GREGORY OF NYSSA AND DIVINE SIMPLICITY: A CONCEPTUALIST READING

ANDREW RADDE-GALLWITZ

Abstract

Andrew Radde-Gallwitz probes Gregory of Nyssa on divine simplicity, a topic that Radde-Gallwitz treated earlier in a book-length monograph and takes further here in response to critics. As he notes, the Cappadocians and their opponents shared belief in divine simplicity. But for Gregory, simplicity functions as part of affirming the co-equal divinity of the Father and Son, *against* his opponents. Radde-Gallwitz lists six negative claims that Gregory's understanding of divine simplicity supports: (1) God is immaterial; (2) God is without parts; (3) God does not possess any perfection "by acquisition"; (4) God does not possess any perfection "by participation"; (5) in God, there is no mixture or conflux of qualities, especially *opposite* qualities; (6) in God, there are no degrees of more or less. Yet with regard to positive statements about God's perfections—for example the relation of God's goodness to God's wisdom—things are more difficult, as Radde-Gallwitz shows. Interpreters of Gregory have differed sharply on this issue, in part because Gregory does not make his position crystal clear. Radde-Gallwitz himself earlier held that Gregory considers God to have real but non-definitive perfections distinct from the divine essence. Indebted to Richard Cross, however, Radde-Gallwitz here adjusts his view, distinguishing more firmly between the divine essence itself and our limited concepts. He draws upon the Platonic distinction between natural and conventional naming, which differ in their accounts of what makes words meaningful. Arguing that Gregory is a "naturalist," he reads Gregory's texts on divine simplicity in this light.

Introduction

The Greek Christian literature of the late fourth century is almost synonymous with controversy. In the midst of so many divisions, divine simplicity was surprisingly uncontroversial. The belief that the divine nature is immaterial and without composition was more or less ubiquitous in the literature of the time. Not every author discusses it, but in contrast to the disputed status of divine simplicity in Christian theology today, in the fourth century, when simplicity was mentioned, it was affirmed implicitly or explicitly. Gregory of Nyssa perhaps used the language of simplicity more often than his peers, but he was far from anomalous in his endorsement of the idea. The doctrine of simplicity was a crucial tenet for the other two Cappadocians as well as for their opponent Eunomius of Cyzicus, as we know from the latter's *Apology* and the fragments of the *Second Apology* quoted by Gregory. Additionally, in *Against the Macedonians—On the Holy*

Andrew Radde-Gallwitz
University of Notre Dame, Program of Liberal Studies, Notre Dame, IN 46556, USA
Email: radde-gallwitz.1@nd.edu

Spirit, Gregory implies that his Pneumatomachian opponents affirmed divine simplicity. We cannot conclude that every Greek-speaking Christian of the late fourth century thought of God as simple. It is hard to believe that the so-called "Anthropomorphites"—who at the end of the 390s emerged in protest against the preaching of Theophilus of Alexandria—were entirely abnormal.[1] It is quite possible that the *literati* were the exception to the rule. Still, among the various doctrinal partisans in the years surrounding the Council of Constantinople in 381, divine simplicity had achieved the status of a *communis opinio*.

Many of Gregory of Nyssa's numerous references to the idea appear in polemical doctrinal works, where the shared belief in simplicity makes it a useful appeal.[2] It is important to be precise about what those topics were. The common trope of referring to this era as the "Trinitarian controversy" can lead us to expect a pro-Nicene writer like Gregory to be concerned with the questions of later Trinitarian theology, in particular, how divine simplicity is compatible with the difference of co-equal persons. Gregory affirms the difference of co-equal persons, and he has several models for expressing the point, but simplicity enters the conversation at a more basic level. Gregory had to establish the equality of honor in the Trinity, and for him this meant showing that the Son and the Spirit are to be included in the very same notion of deity as the Father; they are not called divine in some lesser sense. Simplicity was a useful resource because, on Gregory's account, it is incompatible with degrees. For someone like Eunomius, it was coherent to say that the Father is simple and the Son is simple, but the two are ranked as superior and inferior. Gregory's fundamental argument is that simplicity is incompatible with any theological scheme that includes a greater or a lesser. Gregory did in fact deal with many of the problems of later Trinitarian theology. He offered various accounts of how the persons can be distinct if they share the same idea of deity: in the closing section of *To Ablabius*, the difference is accounted for by relations of origin.[3] In other places, he argues by analogy, likening the difference of persons in one place to the distinction of individual human beings within the common nature, in another place to the relation of a body's shape to the body itself, in yet another to the indistinguishable differences of the rainbow's colors. Yet, he does not use the language of simplicity in connection with these various models.

To get at his usage, we need to set forth some basics. His terminology is standard: he uses ἁπλοῦς and ἁπλότης for simple and simplicity, respectively, and often substitutes or merely juxtaposes, in his characteristic penchant for hendiadys, the equivalent terms ἀσύνθετος ("incomposite") and μονοειδής ("uniform"). He uses this language in various places to make six negative claims:

(1)   God is immaterial (ἄϋλος).
(2)   God is without parts (ἀμερής).

---

(3)   God does not possess any perfection "by acquisition" (ἐξ ἐπικτήσεως).

(4)   God does not possess any perfection "by participation" (ἐκ μετουσίας).

(5)   In God, there is no mixture (μίξις) or conflux (συνδρομή) of qualities, especially *opposite* qualities.

(6)   In God, there are no degrees of more or less (τὸ μᾶλλόν τε καὶ ἧττον).

Naturally, these points are closely related, and there is a sense in which each is by definition true if one accepts that God is simple. The list should not be thought of as akin to the third question of the *Summa theologiae*'s first part, where Thomas Aquinas negates in a systematic order the various kinds of metaphysical composition, beginning with the combination of quantitative parts (as in a body), then proceeding to the compounding of matter and form, of essence and subject, of essence and existence, of genus and difference, and of subject and accidents.[4] Gregory does not develop the topic in a sequential order in any one place as does Aquinas, so the list of six points I have given is merely an artificial assemblage of various ways he glosses the language in different texts. Moreover, the Greek terms I have cited are merely representative; Gregory substitutes equivalent expressions for rhetorical variety.

