A theological exploration of the shape of life and death in dialogue with the biographical works of Gregory of Nyssa

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Declaration

This thesis is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the preface and specified in the text. It is not substantially the same as any work that has already been submitted before for any degree or other qualification except as declared in the preface and specified in the text. It does not exceed the prescribed word limit for the Faculty of Divinity Degree Committee.

Abstract

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In this thesis I investigate Gregory of Nyssa's doctrine of the spiritual ascent of *epektasis* in order to uncover a theological vision of progress through the passage of a human life. I argue that how such progress is construed yields vivid ethical implications for how ageing and dying at the end of life can be experienced and perceived. In the course of making this argument, three additional projects are developed. First, primary use is made of Gregory's under-studied biographical works, and a proof of their relevance to his doctrinal thought and richness as ethical sources offered. Second, three distinctively 'Nyssen' virtuous practices are analyzed and their relation to Gregory's doctrinal positions clarified; one practice in particular, *forgiving*, having received scarce attention in the literature thus far. Third, in positing that practice throughout life can shape perceptions of life's end, a challenge is posed to recent ethical studies insistent on treating the end of life as its own siphoned off frontier without reference to a whole picture of living. The thesis engages, then, with the ethical implications of theological anthropology, contributing both to the study of Gregory of Nyssa and to contemporary debate pertaining to questions of ageing and dying.

Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction

1. Introduction

Among the early stimuli for this thesis was the experience of standing between two self-portraits made by Stanley Spencer, one, thought to have been drawn in his twenty-first year, the other, his final self-portrait, in which an elderly man looks at himself in the knowledge of the terminal prognosis of his cancer. Between these works, the question, first, of how we see and make sense of the progress and growth of a human life, its occurring across a passage of time, seemed starkly put; as did the question, second, of how we perceive the fact of life's diminishment and end in ageing and death. Put generally, it is the concern of this thesis to use the works of Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335-395) to respond theologically to the basic anthropological observation behind these two questions: that human life is that which courses and ends, in which we age, change, grow, and deteriorate. Put more specifically, it is the concern of this thesis, through investigating Gregory's doctrine of the spiritual ascent of *epektasis*, to uncover a theological vision of progress through the passage of a human life. It will be argued that such a vision, as it arises via Gregory, will yield vivid ethical implications for a perception of the dwindling and end of life. That is, the response of this thesis to its two opening questions posits their strong interrelation: how we envision the progress and shape of a life will inform and direct our perception of its end.

In the process of making this argument, three projects will necessarily be developed along the way, which contribute to the wider offering of this thesis. First, primary use will be made of Gregory's under-studied biographical works, and a proof of their relevance to his doctrinal thought and richness as ethical sources offered. Second, three distinctively 'Nyssen' virtuous practices will be analyzed in depth and their theological backdrops clarified, one practice in particular, forgiving, having received scarce attention in the literature thus far. Third, in positing that practice throughout life can shape perceptions of life's end, a challenge will be posed to recent ethical studies insistent on treating the end of life as its own siphoned off frontier without reference to a whole picture of living and ageing.

(A) Recourse to Gregory of Nyssa

In his short work, *Being Human: Bodies, Minds, Persons*, Rowan Williams writes that a

fundamental question to be asked of 'any religious practice, habit, or system' is, through it, 'what kind of human face is being uncovered?'[1] In this question, Williams draws attention to the reality that doctrinal and theological discourses have anthropological implications, both in what they imply about what it is to be human, and in the responses and behaviours they nurture in the human persons who confess such doctrines. In a similar way, this thesis engages with the anthropological implications of Gregory of Nyssa's so-called doctrine of *epektasis*.

The term *epektasis* was coined by Patristics scholar Jean Daniélou and expounded in his 1944 work, *Platonisme et théologie mystique*.[2] The term captures the exegetical interest that Gregory had in Paul's verb choice of *epekteino* (straining, stretching) in Philippians 3.13, which Gregory would deploy as he envisioned and described the Christian's ascent towards God as a perpetual and unlimited straining and stretching of desire, beginning in the present life but continuing 'in the entire eternity', as he writes.[3] Undergirding Gregory's vision of this perpetual spiritual progress is a commitment to the divine as infinite, radically contrasted with the finitude of creatures. This contrast necessitates that there will be no end to the desire and love that the human person can know for God, whose divine goodness and truth must be thought to run ever deeper and thus who will never cease to elicit deeper love. God will be ever beyond the capacities of the human to love and know in totality. This being so, the endless growth of the person's desire will be the stability of their perfection. In addition to the affirmation of God's infinity contained in *epektasis*, Ronald E. Heine's 1974 landmark monograph, *Perfection in the Virtuous Life*, also identified its polemic engagement with a position taken by Origen (c. 184-253).[4] Where Origen had proposed that the first fall of spirits (in heaven, in his view) had occurred because of their becoming satiated by heaven, Gregory's *epektasis* would assert this as impossible on the basis of divine infinity which, as we have seen, elicits infinite desire and renders the human person perpetually un-satiated. What results from Gregory's positive theological conviction and polemic response to the problem of satiety is a vision of perpetual progress in this life but also characterizing the next, finding vivid description most notably in his *Homilies on the Song of Songs* and *The Life of Moses* (in particular, his preface and account of the third theophany), though the roots of the *epektastic* vision can be discerned earlier, for example

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[1] Rowan Williams, *Being Human: Bodies, Minds, Persons* (London: SPCK, 2018), 84.

[2] Jean Daniélou, *Platonisme et Théologie Mystique: Essai Sur La Doctrine Spirituelle de Saint Grégoire de Nysse*, 2nd edn (Paris: Aubier, 1953).

[3] Gregory of Nyssa, 'Homilies on the Song of Songs', in *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Song of Songs*, ed. and trans. Richard A. Norris (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 2–500, (Homily 8) 259.

[4] Ronald E. Heine, *Perfection in the Virtuous Life: A Study in the Relationship between Edification and Polemical Theology in Gregory of Nyssa's De Vita Moysis*, (Cambridge, MA: Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, 1975).

in his treatise *Against Eunomius*.[5] In this vision, the esteemed place that human mutability takes in the pursuit of perfection stands in stark contrast to the preceding Greek consensus, which considered the accomplishment of a particular immutable end the ideal of perfection (having connected infinity, in contrast, with multiplicity and the bad).[6]

The reason for recourse in this project to the doctrine, as will be developed in the discussion of this chapter, lies in the fact that Gregory's *epektasis*, as it is rendered in recent scholarly readings, would seem to imply a particular vision of human progress with troubling consequences for how the end of life is to be perceived. It is my contention in this thesis, however, that a closer examination of Gregory's doctrine, illuminated by reference to his biographical works, will disclose a critical alternative to the anthropological implications that may seem initially to be implied by the doctrine.

(B) Structure of this study

This study will proceed, first, in the remainder of this chapter, by charting three moments of scholarship that have perceived and coloured our sense of Gregory's notion of *epektasis*. The doctrine that these readings present, I will suggest, nurtures a particular anthropology with which the human life-course might be imagined. I will observe that the picture of the life-course that emerges from these readings of *epektasis* overlaps with anthropological presumptions present in contemporary culture. I will indicate, further, that the perception and experience of old age and the end of life that these pictures and presumptions are disposed to foster is troubling. I will end by setting out the reasons why a return to the doctrine of *epektasis* from the perspective of the biographies promises to open up new possibilities in enlightening the subject of the life-course.

In the main body of this thesis I will consider three aspects of a 'lived life' of *epektasis* as exemplified in the biographical works that Gregory devises. These aspects constitute the stuff of daily living that form Gregory's subjects in the never-ending love of God that Gregory had envisioned. I come to the theological 'doctrine', then, by taking account of the *lived life* in light

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[5] As J. Warren Smith comments in, 'Becoming Men, Not Stones: *Epektasis* in Gregory of Nyssa's Homilies on the Song of Songs', in *Gregory of Nyssa: In Canticum Canticorum Analytical and Supporting Studies. Proceedings of the 13th International Colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa (Rome, 17-20 September 2014)*, Vigiliae Christianae, Supplements, Volume: 150 (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 340–59, 341.

[6] Plotinus in the *Enneads* 6.6.2, for example, sees that 'multiplicity is a revolt from unity, and infinity a more complete revolt by being infinite multiplicity. Hence infinity is bad, and we are bad when we are in multiplicity.' For a discussion of this text and its contrast with Gregory, see Anna Silvas, *Macrina the Younger, Philosopher of God* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008), 212 n. 79.

of that doctrine (for reasons expanded below). The three aspects of the 'lived life' of *epektasis* to which I turn will be: *giving* (the work of philanthropy), *telling* (sharing the good news of God), and *forgiving* (the work of interpersonal forgiveness). These are taken as three distinctively 'Nyssen' calls on the life of the Christian which each draw their partaker into a distinctive kind of progress and nurture particular facets of the partaker's anthropological experience. In regard to *giving* (chapter 2), we shall see that Gregory's commitment to perpetual generosity fosters progress that is marked by the undulations of radical insecurity. In regards to *telling* (chapter 4), we shall see that Gregory's encouragement to tell and share the good news of God alongside others inverts the predictability of an individual journey with the multiplicity and surprises of those belonging to others. In regards to *forgiving* (chapter 6), we shall see how Gregory calls the Christian to a work of forgiveness that anticipates and joins with the divine forgiveness of the resurrection to come, such that the forgiver's life is marked by a most radical reverence for human freedom, against the fatalism of a predetermined course.

Each of these chapters will be coupled with an additional, briefer, chapter, which will suggest the difference that the particular dimension of progress (and its anthropological implications) I uncover could have in rethinking some of the dilemmas in current experiences of ageing and dying present in North-Atlantic culture. Here I will offer a vision for how the theological concept of *epektasis*, when lived in the practices of *giving*, *telling*, and *forgiving*, might effect particular ethical responses to the end of life. This is intended to demonstrate the significance of how our visions of progress (embodied in practices) may shape our ethical perspectives and actions. I shall thus venture, in chapter 3, the different answers a picture of the life-course that incorporates insecurity (based in giving) into its vision of progress might give to questions of when to consider life 'complete' and how to receive the agency of those in old age. In chapter 5, I will turn to imagine the difference that a picture of the life-course that takes seriously a person's progress with and beside others (as practiced in *telling*), which accordingly accommodates the unpredictability concomitant with multiplicity, would make to our perception of the human limitation and dependence encountered, for example, in the experience of living with dementia. In chapter 7, I will imagine how a conception of the life-course that reveres the freedom of people to shape their own futures (as arises in *forgiving*), against fatalism, might impact upon our relation to the 'stages' of life, as well as the way we narrate the meaning of death.

In a final chapter, I will end by suggesting the relevance of the conclusion that this thesis reaches, and the method by which this conclusion is reached, both to future theological reflection on the life-course, and to the study of Gregory of Nyssa.

2. Three moments of scholarship

We begin our analysis by examining the anthropological implications that arise from Gregory of Nyssa's vision of *epektasis* as we receive that vision through the colouring of three key moments of the last century's scholarship on his work. Crucial here, I argue, are three lenses through which Gregory's notion has been perceived, coloured, and imparted. The division here of three moments – though permeable and by no means claiming to be complete – draws on observations cited in recent historiographies of the treatment of Gregory of Nyssa's work, among them, research offered by J. Warren Smith (2004);[7] Morwenna Ludlow (2007);[8] and Raphael Cadenhead (2018).[9] Of interest here is the question of how the key readings of *epektasis* these historiographies locate can cumulate and overlap in such a way that Gregory's vision of *epektasis* comes to imply an ideal life-course. In what follows, I shall demonstrate the significance of three, broadly construed, scholarly 'moments', formulating their anthropological implications as three statements: (a) Progress is reliant on effort; (b) Progress is of the individual; and (c) Progress implicates the body.

(A) Progress is reliant on effort

The backdrop of the first moment of Gregory studies for our consideration consists in the search for the origins of Christian doctrine, which occupied the attention of much late nineteenth and early twentieth century academic theology. Here we discover Gregory of Nyssa's work, when it was received in this period, received primarily as a depository that might contain clues to doctrinal origins.[10] His work was readily pooled together with that of the other so-called 'Cappadocian Fathers' – his brother, Basil of Caesarea (c. 329-379), and their friend

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[7] J. Warren Smith, *Passion and Paradise: Human and Divine Emotion in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 2004).

[8] Morwenna Ludlow, *Gregory of Nyssa, Ancient and (Post)modern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[9] Raphael Cadenhead, *Body and Desire: Gregory of Nyssa's Ascetical Theology* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018).

[10] Examples of this reception include Karl Holl, *Amphilochius Von Ikonium In Seinem Verhaltnis Zu Den Grossen Kappadoziern* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1904) and Friedrich Loofs, *Leitfaden Zum Studium Der Dogmengeschichte* (Halle: M. Niemeyer, 1906), as cited by Cadenhead, *Body and Desire*, 13.

Gregory of Nazianzus (c. 329-390). Together they were read, as Cadenhead comments, as a set of ripostes to the heresies of Arianism, Sabellianism, Eunomianism, and Macedonianism, and, in these ripostes, found disclosing clues to the beginnings of Christian dogma.[11] A central pursuit of this search involved discerning what precisely was *Christian* in these dogmas and what could be discounted as the residue of the Hellenism that Adolf von Harnack had so forcefully argued had obscured the authentic gospel message in the patristic era.[12] With regard to Gregory of Nyssa and the Cappadocian Fathers, attention was turned in particular to the question of whether Platonic interpolation was discernible in their work. We see such attention, for example, in the quest of Harold Cherniss in 1930, whose seminal article, *The Platonism of Gregory of Nyssa*, would have its conclusions affirmed in the subsequent work of John F. Callahan.[13]

It is in pursuit of these same questions, and with the same concerns, that we can locate the work of Protestant classicist Werner Jaeger, who we will take here, following Ludlow, as broadly characteristic of a certain school of thought central to this first 'moment'.[14] Jaeger remained deeply interested in the question of Hellenic influence on Gregory's work, if also committed to overcoming some of the 'oversimplifications' of earlier alleged discoveries of Platonic and Neo-Platonic traces.[15] In his late study of Gregory's treatise *On the Christian Way of Life* (1954), Jaeger concludes that the treatise – for him, emblematic in important ways of Gregory's wider works – represents the 'culminating point' of the Eastern Church's 'tendency to bring the two basic elements of the Christian religion, divine grace and human effort, into perfect balance'.[16] Yet, 'at the same time', Jaeger claims, the treatise, like Gregory's wider corpus, 'attempted a reconciliation of the Christian concept of grace with the *Hellenic* ethical tradition, the classical ideal of *arete*', that is, 'moral virtue'.[17] While the influence of this classical ideal is, by Jaeger's sight, imbued across Gregory's corpus, it is intensely clear in

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[11] Cadenhead, *Body and Desire*, 13. Since Gregory of Nyssa was considered less rhetorically skilled when compared with Gregory of Nazianzus and Basil of Caeserea, his work received significantly less attention.

[12] Adolf von Harnack, *Lehrbuch Der Dogmengeschichte* (Freiburg: J. C. B. Mohr, 1889).

[13] Harold F. Cherniss, *The Platonism of Gregory of Nyssa* (New York, NY: B. Franklin, 1930); John F. Callahan, 'Greek Philosophy and the Cappadocian Cosmology', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 12 (1958), 29-57, cited by Smith, *Passion and Paradise*, 13.

[14] Ludlow, *Ancient and (Post)modern*, 120.

[15] Werner Jaeger, *Two Rediscovered Works of Ancient Christian Literature: Gregory of Nyssa and Macarius* (Leiden: Brill, 1954), 71.

[16] Jaeger, *Rediscovered Works*, 88. For Jaeger the treatise is emblematic with Gregory's wider works, in parallel in particular with *On Virginity, The Life of Moses,* and *Homilies on the Song of Songs*.

[17] Jaeger, *Rediscovered Works*, 88.

Gregory's account of the ascent to God. In the ascent – 'a long way of gradual approach to God' – Jaeger is certain that we can find lurking 'the old religious idea, adopted and deepened by Greek philosophy, that only the pure can approach God', since for Gregory to near God's transcendence requires the costly growth of virtue day by day. [18] Thus, according to Jaeger's reading of Gregory, life is cast as a project of purification demanding the moral heroism of classical poetry: 'a lifelong work, a ceaseless labour and toil of man' to render himself capable of taking the next step towards God. [19] For Jaeger, the deep philosophical and poetic allusions to Greek *arete* that ground Gregory's account of the ascent render Gregory's account a 'misunderstanding of Christianity as rational moralism'. [20]

Attention to the form that Jaeger's points take here allows us to appreciate the particular force of the critical characterization that he pursues. Having 'devoted much of his later years to the study of Gregory and the production of critical editions', as Smith notes, Jaeger's work is well 'supported by his readings of the corpus'. [21] Yet that support goes beyond quotation. It is added to by Jaeger's own lexical field of work: the ascent is, Jaeger repeats, a process, it is intensity, it is toilsome, a struggle, needing incessant human effort, and, in one particular flourish, it is 'wrestling for the victor's crown in this new Christian Olympic *agon*'. [22] In pulling the imagery of work into the foreground, accompanied by all it is loaded with as a category in Protestant theology, Jaeger can deploy a contrast with grace in his reading, summarizing that Gregory incorrectly 'postulates a strict reciprocity between the effect of grace and human works, so that the effect of grace can, so to speak, be measured by the increased efforts of him who receives it'. [23]

For our purposes, such a reading is of significance insofar as its invocation of work, in presumed contrast to grace, strongly accentuates the effort involved in the ascent Gregory commends. While true that Gregory speaks of 'ascent', it is possible to speculate that it is in part Jaeger's critical reading and its foregrounding of effort and work that enabled the motif of upward movement toward God to settle as the emblematic direction of Gregory's spiritual way. In the event, to ascend toward God becomes pictured as toil, exertion, and work – its success reliant on the energy and commitment *we* may give it depending on *our* capacity and inclination. As

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[18] Jaeger, *Rediscovered Works*, 78, 88.

[19] Jaeger, *Rediscovered Works*, 85.

[20] Jaeger, *Rediscovered Works*, 85.

[21] Smith, *Passion and Paradise*, 87.

[22] Jaeger, *Rediscovered Works*, 86.

[23] Jaeger, *Rediscovered Works*, 87.

