object. Speech about intelligibles lacks a clear and consistent paradigm against which it can be tested."

explanation of reality demonstrates the noetic process which formulates theological *epinoiai*.

Now the ultimate division of all being is into the Intelligible and Sensible. The Sensible world is called by the Apostle broadly ‘that which is seen.’ For as all body has colour, and the sight apprehends this, he calls this world by the rough and ready name of ‘that which is seen,’ leaving out all the other qualities, which are essentially inherent in its framework. The common term, again, for all the Intellectual world, is with the Apostle ‘that which is not seen:’ by withdrawing all ideas of comprehension by the senses he leads the mind on to the immaterial and intellectual. Reason again divides this ‘which is not seen’ into the uncreated and the created, inferentially comprehending it: the uncreated being that which effects the creation, the created that which owes its origin and its force to the uncreated. In the Sensible world, then, is found everything that we comprehend with by our organs of bodily sense, and in which the differences of qualities involve the idea of more or less, such differences consisting in quantity, quality, and the other properties. But in the Intelligible world—that part of it, I mean, which is created,—the idea of such differences as are perceived in the Sensible cannot find a place: another method, then, is devised for discovering the degrees of greater and less.⁹

The method for deciphering gradation will be explained later. For now it is important to recognize the threefold reality as it appears in Gregory’s thought. In the realm of ‘sensibles’ exists all material and sensible objects. Gregory plainly avows what is contained by each of the two intelligible realms: “We detect again a further distinction into the Created and Uncreated: to the latter of which we have defined the Holy Trinity to belong, to the former all that can exist or can be thought of after that.”¹⁰ Therefore, the divine essence alone resides in the ‘uncreated intelligible’ realm, while the *essence* of all else and all *conceptions* are located in the ‘created intelligible’ realm.

⁹ *Ag. Eun.*, NPNF, 60.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 63

Gregory makes a supplementary threefold distinction from Scriptural references that does not entirely operate in tandem with the one just described but is nevertheless significant. He introduces the three human faculties of body, soul and mind (or spirit), and explains their respective functions. The body is the corporeal entity that receives physical nourishment; the soul is responsible for sensory perception; and the mind is the mental and intellectual faculty.¹¹ Gregory further designates the soul as an intermediary faculty between the sensible and the intellectual. As such, the soul is what extracts information from the material world with the senses and ‘relays’ it to the intellectual faculty, the mind. The soul is the living essence of the human and is responsible for the motion between the ‘sensible’ and the ‘intelligible’ realms.

Gregory clearly affirms the value of empirical reality, and understands knowledge to be *a posteriori* sensory perception.¹² This knowledge, which is received through the operation of the senses, generates corresponding conceptions or ‘mind images’. After contrasting speech as that which emanates from humans, and hearing as that which senses the ‘sensible’ world, Gregory claims, “The operation of the instrument,¹³ however, is twofold; one for the production of sound, the other for the reception of concepts from without.”¹⁴ Hence, concepts are formed subsequent to sensory reception. In this case, hearing receives

¹¹ *Mak. Man*, NPNF, 394.

¹² *Ibid.*, 396. “We find, then, by experience, both the bitterness of gall and the pleasant character of the quality of honey; but when these facts are known, the knowledge is one which is given to us... by taste, smell, hearing, and often by touch and sight.”

¹³ *Ibid.*, 395. See quote from footnote 9. The instrument is a projection of Gregory’s musical metaphor and represents the mind in connection with reason.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

information from the 'sensible' realm and generates corresponding concepts in order to ascertain its precise appearance and form.

So far Gregory's threefold reality has been established. From the human perspective corporeal 'sensibles' exist externally and are received by the senses, whose information are, in turn, relayed by the soul to the mind. The mind makes sense of this information by comprehending and organizing it. "The qualities which together complete the body are comprehended by the mind and not by sense perception."¹⁵ This again demonstrates the passive and automatic response of sensory perception. After sensory information is received through the senses and is relayed to the mind, the 'accidents' such as colour, shape and size are comprehended in the 'intelligible' realm. All of these qualities are then "ordered by the mind"¹⁶ producing a 'mind image'. This is how graduation and distinction are determined in the mind in order to form the conception. This is also the *epinoia*, and constitutes the conceptual icon or idol depending on the projection and distance of the gaze and whether or not this gaze emanates from the 'eye of the soul' and is thus ontological. These concepts are themselves images which are organized in the 'created intelligible' realm.

What sort of storehouses are there for the *concepts* that are being put in by our hearing?...And one may have the like feeling of wonder also with regard to the operation of sight; for by it also in like manner the *mind* apprehends those things which are external to the body, and draws to itself the *images* of phenomena, marking in itself the impressions of the things which are seen (*italics mine*).¹⁷

¹⁵ *Soul Res.* Translated by Catharine P. Roth, 99.

¹⁶ *Mak. Man*, NPNF, 393.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 396.

It is important to acknowledge, therefore, that all concepts have their origin in perceptible objects located in the ‘sensible realm’. As will become increasingly apparent, the noetic process admits an anomaly with respect to theological *epinoiai* and their origin in the ‘sensible realm’.

The Anomaly of the Created/Uncreated Dichotomy

The relevance of Gregory’s philosophical system to this thesis, however, resides specifically in Gregory’s evaluation of theological *epinoia*, which ensues from the noetic process. As is entirely consistent with his apophaticism, Gregory asserts, “The blessed and eternal substance of God, that surpasses all understanding, contains all perfection within itself and cannot be limited. Hence nothing that is limiting, whether *name*, or *concept* or thing, can be considered as His attribute, as, for example, time, place, colour, shape, form, mass, magnitude, dimension” (italics mine).¹⁸ The question must be asked: Why can God *not* be represented accurately with a concept? Of course, the inadequacy of *epinoia* to represent anything in a precise manner coincides with the progression of the human soul towards perfection as well as the complexity and variety of the information received through the senses. However, theological *epinoia* is unique. The only object that resides in the ‘uncreated intelligible’ realm, the domain ‘above’ the ‘created intelligible’ realm, is the divine essence itself. “What difference then do we discern between the Divine and that which has been made like to the Divine? We find it in the fact that the former is uncreated, while the latter has its being from creation.”¹⁹ Since the divine essence is uncreated, it is

¹⁸ *Comm. Song*, Glory, 189.

¹⁹ *Mak. Man*, NPNF, 405.

immutable because its existence was never achieved through change. Creation itself is the initial change from non-existence to existence. Incidentally, humans can perceive and interpret that which resides in the created realms, however imprecise these interpretations may be, simply because of its proximity. It is here with us and is physically visible. Therefore, humans have empirical access to ‘sensibles’ and ‘created intelligibles’ such as *epinoiai*. In contrast, humans do not have the same access to the invisible and incomprehensible divine essence, and thus, cannot form a conception of it. “Whatever be the nature of God, He is not to be apprehended by sense.”²⁰ Thus, the anomaly of the created/uncreated dichotomy finally emerges as it relates to theological *epinoia*. If theological *epinoiai* cannot result from sensing the invisible and incomprehensible divine essence, which for Gregory it certainly cannot, then they must have formed through empirical access to universal social constructs employed for the understanding of those who acknowledge the same universal social constructs. Therefore, instead of conceptualizing God’s essence as it is itself, God “may be contemplated in the things that are referred to him.”²¹ God is thus “known by analogy.”²² When describing God as one or three, separate or unified and Father, Son or Holy Spirit, universal social analogies are employed in order to interpret something that cannot be physically ‘sensed’. Humans are merely appropriating what they sense from the material world and conferring them on God.

[Gregory] shows the entire relativity of our knowledge of the Deity. Ungenerate and every other name of God is due to a conception; in each case we perceive either an operation of the Deity, or an element of evil,

²⁰ *Ans. Eun.*, NPNF, 264.

²¹ *Beat.*, ACW, 147.

²² *Ibid.*

and then we conceive of Him as operating in the one, or as free from the other; and so name Him. *But there is no conception, because there is no perception of the substance of the Deity* (italics mine).²³

This understanding was acknowledged within the context of Gregory's confrontation with Eunomius. Eunomius kataphatically claimed that the word *ungenerate* or *agenetos*, which describes God's essence, emerges from a perception implanted in humans by God. Correspondingly, Eunomius alleges,

It would be dangerous to trust the naming of the Deity to a common operation of the mind. The faculty of Conception may and does play us false; it can create monstrosities. Besides, if the names of the Father are conceptions, the names of the Son are too; for instance, the Door, the Shepherd, the Axe, the Vine. But as our Lord Himself applied these to Himself, He would, according to you, be employing the faculty of conception; and it is blasphemous to think that He employed names which we too might have arrived at by conceiving of Him in these particular ways. Therefore, Conception is not the Source of the Divine Names; but rather they come from a perception or intention implanted in us directly from on High. Ungenerate is such a name; and it reveals to us the very substance of Deity.²⁴

It is easy to decipher the contrasting understanding of conceptions between Eunomius and Gregory in this quote. Eunomius believes that conceptions and language emerge from innate ideas which are implanted by God, whereas Gregory admits the human empirical situation and origin of concepts. However, Gregory is not pessimistic about theological *epinoia*; he of course uses concepts to describe God. "Gregory, as spokesman of the Nicene party, defends the efficacy of the mental operation of conception to supply terms for the deity, which, however, *can none of them be final*" (italics mine).²⁵ Ultimately, theological *epinoiai* fail, but they can be conferred on the divine essence if their appropriate

²³ Henry Austin Wilson, *EIIINOIA*, NPNF, 249.

²⁴ Eunomius of Cyzicus, as quoted from, *Ibid*.

²⁵ Henry Austin Wilson, *EIIINOIA*, NPNF, 249.

objective is not distorted. Although it is true that these theological *epinoiai* are used for the instruction of those who recognize the relevance and interpretive value of the social metaphors employed in theological discussion, if humans sojourn at the theological *epinoia* itself, as Eunomius does, it becomes an idol. After it is developed through the noetic process, theological *epinoia* must guide humans beyond itself towards the divine essence; this is precisely how theological *epinoia* functions as an icon.

Intermediary and Dialectical Orthodoxy

Rather than perceiving orthodoxy as that which completely encompasses truth, Gregory is more comfortable assigning orthodoxy the responsibility of guiding one towards truth in its ineffable essence. In compliance with his apophaticism, he succeeds in his endeavour through negation. This is to say, truth is exposed by refutation or peeling away layers of false contentions. Consequently, Gregory declares, “In my view the definition of truth is this: not to have a mistaken apprehension of Being.”²⁶ Notice that Gregory does not perceive truth as an accurate apprehension or conception of Being. He instead describes truth in negative terms. Hence, Gregory’s apophatic sensitivity is exposed when discussing the objective of orthodox theological *epinoia*. Furthermore, truth is something one experiences or participates in rather than describes affirmatively.²⁷

The purpose of orthodoxy for Gregory is to provide a compromise

²⁶ *Life Mos.*, II: 23.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, II: 24-25.

between two fallacious extremes.²⁸ Orthodoxy is intermediary. Accordingly, language is used to describe the theological *epinoiai* that oppose extremes on either side and the impudence intrinsic to affirmative literal descriptions of Christ and the Trinity. However incompetent theological *epinoia* may be to depict literally the Godhead, it can, nevertheless, guide one toward an experience of the truth within a specific isolated context. This last point must be elucidated further in light of Gregory's interaction with the various heresies. By necessity, Gregory's defense of orthodoxy must be located in the middle of two extremes. While attempting to explicate, albeit quite inelegantly, the unity and distinction of the two natures in Christ, Gregory asserts:

The Jewish dogma is destroyed by the acceptance of the Word, and by the belief in the Spirit; while the polytheistic error of the Greek school is made to vanish by the unity of the Nature abrogating this imagination of plurality. While yet again of the Jewish conception, let the unity of the Nature stand; and of the Hellenistic, only the distinction as to persons; the remedy against a profane view being thus applied, as required, on either side. For it is as if the number of the triad were a remedy in the case of those who are in error as to the One, and the assertion of the unity for those whose beliefs are dispersed among a number of divinities.²⁹

The theological process demonstrated above is explained in more detail by John Henry Cardinal Newman:

The mind which is habituated to the thought of God, of Christ, of the Holy Spirit, naturally turns with a devout curiosity to the contemplation of the object of its adoration, and begins to form statements concerning it, before it knows whither, or how far, it will be carried. One proposition necessarily leads to another, and a second to a third; then some limitation is required; and the combination of these *opposites* occasions some fresh

²⁸ Anthony Meredith, *The Cappadocians*, 103. Meredith describes the refutational methodology employed during the time between the Council of Nicea and the Council of Constantinople and the confusion and inconsistency it produced. Specifically, the Cappadocians sought to locate a 'middle course' between Arius on one side and Marcellus of Ancyra on the other.

²⁹ *Cat.*, NPNF, 477.

evolutions from the original idea, *which indeed can never be said to be entirely exhausted* (italics mine).³⁰

Not only does this demonstrate the centre line of orthodoxy, but orthodoxy's limited function and, thus, deficiency is also exhibited quite clearly. This is to say, theological *epinoia* is only as useful as the extremes it seeks to refute. Heresies, therefore, act as a point of reference; if the point of reference altered, the orthodox theological *epinoia* would also be different. Consequently, the theological process is dialectical. Orthodoxy is predicated on the heresy it seeks to refute. For instance, Gregory argues that the Godhead is one only because his opponents deny the Holy Spirit a place within the Godhead:

What [heretical] doctrine is that which accuses us for saying that the Godhead is one? But they reveal more clearly the aim of their argument. As regards the Father, they admit the fact that He is God, and that the Son likewise is honoured with the attribute of Godhead; but the Spirit, Who is reckoned with the Father and the Son, they cannot include in their conception of Godhead, but hold that the power of the Godhead, issuing from the Father to the Son, and there halting, separates the nature of the Spirit from the Divine glory. And so, as far as we may in a short space, we have to answer this opinion also (italics mine).³¹

Gregory here feels obliged to respond to the attacks of his enemies with a refutation of his own. Expressing both the concept of intermediary orthodoxy and dialectical orthodoxy, Gregory asserts,

No one could set Sebellius right by the same instruction as would benefit Anomoean. The controversy with the Manichee is profitless against the Jew. It is necessary, therefore, as I have said, to regard the opinions which the persons have taken up, and to frame your argument in accordance with the error into which each has fallen, by advancing in each discussion certain principles and reasonable propositions, that thus, through what is

³⁰ John Henry Cardinal Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (London: Longmans Green and Co., 1920), 52.

³¹ *Trin.*, NPNF, 327.

agreed upon on both sides, the truth may conclusively be brought to light.³²

This process demonstrates precisely how orthodoxy is composed. If a Bishop of that era had espoused the view that a fourth person ought to be included in the Godhead, no doubt orthodox conception would address this issue. The point being, orthodox theological *epinoia* is ultimately incomplete and inadequate to describe the immeasurable complexities of Christ and the Trinity, but is sufficient only in the context within which it is employed. Hence, concepts have a positive function when used to direct a specific people at a particular period towards the much more expansive and far-reaching truth that lies hidden behind the limitedness of theological *epinoia*.

Soteriological Substantiation Through Christological and Triadological Means

It is important to determine precisely how Gregory's christology and trinitarian expressions sustain his soteriology. By doing this, one is able to ascertain Gregory's theological motivation. This is to say, it can be demonstrated that the primary reason Gregory affirms and uses theological *epinoia* is to substantiate a pre-existing soteriological view. This, incidentally, will answer the question with respect to why Gregory conceptualizes and publicizes any triadological and christological conclusions at all, and why, considering the importance of salvation, he essentially did not have an option. Salvation is very spiritual and ascetic for Gregory, and it would not be out of character for him to substantiate his soteriology with theological *epinoiai* that would have otherwise been pragmatically inconsequential. It is imperative, however, to establish the

³² *Cat.*, NPNF, 474.

initial concept on which the other is based. It must be demonstrated, therefore, that Gregory's soteriology appeared first after which his christological and triadological formulations emerged consequentially. Gregory seems to indicate this sequence:

If, then, the soul of man, although by the necessity of its nature it is transfused through the body, yet presents itself everywhere at will, what necessity is there for saying that the Deity is hampered by an environment of fleshly nature, and why may we not, *by examples which we are capable of understanding, gain some reasonable idea of God's plan of salvation* (italics mine)?³³

Gregory appears to be conferring an analogy from experience onto Christ in order to justify an uninhibited assimilation between the divine essence and the human nature, which, in turn, can be used to describe his pre-existing soteriological view. Specifically, Gregory is identifying the role of the soul and is thus establishing 'some reasonable idea of God's plan for salvation'. After forming a soteriological view with 'examples which we are capable of understanding', Gregory is able to decipher a probable christological composition using theological *epinoiai*. In fact, since God's *energeia* alone can be known, God's salvific operations must be recognized initially after which the divine/human composition of Christ can be determined within a pre-established soteriological context. Furthermore, while in monastic retreat Gregory wrote solely on spiritual matters before engaging in theological controversy once enthroned as Bishop of Nyssa. Although not a convincing argument by itself, it nevertheless lends credence to the overall theory that Gregory formed his soteriological view before associating the soteriologically

³³ Ibid., 485.

significant soul/body composition of humans with the divine/human composition of Christ.