Gregory assumes that his opponents and not his allies have violated divine simplicity. Whether we are speaking of Eunomius or the Pneumatomachians, the opponents envisioned in Gregory's texts believe that simplicity is compatible with differences of nature, and in particular with ranking of superior and inferior qualities and powers. Eunomius, for instance, in keeping with scripture, applied the term "light" to both the Unbegotten Father and the Begotten Son, but he perceived the light as different in the two cases, one incomparably greater than the other. For Gregory, this combination of a common term with differences of degree is reminiscent of a genus with species-making differentiae, just as, for instance, all birds are winged, but the various types of bird are distinguished partly by larger or smaller wings. Aristotle had noted that Platonic dichotomous differentiae such as winged-versus-not-winged cannot account for differences among species. Accordingly, he proposed that species differ in terms of their relative (μᾶλλον καὶ ἧττον) participation in common traits.[5] Gregory sees this sort of thinking as lying behind Eunomius' Trinitarian theology. Instead of genus-species relations, Gregory occasionally speaks of the Trinitarian persons as akin to individuals within a common species.[6] In such cases, the nature is present invariably in the individuals despite the individual differences. Accordingly, the species-individual model provides a greater, though still imperfect, likeness to the distinction of the divine hypostases. He therefore sees no problem of reconciling Trinity with simplicity since in this context the common feature does not vary, and for him simplicity is principally about negating variation. Moreover, in order to correct some of the incongruous elements of the analogy with human individuals, Gregory alternates models for speaking of Trinitarian difference-within-unity, as noted above.

---

[4] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 3, aa. 1-7.

[5] Aristotle, *On the Parts of Animals* 644b15. For a clear discussion of the Aristotelian text, see Armand Marie Leroi, *The Lagoon: How Aristotle Invented Science* (New York: Penguin, 2014), 107-13; and for the complex late ancient reception, see Porphyry, *Introduction*, trans. with intro. and commentary Jonathan Barnes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 172-76. That Gregory is thinking of biological classification is suggested by such passages as *Eun.* 1.180-4 and the explicit mention of "the differences between animals" at 1.321 (GNO I, 122.15-16); note also the reference to the Aristotelian differentiation of beings at 3.10.50 (GNO II, 309.8-12). In modern scholarship on the Trinitarian controversies, it is the homoiousian theologians of Asia Minor and their pro-Nicene Cappadocian heirs who have been accused of a generic conception of the Trinity. See Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, vol. 4, trans. Neil Buchanan (New York: Dover, 1960), 84, 97-101.

[6] See Nathan Jacobs, "On 'Not Three Gods'—Again: Can a Primary-Secondary Substance Reading of *Ousia* and *Hypostasis* Avoid Tritheism?," *Modern Theology* 24, no. 3 (July 2008): 331-58.

When reading Gregory on simplicity, the interpretive difficulties arise not directly from the set of six negations listed above, nor from the matter of how to reconcile simplicity with Trinitarian difference, but from trying to offer any positive statement about what the various perfection terms we use for God signify. From the denial of participation, for instance, we can tell that there is no universal goodness in which God participates, as a species might participate in a higher-order generic property or an individual in a specific property.[7] But how God and God's goodness (or any other perfection) relate is not clear. He does not claim, as Augustine does and Latin tradition after him, that simplicity entails that God is the goodness by which he is good, or that in God quality and substance are identical.[8] Naming what Gregory does say is quite difficult. One can be tempted to draw a sharp contrast with Augustine. Take, for instance, what Gregory says in *To Ablabius* about the term "incorruptible." He says that, like any other divine name, this one has a meaning appropriate to the divine nature, though "without indicating that which the nature is according to essence" (οὐ μὴν ἐκεῖνο σημαίνουσαν, ὅ ἐστι κατ᾽ οὐσίαν ἡ φύσις). I do not think Gregory is drawing an ontological distinction here, though the contrary position might seem the more intuitive reading on its face. Gregory must be drawing *some* distinction between incorruptibility and essence here. One might take this distinction as implying that incorruptibility—as well as any other description of God—has some extra-mental referent apart from the divine essence. Two lines of recent interpretation have drawn precisely such an inference. First, David Bradshaw, following the Byzantine distinction between essence and energies in God, has ascribed to Gregory the notion that perfection terms refer to divine energies rather than to the divine essence.[9] Second, in a previous study, I argued that perfection terms refer to real and necessary, but non-definitive properties of the divine nature, for which Gregory uses the language of *propria* (ἰδιώματα and similar terms).[10] Despite the differences between these two positions, both can be thought of as realist in the sense that both posit real, extra-mental referents distinct from the divine essence and corresponding in a one-to-one fashion with the various perfection terms.

A recent article by Richard Cross, responding partly to my chapter, has called my realist interpretation of Gregory into question.[11] Cross focuses on *Against Eunomius* 2, where Gregory defends the human capacity for inventing terms, including true theological descriptions. Following Basil, Gregory maintains that we can do so via "conceptualization" (ἐπίνοια), a complicated term that can denote both the process of discovery and the results of that process. For Eunomius, to say that we have devised our theology by conceptualization is tantamount to admitting its fictional status and hence its falsity. In my previous book, I argued, against a prevailing trend, that we should take the various conceptualizations in a non-realist manner, which we might call nominalist or conceptualist, though we should distinguish these conceptualizations from the names of the *propria*, which denote in a realist fashion inherent features of the divine nature. Cross argues, persuasively in my opinion, that we ought to take *both* sets in a nominalist fashion—or perhaps better, that all *propria* names are also *epinoiai*. Cross sees Gregory as

---

[7] On the sense of "participation" implicit here, see Jonathan Barnes' comments at Porphyry, *Introduction*, 136-41.

[8] See, for instance, Augustine, *City of God*, XI.10.

[9] David Bradshaw, *Aristotle East and West: Metaphysics and the Division of Christendom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 153-78. Cf. Alexis Torrance, "Precedents for Palamas' Essence-Energies Theology in the Cappadocian Fathers," *Vigiliae Christianae* 63 (2009): 47-70, at 64-69.

[10] Andrew Radde-Gallwitz, *Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and the Transformation of Divine Simplicity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 175-224.

[11] Richard Cross, "Divine Simplicity and the Doctrine of the Trinity: Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine," in *Philosophical Theology and the Christian Tradition: Russian and Western Perspectives*, ed. David Bradshaw (Washington, DC: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2012), 53-65.

marking a distinction between semantics and metaphysics. In God, what makes a sentence like "God is good" or "God is unbegotten" true is nothing other than the divine essence. But in order for our language to be meaningful, the predicates naming divine perfections do not need to correspond to any extra-mental property; they need only signify distinct concepts. Gregory is therefore more "metaphysically parsimonious" than Eunomius.[12] I am convinced that conceptualism is a fruitful lens for reading Gregory, and I want to revisit some of the crucial passages with this question in mind.