Ludlow points out, kindred perspectives are to be found in the works of Heinrich Dörrie, Walther Völker and Hermannus Langerbeck (all Protestants), who joined with Jaeger's accusation of Gregory, and 'whose works jointly had a huge impact on later readings' of him, namely, in underscoring the suggestion that, for Gregory, it is human effort and agency upon which human progress to God depends.[24]

(B) Progress is of the individual

A further moment of scholarship that warrants our attention is found spearheaded in the work of Daniélou (1905-1974), whose work deploys the same categories of interest to Jaeger but does so to different effect. Via a theorization of Gregory's sense of *desire*, Daniélou offers a reading of Gregory that conceives of his ascent as a 'mystical' event. The problems inherent in too straightforward a use of such a word will be addressed below, as we examine how the meanings imported between the charged layers of the descriptor 'mystical' would, in this second 'moment', render *epektasis* a solo journey, involving progress as it belongs to the individual in the realm of her private, inner development.

Ludlow has compellingly evidenced the lasting impact of the categories of the Protestant polemic we discussed above, indicating in particular just how the cited approach to works and grace set the scene for the interest in nature and grace which would stir the concerns of several theologians to come.[25] Daniélou may be counted among these theologians, as one who, with Jaeger, likewise sees in Gregory's work the same attempt to unify human action and divine grace. Yet, strikingly, Daniélou disregards the criticism that Jaeger attached to this union, instead regarding the union Gregory attempts in a favorable light.[26]

The question of why this favourable light should so suddenly dawn is in part answered as we turn to the instructive contextualisation that Sarah Coakley gives to Daniélou's work. Coakley recalls to us the urgent quest in the mid-20th century of what has been termed the Catholic '*ressourcement*', in which Daniélou was instrumental.[27] The *ressourcement*, or '*la nouvelle théologie*' as it came to be known, was a movement of mostly French- and German-speaking theologians who sought to re-engage disregarded theological sources (especially patristic texts) not 'to constrain the parameters of contemporary theological expression, but to inspire [and] provoke

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[24] Ludlow, *Ancient and (Post)modern*, 120.

[25] Ludlow, *Ancient and (Post)modern*, ch. 6.

[26] Ludlow, *Ancient and (Post)modern*, 121.

[27] Sarah Coakley, 'Gregory of Nyssa', in *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity*, ed. Paul L. Gavrilyuk and Sarah Coakley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 36–55, 49.

theological imagination to new insight', as Anna Williams comments.[28] As Brian Daley summarizes, the spirit of this movement consisted in looking back to these early sources as 'not simply evidence for the history of religious ideas, but [full with] religious substance'.[29] One aspect of the motivation for this work of retrieval and renewal, writes Coakley, was a perceived need to construct a new religious outlook, inspired by the Fathers, 'which would break down the seemingly rigid disjunctions between nature and grace that had characterized the neo-scholasticisms of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries'.[30] Aware of the impression these concerns left on Daniélou's setting, we can better comprehend the attraction that the perceived attempt to balance nature and grace, previously regarded critically, would now pose to Catholic theologians caught up in the quest of the *ressourcement*. For Daniélou, it was Gregory's recourse to *desire* that, Coakley suggests, appeared so promising in light of the theological currents: in Gregory's sense that our endless desire for God propelled us (endlessly) toward God, Daniélou discovered a convergence between that which seemed *naturally* to well up in us and the *grace* of God.[31] So promising to Daniélou was this insight that he assigned *desire* as the key hallmark of Gregory of Nyssa's work, reiterating its centrality to his corpus repeatedly.

Concomitant with Daniélou's particular interest in the category of *desire* is a broader trend that saw scholars re-evaluate the Platonic and Neo-Platonic influence in Gregory's writings. Under the auspices of von Harnack, such influence had been considered troubling because it had largely been assumed that Gregory had absorbed Hellenic assumptions unthinkingly.[32] Yet as Daniélou, as well as Hans Urs von Balthasar, came to Gregory, they regarded him as having engaged consciously and creatively with Platonism, and therefore considered the presence of

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[28] Anna N. Williams, 'The Future of the Past: The Contemporary Significance of the Nouvelle Théologie', *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 7.4 (2005), 347–61, 351. Williams is right that the 'movement' described here was formed by a common spirit rather than assent to any system.

[29] Brian Daley, 'The Nouvelle Théologie and the Patristic Revival: Sources, Symbols and the Science of Theology', *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 7.4 (2005), 362–82 (364).

[30] Coakley, 'Gregory of Nyssa', 39. Those distinctions were cemented by the promulgation of the magisterial document, issued by Pope Leo XIII in 1879, *Aeterni Patris.*

[31] Coakley, 'Gregory of Nyssa', 39. Daniélou gives direct voice to this crucial convergence in his preface to Gregory of Nyssa, *From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa's Mystical Writings*, ed. and trans. Jean Danielou (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997), where he writes: 'there is no opposition in [Gregory's] teaching between the natural and the supernatural man of modern terminology. For him the natural man is man as he was gifted in God's concrete plan – that is, man with all those gifts we now call supernatural' (11).

[32] Cadenhead, *Body and Desire*, 13.

such influence intriguing rather than problematic.[33] We see this instanced in what Cadenhead describes as the 'watershed' publication of works that attended to the enrichment of Gregory's spiritual writings by Platonic and Neo-Platonic ideas.[34] This new and positive regard is notable for the way in which it allowed the loaded connotations attached to the descriptor 'mystical' to infuse the category of desire, which, in turn, would have lasting implications for future impressions of *epektasis*. For, as Daniélou positively affirmed the fusion of Platonism and Neo-Platonism with biblical exegesis (particularly of Exodus) in Gregory's writing, and read Gregory as one creatively deploying Platonic metaphors, he also imported the 'mysticism' associated with those metaphors into his notion of *epektasis*.

We see this importation in the emphases that Daniélou gives to Gregory's notion of desire as Daniélou recounts it. One emphasis is of Gregory's structuring imagery. As Bernard Pottier remarks in his survey, Daniélou is committed to drawing out this imagery, pointing out time and again the images of light, cloud, and darkness in Gregory's discourse on desire*,* and transposing these into the three ways of purgation, illumination, and unity, and expressing these sacramentally as baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist.[35] These triads, which imply the viability of marking and describing the human journey towards God by a set of stages sit closely, Pottier sees, to a range of Neo-Platonic images, which, likewise, are concerned to stage and structure the soul's ascent.[36] A second emphasis made by Daniélou concerns Gregory's sequencing of the texts themselves. Daniélou reads much into the designation Gregory makes of specific texts to readers at specific points of the journey of faith. In so doing, he draws out Gregory's sense that works should be regarded as appropriate according to the stage of development occupied by their audience – beginners start with writings to be read prior to the advanced. Daniélou notes indeed that Gregory regards scripture itself as written in 'an orderly

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[33] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought: Essay on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa*, trans. Mark Sebanc (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1995)

[34] Cadenhead, *Body and Desire*, 23. Cadenhead has in mind Von Ivánka, 'Vom Platonismus Zur Theorie Der Mystik (Zur Erkenntnislehre Gregors von Nyssa)', *Scholastik*, 11 (1936), 163–95; Hugo Rahner, 'Die Gottesgeburt: Die Lehre Der Kirchenväter von Der Geburt Christi Im Herzen Des Gläubigen', *Zeitschrift Für Katholische Theologie*, 59 (1935), 333–418.

[35] Bernard Pottier, 'Le Grégoire de Nysse de Jean Daniélou', *Nouvelle Revue Théologique*, 128 (2006), 258–73. It must be said that at times Daniélou's 'transposing' can appear sleight of hand in its discovery of rather neat ecclesial categories, as the likes of Völker have identified.

[36] Pottier, 'Grégoire de Nysse'. Notably, Pottier observes Daniélou draw on the convergence of the Neo-Platonic categories of *phôs* (light), *nephele* (cloud), and *gnophos* (darkness), with the triadic images that Gregory draws upon. More widely, one can also see, with Ludlow, the importance of Plato's analogy of the cave, the Neoplatonic image of a ladder of earthly beauties leading up to the divine, and the Platonic concept of love' as important features of Neoplatonic imagery in Gregory, drawn out and accentuated by Daniélou. See Ludlow, *Ancient and (Post)modern*,126.

and progressive way'.[37] These ordering principles are highly evocative of the structuring to be found in Platonic philosophies of reading.[38] To draw out these emphases of imagery and structure as insistently as Daniélou does is to underscore the proximity of the connection between what Gregory is mapping in his reference to 'ascent' and the mysticism associated with entry into the structures of reading and imagery associated with Platonism.

As Daniélou regards Gregory's ascent as structured (positively) by the terms and imagery of Platonism, so he sees it fitting to describe the journey Gregory commends as, like the Platonic ascent, 'mystical'. Thus we read repeatedly of 'la mystique gregorienne', 'l'experience mystique'; thus we are made aware that the intention behind the *Homilies on the Song of Songs* and *The Life of Moses* is 'to give a mystical orientation' to spiritual practise; thus we are invited to read Gregory's fundamental metaphor of 'darkness' as bearing 'an essentially mystical connotation'; thus should we hear ourselves called in Gregory's work to the 'highest stages of mystical experience'.[39] The distinct stages of the ascent that Daniélou pulls from Gregory, which undergird the label mystical, have met strong critique, notably, by Völker, who sees Daniélou's hand too intent on mapping and systematizing a corpus too wild.[40] The description of Gregory's work as mystical' has likewise met considerable opposition, especially from Ekkehard Mühlenberg who, followed by Heine, takes the portrayal of a mysticism traceable to the Platonic tradition as missing the highly polemical nature of Gregory's engagement with classical metaphysics.[41]

Putting aside the question of Daniélou's legitimacy in describing Gregory's spiritual ascent as 'mystical', that 'mysticism' is so closely intertwined with the ascent by this pivotal reader of Gregory is of great consequence. In this designation, several suggestive connotations are brought to bear on Gregory's vision of *epektasis* with lasting effect. For the descriptor 'mysticism', which is neither precisely defined by Daniélou nor directly equivalent to any of

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[37] Jean Daniélou, *L'être et Le Temps Chez Grégoire de Nysse* (Leiden: Brill, 1970), 38; cited by Morwenna Ludlow, 'Theology and Allegory: Origen and Gregory of Nyssa on the Unity and Diversity of Scripture', *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 4.1 (2002), 45–66 (53), Ludlow's translation.

[38] For a comprehensive discussion of these structuring principles and philosophies of reading, see Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).

[39] Daniélou, quoted by Coakley, 'Gregory of Nyssa', 37; Daniélou, *Glory to Glory*, 10, 27.

[40] Walther Völker, *Gregor von Nyssa Als Mystiker* (Wiesbaden: F. Steiner, 1955). For a thorough account of this critique, see Pottier, 'Grégoire de Nysse'.

[41] Ekkehard Mühlenberg, *Die Unendlichkeit Gottes Bei Gregor von Nyssa: Gregors Kritik Am Gottesbegriff Der Klassischen Metaphysik.* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966), 22–25, as Cadenhead comments, *Body and Desire*, 14; Heine, *Perfection in the Virtuous Life*, 71–97.

Gregory's own terminology,[42] has come to evoke perhaps two critical categories in the *lingua franca* of western Christianity as Denys Turner recalls to us in his study *The Darkness of God*: a sense of inwardness, and a sense of ascent.[43] Both of these qualities take root in the journey of *epektasis* as we find it presented in Daniélou's vision, their presence consisting in the implication that *epektasis* refers to the single journey of an individual: inner, in the sense of her own private venture; an ascent, in the sense, to use Turner's image, of a preference for the vertical, between myself and God, over the horizontal, of myself among others.[44] What emerges, finally, in this moment of scholarship, is a lens that sees such progress as descriptive of a spiritual journey belonging, emphatically, to an individual.

 (C) Progress implicates the body

The prelude to the next moment of scholarship we shall assess is to be found in the first significant critique of Gregory of Nyssa's work set out by feminist theologians. These theologians were drawn to Gregory, as Ludlow points out, for his lengthy discussion of the body, as well as the significance of his sister, Macrina, to his work.[45] Yet we might add, as Cadenhead has argued, that such an interest could arise and develop in the way that it has partly insofar as Daniélou had highlighted the category of *desire*, which raised the profile of Gregory as one whose works might pertain to themes of sexuality and gender.[46]

These preluding readings, occurring in the latter half of the twentieth century and emblematically offered by Rosemary Radford Ruether (1974) and, following her footsteps, Kari Elisabeth Børresen (1991), regarded Gregory as problematic, largely because of the so-called narrative of double creation arising from his exegesis of Genesis.[47] This narrative was taken to suggest that humans were created first as non-sexual, purely spiritual creations, in which, according to Gregory, 'their mode of existence preclude[d] intercourse, birth, growth

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[42] Cadenhead, *Body and Desire*, 14.

[43] Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 7. Indeed, at its boldest, Turner's hypothesis is that 'modern interpretations…invented "mysticism" and that we persist in reading back the terms of that conception' (7).

[44] Turner, *Darkness of God*, 3.

[45] Ludlow, *Ancient and (Post)modern*, 164.

[46] Cadenhead, *Body and Desire*, 1.

[47] Rosemary Radford Ruether, 'Misogynism and Virginal Feminism in the Fathers of the Church', in *Religion and Sexism: Images of Women in the Jewish and Christian Tradition*, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1974), 150–83; Kari Elisabeth Børresen, 'God's Image, Man's Image? Patristic Interpretation of Gen. 1:27 and 1 Cor. 11:7', in *Image of God and Gender Models in Judaeo‑Christian Tradition*, ed. Kari Elisabeth Børresen (Oslo: Solum Forlag, 1991), 188–207; cited in Ludlow, *Gregory of Nyssa, Ancient and (Post)modern*, 164.

from youth to old age, disease and death', and only in the second instance, with a view to the fall, as God foresaw creation's 'failure… to keep a direct course to what is good and… subsequent declension from the angelic life', was a bodily nature added, as both male and female.[48] This second stage, in which a division between sexes is enacted, is interpreted by Ruether and Børresen as an accommodation: since the division enables humankind to produce progeny despite the consequence of their sin, namely death. Since the division has the status of an accommodation and is not considered part of the original divine intention, it follows, for them, that in the resurrection humans will not be sexed or gendered, for these qualities are only the 'tunics of hide' we shall later be stripped of as we are returned to our primordial selves, selves seeming more 'souls' than 'bodies'.[49] Such a vision is troubling to Ruether and Børresen, both of whom read in Gregory's narrative no place for the body in what is truly human. Thus they see, first, a contradiction, as Ludlow puts it, to 'a near universal axiom of feminism that human nature is a psychosomatic unity', and, second, complicity with a 'western patriarchal metaphysic which is alleged both to associate womanhood with bodiliness and to denigrate both'.[50] In the sight of Ruether and Børresen, Gregory is committed to an anthropology that excludes the body and, in turn, expresses a misogyny to be resisted.

It is in the rich set of responses to these highly critical readings of Gregory that the third scholarly moment of interest in this survey comes about. Two shifts occur which open the way to this third moment. The first shift occurs in a set of correctives yielding greater precision and nuance in interpreting Gregory. Important here is Sarah Coakley's attention to Gregory's own biography, namely, her showing how the experience of the death of Gregory's siblings interacts with the *varied* perspectives he espouses with regard to the resurrection of the body.[51] Likewise important is the intervention, noted by Ludlow, made by a number of patristic scholars who return to the question of eschatology with a closer eye, attending to the parts of Gregory's corpus wherein the resurrection is emphatically a resurrection of the physical elements of the

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[48] Gregory of Nyssa, 'On the Making of Man', in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic Treatises*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wallace, trans. H. A. Wilson, Second Series (New York, NY: Cosimo Classics, 2007), V, 387–427, XVII: 4 (407).

[49] Since the 'tunics of hide' of the second creation involve mortality and passion improper to rational beings, the body must be considered accidental to the true primordial self.

[50] Ludlow, *Ancient and (Post)modern*, 169. The problem, as Ludlow recounts, arises not only in the disparagement of the bodily because it disparages the feminine; but also insofar as the primordial, disembodied human would, inevitably default to being regarded as male.

[51] Coakley, 'Gregory of Nyssa', 52. As Coakley writes, 'the crisis of their demise…seem[s] to have caused him to reconsider the whole matter of the resurrection and its implications for transformed physical life even in this life, in the era of the church', such that the 'Platonic' body/spirit dualism of his earlier work dissipates in the work that follows their deaths.

body that bear the form of the soul.[52] The challenges brought, for example, by Nonna Verna Harrison and Giulia Sfameni Gasparro contribute to this critical wave, as they call into question the assumption that Gregory's account of creation is two-stage and temporally successive (after Origen).[53] The second shift occurs in the flourishing of novel and freshly illuminating approaches to reading Gregory. Here, as Ludlow observes, literary readings, as well as those arising in the field of classical studies, established a new willingness to ask how Gregory adapted the images he deployed, which in turn led to a 'gradual but noticeable move away from plain readings of Gregory to deeper readings which prod beneath the surface', including a growing sense that his metaphors could be read subversively, such that dichotomies of male/female and sex/gender come to seem enticingly ambiguous.[54] The work of Derek Krueger and Patrick Sherry can be counted as examples of these new and inquisitive readings.[55]

It is in the light of these shifts, both corrective of previous readings and conducive to new ways of reading, that it became viable to regard Gregory's anthropology as much subtler than had been perceived in earlier renditions. Indeed, it became possible to find Gregory's depiction of the person as one in psychosomatic unity, in which body and soul, while referred to as distinct, could be found created together: the soul never existing without the body.[56] It is in this space, cleared by the reaction to early feminist readings of Gregory, that, for our purposes, the third moment to be attended to can be discerned. For the sight of the body and soul in a psychosomatic unity leads to the compelling suggestion, made in a myriad of ways, that the body and soul, for Gregory, might be in a mutually informing relationship, in which 'the mind gives form to the body' ('organizing its material and giving it form'), and 'the body influences the character of the soul' (facilitating the expression of the soul's nature), to borrow Smith's formulation.[57] This mutually informing relationship makes way for the prospect that the progress of the soul might implicate, in different ways, what is thought of as the progress of the body. Two examples will offer a flavour of the kind of connections being affirmed.

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[52] Ludlow, *Ancient and (Post)modern*, 176.

[53] Verna E. F. Harrison, 'Male and Female in Cappadocian Theology', *Journal of Theological Studies*, 41.2, 447–48; Giulia Sfameni Gasparro, 'Image of God and Sexual Differentiation in the Tradition of Enkrateia', in *Image of God and Gender Models in Judaeo-Christian Tradition*, ed. Kari Elisabeth Børresen (Oslo: Solum Forlag), 138–71; as cited by Ludlow, *Ancient and (Post)modern*, 178.