Scholars seem to agree. With reference to Christ's humanity and Gregory's notorious christological inconsistencies described in detail in the next section, Zachhuber declares, "[The Cappadocians] did not...feel the need to address the resulting Christological problem of how the union of human and divine could be conceived...And this, I think, not by coincidence, but rather as a consequence of their 'humanistic' soteriology which could work without a precise Christological framework."³⁴ Christ requires human and divine natures, but the significance of the precise quality of their union is negligible. Furthermore, Gregory's soteriology takes precedence, while the christological and triadological conceptions are formed consequentially. Brian Daley expresses succinctly how Gregory is indeed unique:

While I would certainly agree on the central place given to the person and work of Christ in all Gregory's thought, I suggest that he is not concerned with christology in the same sense or to the same degree as Nestorius, Cyril, Theodoret and Leo would be, let alone Severus, Leontius of Byzantium and Maximus the Confessor. He is concerned above all with Jesus Christ as the man in whom and through whom the infinite and saving reality of God touches us all: with preserving the transcendence of the God who is present in him, and with emphasizing the transformation of that human reality which God, in the man Jesus, has made his own.³⁵

Gregory's emphasis on the humanity of Christ, while seemingly abandoning his divinity, is expressed overtly in *On the Faith*: "He Who was formed in the virgin's womb, according to the word of the prophet, is the servant, *and not the*

³⁴ Zachhuber, Johannes, *Human Nature in Gregory of Nyssa; Philosophical Background and Theological Significance* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 213.

³⁵ Brian E Daley, "Divine Transcendence and Human Transformation: Gregory of Nyssa's Anti-Apollinarian Christology," 73.

Lord...He Who was created as the beginning of His ways is not God, but the man in whom God was manifested to us for the renewing again of the ruined way of man's salvation (italics mine)."³⁶ Christ, therefore, is perceived as human because humans need salvation. However, when the context alters, Gregory shifts his focus. "Because of the debates with Eunomius Gregory is concerned in his christology to emphasize the full divinity of Christ."³⁷ Although he alleges that Gregory did not consider Christ's divinity to be of "crucial importance,"³⁸ Zachhuber nevertheless claims elsewhere "that Gregory, under the pressure of maintaining, against Eunomius, the salvific necessity of Christ's full divinity, shifted the emphasis of his soteriology away from the humanistic approach of the Origenist tradition towards an approach stressing the salvific activity of the Logos."³⁹ Notice the austere contrast between the sentiment expressed in *Against Eunomius* and that which is conveyed in *On the Faith* above: "Then he took dust from the earth and formed man, again he took dust from the virgin *and not only formed man, but formed him around himself*; then he created, afterwards he was created; then the word made flesh, afterwards *the word became flesh* in order to *transform our flesh into spirit* by partaking of our flesh and blood" (italics mine).⁴⁰ Evidently, Gregory is more concerned with maintaining a balanced soteriological approach by conveniently emphasizing Christ's divinity and equal status within the trinitarian economy when required.

³⁶ *Faith*, NPNF, 337.

³⁷ Morwenna Ludlow, *Universal Salvation: Eschatology in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa and Karl Rahner* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 93.

³⁸ Johannes Zachhuber, *Human Nature in Gregory of Nyssa; Philosophical Background and Theological Significance*, 192.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 217.

⁴⁰ *Ag. Eun.*, as quoted in, *Ibid.*, 216.

The interdependence of all three *hypostases* in the Trinity provides further soteriological reinforcement for Gregory. Casimir McCambley describes the economy of salvation where “the Holy Spirit incorporates us in the Son who in turn unites us to the Father.”⁴¹ He then proceeds to exposit Gregory’s inferences in *On the Inscriptions of the Psalms*: “Thus by more subtle teachings of his intentions, the divine sculptor (Father) scrapes and polishes (actions of the Holy Spirit) our mind and then forms Christ in us according to the pattern of virtue.”⁴² Elsewhere, Gregory declares, “Our life is one which comes to us by faith in the Holy Trinity, taking its rise from the God of all, flowing through the Son, and working in us by the Holy Spirit.”⁴³ Each *hypostasis* assumes its salvific role based on the nature of Gregory’s soteriology. The motivation for Gregory’s own theological *epinoiai*, then, is located in his insistence on a correct soteriological understanding. Theological *epinoia* is therefore used to discern the divine *energeia* rather than the divine essence. Where the divine essence is concerned, however, the ‘ontological gaze’ surpasses the theological *epinoiai* in order to ‘see’ God with the ‘eye of the soul’.

Gregory of Nyssa’s Interaction with Heresies and the Ensuing Inconsistencies

To underscore Gregory’s theological inconsistencies is not to discredit his performance as a theologian; rather, the objective is to shift scholarly focus away from his theological aptitude and toward that which makes him truly unique. The ultimate futility of theological *epinoia* restrained Gregory from systemizing and

⁴¹ Casimir McCambley, (Introduction), *Commentary on the Inscriptions of the Psalms* (Brookline: Hellenic College Press, 1990), 15.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ *Let. 2*, NPNF, 528.

rationalizing his theological positions. Instead, as was just determined, he sought to discredit theological positions that facilitated soteriological misunderstandings. Practically speaking, Gregory was more concerned about maintaining christological and triadological teachings that endorsed an apophatic ascent. Consequently, in his attempt to refute erroneous and detrimental theological positions, Gregory often unwittingly fell into blatant contradictions. The unique context within which each contradicting emphasis occurred can account for many of the inconsistencies. However, this does not dismiss the fact that Gregory was less worried about proper confirmatory theological *epinoia* than he was of refuting destructive doctrines that sought to undermine his soteriological view. Nevertheless, Gregory's theological inconsistencies validate the claim that affirmative theological descriptions cannot be understood literally, since it would be nonsensical to retain literally various contradicting and incompatible theological *epinoiai*.

Although scholars like George Dragas⁴⁴ and at times Brian Daley⁴⁵ may prefer to downplay Gregory's theological inconsistencies, their attempts to preserve his theological integrity are unwarranted. Instead, his inconsistencies should be acknowledged without fearing the repercussions. The key is to acknowledge Gregory's theological inconsistencies as they appear on the surface, while simultaneously acknowledging that these inconsistencies must be considered "within the context of the controversies that exercised him in his own

⁴⁴ George D. Dragas, "The Anti-Apollinarist Christology of St. Gregory of Nyssa: A First Analysis," 299-314.

⁴⁵ Brian E. Daley, "Divine Transcendence and Human Transformation: Gregory of Nyssa's Anti-Apollinarian Christology," 67-76.

day.”⁴⁶ As indicative of the necessity to acknowledge context in dialectical orthodoxy as elucidated earlier, “Gregory claims that to the extent theological language expresses divine truths at all such language can have no fixed content, but must forever be reinterpreted in an endless pursuit of an ever elusive meaning.”⁴⁷ Therefore, the manifold contexts will invariably produce a variety of corresponding conclusions.

While avoiding a harmonization of Gregory’s christological inconsistencies with his larger theology, a brief description of these inconsistencies is warranted, while presupposing the aforementioned insights. Meredith asserts, “If Gregory began his reply to Apollinaris as a Nestorian, he ends it as a pronounced Monophysite.”⁴⁸ Observe the rapid progression from an acknowledgement of two separate natures in Christ to the co-mingling of these two natures:

Now the human side of Christ, in accordance with normal human custom, was named by a particular name which he had received through the revelation made by Gabriel to the maiden, and the nature of his humanity, as has been said, was Jesus. His divine nature, however, cannot be expressed by a name, but the two [sc. the divine and human natures] became *one* through their *co-mingling*. For that reason God receives his name from his humanity (*italics mine*).⁴⁹

Another transparent indication of Gregory’s christological inconsistency occurs when his view of Christ in *On the Faith*, just recently described in the previous section, is contrasted with that which occurs elsewhere in *Against Apollinaris*.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 68.

⁴⁷ Alden A. Mosshammer, “Disclosing but not Disclosed: Gregory of Nyssa as Deconstructionist In *Studien zu Gregor von Nyssa und der christlichen spatantike*, eds. Hubertus R. Drobner and Christoph Klock (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 101.

⁴⁸ Anthony Meredith, *The Cappadocians*, 113.

⁴⁹ *Ag. Apol.* Translated by Anthony Meredith. *Gregory of Nyssa* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 58.

First,⁵⁰ Gregory asserts, “He [the human nature or flesh] Who was formed in the Virgin’s womb, according to the word of the prophet, is the servant, and not the Lord.”⁵¹ And further down, “He Who was created as the beginning of His ways is not God, but the man in whom God was manifested to us for the renewing again of the ruined way of man’s salvation.”⁵² In *Against Apollinaris*, however, Gregory describes Christ’s humanity as “a drop of vinegar mixed with the endless ocean”⁵³ when compared to his divinity.⁵⁴ This inconsistency is rectified, however, when one realizes that in *On the Faith* Gregory is attempting to refute those who believed that “the Creator and Maker of all things was created”⁵⁵ because the only-begotten was made man, while the Father himself is unbegotten. Conversely, Gregory attempted to substantiate his soteriology as it is presented in Matthew 18:12 by demonstrating the salvation of the unified natures in humanity as concurrently manifested through Christ, who also possesses a unified nature.⁵⁶

Gregory’s triadological inconsistencies need not be explicated;⁵⁷ his christological inconsistencies adequately serve to illuminate his willingness to provide conflicting responses depending on the refutational context.

Additionally, one is able to admit Gregory’s objective to refute detrimental

⁵⁰ The page after the ‘Contents of Volume V’ page containing information on the ‘Dates of Treatise, etc., Here Translated’ in NPNF states that *On the Faith* was written in AD 375, while Anthony Meredith claims that *Against Apollinaris* was written sometime after AD 385. Anthony Meredith, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 48.

⁵¹ *Faith*, NPNF, 337.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ag. Apol.*, Translated by Anthony Meredith, 113.

⁵⁴ George D. Dragas, “The Anti-Apollinarian Christology of St. Gregory of Nyssa: A First Analysis,” 301.

⁵⁵ *Faith*, NPNF, 337.

⁵⁶ *Ag. Apol.*, Translated by Anthony Meredith, 51.

⁵⁷ *Cat.*, NPNF, 477. Here Gregory clearly expresses an indifference towards theological description of the Godhead in the context of refuting both Greek polytheism and Jewish anti-trinitarian dogma. Accordingly, for Gregory the “remedy against a profane view [is] thus applied, as required, on either side.”

doctrines rather than provide confirmatory theological description, thus demonstrating the futility in observing *epinoia* as literal affirmative theological depictions, since various incongruous theological descriptions are espoused by Gregory.

Gregory of Nyssa's True Inclinations Exposed: Prefaces to 'Dogmatic' Treatises

Although occasionally Gregory may seem somewhat dogmatic in his theological treatises, his prefaces to each treatise reveal his true concerns, and a methodology that refutes his ostensible dogmatism. A brief description of each preface in four of his most 'dogmatic' treatises is warranted even though the sentiments expressed therein mirror much of what has already discussed. The uniqueness of what is about to be explained, however, lies in the fact that all of these sentiments are introductory comments written before Gregory actually interacts with the heresies in the writings themselves, thus serving as a caveat of sorts.

First, the preface to Gregory's instructional and apologetic treatise *The Great Catechism* reveals the subjectivity of his instruction.

The catechism must be adapted to the diversities of their religious worship; with an eye, indeed, to the one aim and of the system, but not using the same method of preparation in each individual case. The Judaizer has been preoccupied with one set of notions, one conversant with Hellenism, with others; while the Anomoean, and the Manichee, with the followers of Marcion, Valentius and Basilides, and the rest of the list of those who have wandered into heresy, each of them being prepossessed with their peculiar notions, necessitate a special controversy with their several opinions. The method of recovery must be adapted to the form of the disease. You will not by the same means cure the polytheism of the Greek, and the unbelief of the Jew as to the Only-begotten God.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ *Cat.*, NPNF, 473-474.

It is therefore quite clear that Gregory does not anticipate his audience will observe each of his varying responses to the triadological and christological heresies with which he is interacting as literally describing the essence of God.

In *On the Holy Spirit* Gregory admits that silence is best in dealing with heresy as he begins this treatise by conceding, “It may indeed be undignified to give any answer at all to the statements that are foolish.”⁵⁹ But soon after admits, “There may be danger lest through our silence error may prevail over truth.”⁶⁰ Therefore, Gregory’s interaction with heresy is again refutational in nature, since he addresses heretics “for the correction of their depraved ideas.”⁶¹ What he proposes in opposition to the heresy is not confirmatory in nature: “For our answers...are not to run on the level of their foolish conception, but rather to *overturn* those unthinking and deluded views as to doctrine” (italics mine).⁶² Ultimately, Gregory seeks to provide theological description for the purpose of worship only: “We...confess that the Holy Spirit is of the same rank as the Father and the Son, so that there is no difference between them in anything, to be thought or named, that *devotion* can ascribe to a Divine nature” (italics mine).⁶³ Notice also the apophatic language employed by Gregory in describing the equality within the Godhead where, ‘there is no difference in them in anything.’

The preface to *On the Holy Trinity* also demonstrates Gregory’s preference of silence and diffidence when confronted with heresy. “I thought it

⁵⁹ *Holy Spirit*, NPNF, 315.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

right, indeed, in view of the continuous and varied effort of our enemies against us, to keep silence, and to receive their attack quietly.”⁶⁴ However, as is entirely consistent with the claim that Gregory felt obliged to interact with heresies because of his position of leadership within the Church, he admits: “But you did well in *urging me* not to betray truth, but to refute the slanderers, lest, by a success of falsehood against truth, many might be injured.”⁶⁵ Observe his practical concern at the end as well as his avoidance to state precisely what the truth is in a confirmatory statement. Instead, he delineates his method to ‘refute the slanderers,’ and speaks of ‘falsehood against the truth.’

Even the title of this next treatise *On ‘Not Three Gods’* is refutational in nature. Again, Gregory does not delineate an affirmative definition of truth, but instead seeks to refute the “enemies of the truth”⁶⁶ and the “opponents of the truth.”⁶⁷ In this treatise Gregory introduces the notion of faith in contrast to the false security of knowledge: “Their shafts sharpened by knowledge falsely so called should be quenched with the shield of faith by us old men.”⁶⁸ Faith provides an alternative to rationalization, and initiates the concept of authority as found in revelation. Gregory states, “We must keep for ever, firm and unmoved, the tradition which we receive by succession from the fathers.”⁶⁹ On several occasions elsewhere throughout the treatise Gregory consults “the testimony of Scripture”⁷⁰ and the “suggestions of Scripture.”⁷¹ Furthermore, although Gregory

⁶⁴ *Trin.*, NPNF, 236.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Thr. Gods*, NPNF, 331.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 332.

is confident in his ability to refute erroneous claims, his attempt to disclose the truth in a confirmatory manner is less assertive, as he describes his effort as “tracing out the truth as best we may.”⁷²

The Noetic Process and the Purification of the Mind

It must be recognized at the outset that Gregory does not represent Nicene orthodoxy itself. Admittedly, he defends Nicene concepts and descriptions of Christ and the Trinity, but it is more beneficial to view Gregory as an individual theologian with idiosyncratic theological developments and conclusions. Nicene orthodoxy is much more systematic than Gregory is or would even like to be. Warren J. Smith accurately asserts that Gregory’s theology is a “kaleidoscopic theology, a theology that by twists and turns describes different facets of God.”⁷³

Brian E. Daley observes,

Gregory never treats the person and being of Christ in a single, thematically focused treatise, comparable to his *opuscula* on the Trinity; most of his Christological writing appears either in a polemical context—in works against Eunomian Arianism or the ‘new’ heresy of the Apollinarians—or in works dealing with the interior, spiritual fulfillment of the individual, such as *On Perfection* or the *Commentary on the Song of Songs*. Surprisingly, perhaps, he rarely uses the vocabulary he and his fellow Cappadocians had so carefully honed for Trinitarian discussions to express what is one and what is manifold in Christ, but speaks instead in a variety of scriptural and philosophical images which were richly suggestive for him, but which were used for different purposes by both sides of the Christological conflicts a half-century later.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., 331.

⁷³ Warren J. Smith, *Passion and Paradise: Human and Divine Emotion in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2004), 51.

⁷⁴ Brian E. Daley, “Divine Transcendence and Human Transformation: Gregory of Nyssa’s Anti-Apollinarian Christology,” In *Re-Thinking Gregory of Nyssa*, ed. Sarah Coakley (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 68.

Anthony Meredith alleges that some scholars believe Gregory's theology to be "crude and with little power of synthetic thought."⁷⁵ In a sense they are correct, but only if an attempt is made to extract surface theological conclusions from Gregory's writings. They would be incorrect, however, if they were to acknowledge that consistency and systemization is not Gregory's objective, but that instead his genius is located in his theological methodology, a notion that appears to be foreign to some scholars.⁷⁶

Gregory's evaluation of the need to use *epinoiai* to depict Christ and the Trinity demonstrates his hesitation to do so. Concepts are useful for a specific context, but should never be relied on to provide literal depictions of God. A dependence on *epinoia* actually confirms one's immaturity and a need for purification. This purification ultimately leads to worship and participation in true Being. Consequently, theological *epinoia* as light⁷⁷ is associated with Gregory's soteriology and the apophatic ascent, as it demonstrates an initiation of

⁷⁵ Anthony Meredith, *The Cappadocians*, 113.