In order to follow Gregory's arguments about divine simplicity, one must bear in mind his view of language and meaning. On this topic, there is something of a consensus interpretation that increasingly seems shaky to me. There were two basic ancient positions on what accounts for the meaning of terms (ὀνόματα, a Greek term that can cover nouns and adjectives as well as proper names). On one view, a term has meaning "by nature" (φύσει); on the other, its meaning is external to it, being attached to it merely "by imposition" (θέσει). We can label these positions "naturalism" and "conventionalism," respectively. Without denying the influence of custom, a naturalist maintains that, because of the way in which words have been coined, meaning inheres in the words themselves and that this meaning somehow reflects or captures the nature of the items named. In some cases, this inherence is a result of the fact that those who coined a word encoded the meaning in its very formation; etymological analysis can uncover these hidden or not-so-hidden meanings. Moreover, for the naturalist, a subject can be mislabeled; in Plato's *Cratylus*, the eponymous speaker, a proponent of naturalism, has offended his interlocutor by saying that Hermogenes is not his real name![13] For a conventionalist, the correct word for a subject is simply what convention dictates, and the correct account of that word's meaning is likewise what is customary. Typically Gregory has been dubbed a conventionalist, but this consensus rests on a confusion.[14] It mistakes the issue of the origin of human language with that of its meaning. The debate between Eunomius and Gregory embodied in *Against Eunomius* 2 was over the *origin* of language, in particular, of theological terms such as "Unbegotten." For Eunomius, such language is of divine origin, whereas Gregory, following Basil, affirms that humans have invented words. This issue has been confused with that of naturalism versus conventionalism. Ancient naturalists and conventionalists were *both* of the opinion that humans have invented language. They differed on what made words meaningful. It is not entirely clear how, if at all, Eunomius answered this question. His focus is on divine speech in Genesis 1 and how that narrative underscores the divine origin of language generally. Moreover, he reasons that, given divine simplicity, the name "Unbegotten" matched the divine substance perfectly and that all other true ascriptions of God are synonymous with it. In the surviving fragments, he never offered a general account of meaning.

By contrast, Gregory does at least sketch such a theory, and there are several reasons for thinking of Gregory's position as naturalist. The most decisive reason is his repeated claim that words, including titles for God, have "inherent meanings." Each meaning corresponds to what Gregory calls a "concept," and in *Against Eunomius* 2, he argues that users of the various languages coin terms to somehow embody the concept. This does not entail a simple one-to-one

---

[12] Cross, "Divine Simplicity," 59.

[13] On this dialogue, which Gregory mentions (and surreptitiously follows) in *Against Eunomius* 2, see David Sedley, *Plato's Cratylus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[14] See, e.g., Alden A. Mosshammer, "Disclosing but not Disclosed: Gregory of Nyssa as Deconstructionist," in *Studien zu Gregor von Nyssa und der Christlichen Spätantike*, ed. Hubertus R. Drobner and Christoph Klock, Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae XII (Leiden, New York, Copenhagen, and Köln: Brill, 1990) 99-123, at 101. The best overview of the topic is Mariette Canévet, *Grégoire de Nysse et l'herméneutique biblique: Étude des rapports entre le langage et la connaissance de Dieu* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1983), 31-64.

correspondence—more than one word can convey the same concept—but it does mean that there is at least one concept embedded in each meaningful term.[15] Moreover, as he shows in the case of the natural elements, the meanings embedded in the terms correspond to the elements' natural powers.[16] Reading Gregory's philosophy of language as naturalist would additionally explain his fondness for etymologies, perhaps most famously his account that the term "God" (θεός) comes from the activity of "beholding" (θεᾶσθαι).[17] It would also account for Gregory's penchant for pointing out that conventional usage of certain terms represents an "abuse of language" (κατάχρησις), an assertion that would make little sense if he were in fact a conventionalist.[18] So, in sum, on my reading, for Gregory language is of human origin and carries inherent meaning, which corresponds to human concepts. In another context, it would be worthwhile to trace the complex philosophical genealogy behind this notion of language and how Gregory relates to the various traditions. Such a study could help us to parse out the precise strands of naturalism that Gregory endorses, and how he combines this view with his conceptualist notion of meaning, as had the Stoics before him.[19] For present purposes, it suffices to place the issue on the table, since the language regarding names and their inherent meanings appears in numerous passages cited below on divine simplicity.

Against the Macedonians

Many scholars have noted that *Against the Macedonians* shares a number of parallels with the confession of faith known in modern editions as Gregory's *Epistle* 24. The confession has been viewed as a somewhat later compressed version of *Against the Macedonians*.[20] I would prefer to reverse the order. Hence, when Gregory opens *Against the Macedonians* by referring to objections that have been raised to what "we confess" regarding the Spirit, the confession in question is *Epistle* 24. When the works are placed side-by-side, one notes significant overlaps in language, with one notable exception: *Against the Macedonians* appeals to divine simplicity, whereas *Epistle* 24 does not. Here is a relevant portion of the shorter confession of faith.

> So then, since we conceive of no difference whatsoever in the incomprehensibility of the
> three persons—for it is not the case that one is more incomprehensible and another less so,
> but rather there is a single idea of incomprehensibility in the case of the Trinity—for this
> reason we maintain, guided by the ungraspability and inapprehensibility itself, that we

---

[15] For examples of semantic equivalents, see *Eun.* 2.156 (GNO I, 270.21-23), *Abl.* (GNO III.1, 44.9-11, with Mueller's addition deleted), and *Cant.* 3 (GNO VI, 90.16-18).

[16] *Eun.* 2.271-275 (GNO I, 305.26-307.16).

[17] See *Abl.* (GNO III.1, 44.7-45.3); *Eun* 2.585-86 (GNO I, 397.8-23); *Eun.* 3.10.10 (GNO II, 292.23-24); *On the Deity of the Son and the Holy Spirit and Concerning Abraham* (GNO X.2, 143.3-4).

[18] See, e.g., *Abl.* (GNO III.1, 40.5-42.3); *Eun.* 3.4.27-29 (GNO II, 144.11-145.12); *Catechetical Oration* 9 (GNO III.4, 37.1-38.4; SC 453, 204), 16 (GNO III.4, 46.2-12; SC 453, 222).

[19] On the complex background, see Mark DelCogliano, *Basil of Caesarea's Anti-Eunomian Theory of Names: Christian Theology and Late-Antique Philosophy in the Fourth Century Trinitarian Controversy*, Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae 103 (Leiden: Brill, 2010), for the philosophical material, esp. 62-65, 177-82. For the Stoics, see James Allen, "The Stoics on the Origin of Language and the Foundations of Etymology," in *Language and Learning: Philosophy of Language in the Hellenistic Age*, ed. Dorothea Frede and Brad Inwood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 14-35.