[54] Ludlow, *Ancient and (Post)modern*, 221.

[55] Derek Krueger, 'Writing and the Liturgy of Memory in Gregory of Nyssa's Life of Macrina', *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 8.4 (2000), 483–510; Patrick Sherry, *Spirit and Beauty: An Introduction to Theological Aesthetics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

[56] In this thesis we take forward this self, in psychosomatic unity, as that which Gregory had in mind in his anthropology.

[57] Smith, *Passion and Paradise*, 144.

First, the recent work of Smith, whose research has been instrumental in developing the argument that the human passions, and the faculties that function to support sentient needs, might have a positive role, according to Gregory, in the soul's heavenly ascent. While closely alert to the inconsistencies within Gregory's anthropology and eschatology, Smith contends that the journey towards God is not a case of straightforwardly surpassing the sentient and bodily, but of training and restoring such impulses so that they might work to serve the spiritual ascent.[58] Thus the bodily, and its development in time as shaped by habit and teaching, interacts with the development of the soul.

Second, the recent work of Coakley, in underscoring the prominence of a tradition of spiritual senses in Gregory's work, tends towards the same connection. Coakley sets Gregory's language of 'senses of the soul' in a biblical (and specifically Pauline) frame to reveal how hard it is 'to see how Gregory can ultimately sustain a dualism between different *sorts* of "sensing"'.[59] Rather, she posits a bold merging of spiritual and bodily senses, whereby sensory perception becomes the very 'bridge between soul and body', so that, for example, 'our very acts of visual perceiving and sensual response might be affected by our moral fibre'.[60] The point, then, resounds again: the body's development is inseparable from that of the soul.

According to this third wave under consideration, we are presented with a vision of spiritual progress that finally has to do with the training, discipline, growth, and habits of the body, in which the chronology of the embodied human life is to be found in strong connection to the spiritual ascent of *epektasis*. The progress of the spirit implicates and is implicated by the progress of the body: the journey of *epektasis* comes to look as much temporal and bodily as heaven-bound and ethereal.

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Via a brief survey of three prominent moments of scholarship to receive Gregory, we have noted the lasting impact of the ways the notion of *epektasis* has been perceived, coloured, and imparted. As these readings overlap, they develop particular anthropological implications with respect to how the progress of a human life ought to be conceived. Such progress, owing to the legacies of these scholarly moments, retains a sense of being founded in some way on the effort or work of a person. Indeed, involving her work and effort, such progress appears to come to

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[58] Smith, *Passion and Paradise*.
[59] Coakley, 'Gregory of Nyssa', 46.
[60] Coakley, 'Gregory of Nyssa', 55.

revolve around her – seeming to belong to the preserve of an individual's private venture. Moreover, it comes to revolve around the *whole* of her, body as well as spirit, such that the totality of who she is is taken up into the private journey fuelled by her own effort. [61]

3. A problem

We shall move now to interrogate the vision of human progress that the culmination of these multiple readings of Gregory's picture of *epektasis* and their anthropological implications might seem to resource. I shall by turn suggest how human progress might appear to be idealized in these readings; outline the troubling perception of those in old age and near to death such idealizations might foster;[62] and evidence the nature of these idealizations by recourse to the remarks of recent commentators on our own contemporary situation, here suggesting that the anthropological picture for which recent Gregory scholarship would give us resources overlaps with at least some inclinations discernible in a North Atlantic context.

(A) A vision of progress

Progress is reliant on effort

In the first instance, that the journey of *epektasis* is considered correlative with the participant's own intentions and desires indicates her own import in determining the shape of her spiritual ascent: borrowing William Ernest Henley's image, the person emerges as one who is the master of her fate, the captain of her soul.[63] According to this correlation, the ideal shape of

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[61] The deployment of the terms 'progress', 'growth', and 'development' in this section are characteristic of their use to come in the rest of this thesis. Namely, as in this section, I consider these descriptors applicable to the forward movement of the whole self, soul as well as body. Moreover, as in this section, I deploy these terms as in themselves unfilled but liable to be given shape and content by particular assumptions or philosophies. In this sense, I treat these terms akin to the earliest use of 'progress' recorded by the Oxford English Dictionary, that is, as referring *simply* to an advance or onward movement, without the later narrowing down through which progress came to refer to following a *prescribed* course, in a *specific* direction, or towards a *particular* place. (See Oxford English Dictionary Online, "Progress" <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/152236?rskey=8dh4hB&result=1 #eid>[accessed 17 May 2021]). In this way, while these terms may initially spark connotations of linearity, I intend for them to remain open enough for the apparent inversions – the folding back, staying put, or even circularity – characteristic of the progress Gregory's exemplars embody.

[62] Those in old age and near to death constitute one group who suffer under this picture; but there are further groupings whose dignity is failed by the idealization of this particular vision. Indeed, insofar as any group suffers, the whole may be said to.

[63] William Ernest Henley, 'IV', in his *A Book of Verses* (London: David Nutt, 1888), 56-57.

progression, we might surmise, is straight. If it is the individual's own intent and effort that determine the course of her progress, then in ideal conditions that course would be unswerving towards a particular decided goal. Swerves or plateaus would indicate misdirection or standstill. Where effort and intent are considered key, it is the straight line that expresses the spiritual ascent's proper route of progression. Such a vision implies the goodness of lives that, journeying by a continuous and unimpeded drive, are coherent, extending towards a goal as directed by the intent and desire of the participant.

Such an idealization is problematic in the extent to which it precludes the goodness of lives that lack coherence; that fail to lend themselves to a single narrative, that do not 'add up' in any straightforward sense; and which challenge the clarity of the very 'what' to which a life could add up. In old age, the possible incoherence of progress through a life may be observed especially acutely: the opportunity in old age for the work of retrospection is particularly able to expose lacunae and irresolution; particularly able to lay bare the strange juxtaposition in life of loss and joy, consolation and desolation, and the insistence of the components of these pairs not to cancel each other out but to exist in their own right. For growing numbers, old age will mean the clouding of clarity and cogency in thought and language through forms of dementia, which will undermine attempts to tell a full and complete story of the self's journey in terms many are attuned to hear.[64] By this imaginary the 'incoherent' life, held together by a thread not found or named or told of in any cogent sense, fails to be counted as well lived.

Indeed, intolerance for the 'incoherent' life is observable in our own era. We might consider, for example, the diminishment of 'remorse' from public life, which Williams laments in his work *Lost Icons*. In the work, Williams notes the marked infrequency of public figures to engage in acts of apology and accountability for failure and betrayals.[65] The refusal of remorse, and the failure to confess and admit error, he sees, is bound up with an assertion that identities are complete, that there can be no cavities or mistakes that would jeopardize the intelligibility of a human story. In the decline of public acts of remorse, we see acted out the preservation of the life story as *complete* and driven by a *singular* direction, avoidant and intolerant of the complexity of error, forgiveness, misstep, and redemption. Such dynamics of forgiveness and redemption,

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[64] According to the World Health Organization, the numbers of people living with dementia globally will increase from 50 million in 2018 to 152 million in 2050, a 204% increase, mainly due to increases in life expectancy. World Health Organisation, *Dementia*, 2020 <https://www.who.int/en/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/dementia> [accessed 8 May 2020].
[65] Rowan Williams, *Lost Icons* (London: T&T Clark, 2000), 105.

we surmise with Williams, are excluded for their undermining of the life story as straightforwardly coherent.[66]

The much reported and recorded social isolation among older people in our era, particularly those suffering with forms of dementia, can also be considered suggestive of this intolerance of a life that is incoherent in a different way.[67] As sociologist Clive Seale has commented, 'in late modernity it appears the process of ageing is difficult to incorporate as a meaningful and fulfilling part of social life'.[68] Indeed one aspect of what is so difficult to incorporate is the complexity of narratives that cannot easily be told or comprehended because their tellers struggle to hold or articulate a narrative of any conventional style. Where those are to belong, who cannot speak of themselves, or cannot do so in complete and focused terms, seems increasingly unclear, as John Swinton's work reflecting on the experience of people suffering with forms of dementia has highlighted: those who cannot say who they are, what they believe, or even what they like, appear ill-fit for a great number of public spaces and institutions.[69] As the life as cogent and coherent is idealized, those who cannot give a cogent and coherent sense of themselves, as well as those whose lives are marred by mistakes and missteps that jeopardize such coherency, are liable to be perceived as less than ideal.

Progress is of the individual

In the second instance, that *epektasis* comes to acquire the connotation of a mystical, individual venture implies the solitude of the spiritual journey. In this reading, the vertical axis, concerning the distance between the participant and the divine goal, is of ultimate importance. We might picture this as a single line, in contrast to the stroke of a broader brush, for while the ascent here may cross and interact with the journeys of others, it is fundamentally distinct and independent. In this sense the ideal journey has a simplicity to it. It occurs between the points of participant and God, not complicated by the unpredictable intrusions of others.

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[66] Williams, *Lost Icons*, 104.

[67] See Age UK, *All the Lonely People: Loneliness in Later Life*, Age UK Media Centre, September 2018 <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/latest-press/articles/2018/october/all-the-lonely-people-report/> [accessed 29 September 2020].Age UK Media Centre, September 2018.

[68] Clive Seale, *Constructing Death: The Sociology of Dying and Bereavement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 105.

[69] John Swinton, *Dementia: Living in the Memories of God* (London: SCM Press, 2012).

This dimension of the vision that emerges is problematic in its failure to accommodate the human experience of community, with its vital component of dependence, into a vision of the life well lived. In old age the fact of dependence becomes harder to disregard. The old age of many is characterized by the experience of diminishment and need; whether by weakness that constrains the body and mind, or personal tragedies and bereavement that render a person suddenly insecure. In the midst of these events, the impression of self-sufficiency is perhaps hardest to maintain, and thus between the life of the older person and the life imagined as properly lived a distance is asserted.

This aversion to the life that exposes its dependency can be discerned in the dominant scripts for death in our era, which, as ethicist Michael Banner has compellingly argued, presume the utmost importance of independence and agency in any life to be considered worth living. Banner cites the 'highly visible cultural forms' of the hospice and euthanasia, both of which, he demonstrates, pivot around a 'concern for the preservation of a self-conscious narrative and agency in dying'.[70] Thus, according to Banner, some modern forms of hospice care, having departed considerably from Cecily Saunders' original vision, 'bid to preserve and maintain the project of the self for as long as possible up until the occurrence of biological death', while 'euthanasia brings death forward so as to avoid the risk of the death of the self prior to biological death'.[71] The individual's control, effort, and will, then, are protected as the qualities essential to life's worthwhileness until the end. Life is presented as livable insofar as the individual remains in apparent control.

Progress implicates the body

In the third instance, the quality of straight simplicity assigned to the spiritual journey comes to infuse bodily life, as the journey to which *epektasis* refers is broadened out beyond the interior to include the lived and enacted dimensions of life. As the rich and productive works of Smith and Coakley, among others, make strides to see that the bodily and lived are interwoven with the spiritual and internal, the bodily life is susceptible to having projected onto it a similar expectation of order and predictability as appears to characterize Gregory's spiritual journey. The ideal life that seems to be implied might then be a life with bodily stages that are identifiably structured by reified, linear milestones – from childhood, to education, work,

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[70] Michael C. Banner, *The Ethics of Everyday Life: Moral Theology, Social Anthropology, and the Imagination of the Human* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 114.

[71] Banner, *Ethics of Everyday*, 115.

marriage, child-rearing, and retirement. Such milestones might be considered aspirations as well as measures against which those who maintain lives according to alternative structures can be contrasted.

While since ancient times people have sought to locate meaning and structure in the passage of a bodily life, to reify and rationalize its particular physical stages is problematic.[72] The reification of milestones risks ostracizing the lives of those who, for a host of reasons, maintain lives that proceed according to alternative structures.[73] Moreover, in determining too precisely when one is old and loading 'old age' with a particular set of expectations, we may be prone to miss the surprise of gifts given in old age that depart from the norm, and the surprise of growth in circumstances that might be expected to be exclusively desolate.

We see elements of this reified, staged account of the bodily life-course present in our times. Social historian Howard P. Chudacoff has charted the recent intensity with which physical 'age has been adopted as an organizing principle' in the fields of psychology, education, popular culture, and with respect to patterns of socializing, commenting on the great extent to which 'we are accustomed to the notion that a precise chronological age marks the transition from one stage of life to another'.[74] Such a notion is internalized, Chudacoff writes, in the prevalence of 'shoulds' that prescribe what ought to have been done or achieved and by when, and a habit of highly age-conscious social comparison.[75] This internalization is testified to in what queer theory has perceived and termed as 'chrononormativity': the projection of heteronormative trajectories, in which, as Kathleen Riach, Nicholas Rumens, and Melissa Tyler write, notions of

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[72] As Ephraim Radner writes in his theological study, *A Time to Keep: Theology, Mortality, and the Shape of a Human Life* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), 'every culture has had its own generally similar ways of periodizing the movement from infancy to old age' (131). Whether by the advice of the Ecclesiast that 'to everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven', or the four ages linked to the four seasons described in Byrhtferth's Anglo-Saxon manual from the early eleventh century, there is much that witnesses to a proclivity to find meaning in developmental patterns across the passage of a human life through time. Yet the precision with which this operates in a contemporary setting is distinctive. See Thomas R. Cole's cultural history of ageing, *The Journey of Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) for a description of the reification of the life stages (185).

[73] Howard Chudacoff, in his *How Old Are You?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), points out the resistance of 'working-class people who retained traditional integenerational contacts in their family and social activities', and women who wanted to work rather than marry to the milestones and character of a typical trajectory (6).

[74] Howard Chudacoff, *How Old Are You?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 5.

[75] Chudacoff, *How Old Are You?*, 183-184. Cole's cultural history of ageing offers answers to the question of how this shift occurred, looking especially to the impact of developments in late medieval spirituality and the demographic and industrial changes of following centuries.

the so-called 'right time' for particular life stages' dictate societal convention.[76] As Chudacoff sees, these 'right times' operate on powerful stereotypes which 'promote self-fulfilling expectations' and make 'anomalous' passages of alternative convention, among them singleness or childlessness.[77] In the power of these trajectories, and the perceived abnormality of those who fail to remain on them, we see the presumption of bodily orderliness as an ideal of the human life-course.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

In a North Atlantic context, then, we see at work presumptions about human progress that converge with the human progress Gregory's *epektasis* (as construed in recent scholarly readings) seems to nurture in its anthropological implications.[78] The picture of progress that arises from these recent readings of *epektasis*, convergent with presumptions we witness in the present day, is problematic for several reasons. As the insight of contemporary commentators helps to clarify, such a picture excludes irresolution and mystery from the ideal human life; fails to accommodate dependence into a vision of life well lived; and, in its preference for order, risks reifying constrictive visions of life's stages. In respect to old age and the end of life, the problems of this picture are acutely exposed.

I contend in this thesis, however, that a closer look at the notion of *epektasis* may reveal an alternative set of anthropological implications with which human progress can be imagined, and via which our perception of life's end can be shaped. Namely, this 'closer look' will consist in understanding Gregory's theological concept through novel recourse to his biographical works. We shall seek to understand the doctrine in primary relation to how Gregory saw that it would be lived out and experienced in the lives of Christians. It is to the reasons for attempting to re-read *epektasis* through recourse to the biographies that we now turn.

4. Sources

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[76] Kathleen Riach, Nicholas Rumens, and Melissa Tyler, 'Un/Doing Chrononormativity: Negotiating Ageing, Gender and Sexuality in Organizational Life', *Organization Studies*, 35 (2014), 1677–98, 1678.
[77] Chudacoff, *How Old Are You?*, 187.
[78] These observations of North Atlantic culture do not constitute a monopolistic account; rather, the mentioned features are found mixed with a range of ideas about human life that contest with one another.

The *Lives* of Macrina, Moses, and Gregory Thaumaturgus are received in this thesis as primary guides to illuminate the doctrine of *epektasis*.[79] The three texts are certainly different from one another. The *Life of Saint Macrina*, written in c. 382, records the life and, atypically, with near to equal attention, death of Gregory's sister (c. 327-379). The work's preface suggests its being written for a family friend, Monk Olympus, who requested an account of the piety and intellect of Macrina, which Gregory is pleased to offer him, as well as a more general readership who appear from the preface intended to access the text in addition.[80] The *Life of Moses*, written towards the end of Gregory's career in c. 390, is addressed in its conclusion to 'Caesarius'.[81] The addition in one manuscript of 'monk' to his description has given rise to a consensus that Gregory's recipient was a priest, and the work as a whole intended to be read communally among a priestly community.[82] The work draws on the Books of Deuteronomy and Numbers, the Letter to the Hebrews, and Jewish Midrashim, to tell the life of Moses in two parts. The first, titled *historia*, recounts a close reading of the biblical narrative of Moses's life; the second and longer, titled *theoria*, returns to the beginning of that narrative, reading it via an allegorical lens with which to discern a further sense to the events and circumstances of Moses's life. Moses is presented as a model of virtue, to be translated by the recipient of his *Life* into his or her own. The *Life of Gregory Thaumaturgus* is an expanded version of an oration given by Gregory in 379 or 380 in commemoration of Gregory Thaumaturgus (c. 210-270). It was likely addressed to Christians congregating in Neocaesarea on their former bishop's feast day. The work details the history of Thaumaturgus's life chronologically, giving great weight to the wonder of his miracles and evangelism, noting the effects still felt among those whom he addressed in his oration, and those to whom the written and edited oration would be circulated.

While varying, at least on structure, solicitation, and proximity to subject, the three works can be grouped together as biographies. Discussion surrounding the ancient genre of *bios* has in

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[79] These are not the only lives that Gregory writes about. In other texts he discourses on the life of his brother Basil, and preaches about Bishop Meletius of Antioch. However, the three chosen biographies are the most fulsome examples of biographies.

[80] See Silvas, *Macrina the Younger*, 109, n. 1 for a discussion of the presence of this addendum among some manuscripts.

[81] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, trans. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson, (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1978), II.319 (135). In this and in all further references to Gregory of Nyssa's primary texts where an internal numbering system is deployed, I give this internal numbering reference first, followed by the edition's page numbers in brackets.