⁷⁶ Although most Gregory of Nyssa scholars seem to recognize Gregory's agenda and priorities in light of his spiritual background and philosophical presuppositions, a few scholars such as George D. Dragas and even at times Brian E. Daley attempt to defend Gregory's theology as entirely consistent. This scholarship is in opposition to the majority of academic opinion on Gregory, however. Not only does the emphasis on Gregory's apophysis as identified by many of the scholars discussed thus far indicate that Gregory is indeed disinterested in forming consistent and literal descriptions of Christ and the Trinity, Dragas himself identifies both the Anglican scholar Charles Raven and the Roman Catholic historian of dogma Aloys Grillmeier as holding to this view: George D. Dragas, "The Anti-Apollinarian Christology of St. Gregory of Nyssa: A First Analysis," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 42 (fall-winter 1997): 300-302.

⁷⁷ *Life Mos.*, II: 162. "Religious knowledge comes at first to those who receive it as light."

this process towards union in the darkness of unknowing.⁷⁸ However, a dependence on theological *epinoia* also indicates a soteriological deficiency.

With a brief psychological analysis of the Western dependence on concepts to comprehend the divine essence, Carabine provides an important observation:

The affirmative way of ‘speaking’ about God, with its heavy reliance upon the creedal formulae adopted by the Ecumenical Councils of the early Church, has sometimes tended to forget that *while creedal formulae provide a conceptual form through which a ray of truth can be communicated, they cannot contain the whole truth about God*; they remain its expression in linguistic terms only. This understanding was officially reaffirmed at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. A literal interpretation of anything said of the divine nature betrays, at least in the eyes of the negative theologian, the measure of human conceit, and that is seen as an attempt to enclose the mystery of the divine within a rigid set of concepts; or perhaps it validates in a measure the Jungian observation that the Western mind cannot function without the aid of concepts.⁷⁹

As a negative theologian himself, Gregory is understandably apprehensive about employing concepts to depict the Godhead. Purification is the solution in this circumstance. However, Smith observes that “the first cycle of purgation and illumination that begins the soul’s spiraling ascent to God could be described as the phase of preparation through *education and discipline*” (italics mine).⁸⁰

Theological *epinoiai* would definitely fit the category of education and discipline. These concepts, however, have their origin in humans, and as such should not be taken literally. Brightman observes, “The faculty for developing a conception is a

⁷⁸ Ibid., II: 163-164. “That which is sought transcends all knowledge, being separated on all sides by incomprehensibility as by a kind of darkness.” And further down, “When, therefore, Moses grew in knowledge, he declared that he had seen God in darkness, that is, that he had then come to know that what is divine is beyond all knowledge and comprehension.”

⁷⁹ Deirdre Carabine, *The Unknown God: Negative Theology in the Platonic Tradition: Plato to Eriugena*, 4.

⁸⁰ Warren J. Smith, *Passion and Paradise: Human and Divine Emotion in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa*, 154.

gift from God; the actual development of a particular conception is a human process and must not be absolutized. It therefore becomes clear that reason—as expressed by language, since that is the only way man is able to express it—is a useful and in fact essential tool.”⁸¹ Gregory himself grants that “intelligence is a gift from God,” but also observes that “the faculty of thought and conception was implanted by God in human nature for good, but, with those who abuse it as an *instrument of discovery*, it frequently becomes the handmaid of pernicious inventions” (italics mine).⁸² Gregory emphasizes further the limitedness of reason to apprehend that which is divine: “Reason supplies us with but a dim and imperfect comprehension of the Divine nature; nevertheless, the knowledge that we gather from the terms which piety allows us to apply to it is sufficient for our limited capacity.”⁸³ Again, orthodoxy is viewed as sufficient within a particular context and in conjunction with the acknowledgement of human finiteness, but it nevertheless should *not* be viewed literally. In order for his audience to better ascertain the connection between theological *epinoia* and apophatic ascent, Gregory provides an analogy that demonstrates the relationship between theological *epinoia* and rays of true light, while the true light itself remains ultimately unapproachable. “That light teaches us what we must do to stand within the rays of the true light: Sandaled feet cannot ascend that height where the light of truth is seen.”⁸⁴

⁸¹ Robert S. Brightman, “Apophatic Theology and Divine Infinity in St. Gregory of Nyssa,” 100.

⁸² *Ans. Eun.*, NPNF, 268.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 263.

⁸⁴ *Life Mos.*, II: 22.

Consequently, the sandals must be removed in order to participate in that true light which Gregory elsewhere paradoxically identifies as darkness.⁸⁵ Although concepts are useful for a time, a process of purification to alleviate one from a dependency on *epinoiai* is recommended. Smith again provides insight: “The second level at which our understanding is purified is our religious understanding—an understanding of God, not as a metaphysical reality or a remote object of philosophical reflection, but as the One with whom humanity was made for relationship.”⁸⁶ This process of purification occurs as a result of an acknowledgement that all concepts are ultimately derived from familiar and immediate customs, a supposition explained earlier in reference to the ‘grammar’ of divinity and social analogies. “The divine word at the beginning forbids that the Divine be likened to any of the things known by men, since every concept which comes from some comprehensible image by an approximate understanding and by guessing at the divine nature constitutes an idol of God and does not proclaim God.”⁸⁷ The idea that a concept is an idol, and is thus dialectically opposed to the icon, is a very important notion that will be examined in greater detail in a later chapter.⁸⁸ Suffice it to say, with respect to eradicating that which is known by men in order to participate in the spiritual ascent, Smith observes, “The intellect is purged of its material representations and analogies by which it formally had conceived of God. Such purity of thought is essential in order for

⁸⁵ Ibid., II: 164.

⁸⁶ Warren J. Smith, *Passion and Paradise: Human and Divine Emotion in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa*, 157.

⁸⁷ *Life Mos.*, II: 165.

⁸⁸ See the section, *The Iconic Function of Theological Epinoia*, in the chapter, “The Function of Theological *Epinoia*: Converting Idols into Icons.” 110-112.

the soul to advance to the next step of intimate union with God.”⁸⁹ Martin Laird adds, “Gregory says that the contemplation of God involves neither sight nor hearing (the realm of the senses); nor is the contemplation of God comprehended by our customary concepts. To contemplate God is somehow to move beyond both the realm of the senses and the contemplation of intelligibles.”⁹⁰ Gregory himself summarizes his thought on the matter:

The contemplation of God is not effected by sight and hearing, nor is it comprehended by any of the customary perceptions of the mind. For *no eye has seen, no ear has heard*, nor does it belong to those things which usually enter *into the heart of man*. He who would approach the knowledge of things sublime must first purify his manner of life from all sensual and irrational emotion. He must wash from his understanding every opinion derived from some preconception and withdraw himself from his customary intercourse with his own companion, that is, with his sense perceptions, which are, as it were, wedded to our nature as its companion. When he is so purified, then he assaults the mountain.⁹¹

Gregory’s soteriological view dictates that full purification is never actually realized, not even in the next life.⁹² Unfortunately, humans must acknowledge and accept that “our knowledge [does not] extend to the comprehension of what transcends knowledge,”⁹³ namely the divine essence.

Since external observation and perception is futile, participation, and ultimately worship, is the only alternative for Gregory. With reference to Moses’ encounter with the theophany of the burning bush, Gregory acknowledges,

At the time the great Moses was instructed in the theophany he came to know that none of those things which are apprehended by sense perception and contemplated by the understanding really subsists, but that the

⁸⁹ Warren J. Smith, *Passion and Paradise: Human and Divine Emotion in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa*, 171.

⁹⁰ Martin Laird, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith: Union, Knowledge and Divine Presence*, 47-48.

⁹¹ *Life Mos.*, II: 157.

⁹² *Ibid.*, I, 7-10.

⁹³ *Ans. Eun.*, NPNF, 261.

transcendent essence and cause of the universe, on which everything depends, alone subsists. For even if the understanding looks upon any other existing things, reason observes in absolutely none of them the self-sufficiency by which they could exist without participation in the true Being. On the other hand, that which is always the same, neither increasing nor diminishing, immutable to all change whether to better or to worse (for it is far removed from the inferior and it has no superior), standing in need of nothing else, alone desirable, *participated* in by all but not lessened by their participation—this is truly real Being. *And the apprehension of it is the knowledge of truth* (italics mine).⁹⁴

Therefore, the participation in true Being, that which actually subsists, is authentic knowledge. *Epinoiai* do not essentially exist, but only the ontological transformation beyond the concept. This overtly iconic notion is illuminated again when Gregory contends that “the Word is not mere speech.”⁹⁵ Incidentally, the words that describe christological *epinoiai* do not actually subsist, but rather the Word beyond these concepts, or Christ himself, is what truly exists and is that toward which the ‘ontological gaze’ projects through the transformation of the soul into the image of God embodied by the Incarnated Christ. In the end, Gregory prefers worship over conceptual description:

Ah the wonder of it! Why does the sacred text fear to approach the glory of the divine mystery, so that it has not even expressed any of those effects which are outside its nature? It does not say that God’s essence is without limits, judging it rash even to express this in a concept; rather it merely marvels at the vision of the magnificence of His glory.”⁹⁶

And again Gregory directs his audience to worship that which is ineffable: “There is one name significant of the Divine Nature—the wonder, namely, that arises unspeakably in our hearts concerning it.”⁹⁷ Through circumstances which led him to affirm theological *epinoia* because of his position within the church and the

⁹⁴ *Life Mos.*, II: 24-25.

⁹⁵ *Cat.*, NPNF, 478.

⁹⁶ *Comm. Eccl.*, Glory, 128.

⁹⁷ *Ag. Eun.* NPNF, 201.

nature of the heresies with which he interacted, Gregory often demonstrates his ascetic tendencies where “all theological speculation is laid aside and the only attitude appropriate to man is the attitude of praise.”⁹⁸

⁹⁸ Robert S Brightman, “Apophatic Theology and Divine Infinity in St. Gregory of Nyssa,” 105.

CHAPTER FOUR

PUBLICIZING THEOLOGICAL EPINOIA: THE INADEQUACY OF LANGUAGE TO SUMMARIZE THE DIVINE ESSENCE***Speaking Without Perceiving: The Apophatic Basis for Semantic Inadequacy***

Gregory of Nyssa's understanding of language is quite layered. These layers, however, are further complicated by the understanding of how semantic representations are conferred on the invisible divine essence. Similar to Gregory's view of theological *epinoia*, his evaluation of theological description is heavily influenced by an overtly apophatic outlook. Essentially, Gregory proposes the dichotomy of created and uncreated as the paradigm within which one ought to understand the limited and temporary function of language. Nowhere is this more apparent than in his confrontation with the Eunomian controversy. In addition to the limited function of language as it occurs exclusively within the created realms, one is able to perceive an even more acutely limited function of language in reference to the divine essence. In Gregory's view language is the result of the perception of 'sensible' objects only. As was determined in an earlier chapter, since the divine essence is invisible and incomprehensible, it is thus ineffable.¹ The words that deduce the divine essence, are derived from the perception of material objects in the 'sensible' realm, which are subsequently conferred on the divine essence in the 'uncreated intelligible'

¹ *Comm. Song*, Glory, 189. "The blessed and eternal substance of God, that surpasses all understanding, contains all perfection within itself and cannot be limited. Hence nothing that is limiting, whether *name*, or *concept* or thing, can be considered as His attribute, as, for example, time, place, colour, shape, form, mass, magnitude, dimension" (italics mine).

realm.² Since no perception of the divine essence is possible, humans infer to the divine essence by perceiving his operations.³ With reference to language specifically, Gregory's interaction with Eunomius' theory of language adequately demonstrates this situation.

Central to Gregory's own assessment of the objective of language is the created and uncreated dichotomy mentioned above. Gregory's interface with Eunomius' claim that the function of the word *agennetos* is to describe the divine essence itself provides Gregory with an opportunity to delineate his own theory of language. Eunomius believes that the term *agennetos* is not created from a conception within the 'sensible' or 'created intelligible' realms. Instead, "it is a name which corresponds with the reality, and a name created by God's providence."⁴ Eunomius therefore maintains, "We do not understand his essence to be one thing and the meaning of the word which designates it something else. Rather we take it that his substance is the very same as that which is signified by his name."⁵ Thus, Eunomius considers the 'grammar' of divinity, and *agennetos* in particular, to reside in the 'uncreated intelligible' realm, something unheard of in Gregory's own writings. However, Eunomius' theory of language is not

² This is why Gregory can say in reference to the relational metaphysical categories used to conceptualize the trinitarian economy and the two natures in Christ: "An analogy of the *separate* and the *conjoined* is found in objects perceptible to the senses" (italics mine). *Let.* 38, NPNF, vol. 8, 139.

³ *Beat.*, ACW, 147. Gregory asserts that God is "invisible by nature, but becomes visible in His energies, for He may be contemplated in the things that are referred to Him." Elsewhere Gregory asserts that "it is clear that by any of the terms we use the Divine nature itself is not signified, but some one of its surroundings is made known." *On 'Not Three Gods'*, NPNF, 332.

⁴ Paulos Mar Gregorios, *Cosmic Man: The Divine Presence*, 31. Gregorios uses the word *epinoia* as that which does not produce the word *agennetos* in the thought of Eunomius. Gregory, conversely, believes that the word *agennetos* as well as all language is precisely an extension of *epinoia*. Thus the basis for the iconic function of theological *epinoia* emerges.

⁵ Eunomius of Cyzicus, *Eunomius: The Extant Works*, trans. Richard Paul Vaggoiné (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1987), 48-49.

exclusive to the divine essence only; elsewhere he alleges that “names designate essences, and different names designate different essences.”⁶ Consequently, language is an extension of the material object itself rather than a description of the *concept* designating the material object as in Gregory’s thought.

Gregory’s apophaticism, however, is evident in his interaction with Eunomius and his manipulation of the word *agennetos*. “In sharp contrast to the position of Eunomius, St. Gregory insists that there is no one term which is able to describe in all its fullness the nature of God.”⁷ With reference to Gregory’s apophaticism, and the created and uncreated dichotomy as paradigmatic for his theory of language, Deirdre Carabine observes:

No name or term can indicate fully the incomprehensible essence of God. Like all negative theologians, Gregory asserts that although some names and terms must be allowed of God – indeed we are permitted to name the divine because of the variety of his dealings with us – these pertain solely to his operations; of his essence we must not speak...According to Gregory, the attempt to express the divine essence in words is a conscious offence to God. This rather harsh judgment forcefully expresses Gregory’s basic skepticism regarding the inadequacy of all language. He argues that since we are forced to use human words about God, we must be aware that these words surpass their normal meaning when applied to the divine essence. It is, he says, the gulf between the created and the uncreated which is the ‘real measure of the separation of meanings’.⁸

The distinction between the created and the uncreated is confused by Eunomius for he insists that “the naming of things given was prior in time to the creation of

⁶ Ibid., 56-57.

⁷ Robert S. Brightman, “Apophatic Theology and Divine Infinity in St. Gregory of Nyssa,” 97.

⁸ Deirdre Carabine, *The Unknown God: Negative Theology in the Platonic Tradition: Plato to Eriugena*, 250. The reference Carabine is using to substantiate her last claim is found in *Ag. Eun.*, NPNF, 93. “Wide, indeed, is the interval in all else that divides the human from the divine; experience cannot point here below to anything at all resembling in amount what we may guess at and imagine there. So likewise, as regards the meaning of our terms, though there may be, so far as words go, some likeness between man and the Eternal, yet the gulf between these two worlds is the real measure of the separation of meanings.”

those who should use them.”⁹ Eunomius is under the impression that language is not descriptive of material objects, and does not involve the subsequent naming of those created objects upon their completion. Instead, language has its origin with God before creation. Therefore, Eunomius believes that language resides in the ‘uncreated intelligible’ realm. But Gregory inquires, “Where did he find this law respecting verbs and nouns?”¹⁰ In response, he rhetorically asks, “Are we not clearly taught that the words which represent things are of later origin than the things themselves, and that the words which are framed to express the operations of things are reflections of the things themselves?”¹¹ Incidentally, language must reside in the created realm, and is thus separate from the divine essence. The centrality of divine infinity in Gregory’s thought is the impetus for his theory of language as it pertains to the divine essence. “As the hollow of one’s hand is to the whole deep, so is all the power of language in comparison with that Nature which is unspeakable and incomprehensible.”¹² The common response for Gregory in this situation, therefore, is silence.¹³

Although Gregory considers silence the ultimate approach to the divine essence, as was demonstrated in the chapter on Gregory’s apophasis, before ascending to the height of silence he prefers negation in opposition to the noetic process which facilitates confirmatory interpretations of the divine essence.

While Eunomius names God with the term *agenetos*, in *On the Soul and the Resurrection* Gregory declares to his teacher, Macrina, “I do not yet know the

⁹ *Ans. Eun.*, NPNF, 277.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.* 265.

¹² *Ag. Eun.*, NPNF, 198.

¹³ *Comm. Eccl.*, Glory, 128.

fitting name for it.”¹⁴ In response, Macrina states that “we do learn...much about many things by this very same method, inasmuch as, in the very act of saying a thing is ‘not so and so’, we by implication interpret the vary nature of the thing in question.”¹⁵ Therefore, Gregory’s apophasis is pragmatically associated with his theory of language, for instead of naming God in a confirmatory manner, as Eunomius does, he states that the divine essence “is not that which our senses perceive, neither colour, nor a form, nor a hardness, nor a weight, nor a quantity, nor a cubic dimension, nor a point, nor anything else perceptible in matter; supposing, that is, that there does exist a something beyond all these.”¹⁶ Gregory here is connecting the use of negative language about God with the dichotomy of created and uncreated. Instead of naming God from something ‘perceptible in matter’ he recognizes that the divine essence as ‘beyond all these’ and instead communicates what God is *not*. This is the nucleus of the tension between Gregory and Eunomius. Eunomius seeks to employ the term *agennetos* “to supply a clear definition of the essence of God,”¹⁷ whereas Gregory understands this word to be a “privation.”¹⁸

Conceptual Description and the Semantic Séance: The Binary Function of Language

Gregory is very consistent in his contention that no term can be used to describe the essence of God. The culmination of this assertion resides in the

¹⁴ *Soul Res.*, NPNF, 436.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ans. Eun.*, NPNF, 264.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* Gregory then supplies us with some additional examples: harmless, painless, guileless, undisturbed, passionless, sleepless, undiseased, impassible, unblamable, and the like.

dichotomy of the created and uncreated. Language cannot sufficiently summarize the divine essence precisely because the divine essence cannot be sensed like material created objects can. However, this epistemological limitation originates in the perspective that language is an inadequate means of expressing pre-established inadequate conceptions. Therefore, when ascertaining Gregory's theory of language, it is essential to presuppose his conviction that theological *epinoia* cannot gain access to the divine essence.