[20] Christoph Klock, *Untersuchungen zu Stil und Rhythmus bei Gregor von Nyssa: Ein Beitrag zum Rhetorikverständnis der griechischen Väter*, Beiträge zur Klassischen Philologie 173 (Frankfurt: Athanäum Verlag, 1987), 160-1n84; Pierre Maraval, *Grégoire de Nysse: Lettres*, Sources chrétiennes 363 (Paris: Cerf, 1990), 278-9n2, 287n1; Thierry Ziegler, *Les petits traits trinitaires de Grégoire de Nysse: temoins d'un itineraire theologique (379– 383)*, These de doctorat, Universite des sciences humaines de Strasbourg, Faculte de theologie protestante, 1987, 360-66; Anna Silvas, *Gregory of Nyssa: The Letters: Introduction, Translation, Commentary*, Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae 83 (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 190-91.

discover absolutely no difference of substance in the case of the Holy Trinity except for the order of the persons and the confession of the hypostases.[21]

Here we see the denial of "more and less," but without any direct appeal to simplicity. Instead, the argument is grounded in the unicity of "the idea of incomprehensibility" (ὁ τῆς ἀκαταληψίας λόγος) as applied to the three—language that will be important for *Against the Macedonians*. In *Against the Macedonians*, Gregory first reiterates the confession that has come under attack, focusing on the shared honor or sameness of honor (τὸ ὁμότιμον) of the Spirit with the Father and Son. He uses similar language to *Epistle* 24 in stating that the Holy Spirit shares in the common names of the Trinity "except for what the Holy Spirit is specifically considered in reference to his hypostasis."[22] Later in the work he phrases the confession in terms that once again echo *Epistle* 24: "except for the difference in order and in hypostasis, we comprehend no variation in any respect."[23] Unpacking this confession, Gregory denies that there can be a more and less, invoking the language of simplicity as justification.

In what follows, I will provide a running commentary on the section where Gregory makes this argument: paragraphs 3–7 of *Against the Macedonians* (using the enumeration of the Patrologia Graeca). Gregory's aim here is to refute the Macedonian claim that the Holy Spirit is unworthy of equal honor with the Father and the Son because of its unequal power. It is difficult to reconstruct their reasoning since we have only Gregory's report of their doctrine, but it appears that they emphasized that the act of creating is ascribed not to the Spirit but only to the Father and the Son, perhaps drawing on John 1:3. Throughout the work, Gregory makes a number of arguments against this position; in paragraphs 3–5 particularly, he argues from two premises: that the Spirit is divine and that it is simple. He treats the Spirit's simplicity as a point granted even by his opponents. Gregory's argument is that the terms in question—"divine" and "simple"—necessarily go together, and that the simplicity implies a certain view of how the divine relates to the various perfection terms we ascribe to it. In paragraph 3, Gregory examines the implications of confessing that the Spirit is divine; in paragraph 4, he introduces a parallel with the elements; and in paragraph 5, he shows how the Spirit's simplicity governs our understanding of the various perfections we ascribe to it.

Gregory's reasoning in this section is manifestly indebted to a passage in Basil's *Homily 15—On Faith*:

[The Spirit] too has all things—the goodness, the righteousness, the sanctification, the life—coessentially according to its nature . . . None of these is acquired by it, nor does any come to belong to it by supervening subsequently. Rather, just as heating is inseparable from fire and illuminating from light, so too are sanctifying, giving life, goodness, and righteousness [inseparable] from the Spirit.[24]

---

[21] *Epist.* 24.7 (GNO VIII.2, 76.28–77.3): Ἐπειδὴ τοίνυν οὐδεμίαν ἐν τῷ ἀκαταλήπτῳ τῶν τριῶν προσώπων διαφορὰν ἐννοοῦμεν (οὐ γὰρ τὸ μὲν μᾶλλον ἀκατάληπτον τὸ δὲ ἧττον, ἀλλ' εἷς τῆς τριάδος ὁ τῆς ἀκαταληψίας λόγος), διὰ τοῦτό φαμεν, αὐτῷ τῷ ἀλήπτῳ καὶ ἀκατανοήτῳ χειραγωγούμενοι, μηδεμίαν τῆς οὐσίας ἐπὶ τῆς ἁγίας τριάδος διαφορὰν ἐξευρίσκειν ἐκτὸς τῆς τάξεως τῶν προσώπων καὶ τῆς τῶν ὑποστάσεων ὁμολογίας. This passage echoes *To Peter—On the Difference between Essence and Hypostasis* (= "Basil," *Epist.* 38), section 3, and Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* 22.53.

[22] *Maced.* 2 (GNO III.1, 89.24-25).

[23] *Maced.* 14 (GNO III.1, 100.19–21): ἐκτὸς τῆς κατὰ τάξιν καὶ ὑπόστασιν διαφορᾶς ἐν οὐδενὶ τὸ παρηλλαγμένον καταλαμβάνομεν.

[24] Basil, *Homily* 15.3 (PG 31, 468C-469A).

In *Against the Macedonians*, Gregory uses Basil's reasoning to expand on his own *Epistle* 24. For Gregory, the pneumatological characteristics Basil lists are part of the "idea" (λόγος) of deity. Before turning to the Spirit, Gregory first tackles what it means to speak of divinity in paragraph 3:

> Confessing that the Spirit belongs to the divine nature,[25] we recognize from the teaching of the scriptures and from common notions absolutely no variation in it, such that the divine and transcendent nature would be divided from itself through a kind of increase or decrease and would differ from itself as greater and lesser. It is believed to be simple, uniform, and non-composite, and no interweaving or composition from dissimilar things is considered in connection with it. For this reason, once we have conceived of (ἐννοήσωμεν) the divine nature in our soul, from this name we have simultaneously recognized perfection in every concept (νοήματι) that is appropriate to God. For that which is divine has perfection in every idea (λόγῳ) associated with goodness. If it should fall short in some way or lag behind in any aspect of perfection, to the extent of the deficiency, the idea of deity (ὁ τῆς θεότητος λόγος) will falter—since in that part (ἐν ἐκείνῳ τῷ μέρει) it will no longer be or even be called divine. After all, how could anyone apply this title to something that is imperfect, deficient, and in need of aid from another?[26]

After Gregory sets forth in characteristic fashion what it means to say that the divine nature is simple, his focus turns to the formation of the concept of the divine in the soul, using the verbal cognate of the noun ἔννοια. This notion immediately connotes complete perfection. The conceptualism of the passage is undeniable, but also ambiguous: Gregory mentions not only the singular "idea of deity" but also the multiple concepts or aspects associated with it, each of which is governed by the intuition of perfection. Gregory calls each concept as a "part," suggesting that the two levels relate as whole to parts.[27] Thus far, it seems that both deity and its various perfections are concepts embodied in names, an impression borne out as Gregory introduces a set of illustrations in paragraph 4.