[82] See the K manuscript's inclusion of *monakos*. Other proposals as to the identity of Caesarius have included the suggestion that he was Gregory Nazianzen's brother or Gregory's son.

recent years has been richly enhanced by suggestions of biography as connected with panegyric, historiography, eulogy, and the rise of a concern for 'individualism' and 'personality'. For the purposes of the grouping deployed here, the basic definition offered by Arnoldo Momigliano in his lectures on *The Development of Greek Biography* will suffice: a biography records an 'account of the life of a [person] from birth to death', according to which a common set of rhetorical choices would include chronological ordering, a narrative trajectory determined by the events of the subject's life, and a focus on an individual as primary and near exclusive subject.[83] Certainly Gregory's *Lives* display the influence of epideictic composition – in the praise with which Gregory furnishes his subjects – and deliberative rhetoric – in the persuasion with which he enjoins his recipients to grow in virtue – but their fundamental mode is biography, and not yet specifically 'Christian biography', which had not at the time of Gregory's writing 'developed into a generic tradition', as Krueger has commented.[84]

While the preface and third theophany of the *Life of Moses* are often extracted as relevant expositions of *epektasis*, the relevance of Moses's life as a whole and the lives of Macrina and Gregory Thaumaturgus have been overlooked with only minor exception.[85] This owes in part to a wider neglect of the biographies as sources, stemming from what Robert Wilken has described as a 'preoccupation with dogmatic categories in the study of the Fathers' (about which we commented above).[86] Such a preoccupation 'circumscribed the range of questions addressed to patristic thinkers, and thereby narrowed the scope of what was considered theological [and] ruled out "non-theological" works' – biographical and liturgical tracts among them – as sources.[87] Against this habit of neglect, it is to Gregory's biographical works that I turn in order to understand *epektasis* more fully. In what follows I propose two key reasons why such a turn makes good sense.

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[83] Arnoldo Momigliano, *The Development of Greek Biography* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 11; Timothy Barnes, 'Early Christian Hagiography and the Roman Historian', in *Christian Martyrdom in Late Antiquity*, ed. Peter Gemeinhardt and Johan Leemans (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 15–34.

[84] Krueger, 'Writing and the Liturgy', 492.

[85] A recent presentation made by V. K. McCarty at the Institute for Studies of Early Christianity Annual Conference 2018, titled 'St. Macrina: Living Midrash of Gregory of Nyssa's Doctrine of Epektasis', stands out as an exception. The paper awaits formal publication, but can presently be accessed at <https://www.academia.edu/37931063/St_Macrina_Living_Midrash_of_Gregory_of_Nyssas_Doctrine_of_Epektasis> [accessed 1 April 2020].

[86] Robert L. Wilken, 'Liturgy, Bible and Theology in the Easter Homilies of Gregory of Nyssa', in *Écriture et culture philosophique dans la pensée de Grégoire de Nysse: Actes du colloque de Chevetogne (22-26 septembre 1969)*, ed. Marguerite Harl (Leiden: Brill, 1971), 127–43, 127. See Part 2A above.

[87] Wilken, 'Liturgy, Bible and Theology', 127. This is reflected by the fact that there are so few studies that treat the biographies together.

(A) The *Lives* as models of *epektasis*

We turn to the biographies of Macrina, Moses, and Thaumaturgus, first, because Gregory considered the practical and lived dimensions of faith (of which the biographies are records) as locations of profound theological importance. The intertwinement of the practical and theological is rooted, for Gregory, in the familial context in which he grew up. The vocations pursued by Gregory's siblings give a strong impression of the lived shape of the faith with which he and they were formed: his sister, Macrina, founded a community at Annesi, the male side of which was headed by their brother Peter; Basil established a male fraternity and wrote its ethical manual, in addition to developing among the first Christian 'poorhouses' for the destitute; while Naucratius retreated to a forest near to the family estate for a life of 'solitude and poverty'.[88] It is amid this community, and its rehearsing of the spiritual in practical terms, that Gregory comes to know asceticism – the deep practice and embodiment of belief – not as one among many possible appearances of the Christian faith, but as its fundamental expression.

Indeed, such an interest in what Christians *do* is also expressed in the distinctive apophaticism for which Gregory is well known. Ari Ojell suggests Gregory's apophasis rests upon four components occurring across his thought: an ontological argument concerning the difference between created and uncreated, which renders the latter unknowable by the former; a philosophy of language aware of the limits of indication, such that conceptions of the divine expressed in language are always incomplete; a distinction between the *energeia* of God, which may be explored via the mental faculties, and the *ousia*, which remains unapproachable by intellect alone; and a conception of the perfection of God's goodness as infinite, which renders all human discovery of God *less than* the fullness of God.[89] In the recurrence of these components we hear Gregory's insistence that intellectual knowledge of God is not a possibility for creatures; in Gregory's mind this repeats the conclusion reached by the biblical figures Abraham, David, Moses, Paul, and John.[90] Yet the impossibility of intellectual knowledge is not the end of theology's work but, for Gregory, a sign indicating its relocation from the imagined certainty of the mind to the actions of a people following Christ. Gregory's distinctive reading of the Exodus narrative in which Moses sees only the back of God expresses this re-routing.

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[88] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Saint Macrina*, trans. W. K. Louther Clarke (London: SPCK, 1916), 968A (29), 974B (39).

[89] Ari Ojell, 'Apophatic Theology', in *Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, ed. Giulio Maspero and Lucas Francisco Mateo-Seco (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 68–73.

[90] Ojell, 'Apophatic Theology', 69.

That Moses sees the back of God, Gregory suggests, owes, first, to the impossibility of seeing God's face – implied here is the routine failure of intellectual knowledge.[91] However, it owes, second, to the fact that Moses, proper to his faith, is *following* God. Such an interpretation, as Williams discerns, invokes the New Testament resonances of the 'astonished' and 'afraid' disciples of Christ who 'were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way'.[92] In this emblematic reading of Gregory's, it is not static intellectual accomplishment which epitomizes the meeting of God, but nor is it simply a void in its absence; it is the active venture of following Christ on his disconcerting way – one step after another. As Williams paraphrases Gregory: God is 'found and known in the converted heart of the believer and in the purity of his or her life and actions': to know God is to follow God.[93]

Both the asceticism in which he grew up, and the apophaticism at which he arrives, point to Gregory's concern to pursue the embodiment of theological proposition in the lives of the faithful. The doctrine of *epektasis*, asserting the infinity of God and the subsequent endlessness of love for God, does not appear, according to this insight, as appropriately discussed only in the realm of its philosophical and metaphysical import. Rather, in keeping with Gregory's interest in how theological propositions give rise to particular practice, the details of his holy lives look as ideal sources for grasping towards a fuller picture of what it means, in Gregory's mind, for progress towards God to be infinite.

We turn to the biographies of Macrina, Moses, and Thaumaturgus, second, and most importantly, because Gregory himself presents the lives as practical embodiments of what would later be called *epektasis*. The biographies of the three record journeys into God, steeped in the terms of love, progress, growth, and virtue, which characterize Gregory's defining expositions of *epektasis*. Macrina is said to have 'loved the pure and unstained mode of life', which 'she nourished in the secret places of the soul'.[94] 'Her course was directed towards virtue', and at its end she is equipped to 'reveal divine and pure love of the invisible bridegroom', finally 'hurrying towards Him Whom she desired'.[95] Moses is described as one who 'never ceased straining toward those things that are still to come'.[96] His life 'ascend[s] the

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[91] *The Life of Moses*, II.221-223 (111-112).

[92] Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge* (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 2014), 63.

[93] Rowan Williams, *Wound of Knowledge*, 63.

[94] *Life of Macrina*, 984A (54).

[95] *Life of Macrina*, 984A (54).

[96] *Life of Moses*, I.5 (29), II.227 (113).

highest mount of perfection', in which, finally, Moses becomes the 'friend of God'.[97] Thaumaturgus is 'outstanding in virtue'; a 'man of God' characterized by 'purity of soul'.[98] The last thing he does before he dies is to pray that others might likewise know 'growth to perfection'.[99] These individuals are presented as exemplars of what it would mean to grow endlessly in holiness and love of God. Their lives embody a response to the fact of a God who is infinite and who solicits a growth in love and holiness that is by necessity endless. In this respect, the biographies constitute pictures of what *epektasis* means.

As I investigate the anthropological implications of *epektasis* in what follows, I do so by looking to what the lives of the three are led to practise and embody as they progress in what Gregory presents as endless holiness and love of God. The primary use of the biographies, I suggest, promises much because the practical and lived reality they report is where we can expect Gregory to be at work theologically; and because they themselves address us in terms that strongly imply their embodiment of a never-ending progress towards a God who is ever beyond reach. The activities of *giving*, *telling*, and *forgiving*, which so strongly occupy the practice of the three exemplars in their holy progress, are thus treated as important disclosures of the significance of *epektasis* as lived in a life.

(B) The *Lives* as sources of ethics

Beyond their relevance to the theological vision of *epektasis*, the *Lives* promise to be rich partners in responding to the ethical questions relating to old age and the end of life with which this thesis is concerned. Namely, in dialogue especially with *The Life of Macrina,* which offers the most detailed account of its subject's ageing and dying, we will be able to avoid two connected problems with which the field of ethics and moral theology has in recent years been encumbered. These problems relate to the abstraction of ethical questions from both an

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[97] *Life of Moses*, II. 319 (136).
[98] Gregory of Nyssa, 'On the Life and Wonders of Our Father among the Saints, Gregory the Wonderworker', in *St. Gregory Thaumaturgus: Life and Works*, ed. and trans. Michael Slusser, The Fathers of the Church: 98 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1998), 41–87, hereafter, *Life of Thaumaturgus*), 893B (41), 941A (74), 897A (44). The 'virtue' that Gregory refers to in this quote and those above, and which I have in mind when referring to virtue in the remainder of the thesis, is a participation in divine virtue which, since God is endlessly and infinitely virtuous, can endlessly and infinitely deepen. To be virtuous, for Gregory, is to be caught up ever more fully in the life of God. The 'virtuous practices' I go on to to posit in chapters 2, 4, and 6 should be understood as practices which, in Gregory's sight, rely on participation in God for their reality. My reading of Gregory's sense of virtue here converges with the reading proffered by Hans Boersma in his *Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa an Anagogical Approach*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1-11.
[99] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 956A (84).

immediate context of living, and the temporal context of the life-course. I will suggest by turn the promising alternative that reading whole *Lives* poses to ethical discussion.

An immediate context of living

In his Bampton Lectures of 2013, Banner laid bare the impoverishment of much moral theology's fascination with 'hard cases': its capacity to speak on the matter of the end of life, for example, with loquacious reference to euthanasia, advance directives, living wills, and assisted suicide, but its near silence with regard to 'the quotidian challenges of growing old, and about what it would be to live well… in this particular stage of life'.[100] As well as lacking insight into the 'everyday ethics' of life, a fixation with the extraordinary dilemmas of some lives fails to show concern for the social context of ethical action.[101] The process of plucking scenarios to deliberate *from* a human life discourages the 'serious work of comprehending contemporary social life, thought, and action' in which ethical decisions are shaped and find their meaning.[102]

To consider ethical questions pertaining to the end of life alongside Gregory's biographies recovers some of the losses incurred in moral theology's abstraction of hard questions from an immediate context of living. Gregory's *Life of Macrina* attends not just to the major dilemmas to which ethics has so far been drawn, of Macrina's illness, suffering, and death, but to the quotidian and undramatic in and among these events. Further, the *Life of Macrina* shows us a subject who operates not as solitary ethical agent, but, whose ethical action exists within a social life and community. In dialogue with this biography, the reflections on old age we posit will indeed touch upon areas not regularly cited (among them, the significance of: gratitude, listening, and prayer), and consider the fitting action not only of single individuals, but the role of communities (for example, in contributing to legacy, or in discerning the older person's gifts).

A temporal context of the life-course

A further recovery offered by conversation with the *Lives* counters a temptation to abstract ethical action from the temporal context of the life-course. Such a temptation sees human crises

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[100] Banner, *Ethics of Everyday,* 9.
[101] Banner, *Ethics of Everyday,* 8.
[102] Banner, *Ethics of Everyday*, 14.

and their responses as oddly unconnected and uninformed by the life that precedes such crisis. The 2015 McDonald conference, 'Toward a Contemporary Art of Dying', whose papers are recorded in a special issue of *Studies in Christian Ethics*, puts this temptation into stark relief. As Coakley states in her introductory remarks, the question of dying has become 'a repressed subject-matter held at bay until some final medical crisis intervenes'.[103] The question of old age can be thought to be susceptive to similar siphoning, regarded as raising ethical dilemmas distinct from the rest of life at its own ethical frontier. As a range of contributors to the *Contemporary Art of Dying* conference forcefully point out, an ethical response to a particular circumstance is more readily born of practice over time than the simple will of a mind persuaded. The possibility of an '*ars moriendi* must be at the same time a revived *ars vivendi*', in which practices and perceptions are cultivated in order to make possible the necessary ethical action that a future moment will demand.[104]

Looking to Gregory's biographies reawakens us to the temporal context of the life-course, in which the ethical action of one moment is connected to the practice of many moments prior to it. The overview we are afforded of a life lived from start to finish errs us not to seek to admire disparate chapters of goodness, but to notice the craft that makes the enacting of goodness possible. Indeed, Gregory offers a striking image in his *Homilies on the Song of Songs* with which we may express the promise of the biographies in this regard. The life of virtue, he writes, can be compared to a fabric made 'using many threads', since in it 'many things must twine together, so that a noble life is shown forth'.[105] The *Lives* let us see not only the moments where the fabric of virtue holds taut, but the weaving of virtuous threads over time, 'stretched vertically and others… horizontally', which construct a garment approaching 'heavenly incorruptibility', a costume according to custom.[106]

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The choice of the *Lives* as primary theological sources has been argued from the perspective of their fittingness as expressions of Gregory's *epektasis*. The significance of what the *Lives* may offer and call to mind in relation to ethics has been noted. Two possible hesitations yet require

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[103] Sarah Coakley, 'Introductory Remarks: The Theology and Ethics of Contemporary Dying', *Society for the Study of Christian Ethics*, 29.3 (2016), 245–48, 247.
[104] Coakley, 'Introductory Remarks', 247.
[105] 'Homilies on the Song of Songs', Homily 9 (287).
[106] 'Homilies on the Song of Songs', Homily 9 (287).

response. These concern (C) whether the biographies are truth telling, and (D) whether a fourth century theologian is a suitable interlocutor in dialogue belonging to a modern era.

(C) Biography and truth

While the *Life of Moses* proceeds by a close exposition of a biblical narrative, candidly interpreted by an allegorical reading that makes no claim to historical realism, the biographies of Macrina and Thaumaturgus profess to be testimonies of individuals to whom Gregory has proximate access. Are his accounts of them truthful? This is a question that has been answered by a number of scholars negatively. For historian Raymond Van Dam, Gregory's biography of Thaumaturgus features 'outright invention', moving far beyond the strictly 'historic'.[107] For a near consensus of scholars, Macrina is a literary construction, owing more to a range of literary inspirations, Plato's Socrates or Homer's Odysseus among them, than Gregory's actual sister.[108] One route towards an answer in the affirmative is to suggest that the biographies as fictive, improvised accounts nevertheless approach historical truth in their very enrichment of it. Such an approach is witnessed to in the compelling analysis of Georgia Frank, whose reading of the *Life of Macrina* alongside portions of Homer's *Odyssey* alerts us to the layers of literary allusion at work that, for all their contrivance, may point to the real depth of his subject. Indeed, to go further than Frank, in significant ways the historical subject may be more closely testified to by these modes than by an alternative list of minimalist historical details posing as a definitive 'view from nowhere'.[109] Fictive or 'spiritualized' modes serve to protect the real dimensions of a subject whose excesses cannot be captured, and thereby precipitate a more 'truthful' representation. The inclusion of episodes in Gregory's biographies that appear to go beyond history can be considered faithful overshooting: their 'missing' of the historical fact in question nevertheless concedes the true quality of its impression.[110]

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[107] Raymond Van Dam, 'Hagiography and History: The Life of Gregory Thaumaturgus', *Classical Antiquity*, 1.2 (1982), 272–308 (280).

[108] Arnaldo Momigliano, *The Life of Saint Macrina by Gregory of Nyssa* (Middletown, CN: Wesleyan University Press, 1987), 208; Catharine P. Roth, 'Platonic and Pauline Elements in the Ascent of the Soul in Gregory of Nyssa's Dialogue on the Soul and Resurrection', *Vigiliae Christianae*, 46.1 (1992), 20–30; Georgia Frank, 'Macrina's Scar: Homeric Allusion and Heroic Identity in Gregory of Nyssa's Life of Macrina', *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 8.4 (2000), 511–530, 519.

[109] See Rowan Williams's *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014) for a discussion of the distrust that contemporary literary criticism rightly directs towards the solo historical 'authority' (137).

[110] We might think here of John Ruskin's comment, equating the failure of representation with the excess of an object: 'the fallen human soul, at its best, must be as a diminishing glass, and that a broken one, to the mighty truths of the universe around it; and the wider the scope of its glance, and the vaster the truths into which it obtains an insight, the more fantastic their distortion is likely to be'. John

While it may be true that literary discourses can testify to historical truth in complex and meaningful ways, it is also possible that 'historical truth' itself is not so robustly divorced from what is literary and spiritual. Peter Turner has described this possibility in his 2012 monograph, *Truthfulness, Realism, Historicity*, in which he suggests that holy men and women would themselves, aware of emerging examples of sanctity, likely live in such a way as to lend themselves to the writing of a biography, self-consciously leaning into the example of former holy people in order to join them.[111] Their imitation of prior literary examples would render the literary historical by their own action. This being so, the writing of spiritual history does not need to be considered opposed to the writing of history.

The lives that Gregory records were, to his mind, not fantasies of hope and imagination but real possibilities for human life. On two counts does this thesis proceed to take the biographies indeed to be truth telling: their literary mode may bear witness to a truth that factual detail could not contain, while their spiritual mode may well have been present within the very history described.[112]

(D) Recourse to the fourth century

Concrete though the lives can be considered, and as fitting as the genre of biography appears, a hesitation may remain as to bringing these fourth century biographies to bear in contemplating some of the presumptions in current experiences of old age and death present in North-Atlantic culture. We may wonder how useful the fourth century account of progress we explore and its anthropological implications can be in response to the dilemmas of a contemporary picture. I turn now to clarify the limited way in which Gregory's corpus will be drawn on in relation to matters of present-day significance.