In addition to the dual theory of language surrounding the description of sensory objects in contrast to their subsequent inference to the inaccessible divine essence, an additional binary theory of language exists in relation to the iconic function of theological *epinoia*. In one sense, language has a pre-existence amid the *epinoiai* with which it is associated and acts as a direct extension of theological *epinoia*. In a subsequent sense, language takes a 'bodily' form, whether visually if written or audibly if spoken, and acts as a material object that itself can be sensed.¹⁹ The initial pre-existent function of language relates to the iconic function of theological *epinoia*. Within the correlation between language and concept, the basis for the inadequacy of all language emerges. W.J.T. Mitchell says of the imagery of language, "The pictures that seem to reside in our language, whether they are projected in the mind's eye or on paper, are artificial, conventional signs no less than the propositions with which they are associated."²⁰

¹⁹ *Mak. Man*, NPNF, 395. This binary function of language is clearly elucidated in relation to the mind as an 'instrument': "The operation of the instrument...is twofold; one for the production of sound, the other for the reception of concepts from without." Consequently, words are conceived in order to be spoken (or written); words are additionally received with the senses, which subsequently invoke the corresponding conceptions.

²⁰ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*, 26.

Gregory seems to maintain a similar assessment of language in relation to the inadequacy of human *epinoia*. Brightman summarizes Gregory's theory of language by examining its subsequent role and dependence on conception:

Man is not able to know fully (here the apophatic emphasis is evident) even in his mind. He therefore forms a conception (*epinoia*) of that reality on the basis of analogy with human experience. But another step must be taken in order for communication to be possible. The conception must be reduced to word or language, and words are signs which refer to a conception of a reality. It may be seen that there are two steps in the process. First there is the movement from reality to conception. St. Gregory argues that reality as it is and as God knows it cannot be totally comprehended by human conception, but some pointers must be provided. There is then the second step in which *the already imperfect conception is reduced to language. Words are imperfect symbols of a mental conception which points to a transcendent reality.* Therefore mere words or names must not be absolutized as conveying a complete understanding of reality, but at the same time they do provide some useful hints (italics mine).²¹

Michel Rene Barnes believes that Gregory broke away from the Origenist theory of language, which is similar to that of both Clement of Alexandria and Eunomius.²² Incidentally, Gregory's theory of language appears to be an individual original contribution, and is an effort to maintain a consistency with his apophaticism rather than a partisanship with past influences. Before language is implemented in its sensible form, it is conceived in the mind as a means to expressing conceptions that themselves do not adequately represent reality. *Epinoia*, therefore, acts as a liaison between language and the 'sensible' objects

²¹ Robert S. Brightman, "Apophatic Theology and Divine Infinity in St. Gregory of Nyssa," 99.

²² Michel Rene Barnes, *The Power of God: Ανναμς in Gregory of Nyssa's Trinitarian Theology*, 253. Barnes adds, "Gregory's cautious approach to speech may reflect the influence of someone like Methodius (that is, and intelligent anti-Origenist) whose influence appears elsewhere in Gregory's thinking."

they both attempt to characterize.²³ Gregory begins by explaining the empirical origin of *epinoiai* as discussed earlier. In order to achieve this end, Gregory invokes the analogy of the ‘city of our mind’, which represents the sensory reception of information from material objects. The information is exceedingly diverse and is received and interpreted only to the extent that it is sensed. Correspondingly, various pieces of information are received through a single sense, while a single piece of sensory information can conversely be received through more than one sense. Therefore, a material object cannot be conceived in a comprehensive manner unless the seemingly infinite number of ‘accidents’ are perceived in the mind and organized in a manner exacting the image of the material object itself; this, of course, is virtually impossible.²⁴ Gregory clearly recognizes “it is mere folly to contend for this or that vocal intonation, as if orthodoxy were a thing of sounds and syllables.”²⁵ Gregory additionally insists, “The words that come from us and the breath that accompanies their utterance are ineffective and unsubstantial.”²⁶ The dichotomy of created and the uncreated accounts for the inadequacy of the ‘grammar’ of divinity, but why does Gregory maintain that all language is insufficient? Brightman provided the answer above when he observed that “the already imperfect conception is reduced to

²³ Alden A. Mosshammer, “Disclosing but not Disclosed: Gregory of Nyssa as Deconstructionist,” 104. Mosshammer claims that “language is not for Gregory the direct representation of things as they are, even in the created order. Language is always separated from what it seeks to signify, both by constant mobility of the created order and *by its reference to free mental processes*, rather than to essences.” Elsewhere, Mosshammer maintains that Gregory emphasizes “the role of the human mind in structuring through language the nature of reality *as men perceive it*.”

²⁴ A more detailed description of this empirical process is provided in *Mak. Man*, NPNF, 396.

²⁵ *Ans. Eun.*, NPNF, 263-264.

²⁶ *Cat.*, NPNF, 478.

language.”²⁷ Since *epinoia* is the arbiter between language and the material objects it seeks to signify, language does not even have direct access to the ‘sensible’ object itself. Instead, terms are awkwardly employed in order to describe the *epinoia* rather than the material object itself. “Every *term* either invented by the custom of men, or handed down to us by the Scriptures, is indeed *explanatory of our conceptions*” (italics mine).²⁸ Although the conceptions mentioned here by Gregory are admittedly of the divine essence, they are, like any other concept, derivatives of sensory perception in the corporeal world. Not only is language inadequate because of its distance from the ‘sensible’ object it is attempting to summarize, but human thoughts are also too diverse and cavernous for language to comprehensively divulge every conceptual element.

Correspondingly, Gregory asserts that it is impossible for words “to avail for the full enunciation of our thought.”²⁹ Again demonstrating the extent to which language is shackled to deficient conceptions, Gregory queries, “If it were in any way possible by some other means to lay bare the movements of thought, abandoning the formal instrumentality of words, we should converse with one another more lucidly and clearly.”³⁰ Nevertheless, the reality of the situation dictates that language must be dependent on the limited perceptibility of human conception, which renders the ‘grammar’ of divinity even more deficient.

Concurrently, Gregory is appalled by the Eunomians since they do not “allow the

²⁷ Robert S. Brightman, “Apophatic Theology and Divine Infinity in St. Gregory of Nyssa,” 99.

²⁸ *Thr. Gods*, NPNF, 332. It must be remembered that any conception of the divine nature is derived from the perception of created objects, and not the perception of the invisible and incomprehensible divine essence itself. Therefore, the terms Gregory is referring to describe conceptions of created objects.

²⁹ *Ans. Eun.*, NPNF, 257.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 289.

term ‘ungeneracy’ to be used in the way of mental conception, but make it represent the Divine nature itself.”³¹

The direct association between the pre-existence of language and the fallible *epinoiai* on which it is dependent, demonstrates the role language plays in the iconic function of theological *epinoia*. Language is deficient even before it is uttered; it is at this juncture that language is significantly linked to theological *epinoia* and thus participates in its iconic function. When words are written down or uttered, language no longer participates in the iconic function of theological *epinoia*, but instead itself becomes a ‘sensible’ object for external readers and listeners to perceive. “In explaining why language is necessary at all, Gregory says that it is only because of his bodily nature that man requires language for the expression of his thought.”³² Language is useful and necessary as a perceptible expression precisely because humans are bodily, created beings. If humans lacked material substance, concepts themselves could be relayed by the soul to the mind bereft of the need for a bodily conduit. This unrealistic precognition, however, warrants the utilization of language. Hence, when humans use a word they use it “according to the prevailing custom, with a view only to this, that the word may be profitable to those who receive it.”³³ However, within the context of conversation, terms are perceived either visually or audibly, but are interpreted in correspondence with pre-established perceptions of ‘sensible’ objects. To this extent, language performs a ‘semantic séance’, so to speak. When words are

³¹ Ibid., 263.

³² Alden A. Mosshammer, “Disclosing but not Disclosed: Gregory of Nyssa as Deconstructionist,” 104. Elsewhere, Mosshammer asserts that for Gregory “all language is a form of conversation.” 102.

³³ *Thr. Gods*, NPNF, 336.

perceived, their meanings are invoked through the aid of pre-conceptions about the object those words seek to communicate.³⁴ The interplay between language and conception is, therefore, cyclical, or perhaps more accurately, spiral. A human may accumulate metaphysical categories as they appear in the ‘accidents’ of perceptible objects, and confer them on the divine essence. These metaphysical categories are then written down or spoken. Subsequently, external readers or listeners will perceive the implemented words as one would any material object, and interpret them based on their own personal experiences with the original perceptible objects that began the process. This, in turn, initiates an identical process within which a new external reader or listener may participate. As the number of speakers and listeners increases, the more unique conceptions summoned by these words are conferred on the divine essence. As time progresses, therefore, the conception of the divine essence becomes increasingly convoluted. The spiral effect is, however, interrupted by Gregory’s view of the iconic function of theological *epinoia*.

³⁴ Ibid. Gregory uses the word ‘men’ as an example: When referring to the word ‘men’ in Scripture, Gregory claims, “No one is by such a figure of speech led astray in his conceptions to imagine a multitude of humanities.” When the word ‘men’ is spoken, no one understands this to mean many essences of ‘men’, but instead it summons the notion of many individual men with individual personalities all, nevertheless, functioning within the single essence of ‘men’. Some, claims Gregory, conceive of many Gods when the Trinity is uttered. However, in congruence with the function of the word ‘men’, the Trinity is composed of a single divine essence, while its economy denotes three hypostases. The difference in human conception between ‘men’ and ‘Trinity’ lies in the pre-established conception of essence in relation to the two aforementioned words. The two words, while used in a similar manner, invoked two separate meanings from external listeners.

The Function of Language within the Iconic Motif

It has already been established that language, when written or uttered, plays no role in the iconic function of theological *epinoia* anymore than other 'sensible' objects do. However, the inadequacy of all language lies in its relationship to inadequate *epinoiai*. Using noticeably iconic language, Joseph Trapp describes this interdependence: "Thoughts are the images of things, as words are of thoughts; and we all know that images and pictures are only so far true as they are true representations of men and things."³⁵ Together, the concept and the unspoken word participate in the iconic function of theological *epinoia*. Contrary to Enlightenment thinking, the imagery of language does not present a "perfect, transparent media through which reality may be represented to the understanding."³⁶ Eunomianism might have been a precursor to this position, but Gregory instead sought to extend beyond semantics with the 'ontological gaze' from the 'eye of our soul'. Brightman effectively summarizes the interdependence of language and conception, while illuminating Gregory's conclusion with respect to their limited function:

The faculty for developing a conception is a gift from God; the actual development of a particular conception is a human process and must not be absolutized. It therefore becomes clear that reason – as expressed by language since that is the only way man is able to express it – is a useful and in fact essential tool. But it remains a tool which provides some pointers and some hints about the nature of reality and does not provide any final answers.³⁷

³⁵ Joseph Trapp, *Lectures on Poetry* (1711). As quoted in, W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*, 19.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

³⁷ Robert S. Brightman, "Apophatic Theology and Divine Infinity in St. Gregory of Nyssa," 100.

Gregory thus maintains, “Reason supplies us with but a dim and imperfect comprehension of the Divine Nature” which is “sufficient for our limited capacity.”³⁸ The full elucidation and implications of the iconic function of theological *epinoia* is provided in the next chapter. Language, however, is unique in that it extends the *epinoia* into the material reality. Language, in essence, is responsible for Gregory’s insistence that theological *epinoia* be viewed iconically; if these conceptions were not communicated, the threat would never have been initiated, or at least it would not have been recognized. Therefore, coinciding with his view on the limited function of language, Gregory seeks to regulate its necessity and explain the method by which one may surpass theological *epinoia* and the words that provide its expression. Regarding the divine providence of salvation, Gregory asks, “What words could be discovered powerful enough to reach this wondrous height?”³⁹ Notice the sensation of progression and ascension in Gregory’s question. Since ‘ascension’ always corresponds to the soul’s progressive transformation into the image of God, it appears that Gregory’s soteriology is reacting against an emphasis on belief over becoming as will be discussed in the subsequent chapter on the ‘ontological gaze’. Gregory is here emphasizing a divine “union”⁴⁰ over mere cognitive recognition through ‘words’. And the inclusion of terms such as ‘reach’ and ‘height’ indicates an underlying method by which one may extend beyond semantic symbols. Indeed, words become idols for those who seek to describe the divine essence definitively. The Eunomians “all but openly idolize their own imagination, in that they deify the

³⁸ *Ans. Eun.*, NPNF, 263.

³⁹ *Vir.*, NPNF, 345.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

idea expressed by this ‘ungeneracy’ of theirs.”⁴¹ This finalized appropriation of language is the exact opposite of the iconic manner in which Gregory views the function of theological *epinoia*. Words do not have any teleological significance for Gregory; instead, they act as guides toward the divine essence which lies beyond. “In applying such appellations to the Divine essence, ‘which passes all understanding,’ we do not seek to glory in it by the names we employ, but to guide our own selves by the aid of such terms towards the comprehension of the things which are hidden.”⁴² These terms, therefore, must be used temporarily and only for their limited utility within conversation, after which the ‘ontological gaze’ from the ‘eye of the soul’ ascends through the divine darkness. The gaze is indeed ontological precisely because of the supremacy of transformation and perfection over cognition and language. It is at this juncture that one must “wash from his understanding every opinion derived from some preconception and withdraw himself from his customary intercourse with his own companion, that is, with his sense perceptions, which are, as it were, wedded to our nature as its companion. When he is so purified, then he assaults the mountain.”⁴³ In reference to the bride in Song of Songs, Gregory insists that the divine essence “cannot be reached by any verbal symbol.”⁴⁴ In response, the bride “learns that the true satisfaction of her desire consists in constantly going on with her quest and never ceasing in her ascent, seeing that every fulfillment of her desire

⁴¹ *Ans. Eun.*, NPNF, 261.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 265.

⁴³ *Life Mos.*, II: 157.

⁴⁴ *Comm. Song*, Glory, 270.

continually generates a further desire for the Transcendent.”⁴⁵ This ascent is ontological since one is required to seek direction from language only temporarily and subsequently recognize its ultimate failure, while progressing beyond semantic symbols by transforming into the divine likeness. “If we who are united to Him by faith in Him, are synonymous with Him whose incorruptible nature is beyond verbal interpretation, it is entirely necessary for us to become what is contemplated in connection with the incorruptible nature and to achieve an identity with the secondary elements which follow along with it.”⁴⁶ The secondary elements are the divine virtues that emanate from God; these are the characteristics one must appropriate for the nourishment and perfection of the soul. To the extent that the soul is perfected, it is able to ‘see’ the divine essence; this is the ‘ontological gaze’ from the ‘eye of the soul’.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ *What Chr.*, FC, 84.

PART TWO
THE ICONIC CONDUIT

CHAPTER FIVE

***THE FUNCTION OF THEOLOGICAL EIINOIA:
CONVERTING IDOLS INTO ICONS******Philosophy of Icons***

A delineation of the historical development of icons is not necessary.¹ Instead, a brief description of the philosophy that supports the implementation of icons is warranted insofar as it corresponds to Gregory of Nyssa's 'iconic' philosophy. The implementation of icons suggests the necessity of achieving an intellectual or spiritual end through material means. This dichotomy is slightly different than that used by Gregory, but the process of using one realm for entrance into a higher subsequent realm exhibits a strong similarity nevertheless. On the purpose of icons John Papajohn declares,

The conception of art which icon painting presupposes, of course, is symbolic...It is not meant to create realities but the images of realities. A material basis, however, is required for the embodiment of these images which are distinguished from the actual objects themselves. It must not be misunderstood that the function of artistic images is to copy, to reproduce certain objects of reality so as to achieve a complete illusion.²

Rather, Papajohn continues, "the purpose of art is to produce the ideal form of the object, the primordial *idea* of the object" (italics mine).³ Similar to theological

¹ For a history of icons from AD 250 to Early Modern times, see John Baggley, *Doors of Perception: Icons and their Spiritual Significance* (London: Mowbray, 1987), 6-32. Henry Chadwick discusses the use of Christian art in pre-Constantinian Christian communities until the iconoclastic controversy in the eighth century. See, Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 280-284. Timothy Ware describes the history of the iconoclastic controversy from immediately before the Seventh Ecumenical Council to the 'Triumph of Orthodoxy' in AD 843. See, Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 30-35.

² John Papajohn, "Philosophical and Metaphysical Basis of Icon Veneration in the Eastern Orthodox Church," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 2, no. 1 (1956): 83.