> We can likewise confirm our account through bodily examples. The nature of fire—equally in all the parts which comprise it—gives off a hot sensation to those who touch it. One part of the flame does not have a greater heat, while another has a lesser. Rather, as long as it is fire, it maintains a seamless unity with itself in an absolutely complete identity of activity. Should it cool down in some part, in the cooled part it will no longer be called "fire," since, as the heating activity diminishes in the opposite direction, the name too gets changed along with it. It is the same for water, air, and all the elementary foundations: for each of them, there is one and the same principle (λόγος) that does not allow increase or

---

[25] This translation renders Mueller's edition, which adds the conjectural phrase εἶναι τὸ πνεῦμα for sense and based on a parallel sentence later in the text. The conjecture is uncertain, though the difference between the two versions of the sentence does not impinge upon the interpretation presented here. Either way, Gregory's focus in paragraph 3 is on the divine nature as such; he turns to the Spirit's nature in paragraph 5.

[26] *Maced*. 3 (GNO III.1, 90.27-91.12).

[27] For a more evocative description of this process of concept and name formation, see *Homilies on the Song of Songs* 11 (GNO VI, 324.9-325.14). This text is about how a certain surplus of experience, an "awareness of presence" (αἴσθησιν μέν τινα δίδωσι τῇ ψυχῇ τῆς παρουσίας), grounds the language developed by the biblical writers. On the "awareness of presence" passage, see *inter alia* Martin Laird, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith: Union, Knowledge, and Divine Presence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 154; Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought: An Essay on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa*, trans. Mark Sebanc (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1995 [French original published 1988]), 97; Anthony Meredith, "The Idea of God in Gregory of Nyssa," in Drobner and Klock, *Studien zu Gregor von Nyssa*, 127-47, at 142.

diminishment. For example, something cannot be called "water" to a greater or lesser degree. As long as it is wet to the same degree, the title of water also is truly applied to it. But if it is transformed to the opposite quality, surely the name applied to it will be changed as well. Again, the non-resistance, upward motion, and lightness of the air are observed equally in all its parts, whereas what is solid, heavy, and flows to the earth also escapes being called "air." Likewise also the divine nature—so long as it maintains perfection in every concept (νοήματος) which is piously thought about it—will show the truth of its title by its perfection in goodness. But if anything that contributes to the principle of perfection is withdrawn, the name of deity will prove false in that part (κατ᾽ ἐκεῖνο μέρος) and will not correspond to the subject. To give the name "divine" to something which does not connote the notion of perfection (ἡ τοῦ τελειότητος ἔννοια) is as impossible as—or rather, *more* impossible *than*—applying the name "water" to a dry body, or giving the title "fire" to what is cool, or calling what is solid and resistant "air."[28]

The aim here is to lay out the conditions under which the adjective "divine" is used successfully. This paragraph tackles the question of the same conditions for the elemental names "water" and "fire." These titles are successfully used when their corresponding concept matches the subject being referred to. Each element has an invariant idea (λόγος) connected to it, just as perfection functions as a normative principle governing any application of the name "divine"; thus there can no more be imperfect divine power than there can be water that is less wet than other water or fire that is less than hot.

The analogy between a sentence like "Anything that is fire is hot" and one like "That which is divine is perfectly powerful," shows that perfect power is not arbitrarily attached to divinity but inherent in it conceptually. The same goes for the other perfections, as Gregory argues in paragraph 5:

> Now, if [the Holy Spirit] is divine, then certainly it is also good, powerful, wise, glorious, eternal, and all such names that lift our thoughts to a level appropriate to its grandeur. The simplicity of the subject ensures that it does not possess these names by participation (ἐκ μετουσίας), as if one could suppose that it is one thing in its own nature, but becomes something different through the presence of the aforementioned names. Such a situation is proper to those beings that have a composite nature. But all people equally confess that the Holy Spirit is simple; there is no one who would dispute it. So then, if the formula (λόγος) of its nature is simple, it does not possess goodness as something acquired (ἐπίκτητον). Rather, the very thing it is (αὐτὸ ὅ τι ποτέ ἐστιν), is goodness, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, eternity, incorruptibility, and all the names that are sublime and elevating.[29]

At first glance, it seems that Gregory makes an unexplained leap here from the simplicity of the divine nature to the simplicity of the Spirit, but clearly the Spirit's simplicity is presented as a concomitant of its divinity. Gregory is concerned to set up a strict entailment: when one calls the Spirit divine, one simultaneously confesses its perfection in every name, and one denies that it possesses these by participation or by acquisition. As Gregory restates the point a little later in the work, referring to the descriptions of the Spirit as honorable, glorious, good and powerful: "all such concepts are introduced together with the notion of divinity (τῇ γὰρ τῆς θειότητος ἐννοίᾳ πάντα τὰ

---

[28] *Maced.* 4 (GNO III.1, 91.13-92.9).
[29] *Maced.* 5 (GNO III.1, 92.13-25).

τοιαῦτα νοήματα συνεισέρχεται)."[30] Gregory's overarching point in *Against the Macedonians* 3–7 is that one must keep these two—the idea of divinity and the catalogue of perfections—together, as he states at the end of paragraph 6: "For this reason, it is altogether necessary to grasp these two, each along with the other: the divine nature together with the fitting belief about it and the pious notions in connection with the divine and transcendent nature."[31]

The necessity Gregory refers to here is akin to the necessity linking a subject with its definitional parts, as the context makes clear. For Gregory, the Pneumatomachian ascription of divine power, though in a limited supply, to the Spirit, is "as if someone called another a human being, but was not sure whether to go on and additionally confess that the person is rational or mortal or anything else that is said about humanity, and thus overturns what she had granted."[32] The items listed here—rationality and mortality—are of course parts of the standard ancient definition of humanity. That Gregory is thinking of essential attributes is clear from a passage later in the work where he reasons that a subject that lacked any one of these would not be human.[33] The person Gregory envisions in his "as if" scenario wrongly conceives of humanity's definitional parts as somehow *additional* ascriptions—as synthetic predicates—and thus betrays a shaky grasp of the concept of humanity itself. These predicates do not convey information about a human being; they answer the question of what it is to be human by telling us its identifying characteristics.[34] One who thinks of another human being but is uncertain about whether this person is mortal or has the capacity for rationality is not lacking information; he or she is confused. Similarly, one who calls the Spirit divine, but does not think of it as having perfect power, is confused about what "divine" means.

One might wonder what has happened to Gregory's apophaticism; after all, is he not synonymous with the idea that we do *not* know what God is? As Gregory says in the sixth homily *On the Beatitudes*, if we reflect on God's creation, we "come into comprehension not of his essence, but of his goodness" (τῆς ἀγαθότητος οὐ τῆς οὐσίας ἐν περινοίᾳ γενόμενοι).[35] In *Against the Macedonians*, goodness is treated as a concept. We must ask whether, in the Beatitudes homily, goodness and essence are two distinct extra-mental items. A conceptualist reading would see the force of the sentence on the phrase ἐν περινοίᾳ γενόμενοι.[36] Gregory's point, on this view, is to affirm that we form one concept that is not identified with the divine essence, perhaps because having a concept of the essence is for Gregory a contradiction in terms. Such a reading seems to be reinforced by an adjacent sentence which says that from the orderly arrangement of creation, "we form a concept not of the essence but of the wisdom of the one who has in all things created wisely" (ἔννοιαν οὐ τῆς οὐσίας ἀλλὰ τῆς σοφίας τοῦ κατὰ πάντα σοφῶς πεποιηκότος ἀνατυπούμεθα).[37] Here the focus is unquestionably on concept formation: from

---

[30] *Maced.* 6 (GNO III.1, 93.27-28).