Ruskin, *The Works of John Ruskin*, *XI: The Stones of Venice*, vol. 3, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1904), 181.

[111] Peter Turner, *Truthfulness, Realism, Historicity: A Study in Late Antique Spiritual Literature* (Farnham, Surrey, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012, ch. 2.

[112] A further sense of the biography's *truthfulness* supports their being trusted here. This truthfulness refers not to historical realism, but to their transformative weight in effecting and changing the lives of their recipients. Their truth can, in supplement to the historicity with which Gregory, to his mind, has imbued them, be tested not by the information they contain, but in the fruits and consistency with which the works move their readers to parallel action.

The differences between the experience of old age in a contemporary North Atlantic context and the context of late antique upper Anatolia can easily be overstated. One frequent overstatement often alluded to consists in a narrative of decline, in which, *then*, a smaller proportion of people survived into old age, so that those who did were esteemed and respected, whereas, *now*, since the proportion of the populace living longer has increased so has reverence for the old diminished.[113] This obscures the truth. As Pat Thane's recent demographic studies have indicated, the low life expectancy belonging to eras such as Gregory's are attributable to a high infant mortality rate: in fact, 'those who survived the hazardous early years of life at any time in the pre-industrial past had a good chance of survival to 60 or beyond'.[114] Indeed, the experience of those later years then seems as ambivalent as our own now. Historian Tim Parkin's study of old age in the classical world reveals Gregory's cultural backdrop as familiarly conflicted: the old were sometimes represented as rightly proud of their age, yet other times the depiction of aged women especially seems 'grotesque and cruel'.[115] Gender as well as socioeconomic status swayed the experience of old age, as Simone de Beauvoir and Susan Sontag have argued is likewise the case in modern times.[116] These parallels being so, it remains the case that developments in technology, biology, medicine, notions of retirement, and secularization (in some parts of the developed world) make for questions which are vastly different to those Gregory would have asked in his era.

For all the difference between his context and our own, I suggest Gregory's works can nevertheless assist an engagement with contemporary perceptions of old age and the end of life when used as we propose. Namely, what this thesis does not set out to do is to ask of Gregory's works direct answers to the question of how we ought, *today*, to imagine the life-course and its end, although a case could be made to argue that Gregory's work might distinctively lend itself to such a pursuit.[117] Rather, this thesis asks how Gregory's biographies, on their own terms,

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[113] For an example of this misconception see the otherwise helpful Rowan A. Greer, 'Special Gift and Special Burden: Views of Old Age in the Early Church', in *Growing Old in Christ*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and others (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 19–37 (3).

[114] Pat Thane, *A History of Old Age* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2005), 9.

[115] Tim G. Parkin, *Old Age in the Roman World: A Cultural and Social History* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2003), 246.

[116] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, trans. Patrick O'Brian (New York, NY: Warner Books, 1973); Susan Sontag, 'The Double Standard of Aging', in *On the Contrary: Essays by Men and Women*, ed. Janet Fleetwood and Martha Rainbolt (New York, NY: SUNY, 1983), 99–112.

[117] We could draw on Ludlow's observation, argued in her 2007 monograph *Gregory of Nyssa: Ancient and (Post)modern*, that Gregory's work is primed for the use of constructive improvisation owing to 'the nature of his writing' as dialogic, open, often ambiguous 'and the content of his particular views about

suggest a theological vision of progress across a human life. The anthropological implications of this vision are teased out, and we speculate as to how such implications might matter, if realized in contemporary experiences of ageing and dying. In this respect, the argument that follows is not taken as an invitation to adopt Gregory's vision, but instead as an invitation to take seriously what is implied and revealed by the visions of human progress which prevail in our times by imagining a contrasting alternative.

<div align="center">*</div>

The anthropology that is implied by Gregory of Nyssa's notion of *epektasis*, as *epektasis* is exposited in key moments of scholarship over the last century, gives rise to a troubling picture of the human life-course and its end. Such a picture is at least partially convergent with a number of presumptions present in our own times. It is the task of this thesis to return to *epektasis* from the alternative angle of Gregory's biographical works. We shall look to how Gregory saw the ever-growing love of God give shape to the lives and practices of Macrina, Moses, and Thaumaturgus. As we look to the significance of three particular practices central to these lives, *giving*, *telling*, and *forgiving*, we see an alternative set of anthropological implications encountered. *Epektasis*, we shall discover, as practiced in lives, draws its partakers into a certain kind of human progress, from which, in turn, old age and death may be perceived and experienced distinctively.

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language and the nature of theology' (287). We will have reason in ch. 3 to explore Ludlow's point in depth.

Chapter 2: Giving and Truth

As Gregory's three *Lives* are received as models enacting the ever-deepening love and virtue of the ascent of *epektasis*, the activity of their lives becomes of urgent interest. In this chapter, the importance of *giving* as a characteristic action expressed in the material lives of the three is examined. The descriptor 'giving' collects together three significant references, which will be treated together. 'Giving' refers to the literal donation of money, resources, and time to the materially poor. Extending further, it refers to the wider display of virtues associated with philanthropy: benevolence, compassion, and beneficence. Extending negatively, it refers to a spirited resistance to greed; since for the Cappadocians greed is read as a form of theft, so inversely moderation is pictured as passive gift to others.[1] In this chapter, an exploration of *giving*, its relation to *truth*, and the progress it thereby engenders will make way, in a second accompanying chapter, for an answer to the question of what difference such a vision of progress would make to the conception of, and engagement with, ageing and dying.

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We begin by investigating the significance of the practice of *giving* in the lives of Gregory's three exemplars as they are caught up in the spiritual ascent of *epektasis*. We shall open by asking: (1) how does the giving to which Macrina, Moses, and Thaumaturgus are shown to be committed present in their lives? The answer given will be descriptive, observing the common features as well as particular flourishes of giving as pictured in each life. In part (2), we will seek to ascertain a sense of the significance of giving for Gregory by turning, for reasons explored below, to his most direct treatments of the topic across his corpus: his *Sermons on the Beatitudes* (c. 379) and *On the Love of the Poor 1* and *2* (c. 382). With recourse to these sources, we will see that Gregory conceives of giving as a response to the truth of who God is (and what things, selves, and the poor are in light of who God is). We will attend in part (3) to the repeated references to right *sight* and *seeing* in these homilies. This phenomenological and

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[1] On this, see Basil of Caesarea's comment that 'clearly your wealth and superabundance indicates a lack of charity', in his *Saint Basile: Homélies Sur La Richesse*, trans. Yves Courtonne (Paris: Firmin-Didiot), 7.1, quoted by Susan R. Holman, *The Hungry Are Dying: Beggars and Bishops in Roman Cappadocia*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 105.

sensory frame will push us to acknowledge a further provocation of giving in Gregory's view. Namely, giving is provoked not only by the cerebral knowledge, learnt by way of doctrine, of what things, selves, and the poor truly are, but also by the 'unschooled' and immediate experience of things, selves, and the poor as they are sensed and attended to in their reality. In a final move (4) we will conclude that giving is for Gregory primarily a matter of recognising the truth, via knowledge of God or sharpened experience. Giving is, in this respect, an activity concerned less with morality and more with ontology, related less to the giver's generosity and compassion and more to the giver's recognition of what things and selves are. We shall end by proposing that such giving – in response to truth – shapes the progress of the three in distinctive ways. As the three give in this way, their lives' progression involves radical insecurity, perpetual rather than occasional.

1. Giving

First, consideration will be given to the place of Christian giving in Gregory's late antique upper-Anatolia, within which his own vision is set. Since the beginnings of Christianity, as Robert Wilken has argued, scriptural insistence to love the poor had been heeded by bishops who exhorted their clergy to be 'zealous in caring for the needy'.[2] Indeed, as Peter Brown contends, that the poor were the responsibility of the bishops was an aggressively maintained 'Christian representation of the Church's novel role in society'.[3] Gregory's setting provided ample need for these deep Christian instincts to find expression. Under Roman rule and following the founding of Constantinople, the monetary value of lands in Cappadocia increased with easier access to large markets; this, combined with high taxation on agricultural properties, led land to be 'concentrated in ever fewer hands', as Justo L. Gonzalez has charted compellingly.[4] Former owners, driven from their land, joined the masses of the urban poor whilst also 'reducing the total agricultural output of a region already prone to shortages'.[5] Meanwhile, not infrequent times of drought presented opportunities for the rich to increase their power, as 'farmers whose seed had dried in the ground had to sell their lands or were

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[2] Robert L. Wilken, *The First Thousand Years: A Global Spread of Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 156.

[3] Peter Brown, *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity: Toward a Christian Empire* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 77.

[4] Justo L. Gonzalez, *Faith and Wealth a History of Early Christian Ideas on the Origin, Significance, and Use of Money* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1990), 173.

[5] Gonzalez, *Faith and Wealth*, 173.

forced to borrow money'.[6] The urban poor were growing and visible. As Gregory remarks of the era himself,

> We have seen in these days a great number of the naked and homeless… [t]heir roof is the sky. For shelter they use porticos, alleys, and the deserted corners of the town… Their clothing consists of wretched rags. Their harvest depends on human pity.[7]

In addition to the *need* to assert Christian love of the poor, Gregory's context also presented a particular cause for *motivation*. Brian Daley explains the opportunity that educated Christians discerned as they heard the Emperor Julian (reigning between 361 and 363) 'enunciate with new force' the importance of the Hellenic concept of *philanthropy*, having himself 'left the Christian tradition… to return to the ideals and practice of Hellenism'.[8] For the so-called Cappadocian Fathers, who held their Christianity together with the Greek schooling they lived and breathed, Julian's exhortation to give proposed an activity deeply convergent with Christian instincts while also commendable in public society. Such an opportunity would be hungrily taken up a 'decade after Julian's edict banning teaching Hellenic culture' by Christians had severely limited their opportunities to contribute to public life.[9] Christian giving, then, garnered a certain appeal for its bridging the publicly and politically acceptable with the profoundly Christian.[10]

With both need and motivation, fourth century Anatolia was a setting for emerging Christian welfare provision, at the heart of which lay the efforts of Gregory, his brother Basil, and their friend Gregory of Nazianzus. By the end of the century, organised systems of welfare provision were emerging in monastic communities and buildings being constructed by Christians for the purpose of care of the poor. These complex welfare institutions (known, after their founding by Gregory's brother Basil as '*Basileias*') signified the motivation of Christian bishops both to care deeply for the poor as their scriptures implored them, and, as Daley sees, to 'reconstruct Greek culture and society along Christian lines, in such a way as both to absorb its traditional

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[6] Gonzalez, *Faith and Wealth*, 173. Gonzalez comments that 'the main business of usurers was not so much earning interest on their capital as it was expropriating land that had been offered as security against loans that could not possibly be paid' (75).

[7] Gregory of Nyssa, 'On the Love of the Poor 1', in Holman, *Hungry Are Dying:* trans. Susan R. Holman, 193–99, 457 (194).

[8] Brian Daley, '1998 NAPS Presidential Address Building a New City: The Cappadocian Fathers and the Rhetoric of Philanthropy', *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 7.3 (1999), 431–61 (436).

[9] Daley, 'Rhetoric of Philanthropy', 438.

[10] Daley, 'Rhetoric of Philanthropy', 438.

shape and radically reorient it'.[11] Understanding something of the weight and relevance of *giving* to Gregory in his epoch – as that which was both urgently required and publicly opportune – we turn to his placement of the activity in the lives of Macrina, Moses, and Thaumaturgus. For each, we will look at common enactments of giving across the lives (choice of simplicity; active generosity; resistance to greed), and the particular enactments distinctive to each.

(A) Macrina

Central to Gregory's portrayal of Macrina is her choice of material simplicity. Like that of Moses and Thaumaturgus, this is understood as a passive gift to others within a dynamic where greed would inversely be theft from others. In Macrina's case, the repeated choice of abstinence and moderation throughout her life is starkly felt after her death. As Gregory recalls his wondering about how his sister's body ought to be dressed for the grave, the words of the deaconess Lampadia, shocked at his wondering, strike him as important to record. As for the right clothes, Lampadia exclaims, 'as far as clothes to adorn the body go, [Macrina] procured none when she was alive, nor did she store them for the present purpose'; as for asking what Macrina's store-cupboard might contain, 'Store-cupboard indeed!'… '[Y]ou have in front of you all her treasure. There is the cloak, there is the head covering, there the well-worn shoes on the feet. This is all her wealth, these are her riches'.[12] Macrina's giving by way of simplicity is laid bare: her storehouse and treasure is in heaven; her adornment has been 'a pure life'.[13]

The passive giving of this simplicity is matched with active generosity. What she comes into receipt of she shares: in early life 'she kept nothing of the things assigned to her in the equal division between brothers and sisters, but all her share was given into the priest's hand'.[14] As she lives with her widowed mother, Emmelia, Macrina organises their communal life such that they live 'on a footing of equality with the staff of maids, so as to share with them in the same food, the same kind of bed, and in all the necessaries of life'.[15] As much as she shares what is material with the poor, Macrina's generosity is too of spirit, exemplified in Gregory's observation of her relationship with Emmelia, in which 'she shared her mother's toils, dividing

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[11] Daley, 'Rhetoric of Philanthropy', 432.
[12] *Life of Macrina*, 990A (63).
[13] *Life of Macrina*, 990A (62).
[14] *Life of Macrina*, 980D (50).
[15] *Life of Macrina*, 970C (34).

her cares with her, and lightening her heavy load of sorrows'.[16] Here she is pictured as 'the prop of her mother's weakness', generous to her in her grief.[17]

A further dimension to the giving that Macrina models alongside Moses and Thaumaturgus is her public resistance to wealth. Turning down 'worldliness', she is one in whom no 'jealousy… hatred or pride' could be found, since she 'had cast away all vain desires for honour and glory, all vanity, arrogance and the like'.[18] The community which she founded and to which she belonged declared that 'continence was their luxury…obscurity their glory', and 'poverty, and the casting away of all material superfluities like dust from their bodies, was their wealth'.[19] 'In fact', Gregory comments, 'of all the things after which men eagerly pursue in this life, there were none with which they could not easily dispense'.[20] Gregory repeatedly reaches for such contrastive formulations in order to recall the protest wrapped up in Macrina's giving: a protest against an alternative reign of greed, wealth, and superfluity.

Macrina's *giving*, expressed in these ways, has the same striking effect particularly visible in Thaumaturgus's enactment: compelling others to join with the generosity. Her brother Basil 'was puffed up beyond measure' as a rhetorician; Macrina 'took him in hand' and 'with such speed' he 'forsook the glories of this world' and renounced his property'.[21] Emmelia was persuaded 'to give up…all showy style of living…to share the life of the maids, treating all her slave girls and menials as if they were sisters that belonged to the same rank as herself'.[22] Her brother Peter was educated by her from his infancy, the fruits of which are borne, when, in a time of severe famine, 'Peter's kindness supplied such an abundance of food that the desert seemed a city by reason of the number of visitors'.[23] Her giving is so pervasive and visible – depicted as a spirit of life rather than a series of calculated decisions – that it is shown as that which others can imitate and join. It is a giving, as has been shown, that consists in repeated choices of simplicity, active compassion, and resolute resistance to greed.

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[16] *Life of Macrina*, 980D (27).
[17] *Life of Macrina*, 970A (32).
[18] *Life of Macrina*, 970D (35).
[19] *Life of Macrina*, 970D (35). While not cited, Matthew 6 might be taken as the scriptural backcloth to this asceticism, which is founded on the substance of God: the Father in heaven will reward for the obscurity of charity now.
[20] *Life of Macrina*, 970D (35).
[21] *Life of Macrina*, 966C (27-8).
[22] *Life of Macrina*, 966D (28).
[23] *Life of Macrina*, 972D (38).

Striking to Gregory's presentation of Macrina in particular is his suggestion that her ascetic giving-up associates her with a kind of beauty. This is observed by Natalie Carnes, who notes in her 2014 work, *Beauty: A Theological Engagement with Gregory of Nyssa*, that Gregory discusses Macrina's beauty as he recalls the suitors who she attracted and yet chose not to pursue in favour of monastic life.[24] Macrina's beauty here parallels the beauty allotted in the same text to Naucratius, which is discussed by Gregory with regard to the worldly possibilities he casts aside like Macrina (not for him the security of a marriage, but the opportunity to win fame and glory for his natural aptitudes).[25] The juxtaposition Carnes points out, between renunciation and beauty, underscores the fact that the poverty Macrina and Naucratius chose did not validate mere loss, but, for them, constituted living by way of the 'narrow gate' that leads to life and abundance.[26] The beauty claimed for Macrina is the reality of what she came to share in when she gave out of and through her poverty. Thus emerges the sense that the giving up Macrina exemplifies has the connotation not of dutiful restraint but of a pathway into what is truly rich. Indeed, we might juxtapose this insight with the connection Gregory makes between Macrina's poverty and her 'discovery of new blessings', positively enriching the lives of her and her community.[27]

(B) Moses

Moses is shown to share the choice of simplicity and moderation exemplified by Macrina and Thaumaturgus, giving implicitly by protecting the opportunity for others to share in the riches available. Gregory's interpretation of Moses and the manna illustrates this, as Gregory sees restraint modelled by his subject who inspires others like him not to 'exceed the bound of need' in their material lives, but to 'understand well that the natural measure of all in eating is to eat as much as can be enjoyed in one day'; that is, to enjoy with temperance and self-control.[28] Moses is remembered by Gregory as one who 'chose the desert way of life', who 'made camps under the cloud', reliant on God's provision for the simple necessities of water and bread, and who, like Thaumaturgus, left behind 'no sign on the earth nor any grave'.[29] Indeed, objects and events within Moses's life that seem unconnected to his asceticism

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[24] Natalie Carnes, *Beauty: A Theological Engagement with Gregory of Nyssa* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 66.

[25] Carnes, *Beauty*, 66.

[26] Carnes, *Beauty*, 66.

[27] *Life of Macrina*, 972B (36).

[28] *Life of Moses*, II.141 (87).

[29] *Life of Moses*, I.75 (49); II.229 (113).

nevertheless gain connection in the allegorical reading that Gregory offers in his second work of *theoria*. Thus the pomegranate detail that Moses is commanded to add as an embellishment of the priestly outer garments comes, in Gregory's eye, to symbolize the ascetic moderation Moses models. The pomegranate is 'covered with a hard and sour rind', like an 'austere and unpleasant' appearance, yet inside is 'full of good hopes when it ripens'.[30] Thus Moses's shoes are 'the…austere life', continuous with the life and practice of the one who wears them.