³ Ibid.

epinoiai “the only purpose [icons] should serve should be didactical.”⁴ The object itself that is being portrayed lies beyond the material representation of the icon. Hence, the icon suggests movement from one realm to a subsequent realm. The icon acts as a gateway or conduit. If the door is opened, the material representation becomes an icon. However, if the door remains closed, the image acts as an idol. Similarly, when implementing icons of Christ “it is not the wood, paint, and other materials which are venerated but the thing signified.”⁵ Later, Papajohn maintains that “the material of the icon, paint, wood, and such, correspondingly, is like a shell or receptacle which contains in a specific sense the Divinity.”⁶ If the wood itself did garner such adoration, it would remain an idol.

Theological *epinoiai* likewise function as a guide directing the gaze towards that which lies beyond the ‘mind image’. John Baggley asserts, “Icons are as much a medium of revelation as the spoken or printed word; the grace and truth of God can enter our souls as much via the eye as via the ear; and the icon is therefore an important door through which we can enter into the world of the Spirit.”⁷ Coinciding with the dichotomy created by the noetic process and the ‘ontological gaze’, Baggley expresses the role of icons as a medium between what is sensed and the ineffable and incomprehensible divine essence itself: “Icons cannot be understood apart from the faith they enshrine and represent; they form part of the visual language of Orthodoxy; and like the verbal language of the Church, this visual language is there to lead us from the beauty of what can be

⁴ Ibid., 86.

⁵ Ibid., 87.

⁶ Ibid., 88.

⁷ John Baggley, *Doors of Perception: Icons and their Spiritual Significance*, 9.

seen and heard with the senses, to the Beauty and Goodness of the Invisible God.”⁸ That which lies beyond the material representation of the icon is thus the “ultimate reality.”⁹ The trajectory of the gaze beyond the icon and towards the divine essence itself is articulated here by Bagglely, as is the mediatory function of icons between sense perception and the divine essence.

Bagglely also seems to allude here, albeit indirectly, to what he refers to elsewhere as the “hidden agenda behind many icons.”¹⁰ The progression of the gaze through the icon to the realm it seeks to represent is not noetic in nature, but is instead ontological. Icons are thus employed as a means for the soul to transcend the realm of passions in anticipation of union with the divine essence ultimately culminating in deification. This end is never actually realized in Gregory’s thought, of course, but ontological progression definitely is a main concern for him. Additionally, those who are depicted in iconic portraits are often understood as “images showing man partaking of the divine life.”¹¹ Consequently, “in an icon, matter is not abolished but transformed.”¹² The icon itself is a participant in the ontological process experienced by the object it seeks to represent. Verna Harrison expresses the necessity, value and function of matter in this process by demonstrating a connection between icons and asceticism. “For [Gregory] the ascetical transfer of attention and value from body to soul does not

⁸ Ibid., 98.

⁹ Robin Margaret Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 129.

¹⁰ John Bagglely, *Doors of Perception: Icons and their Spiritual Significance*, 79.

¹¹ George Galavaris, *The Icon in the Life of the Church* (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 1.

¹² Verna E.F. Harrison, “Allegory and Asceticism in Gregory of Nyssa.” *Semeia*, no. 57 (1992): 126.

mean that the body is devalued.”¹³ Defending such an elevated assessment of matter, Baggley claims, “Since God had been revealed in the flesh, matter and art as well as word were the means the Spirit used to continue the work of revelation.”¹⁴ Despite this high evaluation of matter, which corresponds to Gregory’s similar assessment of theological *epinoiai*, it must be acknowledged that in iconography as well as in Gregory’s soteriology sense perception and conceptual representations are transcended yet remain ontologically intact, but nevertheless acts as conduits to a subsequent realm. Matter is necessary and good, but is not, of course, as valuable as the pure good, the divine essence that resides beyond our sense perception and conceptual images. Concurrently, as will also be demonstrated in Gregory’s own thought, Maximus the Confessor maintains that the best worship “is that in which the mind is elevated without the assistance of any visible image, but unfortunately only a few are capable of it.”¹⁵ Humans are invariably compelled to employ words and concepts to depict God despite their reference to sensible objects rather than to God himself. A conceptual depiction of God is admittedly impossible, according to Gregory, since God cannot be sensed and subsequently conceptualized. Human conceptions depicting God are thus derived from the surrounding social ‘sensible’ context rather than from God himself. Theological *epinoia* is performed in order to conceive of God using familiar metaphors only.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Baggley, John, *Doors of Perception: Icons and their Spiritual Significance*, 23.

¹⁵ John Papajohn, “Philosophical and Metaphysical Basis of Icon Veneration in the Eastern Orthodox Church,” 84.

Gregory of Nyssa's Interaction with Art

Although it may seem more reasonable to argue merely that Gregory did not view theological *epinoiai* literally, this thesis would ultimately be incomplete. A strong element of *motion* exists in his perspective of theological *epinoia* as it does in iconic philosophy. Humans begin by receiving information from the 'sensible' realm and undergo a process that culminates in an 'ontological gaze' towards the divine essence. The reason why this gaze is ontological will be explained in more detail in the next chapter. Regardless, the element of motion intrinsic to Gregory's comprehensive view of theological *epinoia* must not be overlooked. Examining Gregory's frequent reference to art will begin to complete the picture.

Baggley contends, "In some parts of the Church there was considerable hostility to the visual arts late into the fourth century; anxieties and scruples about idolatry were felt by many Christians; St. Basil the Great and St. Gregory of Nyssa in the fourth century were the earliest major theologians to make positive statements about images."¹⁶ Gregory seems to have been a pioneer of the arts among Christians who were antagonistic towards material representations. Thus, it is entirely appropriate to make reference to iconic philosophy when describing Gregory's own philosophy. Gregory regularly interacts with and critiques artistic depictions of biblical narratives and other forms of Christian art.¹⁷ Additionally, Gregory frequently uses art and the act of painting as instructive metaphors. In an

¹⁶ Baggley, John, *Doors of Perception: Icons and their Spiritual Significance*, 9.

¹⁷ Robin Margaret Jensen, *Face to Face: Portraits of the Divine in Early Christianity*, 121. Jensen provides an example of when Gregory described a painting of the sacrifice of Isaac: "Already the sword touches the body, when a voice sounds unto him [Abraham] from God, prohibiting the deed."

attempt to explain the migration of the soul with the body after the final resurrection, in *On the Soul and the Resurrection* Gregory equates art with the soul, the colours of art with atoms and the mixing and separation of these colours with the concourse and separation of atoms.¹⁸

Early Christian art was quite often viewed iconically even before later more comprehensive iconic philosophies were developed in defense of icons.

The many variations of Jesus' appearance in art...may be, in the end, a recognition that in his divine nature, Christ cannot be represented fully in art and ultimately must subsume or even transcend all efforts to portray his appearance. Early Christian art then did reveal truths about Christ, *but limited truths, and only some of his many aspects*. Portraits, in this case, are much more than simple external likenesses.¹⁹

Gregory provides an example of the function and integrity of the image to depict its object as it relates to the ontology of bearing the title 'Christian' by using an artistic analogy:

Assume that a professional painter is given a commission to paint a picture of the king for those living far away. If he draws a ridiculous and ugly shape on the wood and calls this ungracious figure an image of the king, would it not be likely that the powers that be would be annoyed, on the grounds that the handsome original had been insulted through this bad painting among those who had never seen the king? For people will necessarily think that the original is what the form on the icon shows him to be.²⁰

In a very representative and comprehensive statement expressing the elements of art, icon, words and concepts, Gregory asserts,

In the art of painting, the material of the different colours fills out the representation of the model. But anyone who looks at the picture that has been completed through the skillful use of colour *does not stop with the mere contemplation of the colours* that have been painted on the tablet; rather he looks at the form which the artist has created in colour... We

¹⁸ *Soul Res.*, NPNF, 445.

¹⁹ Robin Margaret Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, 128.

²⁰ *What Chr.*, FC, 85-86.

must not as it were look merely at the material of the colours (in this case, the words), but rather at the *form* of the King that the chaste *concepts of the mind have expressed in words* (italics mine).²¹

Therefore, humans are to gaze past the ‘concepts of the mind expressed in words’ towards the *form* of the king itself. We must not sojourn at the image, but direct our gaze towards the form it seeks to represent.

Another reason why it is appropriate to associate Gregory’s attitude towards theological *epinoia* with iconic philosophy is the ‘audible’ function of art that he acknowledges in relation to speech. Gregory envisages that “the silent painting speaks on the walls and does much good.”²² Gregory similarly credits “the painter with portraying by means of colours ‘as if it were a book that uttered speech’.”²³ Hence, it is fitting to unify theological *epinoia*, and the language it projects, with an iconic perspective that seems to speak the same language.

The Mediatory Function of Theological Epinoia

In a previous chapter the limited and fallible created realms were evaluated, both ‘sensible’ and ‘intelligible’. It is important to acknowledge, however, that the ‘created intelligible’ realm, and the concepts contained therein, serve a mediatory function between the fallible ‘sensible’ realm and the ineffable ‘uncreated intelligible’ realm, and therefore the noetic process and the ‘ontological gaze’.

Created intelligible nature stands on the *borderline between good and the reverse, so as to be capable of either*, and to incline at pleasure to the things of its choice, as we learn from Scripture; so that we can say of it

²¹ *Comm. Song, Glory*, 153-154.

²² Quoted in John Baggeley, *Doors of Perception: Icons and their Spiritual Significance*, 17.

²³ Quoted in Robin Margaret Jensen, *Face to Face: Portraits of the Divine in Early Christianity*, 182.

that it is more or less in the heights of excellence *only in proportion to its removal from the evil and its approach to the good*. Whereas uncreated intelligible nature is far removed from such distinctions: it does not possess the good by acquisition, or participate only in the goodness of some good which lies above it: in its own essence it is good (italics mine).²⁴

Concurrently with the mediating function of theological *epinoia* and the ‘created intelligible’ realm, an internal struggle exists between the pure uncreated good and the fallible and fluctuating ‘sensible’ realm. The reason for this internal struggle is located in the twofold human ontology. “The creation of our nature is in a sense twofold: one made like to God, one divided according to distinction... While two natures—the Divine and incorporeal nature, and the irrational life of brutes—are separated from each other as extremes, human nature is the mean between them.”²⁵ Human nature, and the concepts it produces through the noetic process in the ‘sensible’ realm, is created much like the theological *epinoiai* that reside in the ‘created intelligible’ realm; both additionally contain a proclivity for error and deviation, while nevertheless interpreting the divine essence to one degree of accuracy or another by observing its *energeia*. Human nature and theological *epinoiai* in their mediatory roles therefore contain elements of that which remains below and that which is anticipated above. Therefore, if so desired, humans can extend beyond theological *epinoia*, which is located in the ‘created intelligible’ realm, by perfecting their soul in virtue. “There is in us the principle of all excellence, all virtue and wisdom, and every higher thing that we can conceive: but pre-eminent among all is the fact that we are free from necessity, and not in bondage to any

²⁴ *Ag. Eun.*, NPNF, 60-61.

²⁵ *Mak. Man*, NPNF, 405.

natural power, but have decision in our own power as we please; for virtue is a voluntary thing.”²⁶ Additionally, the nature of the human mind, where the *epinoia* resides, is itself the image of God. The perfection of the soul has as its goal the image of God represented as ‘mind’. Conceptual accuracy develops in conjunction with the perfection of the soul, that which relays sensory information to the mind. The precision of *epinoia* to capture adequately what is sensed is comprehended by the mind and in the mind as a reflection of the soul’s progression. However, the mind itself cannot be comprehended because of its likeness to the Divine nature.

The image is properly an image as long as it fails in none of those attributes which we perceive in the archetype; but where it falls from its resemblance to the prototype it ceases in that respect to be an image... Since the nature of our mind, which is the likeness of the Creator, evades our knowledge, it has an accurate resemblance to the superior nature, figuring by its own unknowableness the incomprehensible nature.²⁷

Consequently, the external divine essence itself and the divine elements of the ‘ontological gaze’ reside beyond theological *epinoia*, while the created realms, and the noetic process therein, function alongside and occupy the space ‘below’ human *epinoia*. Similar to how ‘created intelligibles’ can progress towards the good, human *epinoia* can conversely lose its precision to interpret adequately the ‘sensible’ realm. Since “we get varied and multiform information by some one sense,”²⁸ the organization of this information will invariably fluctuate and adjust to what is received by the senses. Thus, in opposition to Platonic doctrine the nature of the ‘mind image’ or human *epinoia* is never uniform. Its precision is

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 397.

²⁸ Ibid., 396.

relative. Furthermore, descent from the pure good can result from a decision of ignorance and apathy.

Since, then, the uncreated nature is incapable of admitting of such movement as is implied in turning or change or alteration, while everything that subsists through creation has connection with change, inasmuch as the subsistence itself of the creation had its rise in change, that which was not passing by the Divine power into that which is; and since the above-mentioned power was created too, and could choose by a spontaneous movement whatever he liked, when he had closed his eyes to the good and the ungrudging like one who in the sunshine lets his eyelids down upon his eyes and sees only darkness, in this way that being also, by his very unwillingness to perceive good, became cognizant of the contrary to goodness.²⁹

Even if one legitimately attempts correct understanding, however, she or he will ultimately fail. In a moment of confessional honesty not uncommon to Gregory, he admits: “But we, imagining the truth, as far as we can, by means of conjectures and similitudes, do not set forth that which occurs to our mind authoritatively, but place it in the form of a theoretical speculation.”³⁰

The Iconic Function of Theological Epinoia

Gregory’s iconic understanding of theological *epinoia* culminates in a synthesis of his threefold philosophy of reality, the iconic insights gained through his interaction with art and the role of the image of God in relation to the ‘ontological gaze’, which will be given more attention in the next chapter. Gregory acknowledges the necessity for theological *epinoia* to act as a guide towards that which is hidden. Humans must gaze beyond theological *epinoia*, however, because of its limited function, and direct the ‘eye of their soul’ towards the divine essence itself. The association between the eye and the soul, sight and

²⁹ *Cat.*, NPNF, 481.

³⁰ *Mak. Man.* NPNF, 406.

transformation, is not unintentional. This ‘gaze’ is ontological, and thus projects itself in correspondence with the extent to which the soul is perfected. This ‘ontological gaze’ is infinite since what it is aimed at is itself infinite. If the gaze remains fixated on theological *epinoiai*, these conceptions of God neglect its intended iconic purpose, and instead function as an idol.

As described in the introductory chapter of this thesis, “*Epinoia* represents some regulated operation of the mind upon data immediately given.”³¹ Lewis Ayres adds that,

From this act of mental dissection we may come more accurately to focus our thoughts on the event or object under consideration, we move towards acquiring a sense of an object that remains hidden from direct perception... We may slowly build up a series of terms, conceptions (*epinoiai*), which we think appropriate to apply to God—and which are licensed by God’s self-revelation in creation and in Scripture—even while we know that in a fundamental sense God remains always unknown... Gregory envisions the process of *epinoia* as part of an on-going shaping of our attention to and speech about something that, more austere than many commentators would have us imagine, remains always unknown and beyond our grasp.³²

Therefore, as Verna Harrison insists, conceptions of God are indeed necessary:

“The material language of the text itself is not bypassed but proves indispensable and functions like the painted colours in an icon, as Gregory himself observes.”³³

Meaning is discerned precisely in and through images of language or colour, not apart from them.”³⁴ What Harrison is saying resonates with the explanation of the function of universal social constructs. Universal social analogies are used to describe God in order that humans may relate one to another about God using

³¹ Henry Austin Wilson, *EPIINOIA*, NPNF, 249.

³² Lewis Ayres, “On Not Three People: The Fundamental Themes of Gregory of Nyssa’s Trinitarian Theology as Seen in *To Ablabius: On Not Three Gods*,” 26-27.

³³ Here Harrison is referring to *Comm. Song*, Glory, 153-154.

³⁴ Verna E.F. Harrison, “Allegory and Asceticism in Gregory of Nyssa,” 113.

universally recognized concepts.³⁵ Hence, theological *epinoia* serves an important, yet limited, function.

Balthasar develops an excellent paradigm within which the iconic function of theological *epinoiai* can operate. The initial stage is the location of theological *epinoiai* and is thus static. The second stage represents motion, and is essentially intermediary. The final stage signifies an escape from the initial stage towards the divine essence itself; it transcends image.³⁶ The description of the conceptual process within this paradigm is provided by Balthasar and anticipates the current discussion: “As soon as the intelligence falls back on the evidence of the representation, it no longer sees. ‘Seeing’ therefore is the very *movement* that surpasses the intelligence, whereas the (static) *content*, on the basis of which desire surges up, is precisely not the vision.”³⁷ The gaze is dynamic, yet because it transcends intelligence, it is an ‘ontological gaze’ rather than an optical or ‘noetic gaze’. The static representation, of course, is not the gaze, but is instead the content, or the impetus of the gaze. Without it there would be no point of reference for the gaze, but it is itself motionless and temporarily appropriated in order to fulfill a greater purpose, the projection of the gaze beyond the static representation.

The paradigm Balthasar applies will be useful when describing how Gregory understands theological *epinoia* iconically. Another aid for

³⁵ For a more extensive explanation of the idea of social analogies, see, Lewis Ayres, “On Not Three People: The Fundamental Themes of Gregory of Nyssa’s Trinitarian Theology as Seen in *To Ablabius: On Not Three Gods*,” 16-17.

³⁶ For a more detailed description of this paradigm, see, Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought: An Essay on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa*, 97.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 99.

understanding precisely how Gregory views theological *epinoia* iconically is Jean-Luc Marion's explanation of the idol and the icon.³⁸ Victor Kal provides this interpretation of Marion's perception of the idol and the icon: "A being becomes an idol when the glance directed towards it allows itself to be filled by this visible being."³⁹ Something is an idol, then, if the gaze returns to itself after encountering that something.