[31] *Maced.* 6 (GNO III.1, 93.30-94.2): διὰ τοῦτο δεῖ πάντως μετ᾽ ἀλλήλων τὰ δύο καταλαμβάνεσθαι, καὶ τὴν θείαν φύσιν μετὰ τῆς προσφυοῦς ὑπολήψεως καὶ τὰς εὐσεβεῖς ἐννοίας περὶ τὴν θείαν τε καὶ ὑπερέχουσαν φύσιν.

[32] *Maced.* 6 (GNO III.1, 93.19-22).

[33] *Maced.* 15 (GNO III.1, 101.11-14): "For no one would say that an unformed embryo is human, but rather that it has potential, when it has become fully formed, to advance to becoming human, whereas so long as it is incomplete, it is something else and not human."

[34] *Maced.* 15 (GNO III.1, 101.30-102.4): "Now in the case of human beings in general, proficiency [this is a reference to 2 Tim. 3:17] would mean completion in every attribute of the nature. For one must be rational, capable of intelligence and understanding, partaking of life, upright in posture, capable of laughing, and with broad fingernails. If someone were to call something human, but was unable to exhibit the aforementioned marks of the nature for this object, then he would honor it in vain with this title."

[35] *Beat.* 6 (GNO VII.2, 141.14–15).

[36] On which, see Canévet, *Grégoire de Nysse et l'herméneutique biblique*, 43-44n43.

[37] *Beat.* 6 (GNO VII.2, 141.9-11).

some phenomenon, we naturally form one concept (that of God's wisdom), but must not confuse it with something else, namely comprehension of the divine essence. Read in this light, these key passages for the realist interpretation fit better with a conceptualist reading.

In the remainder of the article, I will argue that the same conceptualist reading makes the best sense of various similar passages. As we will see, there is a parallel between divine incomprehensibility, which is due to the necessary limitation of concepts, and divine unnameability, which stems from the limitation of words. Gregory uses the term περίνοια as the cognitive counterpart to the noun περίληψις ("encompassing"), which refers to a property of words.[38] Every meaningful word encompasses some distinct meaning, even if some terms (such as terms naming general kinds or wholes) encompass other terms. Given that the function of language is to slice off concepts one from another, and given that the divine is infinite, no term can encompass the whole idea of God. Thus, on the level of our cognitive capacities, we can know various things about God, each of which is part of some general notion of God, without "coming into comprehension" of God's essence. It is not that this essence is intrinsically unintelligible or that it corresponds to some other notion than the ones we ascribe to it; rather, it is not any one of the notions thought about it taken individually. Likewise, on the linguistic level, each perfection-name contains some meaning that is appropriate to God, and these names can be encompassed in more general ones such as "goodness" or "perfection," but no name encompasses all that we intend when we think and speak of God.

To Ablabius and Against Eunomius 2

Two important works for our topic—*To Ablabius* and *Against Eunomius* 2—can be treated together, given the close links between them. We can begin with the famous passage mentioned earlier from *To Ablabius*, in which Gregory distinguishes the essence from the incorruptibility. The adjective "incorruptible" tells us that God does not suffer corruption but does not tell us *what* it is that does not suffer corruption. It does not follow, however, that Gregory is drawing an ontological distinction. The overarching point of the passage must be borne in mind. Gregory's argument in this section is that the divine nature differs from many ordinary created natures such as the heavens or the sun, which "are pointed out by proper expressions indicative of the subjects." Gregory opposes those who treat the word "God" similarly, taking it "as a proper name naturally (προσφυῶς) applied to its referent." Citing Philippians 2:9, he argues that there is no such term for the highest nature. This, however, does not mean that we are without words, but that each term "is expressive of what is thought about the divine nature; it does not contain the meaning of the nature itself."[39] No term fully encompasses the nature's meaning, or we might say, its essence. As he says later in the work, since we believe the divine nature to be infinite, we envision "no encompassing of it" (οὐδεμίαν αὐτῆς . . . περίληψιν).[40] Each word that leads us to an understanding of God "has its own encompassed sense" (ἰδίαν ἔχει . . . ἐμπεριειλημμένην διάνοιαν) and hence it merely conveys some partial truth about God. Accordingly, the question of the meaning of religious language has to be settled on a case-by-case basis. A term like "life-giver" indicates what God does. So too does "God," since it is derived etymologically from a verb. The word "incorruptible" merely tells us that which is not the case. Some words play the role of forbidding us from thinking false thoughts about God;

---

[38] For illustrative uses of περίληψις, see *Eun.* 2.587 (GNO I, 397.29-30); 3.1.110 (GNO II, 41.17); 3.5.55 (GNO II, 180.12); *Abl.* (GNO III.1, 52.17); *Prof. Chr.* (GNO VIII.1, 135.1); *Life of Moses* 2.238 (GNO VII.1, 116.13); *Beat.* 1 (GNO VII.2, 79.28), 7 (GNO VII.2, 149.3, 17, 154.6).

[39] *Abl.* (GNO III.1, 42.22-43.2).

[40] *Abl.* (GNO III.1, 52.17).

others teach us what we ought to think.[41] We cannot offer a general theory of what all names do. The variety is grounded in Gregory's naturalist view of language; like any term, each theological description is a human creation containing an "inherent meaning" (ἐγκειμένης . . . σημασίας).