Active generosity is a further feature of Moses's giving, if less central to his depiction than it is to the lives of Macrina and Thaumaturgus. We can find it presented by pivoting again around the account of the manna in the desert, this time observing the extent to which Gregory portrays Moses's temperate distribution of bread and water among the community as a means to an end in which all actively have enough. This distribution is not only about restraint, then, but about an end in which it may be said that 'the strength of those who gathered made no difference', in which there are plentiful gifts for all and all have an active experience of abundance.[31]

A feature of greater prominence is the contrast with which Moses's giving is depicted against the aspiration to wealth endemic to his backdrop. Gregory accentuates a divergence between 'the multitude' and Moses. The former 'fell into disorderliness', as they lived by 'a lack of moderation in regard to the pleasures of the table', unsatisfied by 'the food which flowed down from above'.[32] The latter, soaring above such lust, was totally devoted to the coming inheritance which had been promised to those who departed from Egypt', trusting the provision of God to meet his need. The multitude's 'immoderation', 'lust of gluttony', and 'unruly desires', stand starkly against Moses's choice of trusting simplicity.[33] In parallel again to Macrina and Thaumaturgus, Moses's way is eventually found persuasive: the Israelites join with his trust and live in the abundance provided by God rather than by the greed which ends in 'sickness and death'.[34] Moses's giving finds expression, then, primarily in its presentation as an ascetic choice of moderation, secondarily in the sharing of gifts with others, and both in contrast to an instinct of gluttony.

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[30] *Life of Moses*, II.229 (113); II.93 (103).

[31] *Life of Moses*, II.141 (87).

[32] *Life of Moses*, I.63 (46).

[33] *Life of Moses*, I.64 (47).

[34] *Life of Moses*, I.64 (47).

As dated among the latest of Gregory's surviving works, the *Life of Moses* offers what is speculated to contain Gregory's most mature theological thought. Accordingly, it is especially interesting to note the particular presentation Gregory gives to Moses as one whose *giving* is concurrent with his *receiving*. We see in the *Life*, for example, how clearly Moses first relies on God for the provision of manna and water, as well as direction and protection (all of which Moses will then share and distribute). Gregory steadily recollects the offerings made to Moses on his way – from the Egyptian princess's 'good will' in taking him in as a babe, to the gifts made by others in establishing the Tabernacle.[35] Indeed, so central is this receiving to Gregory's perception of Moses that the latter example is cited in his earlier homily, *Love of Poor 1*. As he implores his recipients (many poor themselves) to *give*, Gregory commends the memory of Moses, who 'did not receive the offerings of the Tabernacle from a single benefactor but all the people gave him contributions'.[36] At the same time as Moses is recalled as one generous to the poor, he is, in Gregory's mind, one dependent on the generosity of others, among them the generosity of the poor themselves.

(C) Gregory Thaumaturgus

Thaumaturgus's giving finds expression in the choice of simplicity common to the three. This choice is shown to run deeply in Thaumaturgus: even as a young man, he was one found 'forsaking all that youth goes wild over… clothes, gambling, luxurious living', preferring instead 'wisdom, temperance, self-control and modesty'.[37] This choice of material simplicity carries into his adulthood. Gregory writes, in a formulation of striking similarity to that deployed with respect to Macrina, that 'freedom from possessions is [his] wealth'.[38] Indeed, it remains a choice to his end; as Gregory notes, again, in likeness with Macrina and Moses, Thaumaturgus did not die a wealthy individual but had '[kept] himself from every earthly possession to the point of not even receiving burial in his own place'.[39] The simplicity of Thaumaturgus's material life is matched by a 'moderation of character' manifest in his relinquishment of the ambition and greed of worldliness.[40] He does not seek out posts of

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[35] *Life of Moses*, (I.17) 32.
[36] 'On the Love of the Poor 1', 460 (195).
[37] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 900C (46).
[38] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 897A (44).
[39] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 956A (84).
[40] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 905D (50).

ostensible glory but announces 'good-bye to life's affairs' in preference for virtue and simplicity. [41]

Once more, active instances of generosity emerge from the life of moderate simplicity. In Thaumaturgus's case, these instances require some excavation, hidden as they are in several of the most significant miracles allotted to him. While these miracles are reported in such a way as to more readily strike us as impressions of power and wonder, they are subtly framed by kindnesses and compassion. The episode of Thaumaturgus's miraculous foreknowledge begins, Gregory recalls, when Thaumaturgus passed a beggar and, 'without hesitation…threw the double cloak which he was wearing onto the one lying there'. [42] In a further episode, Gregory indicates his consciousness of how distinctive the undergirding of Thaumaturgus's miracles with compassion is, commenting of a marvel in which the river Lycus's flooding was overcome that while the miracle itself is somewhat generic (since prophets too seemed able on occasion to command water rendering it 'equally subject'), what Thaumaturgus did 'wins in philanthropy' as by it 'the safety of the neighbours was assured since the stream was reinstated once and for all'. [43] The instinct to give actively and compassionately to others is found integral to the wondrous ministry of Thaumaturgus.

A spirited opposition to worldly wealth and vanity accompanies such generosity, evident especially as Gregory recalls the role of Thaumaturgus in the appointment of a future bishop. As church leaders deliberate, Thaumaturgus, 'not suppos[ing] that wealth and prestige should be relied on for testimony, nor the distinctions of this world, none of which the divine word enumerates in its lists of goods', proposes an unlikely candidate, Alexander, 'clad in dirty rags' with an 'unkempt body'. [44] As he convinces the others of Alexander's fittingness, he forcefully expresses the error of reading wealth and power as indicators of the truly good, chastising those who have equated the two. [45] As with Gregory's further examples, Thaumaturgus's giving is compelling to those who encounter it. Just as those he deliberates with come to see the truth of his perspective, so too, the temple custodian, meeting Thaumaturgus, 'straightaway believed in the word and left everything', joining the wonderworker in his material simplicity. [46]

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[41] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 908C (50).
[42] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 940D (74).
[43] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 933A (68).
[44] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 940A (73), 936B (70); 936C (70).
[45] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 940A-940C (70-73).
[46] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 917B (58).

Thaumaturgus, like Moses and Macrina, is one whose giving is exhibited in a choice of moderation, active compassion, and opposition to worldly wealth.

In this *Life*, in comparison to those of Gregory's other models, the emptiness of wealth is exposed most strongly. The mentioned episode in which Thaumaturgus presents Alexander as a fitting candidate for Bishop is emblematic of a repeated insistence on Gregory's part that riches and renown are void and meaningless. Gregory indicates this at the opening of his telling, declaring that the 'wealth, pedigree, glory, worldly powers…founding stories of homelands, and narratives…[of] victories, battlefields, and the horrors of war'…'are irrelevant to our purpose'.[47] To locate the goodness of a person by listing those 'who set the stage for his birth in order of the flesh', or by discoursing on their 'worldly renown' is a profound error.[48] The strength with which Gregory incontrovertibly belittles the persuasiveness of wealth and power fits well with his theology of giving. As the argument of this chapter progresses, the statement of wealth as void will ring true with the analysis Gregory expresses elsewhere about the ontological impossibility of ownership in light of a God who endlessly gives all things.

2. Giving in response to knowing

Gregory foregrounds giving in the *Lives* he praises. This giving presents in the biographies of the three as they reject wealth, actively donate, choose compassion, and protest against greed, as well as in an array of expressions particular to each figure. We turn now to step towards the following texts as our primary foci: Gregory's early sermon on the first beatitude, *Blessed are the Poor in Spirit* (c. 379), part of a commentary in which each beatitude is interpreted as transporting the Christian towards closer likeness of the divine archetype; his later Lent Homilies (c. 382) *On the Love of the Poor 1* and *2* (hereafter, *Love of Poor*), preached in response to the social and economic turmoil known acutely in Nyssa since the late 370s; and, in a lesser role, his Homily *Against Those who Practice Usury* (c. 379) (hereafter, *Against Usury*), frequently collected together with the Lent homilies, in which Gregory attempts to persuade the faithful to abandon the common practice of exploitative moneylending. These texts are of significant relevance to our investigation. Not only do we encounter in them Gregory's most direct treatments of giving, but such treatments are dated as originating at the same time at which

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[47] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 896B (42).
[48] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 900A (45).

Gregory was writing the lives of Macrina (c. 382) and Thaumaturgus (c. 379-380). Addressed to Christian lay people, on matters of Christian everyday living, these texts then shed apposite light on what Gregory believed the ordinary giving of Christians to be about. By attending to them, we will be able to deepen our sense of the significance of giving in Gregory's view. Equipped with this, we may then step back to the biographies he was writing alongside his homilies and more vividly understand the weight and significance of the giving the three engage in.

The texts in question are not systematic works and the theological moves made in them are not spelled out in explicit terms. Nevertheless, on closely reading these texts together, common convergences can be discerned and their undergirding theology pieced together in retrospect. I will argue that this reconstructive task clarifies the proximity of two integral doctrines to the act of giving in Gregory's mind: God as creator, and Christ as incarnate. It is knowledge of these doctrines that exposes the truth of things, selves, and the poor, in such a way as to render generous giving the only reasonable response to what they truly are. The language of *knowledge* and *truth* might seem to jar here with the correct perception we have of Gregory as a profoundly apophatic theologian, who, standing in a tradition alongside Philo and Pseudo-Dionysius, as Andrew Louth sees, was committed to the idea that the nature of God is essentially *un*knowable, and the nature of creatures (being real in relation to God) likewise resistant to our full comprehensive grasp.[49] The knowledge that doctrine provides, and which we discuss, does not compromise this deep unknowability. Rather, what we discuss as doctrinal 'knowledge' must be thought of as the (always limited) scaffold upon which Gregory believed we would more precisely grasp the ineffability of God. This point acknowledged, we move to show how giving, in Gregory's vision, poses not as dutiful obligation *to* God but as truthful knowledge *of* God, and truthful knowledge of selves, things, and the poor, in light of God. It is my contention that this theological backdrop to giving, gleaned from the homilies, will shed light on the practical examples of giving presented to us in the biographies, to which we will return later.

(A) Giving as knowledge of God: Creator

The divine generosity of a creator

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[49] Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 159, 180-1.

The recapitulation of God's status as *Creator*, and the foregrounding of God's cosmological power, is integral to the homilies in which Gregory discusses and implores generosity and beneficence. After describing this emphasis and its particular strength, we will turn to propose why Gregory might be so intent on making it. In *Love of Poor 1*, Gregory insists that 'God Himself' is known in 'the creation of the earth, the arrangement of the heavens, the well-ordered rhythm of the seasons, the warmth of the sun, the formation, by cooling, of ice, in short, all things'.[50] As he preaches *Against Usury*, the 'whole world' is recalled as belonging first to God; 'silver, copper and every other material are subject to his authority' and 'all belong to him'.[51] He urges his hearers to marvel at the extent of divine creativity; to 'consider the sky's expanse, examine the boundless sea, [or] learn from the earth's magnitude and count the living beings which it nourishes'.[52] As he preaches on the first beatitude, Gregory sets out in his opening lines the 'Word of God', from whom his ethical teaching arises, as the Word 'who specifies the nature and number of the things that are contemplated…[who] points them out, as it were, with His finger; here the Kingdom of Heaven, there the inheritance of the earth that is above'; the Word, in other words, is in deep 'kinship with the God of all creation'.[53] Indeed, further in his homily Gregory urges his hearers to remember the 'authority of Divine power', which 'is the true Master of human life, who determined the beginning as well as end of existence'.[54]

The strength with which Gregory asserts God is Creator is clarified by placing his thought in relation to the prevailing theologies of his backdrop. In her work *God and Creation in Christian Theology*, Kathryn Tanner offers a comprehensive survey of a number of discernible theological positions in the Greco-Roman world pertaining to creation. We will not repeat the detail of the array of positions she outlines here, but we will restate the compelling conclusion she reaches: that the positions discernible operate within a matrix where the 'transcendence of God', on the one hand, and the 'direct involvement of God with the non-divine', on the other, are rendered mutually exclusive, indeed 'vary[ing] inversely in degree'.[55] Hellenic conceptions of divinity,

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[50] 'On the Love of the Poor 1', 461 (196).

[51] Gregory of Nyssa, 'Against Those Who Practice Usury', ed. and trans. Casimir McCambley, *Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, 36.3–4 (1991), J204 (294–302; 296).

[52] 'Against Those Who Practice Usury', J199 (296).

[53] Gregory of Nyssa, 'The Beatitudes', in *The Lord's Prayer and The Beatitudes*, ed. and trans. Hilda C. Graef (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1953), 85–166, Sermon 1 (85).

[54] 'The Beatitudes', Sermon 1 (94).

[55] Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment* (London: Blackwell), 39.

she comments, 'oscillate…between a characterization of divinity as a kind of being in the world that supposes their close connection and an oppositional definition of divine transcendence that separates them'.[56] Against both of these tendencies, Tanner diagnoses that early Christian theologians (Gregory among them), confessing a God both beyond and in the world, would need to 'radicalize claims about both God's transcendence and involvement' in order for the two to coexist.[57]

The doctrine of Creation offers a narrative that responds to this need, telling of a God at once wholly active in the world while never identified as a part of it, absolutely immanent and absolutely transcendent. Knowing something of the backdrop against which the doctrine stands exposes its radicalism. As Gregory discusses God as Creator in his homilies, he is speaking not merely of a divine agent who brings to being the *things* of creation, but about the immanence of a God who sustains the creation of all things in all moments. Indeed, we read of the immanence of such a God's creativity in Gregory's preface to his homily *Love of Poor 2*: God, he states, is one in whom 'we have life, movement and being', one who 'encompasses' all in all times.[58] We read of the sustaining, unceasing quality of God's creativity in *Love of Poor 1*, where Gregory tells of how God 'maintains [creation] continually on our behalf':

> he sows at the opportune moment and waters the earth skillfully… When the delicate buds sprout and green blades appear, He sets the sun over them… He also causes the clusters on the vine to swell, and in the autumn distills His wine for the thirsty and fattens our various flocks that humankind may have abundant meat.[59]

Such a radical insistence on the total and continuous nature of God's creating is protected and promoted at numerous points across Gregory's corpus.[60] Notable in his consideration in the homilies is the parsing out of divine creativity in terms of generosity and giving. As Gregory puts it in *Love of Poor 1*, God is one 'who in the first instance manifests Himself to us as the

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[56] Tanner, *God and Creation*, 39. The divine, she shows, is liable either to be in close relation to the world and unable to transcend the world (for example, Stoic conceptions of divinity, which share material substantiality with the non-divine) or to be distinct from the world at the cost of engagement with it (exemplified in, Tanner argues, middle Platonism) (40-41).

[57] Tanner, *God and Creation*, 46.

[58] 'On the Love of the Poor 1', 473 (200); Acts 17:28.

[59] 'On the Love of the Poor 1', 464 (196).

[60] See especially Gregory's *Apology on the Hexaemeron* and *Address on Religious Instruction.*

author of good and philanthropic deeds' in his creation.[61] His creative power, as he preaches *Against Usury*, 'is a fountain of abundant generosity'; his love and sustenance of all creatures is 'most generous'.[62] As Gregory impels the listeners of his homilies to live simply, to give to the poor, and to disengage from usury, it is God as Creator – whose creativity is received as a work of philanthropy and generosity – that is placed front and centre of his supplication.[63]

The status of things and selves

That God is so supremely generous is relevant to the prospective giver addressed by Gregory in his homilies not only, however, because of the model that such a God provides for imitation (God is generous, so you must be generous too). Rather, Gregory's deeper reasoning appears as follows: that God is Creator, known in his creative generosity, is essential to the prospective giver because of the transformation such knowledge effects of the status of all things and selves.

With respect to things, God as figured so totally as generous Creator of all, not once but continuously, bestows on all things the permanent status of gift. This status is not sentimental and benign but powerfully prohibitive of ownership. As Gregory puts it in *Against Usury*, 'the entire world is the possession of a fair Debtor…the whole earth is gold and belongs to your Debtor'.[64] The implications of this are teased out two-fold. Negatively, if things have the ontological status of gift or debt, their being hoarded constitutes a misreading of what they are. The assertion that one truly possesses or owns a thing becomes a category mistake, since in all moments things exist as sustained and repeatedly gifted by God. Thus does Gregory instruct those who hear his homily *Love of Poor 1*: 'don't retain everything for yourself…it is best and more just that brothers reap an equal part of the heritage'.[65] Positively, if things have the ontological status of gift, their being passed on and shared with others and re-gifted to a community is a fitting response to what they truly are, an astute acknowledgment of the fact

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[61] 'On the Love of the Poor 1', 461 (196).

[62] 'Against Those Who Practice Usury', J201 (298).

[63] A further indication of the centrality of generosity to Gregory's God is clear in Gregory's insistence, responding to Eunomius, that *philanthropia* is rightly applied to describe the Son as well as the Father. As Eunomius writes that the incarnation constitutes the Son's display of *philanthropia* and so indicates Christ's inferiority, Gregory retorts not by way of denying such a display, but by asserting its high value. The work of creative *giving* is fundamentally divine; upon such a basis Christ as *giver* in the Incarnation precisely reveals his divinity shared with the Father. For a discussion of this, see Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue*, 162.

[64] 'Against Those Who Practice Usury', J198 (296).

[65] 'On the Love of the Poor 1', 465 (197).

that in each moment their givenness is renewed by God's sustaining provision.[66] In this vein do we hear Gregory, quoting the prophet Isaiah, enjoin his hearers to 'share your bread with the hungry, [and] lodge in your (own) house the poor who have no shelter', and 'share with the poor'.[67] The conclusion we can reconstruct is thus that knowledge of God as Creator, generously giving each thing its being in every moment, is that which impels the giver to give, as she sees what appears as her possession as properly gifted and re-gifted again.