The icon, however, is not produced by the human glance. On the contrary, the icon summons a glance...The being that serves as icon gradually shows something of the real divine. Here the visible is not excluded. It appears in the visible, but without being trapped in it. Marion believes that the icon makes the invisible visible *as invisible*. In other words, the icon, the visible object, refers beyond itself to the invisible.⁴⁰

Using this explanation as an aid only, Gregory must be allowed to elucidate his own precise understanding of how theological *epinoiai* should be viewed iconically.

When gazing at the theological *epinoiai*, or the conceptual image in one's mind, one must not stop at this image, but instead progress beyond the theological *epinoiai* towards the divine essence itself. "They *never stop* rising, moving from one new beginning to the next, and the beginning of ever greater graces is never limited of itself" (italics mine).⁴¹ Similarly, Gregory explains that in Moses' ascent towards the divine essence, he also "at no time stopped."⁴² Like Marion, Gregory alleges that if a human were to stop at theological *epinoiai*, these

³⁸ Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, Translated by Carlson, Thomas A. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 16-18.

³⁹ Victor Kal, "Being Unable to Speak, Seen As a Period: Difference and Distance in Jean-Luc Marion," In *Flight of the Gods*, eds. Ilse N. Bulhof and Laurens ten Kate, 144-165 (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 157.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 158.

⁴¹ *Comm. Song*, Glory, 213.

⁴² *Life Mos.*, II: 227.

concepts of God would essentially function as an idol: “The divine word at the beginning forbids that the Divine be likened to any of the things that are known by men, since every concept which comes from some comprehensible image by an approximate understanding and by guessing at the divine nature constitutes an idol of God and does not proclaim God.”⁴³ Accordingly, theological *epinoiai* is an idol if the gaze sojourns at the concept of God rather than at God himself. These conceptions also encourage idolatry if the distinction between theological *epinoiai* and the divine essence itself is not properly acknowledged. In the context of a discussion on the identity of the mind with the divine essence, Gregory’s teacher provides a corrective instruction: “‘Don’t say same,’ my teacher said, ‘This is another impious argument. Say, as you were taught by the inspired voice, that the one is *like* the other’.”⁴⁴ Hence, humans must not stop at the concepts “ordered in the mind”⁴⁵ since they simply are not the same as the divine essence, and therefore lack teleological significance while retaining its processional significance. Evidently, Gregory maintains that “the proper sign of the divine nature is to remain beyond all signs.”⁴⁶ The reason why the divine essence does indeed transcend all signs is the ‘sensible’ and social origin of all representations. “It is clear that by any of the terms we use the Divine nature itself is not signified, but some of its surroundings is made known.”⁴⁷ Therefore, the final step is to direct one’s gaze, represented in the image of God in the

⁴³ *Ibid.*, II: 165.

⁴⁴ *Soul Res.*, Translated by Catharine P. Roth, 45.

⁴⁵ *Mak. Man*, NPNF, 393.

⁴⁶ *Life Mos.*, II:234. As quoted in, Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought: An Essay on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa*, 108. Abraham J. Malherbe translates it, “The characteristic of the divine nature is to transcend all characteristics.”

⁴⁷ *Thr. Gods*, NPNF, 332.

perfection of the soul, beyond the intellectual capacity to conceptualize. “There exists a possession of God that is antecedent to all efforts of the intelligence: it is the image of God in the soul.”⁴⁸ The preeminence of the image of God lies in its theistic origin before the limited and fallible concepts of God emerged in the intelligence from sensory perception.

Gregory demonstrates the synthesis of concept and language and its uniform function: “His thought turns to the common and obvious fact that *we signify our reasoning by means of the natural employment of our hands in written characters*. It is true that this fact, that we speak by writing, and, in a certain way, converse by the aid of our hands, preserving sounds by the forms of the alphabet, is not unconnected with the endowment of reason” (italics mine).⁴⁹ This fusion of concept and language in relation to christological and triadological description is the theological *epinoiai* that Gregory views iconically. Carabine alleges that according to Gregory “all expressions which are used of the divine nature are inadequate and should be understood in the sense that they are simply a *guide* to the comprehension of what *remains hidden*. Words are inadequate expression of inadequate ideas” (italics mine).⁵⁰ Although this may sound pessimistic, Carabine does not deny language the iconic role of ‘guide’, thus functioning necessarily and not in vain. However, the divine essence does ‘remain hidden’, thus Carabine accurately emphasizes the limited function of language and, in this context, theological *epinoiai*. Coinciding with the philosophy and function of icons,

⁴⁸ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought: An Essay on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa*, 111.

⁴⁹ *Mak. Man*, NPNF, 393.

⁵⁰ Deirdre Carabine, *The Unknown God: Negative Theology in the Platonic Tradition: Plato to Eriugena*, 251.

Gregory himself suggests the utility of language as that which guides one towards that which is hidden: “In apply such appellations to the Divine essence, ‘which passes all understanding,’ we do not seek to glory in it by the names we employ, but to guide our own selves by the aid of such terms towards the comprehension of things which are hidden.”⁵¹ Gregory employs an analogy to describe the extent to which language is inadequate when attempting to describe the divine essence:

So long as we say and believe these things, how like is an argument that promises any comprehension and expression of the infinite Nature, by means of the significant names, to one who thinks that he can enclose the whole sea in his own hand! For as the hollow of one’s hand is to the whole deep, so is all the power of language in comparison with the Nature which is unspeakable and incomprehensible.⁵²

The synthesis of concept and language, as in the case of theological *epinoia*, thus serves a crucial function, albeit a limited one, and is ultimately unable to completely represent the divine essence. Similarly, icons do not summarize the objects they seek to represent. Theological *epinoiai* must ultimately be surpassed, and the ‘ontological gaze’ from the ‘eye of the soul’ must be projected towards the divine essence itself.

⁵¹ Ibid., 265.

⁵² Ibid., 198.

PART THREE
THE ONTOLOGICAL PROGRESSION

CHAPTER SIX

BEYOND THEOLOGICAL EPINOIA: THE 'ONTOLOGICAL GAZE'***Soteriological 'Objective': The Ontology of Salvation***

Salvation as a whole, but more precisely as it occurs in the perfection of the soul, is itself the 'ontological gaze' that projects toward the external divine essence. Determining the objective of Gregory of Nyssa's soteriology, however, is not an easy task. The reason for this is that the objective does not appear at the end, since no real end even exists. Salvation is perpetual; the perfection of the soul will not even be realized posthumously. Therefore, the real objective consists in continually growing towards perfection in virtue or consistency; the ideal objective is deification or *theopoiesis*. Evidently, the two elements of Gregory's soteriology, ascent and *theopoiesis*, are not mutually exclusive. They co-exist and are simultaneously responsible for a person's position in relation to the divine. When describing the essence of Gregory's soteriology one could use such terms as ascent, transformation, deification, union, participation, perfection, imitation, virtue, becoming and growth all in one descriptive statement. These terms, however, are by no means interchangeable. Rather, they are employed in relation to one another. Perfection cannot be envisaged without growth, and union cannot be understood apart from ascent. Whenever possible, the ontological nature of Gregory's soteriology will be assessed apart from the notion of mystical ascent. However, the latter will be mentioned briefly when necessary.

Jean Danielou identifies what is specifically unique about Gregory's soteriology, and demonstrates at what point he deviates from the Platonist view: "Gregory's notion of perfection implies a positive idea of the process of change which is a most important contribution to the Christian theology of man." Conversely, Platonists typically perceive change as a "degeneration from a state of initial perfection."¹ Yet, Gregory admits that change is essential to the human condition. "Everyone knows that anything placed in a world of change never remains the same but is always passing from one state to another, the alteration always bringing about something better or worse."² However, he acknowledges that growth apart from God's interference is ultimately ineffectual. Demonstrating how God recognizes humanity's deficiency Gregory then declares, "Humanity, however, having sunk, because of the changeableness of its nature, from the height of good things to the lowliness and slipperiness of sin, was vitiated. [God] says, therefore, 'Stretch out your hand, O you who are not liable to falling [who is Christ], to slipping man, becoming in us whatever you are in nature'."³ Consequently, through Christ's involvement the human soul can be changed or transformed into the divine essence. As Everett Ferguson observes, "Man's ability to change is a part of Gregory's characteristic emphasis on the freedom of the will. Man has the power of choice between good and bad."⁴

¹ Jean Danielou, (Introduction), *Glory*, 47.

² *Life Mos.*, II: 2,

³ *Comm. Inscr. Ps.*, Translated by Ronald E Heine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 104.

⁴ Everett Ferguson, "God's Infinity and Man's Mutability: Perpetual Progress According to Gregory of Nyssa," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 18, no. 1-2 (1973): 70.

Gregory describes this interplay between good and bad, and humanity's responsibility therein:

For man does not merely have an inclination to evil; were this so, it would be impossible for him to grow in good, if his nature possessed only an inclination towards the contrary. But in truth the finest aspect of our mutability is the possibility of growth in good; and this capacity for improvement transforms the soul, as it changes more and more into the divine....Let us change in such a way that we may constantly evolve towards what is better, being transformed from glory to glory (II Cor. 3:18), and thus always improving and ever becoming more perfect by daily growth, and never arriving at any limit of perfection. For that perfection consists in our never stopping in our growth in good, never circumscribing our perfection by any limitation.⁵

Several elements from Gregory's soteriology are contained in this quote. One of the more prominent and characteristic features is the infinite nature of one's transformation. Hence, the culmination of this transformation, to 'change into the divine' as Gregory states above, is ideal and paradigmatic and, thus, never actually accomplished.

Warren J. Smith asserts, "Following the tradition of Alexandrian Christianity, Gregory's soteriology is essentially a theory of divinization or *theopoiesis*."⁶ Similarly, Johannes Zachhuber associates Gregory's soteriology with the Neoplatonic pattern of the fall where "human beings can be saved if they recover the divine image which they still have within themselves."⁷ Zachhuber further defines *theopoiesis* as "the change humans undergo once they decide to

⁵ *Perf., Glory*, 83-84.

⁶ Warren J. Smith, *Passion and Paradise: Human and Divine Emotion in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa*, 151.

⁷ Johannes Zachhuber, *Human Nature in Gregory of Nyssa; Philosophical Background and Theological Significance*, 190.

orient their lives towards the divine.”⁸ Gregory employs this language in relation to the virtuous life represented in virginity: “What greater praise of virginity can there be than thus to be shown in a manner deifying those who share in her pure mysteries, so that they become partakers of His glory.”⁹ In a broader sense Gregory confirms the role of the divine essence in this ontological transformation: “When the Word calls a soul that has advanced to come unto Him, it is immediately empowered at His command and becomes what the bridegroom wishes. It is transformed into something divine, and it is transformed from glory to glory in which it exists to a higher glory by a perfect kind of alteration.”¹⁰ Therefore, ontologically one becomes deified; this is the essence of Gregory’s soteriology. This ontological transformation, then, is predicated on the initial existence of a fallible human nature and an awakening of the divine image within.

Full deification is never actually realized, however, and each step towards perfection is concomitantly viewed as an end and a beginning. Danielou affirms “the notion of end as beginning, that is, that every perfection is a principle of a higher good.”¹¹ Gregory acknowledges human limitations and correspondingly declares that although,

The new grace we may obtain is greater than what we had before, it does not put a limit on our final goal; rather, for those who are rising in perfection, the limit of the good that is attained becomes the beginning of the discovery of higher goods. Thus they never stop rising, moving from one beginning to the next, and the beginning of ever greater graces is never limited of itself.¹²

⁸ *Ibid.*, 194. This is where Gregory distinguished himself from the Platonists for change is always viewed as inferior to immutability in Platonism. Gregory nevertheless acknowledges the need to change and understands this to be a positive process.

⁹ *Vir.*, NPNF, 344.

¹⁰ *Comm. Song*, Glory, 217.

¹¹ Jean Danielou, (Introduction), *Glory*, 67.

¹² *Comm. Song*, *Glory*, 213.

Gregory is optimistic about this perpetual perfection, and does not view the incomplete 'objective' as a deficiency. The valid objective in continually striving after perfection, therefore, is located in consistency and in the growth itself.

Smith observes that Gregory's soteriology "is essentially an account of man's participation (*metousia*) in God."¹³ Participation is the means by which one obtains union with God and becomes deified. For Gregory, the more one participates in the divine essence, the more she or he is able to receive it. Essentially, growth in perfection provides additional space within which more divinity can be included. The two, perfection and divinity, grow simultaneously, since the growth of each component is predicated on the veracity of its counterpart. "For the participation in the divine good is such that it makes anyone whom it enters greater and more receptive. As it is taken up it increases the power and magnitude of the recipient, so that the person who is nourished always grows and never ceases to grow."¹⁴ Hence, it is participation specifically that guarantees infinite growth. The infiniteness of the divine essence in which one participates corresponds to the infinite size of that in which the divinity is contained.¹⁵ This satisfies the anomaly of perpetual growth. Gregory recognized that if the divine essence is infinite, so is the ascent. The ideal objective here is to obtain union with the divine. Since humans are twofold creatures, composed of

¹³ Warren J. Smith, *Passion and Paradise: Human and Divine Emotion in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa*, 148.

¹⁴ *Soul Res.*, Translated by Catharine P. Roth, 87.

¹⁵ *Perf.*, Translated by Casimir McCambley *Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, 29 (Winter 1984): 369. Gregory here demonstrates that one's participation in the Word corresponds to her or his ability to do so.

both body and soul,¹⁶ “what is there, then, to prevent our thinking...of a kind of union or approximation of the Divine nature with humanity.”¹⁷

Gregory further identifies the method by which one comes to participate in the divine nature as imitation. Using Paul as an example, Gregory claims,

He understood who Christ is and the requirements of the person named after him. Paul spoke of what he himself had accomplished and thereby accurately *imitated* him in a way as to show the Lord expressed in his own person. By a most careful *imitation*, Paul changed his soul into a model so that no longer is Paul perceived as living and speaking, but Christ lives in him (*italics mine*).¹⁸

In addition, the ability to *change* is manifested through imitation. The change itself occurs as a result of participation, but the method involved is imitation.

This imitation intrinsically results in a virtuous life leading to perfection.

But it is said that Christ is a rock (I Cor. 10:4); by this term our lives should be firm and stable according to *virtue*, and we should firmly endure sufferings, resist every assault of sin and manifest a constant, steadfast soul. For by these and similar qualities we become a rock *imitating* the Lord’s immutability and constancy as far as possible in our mature nature (*italics mine*).¹⁹

On the one hand, a lack of virtue indicates a dissent from divinity. “Just as the end of life is the beginning of death, so also stopping in the race of virtue marks the beginning of the race of evil.”²⁰ Conversely, “Gregory’s third kind of motivation, where we act virtuously neither through fear nor hope, is motivation by love....Gregory is presupposing not that love can be motivated by desire for benefits, but that love is distinct from such desire, is a different kind of motivation, indeed one that values the beloved rather than the benefits that the

¹⁶ *Cat.*, NPNF, 504.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 486.

¹⁸ *Perf.*, Translated by Casimir McCambley, 360-361.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Life Mos.*, I: 6.

beloved happens to provide.”²¹ Gregory additionally indicates the infiniteness and immeasurable nature of this virtue which is evidently motivated by a love for the Incarnated Christ rather than by christological analysis: “The possession of virtue, once it is solidly achieved, cannot be measured by time or limited by satiety. Rather, to those who are its disciples it always appears as something ever new and fresh.”²² Therefore, the virtuous path is again shown to be endless, but nevertheless anticipates a union with the divine that, of course, will never actually be realized. “If we are to be named brothers of him who brought us into birth, innocence of life will be believed to constitute our relationship to him provided that nothing unclean separates us from a union in purity.”²³ Since a disparity perpetually exists between the progressive ‘purity’ of human nature and the actualized purity of the infinite divine essence, complete union is correspondingly inaccessible.

Soteriological Method and Apophatic Ascent

While the ontology of salvation indicates a ‘becoming’ like the divine, apophatic ascent necessarily negates the need to emphasize ‘believing’. By discussing both ontology and apophatic ascent, one is able to establish Gregory’s emphasis on ‘becoming’ over ‘believing’. The purpose of invoking this dichotomy is to establish the point at which the noetic process ends and the ‘ontological gaze’ begins. By identifying the dichotomy of ‘becoming’ over ‘believing’ in Gregory’s own writings it is thus easier to additionally identify a

²¹ Catherine Osborne, *Eros Unveiled: Plato and the God of Love* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994), 78.

²² *Beat.*, Glory, quotation provided by Jean Danielou in his introduction, 70.

²³ *Perf.*, Translated by Casimir McCambley, 374.

sense of motion intrinsic to the gaze in iconic philosophy. Gregory borrows the word *epektasis* from Paul (Phil. 3:13) and uses it to describe the mystical ascent.²⁴ Smith identifies Gregory's notion of mystical ascent with the elements of purgation, illumination and unification. These categories, however, do not seem to be employed in any systematic fashion by Gregory himself, but are more indicative of later writings especially the mystical teachings of the *Pseudo-Dionysius*.²⁵ Gregory's conception of the mystical ascent is described in terms of an initial darkness that corresponds with ignorance, followed by a conceptual light, which finally culminates in a ceaseless experience of apophatic or divine darkness. Andrew Louth describes this tripartite succession as a "progress from light to deeper and deeper darkness. The initial stage is the removal of the darkness (*skotos*) of error by the light of truth. But, from then on, the further the soul progresses the deeper is the darkness into which it enters, until eventually the soul is cut off from all that can be grasped by sense and reason."²⁶ Gregory provides this comprehensive description of the mystical ascent:

Bodies, once they have received the initial thrust downward, are driven downward by themselves with greater speed without any additional help as long as the surface on which they move is steadily sloping and no resistance to their downward thrust is encountered. Similarly, the soul moves in the opposite direction. Once it is released from its earthly attachment, it becomes light and swift for its movement upward, soaring from below up to the heights. If nothing comes from above to hinder its upward thrust (for the nature of the Good attracts to itself those who look to it), the soul rises ever higher and will always make its flight yet higher—by its desire of the heavenly things straining ahead for what is

²⁴ Jean Danielou, (Introduction), *Glory*, 58.