A similar argument is developed in *Against Eunomius* Book 2, which tackles Eunomius' pet term "unbegotten." Eunomius held this name to be uniquely revelatory, and for him, divine simplicity requires that it name nothing other than the divine essence or substance itself. Moreover, Eunomius maintains that the name has a divine origin. Like Basil before him, Gregory tackles both points. Gregory insists that all words, including true theological descriptions like "unbegotten," are created by human beings. As in *Against the Macedonians*, he likens such titles for God to the essential characteristics of humanity, though here, given that the theological description in question is a negation, he says that this is like speaking of humans as "not lifeless, not imperceptive, not winged," and so on.[42] Such terms are not false, but they tell us what humanity is not rather than what it is. By the same token, he says "since there are many similar things said about the divine nature, in which we learn what we ought to think God is, though we are not taught through these statements what it is in essence" (αὐτὸ δὲ ὅ τι ποτέ ἐστι κατ᾽ οὐσίαν).[43] The point is not that there is an ontological difference between essence and attributes, as Gregory makes clear in the next sentence, where we learn that the difference in these appellations corresponds to different concepts. As in *To Ablabius*, Gregory links his conceptualist view of meaning with his affirmation of the need for multiple divine names: "since we have discovered for the divine no encompassing term (ὄνομα περιληπτικόν), which applies suitably to the subject itself, this is why we entitle the divine with many names, each one marking out some unique notion about it in accordance with various intuitions" (ἑκάστου κατὰ διαφόρους ἐπιβολὰς ἰδιάζουσάν τινα περὶ αὐτοῦ τὴν ἔννοιαν ποιουμένου).[44] Later in the treatise, Gregory applies this conceptualist notion of names to the word "God" very much as he does in *To Ablabius*: "though by this name we have been taught some specific activity of the divine nature, we have not through this term come into comprehension of the essence itself" (τῆς οὐσίας αὐτῆς ἐν περινοίᾳ διὰ τῆς φωνῆς ταύτης οὐκ ἐγενόμεθα).[45] From Philippians 2:9, we learn the paradoxical truth that "God's only natural name" (προσφυὲς ὄνομα) is that he is believed to be beyond every name and thus is "outside of the encompassment of any name" (ἐξώτερον . . . τῆς ὀνοματικῆς περιλήψεως).[46]

Gregory's Metaphysics

When Gregory turns in various places from discussing concepts to speaking of the perfections as such, he insists that these are not external to the divine essence. Rather, in David Balás' phrase, "God is all these perfections in virtue of his nature."[47] In one passage cited by Cross, Gregory says that "there is no composition whatever in [God]; rather, the very thing he is, he is

---

[41] See also *Eun*. 2.131 (GNO I, 263.26-264.5).

[42] *Eun*. 2.144 (GNO I, 267.10-11). See also *Eun*. 2.63 (GNO I, 244.10-15).

[43] *Eun*. 2.144 (GNO I, 267.15-17).

[44] *Eun*. 2.145 (GNO I, 267.21-26).

[45] *Eun*. 2.586 (GNO I, 397.19-21).

[46] *Eun*. 2.587 (GNO I, 397.26-27, 29-30).

[47] David Balás, *ΜΕΤΟΥΣΙΑ ΘΕΟΥ: Man's Participation in God's Perfections According to Saint Gregory of Nyssa* (Rome: Herder & Herder, 1966), 124.

as a whole" (σύνθεσις δὲ περὶ αὐτὸν οὐδεμία, ἀλλ᾽ ὅπερ ἂν ᾖ, ὅλος ἐστι).[48] This echoes a passage in Basil's *Against Eunomius*: "the very thing which God is, is life as a whole, light as a whole, and good as a whole" (ὅλον ὅπερ ἐστὶ ζωὴν ὄντα, καὶ ὅλον φῶς, καὶ ὅλον ἀγαθόν).[49] Using a different idiom, Gregory says that God is "all things at once" (ὁμοῦ τὰ πάντα).[50] This phrase has a long philosophical prehistory, but most pertinently is a favorite expression for Plotinus when denoting the simultaneous presence of all intelligible reality in Intelligence (νοῦς).[51] According to Plotinus, while such a state is more integrally one than anything we can experience through discursive reasoning, it is nonetheless inaccurate to speak of νοῦς as simple insofar as it is both one and many rather than a pure unity; for Gregory, by contrast, even the human mind can be spoken of as simple.[52] For Gregory, God's being all perfections at once is compatible with, indeed is the essence of, divine simplicity. As a hendiadys with "all things at once" (ὁμοῦ τὰ πάντα), Gregory speaks of the perfections as "simultaneous" (κατὰ ταὐτόν). Interestingly, he uses the same two expressions in his *Apologia in Hexaemeron* in describing the concurrence of the divine intention, wisdom, and power in the act of creation:

> . . . In the case of the divine nature, the power is concurrent with the willing and the intention becomes proportionate to God's power. Now, the intention is wisdom. And it is proper to wisdom to be ignorant of nothing of how particular things might come into being. Now, the power is co-natural with the knowledge, so that as soon as he knew what ought to come into being, the force for producing beings ran along with it, bringing what had been thought into actuality and not lagging behind the knowledge at all—no, it manifested the work with the will unitedly and seamlessly. For the will is power simultaneously (δύναμις γάρ ἐστιν ἡ βουλὴ κατὰ ταὐτόν) deliberating in advance how things might come into being and furnishing the resources for the existence of what had been thought of, since all attributes of God concerning creation are understood at once (ὁμοῦ τὰ πάντα τοῦ θεοῦ περὶ τὴν κτίσιν νοεῖσθαι)—the intention, the wisdom, the power, the existence of beings.[53]

In such passages from *Against Eunomius* and the *Apologia in Hexaemeron*, we see the difference between what Gregory in *Against the Macedonians* called the "idea of deity" and that idea's referent. The idea is in some sense a whole composed of distinct parts, each of them concepts. God, however, is not a whole, but is fully each of the perfections that we might name diversely with various terms. This is not quite an explicit claim to identity such as we see in Augustine and subsequent Latin tradition, but a harmonizing reading is not out of the question.

We can now return to Trinitarian theology. Much of what we have seen thus far on this topic is negative: simplicity is incompatible with a ranking of the persons. Yet, we can push further now that we have uncovered Gregory's metaphysics of the divine perfections as simultaneously engaged in the act of creation. Gregory uses similar language for the activity of the three

---

[48] *Eun.* 1.597 (GNO I, 198.9-10). Compare the other passages cited by Cross, "Divine Simplicity," 60-61: *Eun.* 1.234-35 (GNO I, 95.12-23), 1.276 (GNO I, 107.4-10).

[49] Basil, *Against Eunomius* 2.29.13-23 (SC 305, 122; St. Basil of Caesarea, *Against Eunomius*, trans. Mark DelCogliano and Andrew Radde-Gallwitz, Fathers of the Church 122 (Washington, D.: Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 176. I note at *Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and the Transformation of Divine Simplicity*, 156-62, that although this conditional sentence seems to express Basil's own position, the following sentences complicate matters.

[50] *Eun.* 1.596 (GNO I. 198.1), *Eun.* 3.6.17 (GNO II, 192).

[51] E.g. Plotinus, *Enneads* 1.1.8; 5.3.17; often without the article: e.g. 5.9.6; 6.5.5; 6.5.6; 6.7.33.

[52] *Eun.* 2.503 (GNO I, 373.2-9).