With respect to selves, since in Gregory's view the self is likewise sustained by the constant creativity of God, it too must be known as given. This yields the admission that such a self, given and created, is finite. As in *Love of Poor 1* Gregory articulates this finitude, 'our life is fleeting and flowing; it is like a river's current that sweeps everything in its path to final destruction'; it is 'short-lived and perishable'.[68] Gregory entreats his hearers to take in this reality, to 'look at both ends of man's life, where it begins and how it ends', as he puts it commenting on the first beatitude.[69] Indeed, he points out the material simplicity that this self-awareness would engender. As he goes on in the same homily to say, to be aware 'as in a mirror who and what sort of person you are', to contemplate the heap of bones 'denuded of flesh' with 'empty sockets' and 'limbs strewn at random' that one day you will become, would stop you from ever again being 'proud because your clothes are dyed in brilliant purple and you have silk robes embroidered with scenes from war or hunting history'.[70] Knowing God as Creator, and the self as therefore finite is, in Gregory's view, to know at once the pitiful contingency of wealth and security, the 'delusion of vain riches', as in *Love of Poor 2* he articulates it. [71]

According to the theology we have reconstructed from reading across Gregory's homilies, the act of giving emerges as rooted in knowledge of God. As God is recognised as Creator in the most complete and continuous of ways, so things and selves are recognised in their givenness. Such recognition demands magnanimity and spirited resistance to greed not as right behaviour in itself but as fitting response to reality.

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[66] cf. Matthew 10.8: freely you have received, now freely give.

[67] 'On the Love of the Poor 1', 457 (194), after Isaiah 58.7. See also, 'The Beatitudes', Sermon 1 (87), and 'Against Those Who Practice Usury', J202 (298).

[68] 'On the Love of the Poor 1', (469) 199.

[69] 'The Beatitudes', Sermon 1 (92–93).

[70] 'The Beatitudes', Sermon 1 (92-93).

[71] 'On the Love of the Poor 2', 485 (204). See also 'On the Love of the Poor 1', 465 (197).

(B) Giving as knowledge of Christ: Incarnate

The incarnate poverty of Christ

A second theological emphasis finds reiteration across the homilies in which Gregory implores his hearers to give: the incarnation of Christ. Gregory is well known for his significant role in developing an interpretation of the incarnation following the declaration of the faith at Nicaea in 325, notably, defending Christ's humanity against Apollinaris and Christ's divinity against the Arianism of Eunomius. In the homilies under consideration, the social ethic underlying the doctrine he develops is exposed. The recognition of Christ's own incarnate 'poverty' is what precipitates the Christian's giving to the poor.

As Gregory explicates the first beatitude, asking what it would mean to be *poor in spirit*, he suggests the exemplification of poverty in Christ himself who, he quotes the apostle, 'for us became poor, being rich'.[72] In the first instance, this poverty is of nature. As Gregory explains it to his hearers, God gives God's self to the world in the birth of Jesus, wholly taking on human nature in the act of joining 'the miserable human race'.[73] The choice of human nature is, in Gregory's sight, a choice of poverty. He captures the descent thus: 'the perfectly pure accepts the filth of human nature', leaving 'the angels on the heights…to dwell with the beasts of the earth' in his inhabitation of a human body which alters and ages.[74] Indeed, as Gregory preaches in the same homily, God in Christ 'takes up our infirmities and bears our diseases', living in flesh susceptible to illness and languor, and, 'after going through all our poverty', he 'passes on to the experience of death…instead of being impassable'.[75] 'What more humble', Gregory asks, 'for the King of creation than to share in our poor nature', joining us in 'pitiable captivity'?[76] As God is incarnate in Christ, so God is made poor.

In the same homily, a second instance of Christ's poverty is presented as integral to his person. Gregory recalls to his hearers that though poor already in flesh, the person of Jesus is poor again in being born into the contingencies of material poverty. As Gregory remarks, 'the Lord of creation dwells in a cave', 'he who holds the universe in his hands finds no place in the inn, but

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[72] 'The Beatitudes', Sermon 1 (90); 2 Corinthians 8:9.
[73] 'The Beatitudes', Sermon 1 (90).
[74] 'The Beatitudes', Sermon 5 (138).
[75] 'The Beatitudes', Sermon 1 (91); Sermon 5 (138).
[76] 'The Beatitudes', Sermon 1 (91); Sermon 5 (138).

is cast aside into the manger of irrational beasts'.[77] Already knowing material indigence, Gregory recalls Christ's vocation to servitude, 'empt[ying] himself, taking the form of a servant', as a further confirmation of his poverty.[78] 'What greater poverty is there for God than the form of a servant?', bending to the very service of those whose poor nature he had already joined.[79] Such servitude impoverishes him of worldly power, as 'the ruler of rulers…puts on voluntarily the garb of servitude', so too 'the judge of all things becomes a subject of governors'.[80] As God lives his incarnate life, so God is poor a second time.

As Gregory urges his hearers in response to the first beatitude to live simply and give generously, Christ's incarnation – conceived in terms of poverty – takes the foreground alongside the divine creativity identified above. While the poverty of the incarnation is not spelled out as directly by Gregory in his later homilies *Love of the Poor 1* and *2*, the extent to which these homilies will likewise place the poor so proximate to Christ implies their reliance on the same theological underpinning.

The salvific work of the poor

The poverty of Christ incarnate is essential to Gregory's instruction to *give* because the doctrine, so articulated, imbues the materially poor with special significance. The poor must be reconsidered, in Gregory's sight, as near Christ and Christ-like owing to their poverty – an insight expressed across the homilies. In *Love of Poor 1*, Gregory preaches not to 'despise those who are stretched out on the grounds as if they merit no respect', but to 'consider who they are [in order to] discover their worth', for 'they bear the countenance of our Saviour' since 'the Lord in his goodness has given them His own countenance'.[81] In *Love of the Poor 2*, Gregory makes much of the Matthean account of Christ's disguise among *the least of these*, recalling the 'stranger, naked, hungry, sick, prisoner' as the face of the Lord on earth.[82] In ending his sermon on the first beatitude, Gregory offers a maxim summarising the revised awareness his hearers ought now to share: 'the Lord became poor, so be not afraid of poverty'.[83] The poor, the

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[77] 'The Beatitudes', Sermon 1 (91).
[78] 'The Beatitudes', Sermon 1 (91); Philippians 2:7.
[79] 'The Beatitudes', Sermon 1 (91).
[80] 'The Beatitudes', Sermon 1 (91).
[81] 'On the Love of the Poor 1', 460 (195).
[82] 'On the Love of the Poor 2', 473 (200); Matthew 25:38.
[83] 'The Beatitudes', Sermon 1 (96).

dispossessed, and the sick become the favourites of God in whose company it is possible to receive the identity of Jesus.[84]

The identification of the materially poor with the person of Christ encompasses a clear imperative for giving. Spelling out the connection in *Love of Poor 2*, Gregory remarks, 'of those whom you have given no aid, it is me you have failed to help' – the poor, as they stand in the place of Christ, solicit our gift and aid.[85] In response to the first beatitude, Gregory expresses the other side of this exchange, seeing that 'the man who gives to the poor will take his share in Him who became poor for our sake…if you become poor because He became poor, you will also reign because He is reigning'.[86] In *Love of Poor 1* Gregory expresses the same sense, describing the poor, identified with Christ, as 'stewards of our hope, doorkeepers of the kingdom, who open the door to the righteous and close it again to the unloving misanthropists'.[87] Because they are near Christ, worthy and esteemed favourites, the poor solicit our gifts. Because they are near Christ, who is abundantly generous and powerful, the poor will give far more in return on receiving our gifts.

Indeed, the reciprocal dimension is worked out in heightened eschatological terms. As Susan Holman writes in her study of Gregory's late poverty sermons, the poor 'effect the exchanges of eternity', receiving alms and effecting redemption.[88] As Gregory preaches in *Love of Poor 2*, 'if we want to be received by [the poor] in the eternal places, let us receive them now…if we wish to heal the wounds by which our sins have afflicted us, heal today the ulcers that break down their flesh'.[89] Indeed, 'the greater the attentions [to the poor], the more vast the blessings that await the faithful servants'.[90] *Love of Poor 1* urges giving for the same reason. 'Sow your benefactions and your house will be filled with a plentiful harvest', for the poor 'defend and prosecute not by speaking, but by being seen by the judge' and will condemn 'misanthropists and [the] wicked [to] punishment by fire'[91] Gregory's overarching

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[84] Holman is right to point out that this association of the poor with God is prefigured in Judaism. As she writes in *Hungry Are Dying*, the Jewish texts 'differ from the Graeco-Roman view of community leitourgia in that within the Judaisms of late antiquity, the poor were entitled to assistance qua poor', rather than being a member of a community and qualifying by virtue of belonging (48).

[85] 'On the Love of the Poor 2', 484 (204).

[86] 'The Beatitudes', Sermon 1 (96); Matthew 5:3.

[87] 'On the Love of the Poor 1', 460 (195).

[88] Holman, *Hungry Are Dying*, 101.

[89] 'On the Love of the Poor 2', 485 (205).

[90] 'On the Love of the Poor 2', 473 (201).

[91] 'On the Love of the Poor 1', 460 (195).

interpretation of the first beatitude converges on the same point: *blessed are the poor* –
interpreted by Gregory as the materially poor – *for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven*.[92] As in
response to the fifth beatitude he comments, 'the gratitude of souls who have received kindness
towards those who have shown them mercy surely remains beyond this life in life eternal'.[93] In
this respect, the poor in Gregory's vision are not the 'passive tool' that Holman argues they are
in a number of early Christian theories of 'redemptive almsgiving', in which the poor are made
mere 'signifier[s] by which the Christian donor may gain honour'.[94] In contrast, the poor for
Gregory will actively adjudicate the salvation of the rich.

In the light of who Christ truly is, the poor will be seen anew as those to whom giving is
clarified as a truly apposite response. The poor, as poor, become those to whom it is a blessing
to give. A blessing, both as giving convenes an encounter with one in whose presence the
shrouded Christ is immediately known; and as giving has its virtue translated into the future joy
of heaven. It is this latter point, the eschatological reward of giving, which has been presented
as the real key to understanding Gregory's philanthropy in the most notable recent treatments
on the theme. Holman, upon whom we have drawn, underscores Gregory's presentation of the
poor as evoking from the rich what enables the deification of the rich. Likewise, Hans Boersma,
draws out 'final judgement on the rich… as an important theme', seeing that Gregory indeed is
concerned that the rich give in order to 'secure their own eternal future'.[95] The argument we
are developing takes in these treatments yet, in the light of additional emphases in the homilies,
we propose that their stress ought to be less on the transaction effected in the act of giving, and
more on the recognition upon which such giving rests.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

The right doctrinal knowledge of who God is – as creator and incarnate – undergirds the act of
giving as Gregory elucidates the practice across his homilies. Knowledge of who God is effects
the right knowledge of what things, selves, and the poor are. Knowing things, selves, and the
poor in their true reality, giving ensues as the only reasonable response.

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[92] 'The Beatitudes', Sermon 1 (96); Matthew 5:3.
[93] 'The Beatitudes', Sermon 5 (140).
[94] Holman argues that this passivity is clear 'in most early Christian texts' (154).
[95] Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue*, 174.

3. Giving in response to experience

I have argued that the homilies where Gregory most extensively discusses giving cast that giving as a response to right knowledge of God as creator and as incarnate, a knowledge which informs, in turn, the giver's knowledge of things, selves, and the poor. A closer look at the language of right seeing and sight, which is present across the homilies in question, exposes in Gregory's vision an additional provocation to give with which we may expand our account. The presence of this phenomenological choice of frame pushes us to appreciate the ways in which giving comes about not only, for Gregory, in response to doctrinal, learned, knowledge, which shapes knowledge of things, selves, and the poor, but in response to the immediate *experience* of things, selves, and the poor in themselves – as they are encountered with sharpened attention to their distinctive reality. Here we find the point of part (2) above recapitulated by another route: giving relates to the recognition of truth, but that truth, we learn now, can be approached not only by way of the mediation of doctrine, but too by attention to what is really in our midst – to experience. Giving, we shall see, ensues not only because the giver knows cerebrally that the object is a gift (because God is Creator, and gives all). In addition to the effort of this thought process, giving ensues because the giver simply sees the object's beauty and givenness in itself, sees that it is a good gift, and honours its reality by giving it away to the delight of another.

(A) The language of sight and seeing

Treating these homilies together uncovers the frequency with which Gregory draws distinctively on the language of right *sight* and *seeing* in order to describe the activity of giving. In his homily on the first beatitude, Gregory rebukes the misdirected sight that 'look[s] at the prime of age' and at 'handsome appearance', at 'curls blown about by the breeze' and at 'sandals delightfully adorned with elaborate needlework patterns'. [96] 'At these things you will look', Gregory exclaims disdainfully, 'but not at yourself?'[97] For such subjects as curls and sandals and the security they imply are tricks of the eye: 'hallucinations' and 'shadows', as artificial as 'actors parading on the stage'. [98] Rather, Gregory commits to 'show…as in a mirror who and what sort of person' his listener truly is.[99] It is a project that will call on the listener to

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[96] 'The Beatitudes', Sermon 1 (92).
[97] 'The Beatitudes', Sermon 1 (92).
[98] 'The Beatitudes', Sermon 1 (93, 94).
[99] 'The Beatitudes', Sermon 1 (92).

'*gaze* at the mysteries of nature in a common burial ground', '*see* the heaps of bones on top of the other', '*look* [at skulls] with their empty sockets', and '*see* their grinning jaws'. [100] 'If you have *seen* these things, you have *seen* yourself', Gregory remarks: the self as mortal, contingent, created, with respect to which pride will be exposed for its emptiness. [101] In *Love of Poor 2*, it is sight that quickly glances rather than closely attends which Gregory critiques. For at first blush, the poor, he grants, look like beasts. They are 'practically changed into animals', 'bending to the earth, walking on four feet'. [102] Yet, as Gregory goes on, his hearers must '*perceive* the soul beyond the ugliness of the body' – for in fact, looking closely, one must '*recognize* him' as 'born in the image of God'. [103] In *Love of Poor 1*, the visual is deployed likewise, as Gregory implores his hearers to discern the 'countenance' (*prosopon*) – the profile, representation, or image – 'of our saviour' in the faces of the poor. [104] To give generously and to reject wealth is to recognize 'the appearance of the ruler'. [105] It is to 'perceive the King of Kings…as clearly as in a mirror', like the Psalmist does, Gregory explains, as he understands the measure of his days and the finitude of his lifetime 'as nothing in your sight'. [106] Across the homilies, Gregory relates the giver's generosity to the accuracy of their sight. It is as the self is *seen* as it is truly mortal, as possessions are *looked* on in such a way as to register their givenness, and as the poor are *recognized* as bearing the countenance of Christ, that giving ensues.

On the surface, Gregory's deployment of the language of *seeing* and *sight* may appear to be no more than a fitting choice of metaphor. In the philosophical tradition of Gregory's backdrop, sight was commonly associated with truth, and privileged as a sense for its apparent objectivity, an association that still prevails in our era. [107] Whereas taste, smell, touch, or sound would seem to affect their undertaker, sight would seem not to, thus emerging, as epistemologist Lorraine Code explains, as a 'primitive, quasi-foundational, innocent mode of perception', preserving

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[100] 'The Beatitudes', Sermon 1 (93), emphasis added.

[101] 'The Beatitudes', Sermon 1 (93, 92).

[102] 'On the Love of the Poor 2', 477 (201).

[103] 'On the Love of the Poor 2', 477 (201), 485 (204).

[104] Strikingly, the word *prosopon* is also deployed by Gregory in his formulations of the Trinity, where he often uses the word synonymously with *hypostasis*. For a comprehensive discussion, see John J. Lynch, '*Prosopon* in Gregory of Nyssa: A Theological Word in Transition', *Theological Studies*, 40.4 (1979), 728–38. For our purposes, this Trinitarian use is significant in confirming the close identification of God with the poor as he deploys the term in relation to the faces of the impoverished.

[105] 'On the Love of the Poor 1', 460 (195).

[106] 'On the Love of the Poor 1', 469 (199), after Psalm 90:5-6.

[107] See George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1980), ch. 24 for a discussion of how sight is linked with the perception of truth in common discourse.

distance between subject and object, and protecting the conditions of disengaged knowledge.[108] This association being so, it might seem that Gregory draws on the imagery of right sight simply to hammer the point home: selves, things, and the poor must be known as truly what they are; they must be known objectively, as objectively as an eye can see.

Yet taking Gregory's references to seeing and sight as metaphors does not sit easily with the fact that he himself seemed not to abide by the association of sight and objectivity that was common to his backdrop. This is made particularly clear by Carnes, reading Gregory's *Homilies on the Song of Songs* in relation to the subject of beauty. Carnes observes that 'Gregory identifies beauty not just with sight, nor even with the reduced sensorium of sight and sound, but with the entirety of the senses'.[109] Similarly, in *On the Making of Man*, Gregory discusses the senses with no indication of the elevation of sight. Indeed, he comments that sight, just like hearing, touch, smell, and taste, has its own particular – rather than total – terrain of knowledge: 'for as hearing receives all sorts of sounds, and our visual perception exercises its operation by beholding things… so with taste with smell, with perception by touch.[110] The association of sight as objective and preferential among the senses seems not to strike Gregory.[111] This being so, his choosing sight as a metaphor seems unlikely; sight does not for Gregory, stand out for its precision against the other senses.

In view of this, we must consider that in his reference to sight Gregory is drawing on the plain, phenomenological sense of seeing. That is, alongside imparting to his recipients *knowledge* of God as incarnate and creator, and urging them to give on that basis, Gregory is also imploring them to look closely and attentively to things, selves, and the poor, and to give on the basis of what, on looking aright, they truly evince that they are. Indeed, the possibility that Gregory here intended to suggest the phenomenological reality of seeing as that which would inspire giving makes sense within the 'spiritual senses' tradition that Gregory sits within and develops.

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[108] Lorraine Code, 'What Can She Know? Feminist Theory and the Construction of Knowledge' (New York, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 141. Code locates the origins of such a connection in Platonic philosophy, wherein 'the eye, the sun, and light are used metaphorically "to establish the characteristics of intelligibility," which culminates in contemplation of the Forms (= things that are seen)' (140-141, quoting Evelyn Fox Keller and Christine Grontkowski, 'The Mind's Eye', in *Discovering Reality*, ed. S. Harding and M. B. Hintikka (Dordrecht: Springer), 207–24, 209. 211).

[109] Carnes, *Beauty*, 229.

[110] 'On the Making of Man', X: 7 (396).

[111] Such a conclusion is reached too by Graham Ward who writes in his 'Allegoria: Reading as a Spiritual Exercise', *Modern Theology*, 15.3 (1999), 271–295, that Gregory 'follows a line of thinking which has consistently offered a critique against what has come to be called, by Jacques Derrida and Luce Irigaray, occularcentrism—the ideology and pornography of visibility' (284).