²⁵ Pseudo-Dionysius, "The Celestial Hierarchy," and, "The Ecclesial Hierarchy," Translated by Colm Luibheid, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 154-155, 163-165, 167-168, 173, 235-236, 238-239, 243, 248-249.

²⁶ Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys*, 83.

still to come, as the Apostle says. Made to desire and not to abandon the transcendent height by the things already attained, it makes its way upward without ceasing, ever through its accomplishments renewing its intensity for the flight. Activity directed toward virtue causes its capacity to grow through exertion; this kind of activity alone does not slacken its intensity by the effort, but increases it.²⁷

Paradoxically, this ascent can also be described in terms of immobility. The more one is set firmly in virtue, the further she or he ascends toward the divine. “Here the ascent takes place by means of standing. I mean by this that the firmer and more immoveable one remains in the Good, the more he progresses in the course of virtue.”²⁸ Immobility is dependent on consistency and one’s proclivity for the divine, but mobility is achieved simultaneously through the continual participation in the divine essence.

For to the Godhead it properly belongs to lack no conceivable thing which is regarded as good, while the creation attains excellence by partaking in something better than itself; and further, not only had a beginning of its being, but also is found to be constantly in a state of beginning to be in excellence, by its continual advance in improvement, since it never halts in what it has reached, but all that it has acquired becomes by participation a beginning of its ascent to something still greater, and it never ceases, in Paul’s phrase, ‘reaching forth to the things that are before.’²⁹

Standing still is understood as a constant state of beginning. Each beginning, however, represents one step in the ascent towards the divine.

Although the ascent itself is signified by the term *epektasis*, the apophatic nature of the ascent is represented by the term *aphairesis*. Martin Laird defines this word as “the letting go of sense perception, images, concepts,³⁰ to enter the

²⁷ *Life Mos.*, II: 224-226.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, II, 243.

²⁹ *Ag. Eun.*, NPNF, 210.

³⁰ Or *epinoiai*.

presence of God.”³¹ The initial stage is a darkness of ignorance which accepts erroneous heretical extremes instead of orthodox theological *epinoiai*.

Furthermore, this initial stage of darkness, like the subsequent light, accepts *epinoiai*, whether fallacious or otherwise, as reality itself. Gregory claims that “it is indeed a darkness as of the night which envelopes mankind, and prevents them [from]... knowing that all which is most prized by the living, and moreover all that is the reverse, exists only in the conception of the unreflecting, and is in itself nothing.”³² Gregory further equates this darkness with ‘men’s vices’.³³ This darkness, however, is only an initial stage, and is actually a stage one endures *before* beginning the ascent. The ascent begins with the light of orthodoxy. The light is the knowledge that rescues one from ignorance. This light, incidentally, is that which is perceived through sensory information, for instance the words used to formulate theological descriptions, and ‘created intelligibles’ such as the theological *epinoiai* that those words signify and invoke.

Scripture teaches...that religious knowledge comes at first to those who receive it as light. Therefore what is perceived to be contrary to religion is darkness, and the escape from darkness comes about when one participates in light. But as the mind progresses and, through an ever greater and more perfect diligence, comes to apprehended reality, as it approaches more nearly to contemplation, it sees more clearly what of the divine nature is un contemplated. For leaving behind everything that is observed, *not only what sense comprehends but also what the intelligence thinks it sees*, it keeps going deeper until by the intelligence’s yearning for understanding it gains access to the invisible and the incomprehensible, and there it sees God. This is the true knowledge of what is sought; this is the seeing that consists in not seeing, because that which is sought

³¹ Martin Laird, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith: Union, Knowledge and Divine Presence*, 48.

³² *Vir.*, NPNF, 349.

³³ *Ibid.*, 350.

transcends all knowledge, being separated on all sides by incomprehensibility as by a kind of darkness (*italics mine*).³⁴

Therefore, as clearly and comprehensively described in this quote, Gregory has a post-noetic view of God resulting from a progression through darkness, light and eventually apophatic darkness. Within this context, Gregory further observes that when “Moses grew in knowledge, he declared that he had seen God in darkness, that is, that he had then come to know that what is divine is beyond all knowledge and comprehension.”³⁵ Laird believes that this is a paradigm for faith.³⁶ He seems to be correct in this regard. For Gregory, faith does not require correct literal theological *epinoiai*, but rather demands obedience in accordance with the revelation of the Incarnated Christ and imitation in virtue.

‘Becoming’ vs. ‘Believing’: A Question of Soteriological Priorities

Gregory’s soteriology clearly demonstrates the extent to which he employs his apophatic outlook. Additionally, his priorities are perspicaciously exhibited. Smith alleges that “paradoxically, the moment of illumination when the soul comes to a right understanding about God’s nature is actually a moment of darkness. All the soul’s knowledge at that instant is *experiential* rather than *conceptual*” (*italics mine*).³⁷ Smith’s claim that illumination and darkness occur in a single instant is misleading. As indicated above, light is the escape from darkness or ignorance, but the darkness that lies in acknowledging the divine

³⁴ *Life Mos.*, II: 162-163.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, II, 164.

³⁶ Martin Laird, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith: Union, Knowledge and Divine Presence*, 17. When discussing Gregory’s use of Abraham as an example of faith in *Against Eunomius*, Laird observes, “Finally the patriarch, having been purified of all conjectures and concepts, arrives at pure faith.”

³⁷ Warren J. Smith, *Passion and Paradise: Human and Divine Emotion in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa*, 171.

essence as incomprehensible and ineffable *subsequently* occurs when the mind progresses toward the divine. This reality transcends conceptual representations or signifiers of reality. However, Smith is correct in asserting that darkness is experiential rather than conceptual, which clearly exhibits the shift from the noetic process to the ‘ontological gaze’ where theological *epinoia* functions as an iconic mediator between the two. In reference to correctly handling Scripture, Casimir McCambley affirms that for Gregory “the theological exposition’s task is to seek where the integral order lies, not so much as to know something about the incomprehensible divine nature, but to conduct the soul in its progress towards God.”³⁸ Gregory is, thus, more concerned with ‘becoming’ than he is with ‘believing’. Along these same lines Louth maintains that.

It is the unknowability of God which leads to Gregory’s insistence that it is only in virtue of the Incarnation, only because God has manifested Himself—and His love—among us, that we can know Him at all. As the soul responds to God’s love, as it comes closer to the unknowable God, it enters into deeper and deeper darkness, and knows Him in a way that surpasses knowledge.³⁹

Specifically demonstrating his preference for ‘becoming’ over ‘believing’, Gregory candidly states that “there is a plainer guide to be found than verbal instruction; and that is practice.”⁴⁰ Retaining this unequivocal stance, Gregory additionally declares: “If we understand Christ as our sanctification (I Cor. 1:30) and reject every unholy, impure deed and thought, we will truly show ourselves as partakers of his name while confessing the power of his sanctification not by

³⁸ Casimir McCambley, (Introduction), *Commentary on the Inscriptions of the Psalms*, 4.

³⁹ Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys*, 81.

⁴⁰ *Vir.*, NPNF, 368.

words but by the deeds of our lives.”⁴¹ In his sermon on the Sixth Beatitude, Gregory succinctly confirms his emphasis on ‘becoming’ over ‘believing’: “The Lord does not say it is blessed to know something about God, but to have God present within oneself.”⁴² The implications are clear; Gregory ultimately desires participation in the divine rather than an explanation of the divine. Therefore, as we witnessed earlier, the light that rescues one from ignorance is equated with the noetic process. It is adequate for a time, but lacks teleological significance. A recent convert to Christianity, for instance, could view them as appropriate alternatives to erroneous allegations about Christ and the Trinity, as Gregory instructs his Catechumens in *The Great Catechism*. However, one must exceed the resulting mediatory theological *epinoia*, and ontologically experience the divine essence through participation. This is the ‘ontological gaze’ and is precisely how theological *epinoia* functions iconically in its mediating role between the noetic process and the ‘ontological gaze’. The reason why Gregory is more inclined to give his “life as an example instead of words”⁴³ is simply because “virtue is above praise.”⁴⁴

The Image of God and the ‘Ontological Gaze’

The use of ‘image’ is a common motif in Gregory’s writings. It can additionally act as a paradigm for all mediating reflections of the divine essence. When comparing the iconic function of theological *epinoia* to Gregory’s use of the term ‘image’, both similarities and distinctions emerge. By assessing

⁴¹ *Perf.*, Translated by Casimir McCambley, 365-366.

⁴² *Beat.*, ACW, 148.

⁴³ *Perf.*, Translated by Casimir McCambley, 360.

⁴⁴ *Vir.*, NPNF, 344.

Gregory's various uses of 'image', a better understanding of how theological *epinoia* itself acts as an image will emerge. Additionally, Gregory's pre-occupation with the image motif will better illustrate how it is indeed appropriate to conceive of theological *epinoia* as iconic.

Gregory invokes the idea of 'image' when referring to gold in *The Commentary on Song of Songs*.⁴⁵ Similarly, Gregory tells us that God becomes visible in his *energeia*: "For he is invisible by nature, but becomes visible in his energies, for he may be contemplated in the things that are referred to him."⁴⁶ God's energies, consequently, function as an icon, as they refer to his invisible nature. Gregory additionally employs iconic language when referring to Moses in relation to darkness,⁴⁷ the cloud,⁴⁸ the burning bush⁴⁹ and God's 'back

⁴⁵ Martin Laird. *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith: Union, Knowledge and Divine Presence*, 133. Laird points out that when Gregory refers to the gold he says, "likeness of gold," and not simply gold itself. "He understands this distinction to refer to the difference between what we understand about the nature of God and the divine nature itself. No matter if our understanding of God is the 'best and highest understanding', this understanding, this knowledge of God is the 'likeness of gold and not gold itself'. For the divine nature itself is 'inexpressible' and 'ineffable'. Any good thoughts which a person may offer refer to the likeness of gold and not the gold, for the divine nature itself cannot be captured in words." In this sense, gold acts as an icon and functions similar to theological *epinoia*.

⁴⁶ *Beat.*, ACW, 147.

⁴⁷ *Life Mos.*, II: 162-163. Gregory explains, "The Divine was beheld in light but now he is seen in darkness," which is representative of "the seeing that consists in not seeing, because that which is sought transcends all knowledge." Consequently, darkness both hides yet simultaneously guides one towards the divine essence.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, II: 82. The cloud is often associated with the darkness, but also functions as a "guide toward the Good."

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, II: 19-25. Gregory equates the light of the theophany of the burning bush with limited knowledge of the divine. The light emanating from the burning bush is itself not God, God resides beyond the light. "It seems to me that at the time the great Moses was instructed in the theophany he came to know that none of those things which are apprehended by sense perception and contemplated by understanding really subsists, but that the transcendent essence and cause of the universe, on which everything depends, alone subsists."

Parts'.⁵⁰ However, Gregory's exposition on the image of God in the perfection of the human soul contains the most relevance to this thesis. Through his employment of 'image' as it relates to the perfection of the soul, the function of the 'ontological gaze' as it relates to theological *epinoia* begins to emerge.

Undoubtedly Gregory's most common use of the image motif is in relation to the progression of the soul towards embracing the divine likeness, the image of God within each human. This use of the term 'image' reflects the purpose of icons. "The word [icon] comes from the Greek *eikon* meaning image; it is the word used in the Greek Bible in Genesis chapter one, where we are told that man is made in the image of God."⁵¹ When evaluating a passage in *On Perfection* that depicts the Incarnated Christ as the "prototype" and "image of the invisible God,"⁵² Zachhuber appropriately employs an analogy from art:

In the Incarnation the Logos became an image of God in order to restore human beings to their original image character. It also seems plain that this restoration is contemplated here on the basis of imitation: like pupils, who learn to paint by looking at a well-drawn picture, human beings ought to learn perfection in the virtuous life from the perfect example set before them by Christ.⁵³

The emphasis here is on human imitation of an archetype. In this sense, a person's progressive imitation of Christ acts as a paradigm for the 'ontological

⁵⁰ Ibid., II: 220-233. "When Moses was summoned, he came out of the hole and saw the *back of the One* who called him" (italics mine). However, Moses was not satisfied, and "at no time stopped in his ascent" because he desired to see God "not in mirrors and reflections, but face to face." God granted Moses this request by *denying* it, thus indicating his incomprehensibility. God's face is the acknowledgment that his face cannot be seen, it is accepting the apophatic reality that God's essence cannot be comprehended or conceptualized. This gaze past 'the back of the One' is as infinite as the divine essence: "True sight of God consists in this, that the one who looks up to God never ceases in that desire."

⁵¹ John Baggeley, *Doors of Perception: Icons and their Spiritual Significance*, 1.

⁵² *Perf.*, Translated by Casimir McCambley, 370.

⁵³ Johannes Zachhuber, *Human Nature in Gregory of Nyssa; Philosophical Background and Theological Significance*, 191.

gaze', whereby the christological concept is exceeded by an ascending approach towards the external divine essence. Christ embodies the divine essence in human form and therefore acts as the goal toward which humanity strives. The progressive and transformational nature of this imitation replicates the trajectory of the 'ontological gaze'. As will become apparent, the relationship between the image of God and icons is significant. The image of God was instilled in humans during the first creation, but was distorted as a result of sin.

Man is a creature endowed with reason and intelligence, and he has been made in the likeness of the undefiled nature of God. Thus it is said of him in the book of the creation of the world: *to the image of God he created him* (Gen. 1:27). This creature man, then, did not possess as a property of his nature at the beginning an inclination to passion and mortality. For the pattern of the image could not have been preserved if in its imitation it had in any respect contradicted its archetype. But the element of passion was introduced later on, after he was created, and in the following way. Man was, as we have said, the *image and likeness* of the power that rules all creation; and this likeness to the ruler of all things also extended to man's power of self-determination: man could choose whatever pleased him and was not enslaved to any external necessity. But man was led astray by deception and deliberately drew upon himself that catastrophe which all mortals now share. Man himself invented evil: he did not find it in God. Nor did God make death; it was man himself who, as it were, was the creator of all that is evil.⁵⁴

Therefore, "the greatness of man consist[s]...not in his likeness to the created world, but in his being in the image of the nature of the Creator."⁵⁵ However, "if the imitation be perverted from its subject, the thing is something else, and no longer an image of the subject."⁵⁶ As was demonstrated above, this is a situation that 'all mortals now share'. "Despite all its similarities, the image differs at some

⁵⁴ *Vir.*, Glory, 112.

⁵⁵ *Mak. Man*, NPNF, 404.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

level or in some degree from the original.”⁵⁷ This image suffers because it does not fully participate in the divine essence. Morwenna Ludlow asserts, “Like many other qualities properly belonging to humanity as the image of God, *participation was impeded*, although not completely stopped, by sin” (italics mine).⁵⁸ The depletion of the image, incidentally, has ontological and thus soteriological implications.

Whenever soteriological concerns arise, the function of the soul, that which animates the body, warrants some attention. Gregory defines the soul as “an essence created, and living, and intellectual, transmitting from itself to an organized and sentient body the power of living and of grasping objects of sense, as long as a natural constitution capable of this holds together.”⁵⁹ Effectively, the soul is the person, it is that which constitutes life in human beings. As the soul progresses towards perfection, it concurrently regains some of the lost image of God instilled in humans.

The soul does not exist in a perfect condition, but only certain parts of the operation of the soul, which in man also...we learn to have accrued when he made himself like this sensuous world. Thus Paul, advising those who were able to hear him to lay hold on perfection, indicates also the mode in which they may attain that object, telling them that they must ‘put off the old man,’ and put on the man ‘which is renewed after the image of Him that created him.’⁶⁰

It is thus apparent that the image of God in humans must be regained through the perfection of the soul.

⁵⁷ Warren J. Smith, *Passion and Paradise: Human and Divine Emotion in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa*, 150.

⁵⁸ Morwenna Ludlow, *Universal Salvation: Eschatology in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa and Karl Rahner*, 55.

⁵⁹ *Soul Res.*, NPNF, 433.

⁶⁰ *Mak. Man*, NPNF, 427.

The soul itself contains the image of God, or rather, strives toward the image of God, which in humans is the 'mind'.⁶¹ However, as has already been made evident, the perfected image of God in humans, that is, the essence of the mind itself, is incomprehensible and ineffable. Hence, limited characteristics and qualities of the pure good, in essence a *partial* image of God, are reflected in the soul concomitantly with its progression and proximity to the divine essence itself. This is precisely how the soul acts as a mirror. "Because God can never be seen in himself, his image is 'seen' in the 'mirror of the soul': when the purified soul⁶² becomes as a mirror through which an image of the Son is impressed upon it it is in this fashion able to comprehend the inaccessible."⁶³ The image of the Son, of course, represents the perfected soul. The Son is humanity's example, the paradigm for the human soul. Gregory explains how one can 'see' his soul: "If a man who is pure of heart sees himself, he sees in himself what he desires; and thus he becomes blessed, because when he looks at his own purity, he sees the archetype in the image"⁶⁴ As Hans Urs von Balthasar points out, Gregory frequently equates 'image' to a 'mirror'. "It is a living image and, more than that, a pure mirror...It is characteristic of [Gregory] that almost always when he speaks of 'image', he immediately substitutes for it the example of the 'mirror'."⁶⁵ Essentially, the eye of the soul "gazes on an image in a mirror toward the

⁶¹ Ibid., 396-397.