[53] Gregory of Nyssa, *Apologia in Hexaemeron* 7 (GNO IV.1, 14.17-15.8).

persons. Here is how the idea appears in *To Ablabius*, where we see the language of will, power, and activity familiar now from the *Apologia in Hexaemeron*:

> The movement of goodness is not from the Spirit without any starting-point. Rather, we find that the power that is conceived as prior to this [movement], which is the only-begotten Son, makes all things, without whom nothing that exists comes into being. But also, again, the very fountain-head of goods originates from the paternal will.[54]

Gregory here correlates the will, power, and activity (spoken of as a movement) with the three persons. Gregory is expanding language he uses earlier to speak of the giving of life in baptism by the Spirit: "the same life is made actual by the Holy Spirit and prepared by the Son and dependent on the Father's will."[55] Gregory reasons that every divine act is like this one: "a single movement and transmission of the good will proceeding from the Father through the Son to the Spirit."[56] Likewise, in *Against the Macedonians*, the simultaneity of divine perfections in the act of creation undergirds Gregory's account of Trinitarian unity:

> One must put away lowly, human concepts for more lofty notions, and take up a way of thinking worthy of the sublimity of what one is seeking. It is not because he needed any help that the God who is over all made all things through the Son; nor is it because the Only-begotten God's power is inferior to his purpose that he produces all things (τὰ πάντα ἐργάζεται) in the Holy Spirit. Rather, the Father is the fount of power, the Son is the Father's power, and the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of power (ἀλλὰ πηγὴ μὲν δυνάμεως ἐστιν ὁ πατήρ, δύναμις δὲ τοῦ πατρὸς ὁ υἱός, δυνάμεως δὲ πνεῦμα τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον), whereas the entire creation, as much of it as is sense-perceptible and as much of it as is incorporeal, is the product of the divine power (τῆς θείας δυνάμενώς ἐστιν ἀποτέλεσμα). And we cannot suppose that there is any strain whatsoever when things pertaining to the divine nature come together (ἐν τῇ συστάσει τῶν περὶ τὴν θείαν φύσιν)—for as soon as it decides what must occur, the intention immediately becomes reality (ὁμοῦ γὰρ τῷ προελέσθαι τὸ γενέσθαι δέον εὐθὺς οὐσία ἡ πρόθεσις γίνεται). Accordingly, someone might justly call the entire nature that came into being through creation a movement of will, an impulse of intention, and a transmission of power, which begins from the Father, proceeds through the Son, and is completed in the Holy Spirit (θελήματος κίνησιν καὶ προθέσεως ὁρμὴν καὶ δυνάμεως διάδοσιν . . . ἐκ πατρὸς ἀρχομένην καὶ δι' υἱοῦ προϊοῦσαν καὶ ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ τελειουμένην).[57]

Conclusion

In Gregory's works, then, simplicity has both negative and positive implications, and both conceptual and metaphysical implications. In keeping with Richard Cross' conceptualist and

---

[54] *Abl.* (GNO III.1, 51.11–15): Οὐκ ἄναρχος δὲ ἡ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ κίνησις ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος· ἀλλ' εὑρίσκομεν ὅτι ἡ προεπινοουμένη ταύτης δύναμις, ἥτις ἐστὶν ὁ μονογενὴς θεός, πάντα ποιεῖ, οὗ χωρὶς οὐδὲν τῶν ὄντων εἰς γένεσιν ἔρχεται· ἀλλὰ καὶ αὐτὴ πάλιν τῶν ἀγαθῶν ἡ πηγὴ ἐκ τοῦ πατρικοῦ βουλήματος ἀφορμᾶται.

[55] *Abl.* (GNO III.1, 48.17-19): . . . ἡ αὐτὴ ζωὴ καὶ παρὰ τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος ἐνεργεῖται καὶ παρὰ τοῦ υἱοῦ ἑτοιμάζεται καὶ τῆς τοῦ πατρὸς ἐξῆπται βουλήσεως.

[56] *Abl.* (GNO III.1, 48.22-49.1): . . . ἀλλὰ μία τις γίνεται τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ θελήματος κίνησίς τε καὶ διάδοσις, ἐκ τοῦ πατρὸς διὰ τοῦ υἱοῦ πρὸς τὸ πνεῦμα διεξαγομένη . . . Perhaps *terminating in* the Spirit.

[57] *Maced.* 13 (GNO III.1, 99.27-100.11). On this passage, see also Lewis Ayres, "Innovation and *Ressourcement* in Pro-Nicene Pneumatology," *Augustinian Studies* 39 (2008): 187–205, at 201.

nominalist reading, I have argued that for Gregory the truth of our ascription to God of various non-synonymous perfections does not depend on there being distinct extra-mental realities corresponding to each, whether we call these *propria* or energies. Our concepts are diverse ways of apprehending what is inherently true of God in virtue of his essence. Gregory does not entirely disavow metaphysics. Without claiming to know the divine essence, Gregory offers a strong affirmation of the simultaneity of perfections *in divinis*, a notion that has implications for his understanding of divine activity, and thus for Trinitarian unity.

Though Gregory insists that knowledge of God is conceptually and linguistically mediated, he is not unaware of the ambivalence of concepts. Ideas that serve in one case as "traveling provisions" (ἐφόδια) and "stepping-stones" (ὑποβάθρας)[58] and along the journey of faith can in another prove to be an "obstacle" (ἐμπόδιον)[59] or even, when pressed beyond their limits, an "idol" (εἴδωλον).[60] It is not that there is some higher, non-discursive point of union with God; as rational animals, we relate to God through our language and concepts, which refract into multiplicity what is single in God.[61] Yet, if we mistake any of these ideas for the whole, we subvert that relationship.

---

[58] *Eun*. 2.89 (GNO I, 253.5).

[59] *Homilies on the Song of Songs* 6 (GNO VI, 183.4).

[60] *Life of Moses* 2.165 (GNO VII.1, 88.2-5). In this passage, we see the terms περιληπτικὴν φαντασίαν and ἐν περινοίᾳ γινομένου, which suggests that the idolatrous concept is not so labeled because it is a concept, but because it markets itself as comprehensive. Hans Urs von Balthasar collated the same texts cited in this sentence, drawing a different conclusion inspired by Fichte: *Presence and Thought*, 106-7.

[61] Martin Laird has shown that Gregory envisions faith as the means of union with God, though I am not convinced by his claim that Gregory understands faith as "non-discursive": *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith*, chapter 3. In the relevant passages, such as *Eun*. 2.91 (GNO I, 253.25-28), faith is more naturally read as naming the belief that God is higher than any specific title: see *Eun*. 2.89 (GNO I, 253.16-17); in other words, in this sense, faith is the propositional correlate of the attitude of epistemological humility. Moreover, any reading of "faith" must account for another sense of the term in Gregory's works, namely, as denoting what we would call a creed, and a non-discursive account does not fit that usage well.