⁶² Carabine admits that "we will never achieve fully" the perfection of the image in the soul "for even as the most perfect image, the soul cannot know the divine essence as it is in itself." Deirdre Carabine, *The Unknown God: Negative Theology in the Platonic Tradition: Plato to Eriugena*, 246.

⁶³ Ibid., 245.

⁶⁴ *Beat.*, ACW, 149.

⁶⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought: An Essay on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa*, 115.

archetype through the beauty that is kin to them both.”⁶⁶ The archetype is thus the goal toward which one’s transformation aspires, and it is the mirror itself that acts as a gauge and guides the gaze from the ‘eye of the soul’ to the archetype.

Gregory provides a comprehensive description of the soul’s internal gaze in *On the Soul and the Resurrection*: “The soul, freed from the movement of the passions, comes to no harm by them..., she withdraws into herself and is able to know herself in her depths, such as she is in her very nature, and she contemplates the archetype in her own beauty as in a mirror and an image.”⁶⁷ The gaze is, thus, ontological for its trajectory corresponds to the soul’s steady progress towards perfection, which reflects the image of God as in a mirror.

This ‘ontological gaze’, however, contains a paradox.⁶⁸ It is both internal and external. While the perfection of the soul ‘creates’ an image of God upon which the eye of the soul can gaze, it also ‘enables’ the soul to gaze externally towards the divine essence itself. The gaze, thus, is the transforming soul itself, and is correspondingly ‘ontological’. The ‘ontological gaze’ exhibits the image of God as reflected in the mirror of the perfected soul, or the extent to which one is transformed into the image of God. “If the human soul is once truly swept clean of all this attachment to heavy, earthly life, and if she can by virtue lift her eyes toward that which is homogenous to her, which is to say, the Divine, from this moment on she no longer takes any rest in researching and investigating the first beginning of things.”⁶⁹ Therefore, through the ontological transformation of the

⁶⁶ *Comm. Songs*, quoted in footnote 26, *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Soul Res.*, as quoted in, *Ibid.*, 121-122.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 127. Balthasar describes this paradox as being at once ‘in self’ and ‘outside self’.

⁶⁹ *Comm. Song*, as quoted in, *Ibid.*, 127.

soul, humans are able to ‘see’ the divine essence by lifting ‘her eyes toward that which is homogenous to her’, thus rendering obsolete all ‘researching and investigation’ of the divine essence. The ‘ontological gaze’ fulfills its purpose in this way, and demonstrates how the soul surpasses theological *epinoiai*, which are generated in the intellect through ‘researching and investigation’, and subsequently gazes toward the external divine essence. The internal image of God reflected in the ‘mirror’ of the soul therefore functions as a visage of the goal toward which the ‘ontological gaze’ is projected, and is used as a gauge for determining the quality or intention of the ‘ontological gaze’. Since, however, the image of God can only be recognized through his *energeia* due to the imperceptibility of the divine essence itself, the archetype can nevertheless be acknowledged by appropriating theological *epinoiai*. The ‘ontological gaze’ projects toward the Incarnated Christ himself, while christological concepts may be employed as a guide for deciphering the configuration of the image of God only. Listen to the overtly iconic language employed by Gregory within the context of imitation:

If anyone names himself after Christ, it is necessary to see what this name demands for persons taking it upon themselves and then to be conformed to it....Thus we recognize both the true and apparent Christian by the properties of their respective manifestations. *The characteristics of the true Christian are the same we apply to Christ. We imitate those characteristics we are able to assume, while we venerate and worship what our nature cannot imitate* (italics mine).⁷⁰

The ‘ontological gaze’ surpasses these theological representations, which humans can imitate but otherwise abandon, and projects itself toward the genuine article, the divine essence itself. At the point where theological *epinoia* fails, Christ

⁷⁰ *Perf.*, Translated by Casimir McCambley, 362.

himself, not his christological conceptual counterpart, is venerated and worshipped. Theological *epinoia*, therefore, has an iconic function.

The function of the image of God in the perfected soul was just recently deciphered, and although its purpose relates to the iconic nature of theological *epinoiai*, the ‘ontological gaze’ must ultimately extend beyond the image of God, acknowledged merely as the visual archetype into which the soul transforms, and project itself towards the ‘external’ divine essence. “The ardent lover of beauty, although receiving what is always visible as an image of what it desires, yet longs to be filled with the very stamp of the archetype.”⁷¹ Gregory describes the reciprocal nature of the ‘ontological gaze’: “You alone are made in the likeness of that nature which surpasses all understanding; you alone are a similitude of eternal beauty, a receptacle of happiness, and image of the true Light; and if you look up to Him, you will become what He is, imitating Him Who shines within you, Whose glory is reflected in your purity.”⁷² In a sort of oscillating or mutual progression, the perfection of the image in the soul coincides with the gaze beyond to the external divine essence. This ‘ontological gaze’, however, is itself the transformational process into the image of God; the more the gaze is directed externally towards the divine essence, the more the image is perfected. In addition, the greater the extent to which the soul is perfected, the more *access* the ‘ontological gaze’ has to the external divine essence.

The gaze towards the divine essence becomes ontological once it surpasses the theological *epinoiai*. “In this ‘assimilation’ to God, the final law is

⁷¹ *Life Mos.*, II: 231.

⁷² *Comm. Song*, Glory, 162.

no longer that of *analogy* but that of *identity*.”⁷³ Balthasar thus claims that the gaze exceeds the social analogies represented in theological *epinoiai*, and thus begins to identify itself with the divine essence, effectively transforming itself into the divine essence. This transformation, of course, is the perfection of the soul. The motion beyond psychological or intellectual representations, Balthasar calls “ontological kinship.”⁷⁴ Balthasar additionally claims that “the search itself is the vision,”⁷⁵ or rather, the progression towards the divine is itself the gaze. This progression, when it exceeds theological *epinoiai*, is always ontological and is always associated with Gregory’s soteriological view. “Christ does not make us mere spectators of the divine majesty. To be sure, he makes participants of them.”⁷⁶

This ‘ontological gaze’ is represented in the ‘eye of the soul’. “The man who has sharp vision for God alone, is blind in all the other things which attract the eyes of the multitude...Sharp-eyed and clear-sighted is the man who looks only to the good with the single eye of his soul.”⁷⁷ Similarly, Gregory demonstrates the unmistakable juxtaposition between sight and the apophatic ascent: “The darkness caused by material entanglements has been removed from the eye of your soul, and so you see the blessed vision radiant in the pure heaven of your heart.”⁷⁸ The ‘other things which attract the eye’ and the ‘material entanglements’ represent the ‘sensible’ social constructs that culminate in *epinoia*.

⁷³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought: An Essay on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa*, 123.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁷⁶ *Beat.*, as quoted in, *Ibid.*, 127.

⁷⁷ *Comm. Song, Glory*, 220.

⁷⁸ *Beat.*, ACW, 150.

These *epinoiai* are ineffectual to describe the divine essence. Therefore, as an alternative, the bodily eyes are replaced with the eye of the soul which gazes beyond itself, through the perfection of the soul, towards the external divine essence. In order to demonstrate the uniform function of the eye of the soul, Gregory employs the metaphor of milk as the only non-reflective liquid since it is not clear. In contrast to bodily eyes, the eye of the soul is like this milk because it does not reflect 'sensible' representations.

It has been truly observed of milk that it cannot reflect any image or likeness. All other liquids are like mirrors, because their smooth surfaces reflect the image of those who look into them. It is only with milk that this does not happen. This then is the highest praise that could bestow on the eyes of the Church, that they do not reflect, as it were, the deceptive shadow-pictures of non-existent things, things erroneous or vain and contrary to the true nature of reality. Rather, they gaze at that which is true Being, and do not take in the mistaken visions and fantasies of life. Hence for purity of eyes the perfect soul judges that bathing them in milk is quite safe.⁷⁹

True Being, as representative of the divine essence, is the only true reality, and is thus the only object toward which the gaze from the 'eye of the soul' should project itself. But since the divine essence cannot be 'sensed' like other material objects can, this gaze from the 'eye of the soul' *must* be ontological and nothing else.

I do not think that if the eye of one's soul has been purified, he is promised a direct vision of God; but perhaps this marvelous saying may suggest what the Word expresses more clearly when He says to others, *The Kingdom of God is within you*. By this we should learn that if a man's heart has been purified from every creature and all unruly affections, he will see the Image of the Divine nature in his own beauty.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ *Comm. Song, Glory, 276.*

⁸⁰ *Beat., ACW, 148.*

Additionally, the ‘ontological gaze’ from the ‘eye of the soul’ is infinite since that which it seeks to behold is infinite. “True sight of God consists in this, that the one who looks up to God never ceases in that desire.”⁸¹ The external gaze is thus both ontological and infinite as evident by its correspondence to Gregory’s soteriological understanding of perpetual progress and the apophatic ascent.

How does a human direct the gaze beyond theological *epinoiai*? Balthasar alleges, “Intelligence must deny itself, must renounce itself, if it wishes to assimilate itself to the nature of the object.”⁸² The ascension of the gaze must acknowledge the temporary function of theological *epinoiai* as that which describes God within a universal social construct. “He must wash from his understanding every opinion derived from some sense perception and withdraw himself from his customary intercourse with his own companion, that is, with his sense perceptions, which are, as it were, wedded to our nature as its companion. When he is so purified, then he assaults the mountain.”⁸³ The mind must leave “behind everything that is observed, not only what sense comprehends but also what the intelligence thinks it sees.”⁸⁴ A human is encouraged therefore to “go beyond all that is visible and (lifting up his own mind, as to a mountaintop, to the invisible and incomprehensible) believes that the divine is *there* where the understanding does not reach.”⁸⁵ One’s notions of God must “transcend all cognitive thought and representation and cannot be likened to anything which is

⁸¹ *Life Mos.*, II: 233.

⁸² Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought: An Essay on Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa*, 105.

⁸³ *Life Mos.*, II: 157.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, II: 163.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, I: 46.

known.”⁸⁶ This again demonstrates the limited function of social analogies. Like the bride in Song of Songs humans must “race through all she perceives by sense or by reason”⁸⁷ and “see things...insofar as we go beyond what we view”⁸⁸ so that “he who has a pure heart sees God.”⁸⁹ Appropriately, Gregory offers a more suitable alternative to theological *epinoia*:

The Divine Nature, whatever It may be in Itself, surpasses every mental concept. For It is altogether inaccessible to reasoning and conjecture, nor has there been found any human faculty capable of perceiving the incomprehensible; for we cannot devise a means of understanding inconceivable things...The way that leads to knowledge of the Divine Essence is inaccessible to thought...*The Invisible and Incomprehensible is seen and apprehended in another manner* (italics mine).⁹⁰

The other manner in which one may ‘see’ God is through purity. “God is promised to the vision of those whose heart has been purified...For according to Scriptural use, to ‘see’ means the same as to have.”⁹¹ Gregory later equates this ‘seeing’ with “participating in”⁹² the glory of God. The trajectory of the gaze is thus ontological, and the extent to which the heart is pure will determine the capacity of the eye to function properly since “no eye has seen that supreme goodness, even though it is always busy seeing. For he does not see God as great as he is, but rather he sees him as great as his eye allows him to grasp him.”⁹³ For this reason, Gregory acknowledges human epistemological limitations to ‘see’ God either optically or noetically, and instead offers an ontological alternative:

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, I: 47.

⁸⁷ *Comm. Song*, Glory, 248.

⁸⁸ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought: An Essay on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa*, 100.

⁸⁹ *Comm. Song*, as quoted in, *Ibid.*, 101.

⁹⁰ *Beat.*, ACW, 146.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 144.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*

But since the promise of *seeing* God has a twofold meaning, on the one hand, that of knowing the Nature that is above the universe, on the other, that of being united to Him through purity of life, we must say that the voice of the Saints declares *the former mode of contemplation to be impossible, whereas the second is promised to human nature in Our Lord's present teaching*, Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall *see* God (italics mine).⁹⁴

Of the two options, Gregory deems optical and noetic sight of God to be unattainable, while the 'ontological gaze' expressed as 'union' and 'clean of heart' is the only means of access to God. In this dichotomy, theological *epinoia* once again functions as a mediating icon.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 151.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION

After acknowledging a structural resemblance between iconic philosophy and Gregory of Nyssa's theological methodology, three main elements emerge which justify the identification of an iconic function of theological *epinoia* in Gregory's philosophy: (1) Gregory's allusions to sight in the theological process; (2) his interaction with both image and art; (3) and the sense of motion intrinsic to iconic philosophy replicated in Gregory's theological methodology. Gregory's references to sight begin with his insistence that no one can 'see' God and live. This Scriptural observation is routed in the created and uncreated dichotomy Gregory employs in order to demonstrate humanity's subservience when compared to the Trinity. It also coincides with the invisibility of the divine essence, again a clear reference to the 'sight' motif in Gregory's theological process. Gregory additionally underscores the empirical origin of theological *epinoia*. Sight is thus responsible for the concepts one cautiously confers on the invisible divine essence. This appropriation of the 'sight' motif as it relates to sensory objects is subsequently grafted into Gregory's soteriological emphasis on the apophatic ascent. The tripartite succession from darkness to light to the darkness which acknowledges the incomprehensibility, ineffability and invisibility of the divine essence is once more associated with the ability to see. The final stage in this ascent identifies "true knowledge of what is sought [as]

seeing that consists in not seeing.”¹ This final stage of darkness therefore ensures that one is unable to ‘see’ God either optically or noetically as was attempted in the previous two stages. The apophatic ascent is achieved by way of a transformation of the soul; in this manner, the only option is to view the external divine essence with the ‘eye of the soul’.

Gregory’s interaction with both image and art provides further reason for conceding to the iconic function of theological *epinoia* in Gregory’s philosophy. Among the several other designations of image, Gregory emphasizes the internal image of God, which evolves to the extent that a person is transformed into the archetype. The degree to which this image resembles the archetype is determined by staring into the ‘mirror’ of the soul. Additionally, Gregory is unique as he and his Cappadocian contemporaries, Basil and Gregory Nazianzen, are among the first to affirm the use of icons amidst controversy over their deployment. This not only demonstrates Gregory’s familiarity with the sense of motion inherent in iconic philosophy, but it also validates his use of the icon/idol dichotomy. Gregory additionally identifies a concept as a ‘mind image’. In doing so, theological *epinoia* can be viewed in the mind; if one’s gaze sojourns at the concept, it remains an idol. However, if one abandons the noetic process and seeks to be transformed into the archetype, the ‘ontological gaze’ projects beyond the theological *epinoiai* towards the external divine essence.

Consequently, Gregory recognizes a sense of motion inherent in iconic philosophy, which he then replicates in his theological methodology. The progression just described corresponds to Gregory’s soteriological emphasis on

¹ *Life Mos.*, II: 163.

the apophatic ascent. This ascent, however, exhibits an even more distinct sense of motion in Gregory's thought due to the infiniteness of the divine essence. The 'ontological gaze' projects into infinity precisely because that which it seeks to view is itself infinite. In addition, despite important differences between the two philosophical systems, Gregory's philosophy contains elements of Neoplatonism, which itself includes a sense of epistemological movement from the realm of sensible and mutable objects to the realm of immutable Forms beyond the material world. This epistemology is what supports the legitimacy and implementation of icons as well as the sense of motion simulated by Gregory's theological methodology. As a vital component of the apophatic ascent from darkness to light to darkness, the 'ontological gaze' itself implies a sense of motion. It is the 'ontological gaze' which demands that one progress in virtue and purity towards perfection in order to 'see' God.

The three aforementioned elements of Gregory's theological methodology provide the justification for recognizing an iconic motif in his philosophy. However, it is the juxtaposition between the noetic process and the 'ontological gaze', or rather Gregory's triadology/christology and his soteriology, or yet again his philosophy and spirituality, which identifies the impetus of the Christian life in Gregory's thought, the structure of which is replicated in this thesis. Gregory proposes an apophatic problem that requires an ontological solution. Gregory's epistemology, or the noetic process, illuminates the inability to 'see' God. This process is limited in its success due to the finiteness of humanity and the infiniteness of the divine essence. Additionally, Gregory's epistemology

demonstrates the inadequacy of theological *epinoiai* whose origin in the sensible realm render them insufficient to depict the invisible, incomprehensible and ineffable divine essence. However, the resulting theological *epinoiai* from the noetic process maintains a valid and necessary function. Not only do they allow for theological discussion using socially constructed analogies for God, but God's *energeia*, which is knowable, as well as the Incarnated Christ which personifies God's *energeia* in human form, provides a basis and standard for imitation. Thus, the ontological solution emerges. One is able to use theological *epinoia* iconically as a gateway or conduit towards the external divine essence. After emerging from the darkness of ignorance and extending beyond the light of knowledge one can acknowledge that God is ultimately unknowable, and therefore ascend ontologically by progressing in virtue and purity towards the perfection embodied by the divine essence. It is through this method that one is able to 'see' God and live.

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