For according to this line of thought, elucidated most vividly in *On the Soul and Resurrection* and his homilies *On the Song of Songs*, Gregory understands the senses as capable of being trained and refined such that they are eventually able to attend physically to spiritual realities.[112] Gregory remembers Macrina describe such a vision in her final dialogue, recalling her comment that 'by the very operation of our senses we are led to conceive of that reality and intelligence which surpasses the senses'.[113] This vision of the spiritual senses, as Coakley has argued in her reading of Gregory, is clarified over the course of his career. Yet Coakley contends that intimations of it are discernible even in the very earliest of Gregory's works, wherein he moves away from a body/soul dualism towards a view wherein the body's senses must be sharpened in order to experience the spiritual reality imbued in the material world.[114]

With this in mind, the language of sight in the homilies in question can be read as expressing Gregory's belief that giving responds to the (purified and accurate) sensory experience of what things, selves, and the poor simply and immediately are. If one looks and truly attends, having trained the sight to see things as they are, having purified the gaze of prejudice, projection, and the instinct to merely glance, one will see the poor as in Christ; one will see the thing as wonderfully given; and one will see the self as a beloved creature. From this physical sight, which discerns, through the Spirit, the glory and givenness of the world and its contents, one will give.

This inquiry into the language of sight as Gregory deploys it in his homilies confirms, then, the same ontological foundation of giving we identified in part (2). It is the truth of things, selves, and the poor that provokes and solicits their being given and given to. Yet here the discernment of that truth takes another route. Rather than being arrived at through theological and cerebral modes of knowing, the implication of Gregory's language suggests that those who have attuned their senses will not need conscious recourse to doctrinal knowledge, but will simply perceive and see the reality that makes giving a reasonable and intuitive response.

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[112] This constitutes a revision of Origen's own rendition of the spiritual senses, which dichotomized the spiritual and physical senses. In contrast, Gregory rehabilitates a creative and redeeming dynamic between the two. For a discussion of this contrast, see Coakley, 'Gregory of Nyssa', 36–55, and 'Homilies on the Song of Songs', Homily 10.

[113] Here I deploy Catherine Roth's particularly direct translation of Gregory of Nyssa's point here in his *On the Soul and Resurrection*, (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002), 34.

[114] Coakley, 'Gregory of Nyssa', 44. Coakley finds these intimations in *On Virginity* and Gregory's *Sermons on the Beatitudes*.

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It is possible to conceive of various relations between these two modes of recognition. Doctrinal knowledge might be considered the temporary scaffold that can eventually give way to the immediate perception of things as they are. Alternatively, the immediate grasp and perception of a thing's givenness might be precisely what lifts one to the knowledge that doctrine seeks to articulate. For the purposes of our investigation into the significance of giving for Gregory, the ordering and interaction of these two modes of recognition is of less interest than the fact of their both being modes of recognition. Together these insights clarify giving as that which ought to occur not because of the contingency of need or the sentiment of compassion, but rather because of the fact of what things, selves, and the poor simply are. In this respect, Gregory offers reasons distinct from the 'brotherly love' or 'civic loyalty' that is fundamental to the case for giving Basil presents in his remaining sermons,[115] and the 'common humanity' that Gregory of Nazianzus invokes in *Oration 14* as he appeals for his audience to give to the leper and destitute.[116] For Gregory of Nyssa, truth is the obligation that compels giving. We can certainly imagine the way that this vision of ontologically founded giving might, in an exclusive form, have its problems. The goodness of a gift that is given without being moved by the particularities of its recipient may well be limited. Without attention to need (poverty, for example) we might fail to identify the positive counterpart (wellbeing, for example) to which gifts should contribute. In disowning compassion we treat as tangential what experientially might seem integral. Our focus in what follows is nevertheless to investigate what kind of progress Gregory's vision, incomplete as it may be, might engender.

4. Conclusion: Progressing by giving

Through a close reading of Gregory's sermons *On the Beatitudes*, and *Love of the Poor 1* and *2*, we have clarified the significance of giving for Gregory as obliged by the truth of what things, selves, and the poor truly are. Equipped with this ontological frame, we may now return to the

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[115] Basil of Caesarea, 'In Time of Famine and Drought', in *The Hungry Are Dying: Beggars and Bishops in Roman Cappadocia*, trans. Susan Holman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), (185), 183–92. For a fuller account of the particular emphases of Basil's advocacy of charity, see Holman, 'Rich City Burning: Social Welfare and Ecclesial Insecurity in Basil's Mission to Armenia', *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 12.2 (2004).

[116] Gregory Nazianzus, 'Oration 14', in *The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers*, trans. M. F. Toal (Chicago, IL: Henry Regenery, 1963), 14.27 (43–64).

biographies and more vividly appreciate the giving in which Gregory's three exemplars engage. Indeed, we shall see that the character of giving we observed in part (1) is enlightened and made sense of in relation to the theological underpinning we exposed in parts (2) and (3). We turn to consider our earlier examples through this new frame.

In the case of Thaumaturgus, we may recall his presentation of Alexander as a fitting candidate for bishop. Thaumaturgus could see the true dignity of Alexander despite his visible impoverishment as 'clad in dirty rags' with an 'unkempt body'.[117] Thaumaturgus's senses, quite in contrast to those of the deliberating church leaders, are aided by 'guidance from God'.[118] Being so sharpened, he sees Alexander's profound value and wisdom. It is in recognising the deep truth of who this poor man really is that Thaumaturgus gifts Alexander the opportunity to meet with those deliberating and ultimately to serve as bishop. At the same time, the episode forcefully conveys the error of the deliberators in seeing wealth as denoting goodness.[119] It is an episode in which giving is inspired by truth, and wealth, in logical contrast, is exposed as a deception.

In the case of the *Life of Moses*, our analysis makes sense of the particular sinfulness that Gregory allots to those who reject generosity and fail to give. The greed of the 'multitude' who 'lack moderation in regard to the pleasures of the table' are chastised by him for their 'unruly desires' and 'gluttony'.[120] Distinctively, the sin of greed is figured as foolishness, even stupidity: the 'craving for meat made them prefer slavery in Egypt to their present good circumstances'; while the 'stingy person' who stored up 'the daily food for the next day' did so simple-mindedly, not realising that every day 'it became inedible, being changed into worms'.[121] Herein we see again the reverse connection to giving as truth: greed as deception, misrecognition, and even stupidity, making slavery seem preferable and the storing up of food seem sensible. The sinfulness of the multitude's greed, then, is presented as a sin of ignorance over intent. Greed as ignorance makes sense as the opposite of giving that responds to truth.

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[117] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 936B; 936C (70).

[118] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 933D (69).

[119] Indeed, this point is matched by Gregory's own description of Thaumaturgus at the outset of the *Life*, in which he casts 'wealth, pedigree, glory, [and] worldly powers' as 'irrelevant' to the purpose of telling the true story of his subject's life', 896B (42); 897D (45).

[120] *Life of Moses*, I.63 (46), II.272 (123), II.67 (47).

[121] *Life of Moses*, I.63 (46); I.37 (39). Indeed, Moses contrasts the immoderate one who has not overcome his pleasures to the 'intelligent man', who 'prefer[s] no kind of fall', II.282 (125).

In the case of Macrina, the concept of giving as a response to truth makes sense of the strong continuity Gregory suggests between her giving and her worship of God. As Gregory describes the intentional simplicity that Macrina and her mother live in and the generosity to the poor they both live by, he splices the account with reference to their worship of God. The pair live 'on a footing of equality with the staff of maids', 'casting away…all material superfluities' and lifting up the livelihoods of the poor such that all could share the 'necessaries of life'.[122] These choices of generosity and simplicity are presented as interweaved with a life of praise: a life engaged in an 'unceasing round of prayer' and 'endless hymnody'.[123] If Macrina gives in response to the truth of things, and the truth of things is their givenness, their createdness, and their Christ-likeness, the act of giving approaches and identifies the reality of God, signed and manifest in the character of things, selves, and the poor as they are truly seen. Macrina's worship of God, then, does not arbitrarily occur alongside her giving but is its seamless outworking: in giving she declares the truth of things, which in turn declares in praise the truth of God.

As Gregory's three exemplars grow in the love of God that characterises their lives, they give generously and live simply. The crucial insight of this chapter – to see that such giving is motivated primarily by *truth* before need – transforms the generosity in question from an occasional response to an integral way of life. If founded on *truth* (the self's createdness, the thing's contingency, or the Christ-likeness of the poor) the provocation to give must be conceived as constant and unceasing rather than occasional and conditional.

Indeed, this is signalled to us by the exemplars' engagement with giving. As they give, they appear in different ways to be indifferent to their context. Thaumaturgus and Macrina give constantly, across their lives, rather than only in reaction to the particular needs of those in their midst. Thaumaturgus chooses simplicity in his youth, forsaking 'riding, hunting, jewellery, [and] clothes' and maintains such a choice to his end, dying without even a burial place of his own, having kept 'himself from every earthly possession'.[124] Macrina's generosity likewise spans her whole life, lived ascetically from close to its start to its very end. In these indifferences, the two model a giving that, for its provocation in what does not change, is perpetual rather than occasional. The work of their giving, being tied to the unceasing truth of

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[122] *Life of Macrina*, 970C; 970D; 970C (34).
[123] *Life of Macrina*, 970D (34).
[124] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 900C (46), 956A (84).

what selves, things, and the poor really are, rather than arising from the contingencies of socioeconomic need (which may be met), or compassion (which may dwindle), is of a continuous rather than responsive nature. As giving responds to truth rather than need, so the time for its being enacted is expanded to fill not a single moment but the whole of life.

Moses, meanwhile, gives and receives in all circumstances and encourages others to do the same, irrespective of their apparent capacity or wealth. As noted above, Gregory records both how manna and water is given to Moses, as well as how Moses generously gives it away; Gregory records both the offerings Moses received in order to build the Tabernacle, as well as the way in which Moses gives to his community through his building of it.[125] Moses does not give only when he is 'rich', nor receive only when he is 'poor', but gives and receives indifferent to the security of his own position. The generosity in question is not determined by the apparent capacity of the giver to give. Once more, giving as concerned with unchanging truth appears to expand the remit of that giving as a calling not only for those in a position secure enough to incur its cost, but to all, in all states and times.

As giving is motivated by truth rather than need its remit is expanded beyond a particular redistributive end, towards a way of continuous living. Its purveyors are imagined beyond those who are rich and secure enough to incur loss, towards all who encounter selves, things, and the poor in their midst. Accordingly, the insecurity and loss concomitant with giving must be understood as states that deepen as the three progress by the generosity to which they are called.

Gregory's vision of giving sounds a sharp contrast with the classical application of philanthropy more common to his backdrop. As Brown and Holman have described, the imperial provision of the grain dole was largely given to eligible citizens and 'granted only to certain cities'.[126] This 'selective patronage' was a great distance from Gregory's call to perpetual giving.[127] As Brown has argued, such patronage did not have 'the poor', as poor, in mind, nor the ideal of giving in itself, but was directed towards the clear end of strengthening and securing the city.[128]

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[125] *Life of Moses*, I.17 (32), II.141 (87).

[126] Holman, 39. Brown, *Power and Persuasion*, 84. Eligible recipients in Rome or Constantinople had to be Roman citizens, at least forty, and own the home in which they resided.

[127] As Holman notes, 'imperial provision of food to those who were starving usually occurred only in the context of famine', that is, when the social order was threatened, 58.

[128] Brown, *Power and Persuasion*, 84.

Gregory's vision of giving sounds a sharp contrast, in addition, with the enthusiasm of some of his fellow bishops who, in his sight, had been far too quick to acclimatize to the Church's new privileges following Constantine's conversion in 312 AD. As Diarmaid MacCulloch writes, as the Church was thrust into 'an equal place alongside traditional official cults' and lavished with 'the lion's share of imperial patronage', so did many church leaders become quickly amenable to the empire's concerns to maintain the binds of family lineage and the late antique system of patronage, effectively settling into 'an increasingly cozy alliance with high society'.[129] Gregory was appalled by how easily the Church had been enamored by wealth and how effortlessly it had seemed to settle into the institutional security of its new 'cozy alliance'. As our argument has demonstrated, insecurity, by contrast, was for Gregory not a characteristic to be considered contingent to Christian life but was integral to it as the consequence of the radical generosity that doctrine and experience both advocate.

This chapter has turned up a number of findings with which we may close. First, in connecting the knowledge of God to the act of giving, we have investigated, in one example, the precise joins between doctrine and practice, seeing how the proposition that God is creator and incarnate forms a response of generosity. Second, in connecting the phenomenological experience of *seeing* God to the act of giving, we have exposed the ethical dimension of the spiritual senses tradition Gregory develops. Significant here is the move made to understand the spiritual senses as of greater consequence than their easy categorization as 'mystical' might claim for them. Third, we have uncovered in Gregory's work a vision of giving that challenges the prominence of need and compassion as its guiding principles. The contrast that this vision conjures against some contemporary philanthropic presumptions may well prove a productive line of further analysis.[130] Fourth, and most important to what follows, is the answer this chapter gives to the overarching question of this thesis concerning what kind of progress is implied by the practice of *epektasis*. The answer of this chapter can be stated thus: as the three grow in holiness through the practice of giving, so they live lives in which progress is shaped by the undulations of radical insecurity. As the three give primarily in response to their approach of knowledge and experience of truth, their giving becomes perpetual rather than occasional. The spiritual ascent, practiced in giving, is expressed materially in the apparent unsteadiness of

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[129] Diarmaid MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (London: Penguin, 2010), 195. See also Cadenhead, *Body and Desire*, 19.

[130] We might interrogate the contrast, for example, between Gregory's vision of giving and the messages invoking compassion that regularly characterise the communications of major charities, or the calculated focus on efficient philanthropy that recent movements of 'effective altruism' have advocated.

lives shaped by the loss and insecurity of generosity not as ad-hoc response but constant mode of life.

Chapter 3: Giving and Ageing

In chapter 2 we investigated the significance of giving as a practice to which Gregory sees his exemplars committed as they grow in holiness and love of God. It was argued that giving, according to Gregory's wider vision, responds to the truth of what things, selves, and the poor really are – as gifts, as given, and as identified with Christ. Gregory suggests that this ontological truth, which solicits giving, is approached via *knowledge* (which doctrine shapes and provides) and by *experience* (to which sharpened so-called 'spiritual senses' can attend). To conceive of giving as that which responds, in at least these two ways, to truth is to conceive of the activity as that which is called for by all and in all times – better enacted, ultimately, as a spirit of continuous living rather than a tool towards a redistributive end. Gregory's giver, in turn, is one who does not give once but gives continually; one who progresses, therefore, by insecurity.

It was argued at the outset of this thesis that prevailing imaginaries of progress imply a perception of the end of life that threatens the dignity of old age. In what follows, we turn to investigate the difference that the kind of progress we have uncovered in chapter 2 – formed by the practice of giving – might make to such a perception. The central question of this accompanying chapter is as follows: if a life is lived in such a way as to progress by the practice of giving, as Gregory conceives it, what facets of what it is to be an embodied, changing, ageing, and mortal person will be uncovered, and how might the exposure of these facets shape one's perception and experience of ageing and death? I suggest that the three particular dimensions of Gregory's vision of giving to which we have attended – (1) the rooting of giving in *knowledge*, (2) the convergence of giving with *experience*, and (3) the *insecurity* that results from giving – might each precipitate distinctive ways of inhabiting and perceiving ageing and dying personhood. Namely and respectively, these dimensions invite the giver to reconsider the 'incomplete' life; to expect and celebrate the unique gifts of old age; and appreciate a broader picture of the older person's agency. While the readings of all three of Gregory's lives remain in the backdrop of this chapter, since the progress under discussion is the progress the three have embodied, we will have cause to draw again on the *Life of Macrina*. In this work, distinct from his other biographies, Gregory includes a lengthy record and commentary on Macrina's

death. This record and commentary will prove vital in the task of imagining the end enabled by the progress of giving.

1. Knowledge

It was argued in chapter 2 that, for Gregory, the prospective giver, knowing (in a limited capacity) that God is creator and incarnate in turn recognizes (in a limited capacity) the status of things and selves as given and the poor as Christ like, and, from this recognition, gives. In what follows we will dwell specifically on the giver's knowledge, declared in her giving, that *things* and *selves* are given. In positively recognizing what has been given and what is received, such knowledge can be characterized as gratitude.[1] While gratitude, when exercised at the end of life, is commonly associated with 'completion' or 'satisfaction', the gratitude modeled by Gregory's exemplars tests and strains what a state of 'completion' might truly mean.

Much attention has been given to the positive role that gratitude can play in the later years of a human life.[2] In particular, gratitude has been promoted frequently in the field of positive psychology on the basis of its benefit in producing a sense of 'life satisfaction' in later years.[3] A substantial body of research supports the claim of this field, asserting a positive correlation between the practice of gratitude and accounts of subjective wellbeing and satisfaction.[4] Indeed, such a connection is present too in a number of recent Christian spiritualties of old age, which likewise promote the practice of gratitude on the same grounds of its role in enabling an individual to 'complete' and round off a life in conscious conclusion. Autumn Alcott

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[1] While gratitude can be construed in a number of ways, as an emotion, a habit, a disposition, or a trait, as psychologist Robert Emmons notes in his analysis of the topic, at its core lies the 'positive recognition' of what is given and has been received. See his 'Introduction', in *The Psychology of Gratitude*, ed. Robert A. Emmons and Michael E. McCullough (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 3–18 (5).

[2] See Maria Aparicio, Carlos Centeno, and María Arantzamendi, 'The Significance of Gratitude for Palliative Care Professionals: A Mixed Method Protocol', *BMC Palliative Care*, 18.1 (2019), 28.

[3] For a summary of recent literature see Wenceslao Unanue and others, 'The Reciprocal Relationship Between Gratitude and Life Satisfaction: Evidence From Two Longitudinal Field Studies', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10 (2019).

[4] See A. Alkozei, R. Smith, and W. D. Killgore, 'Gratitude and Subjective Wellbeing: A Proposal of Two Causal Frameworks', *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 19 (2018), 1519–42; A. M. Wood, J. J. Froh, and A. W. Geraghty, 'Gratitude and Well-Being: A Review and Theoretical Integration', *Clinical Psychology Review*, 30, 890–905; Robert A. Emmons and M. E. McCullough, 'Counting Blessings versus Burdens: An Experimental Investigation of Gratitude and Subjective Well-Being in Daily Life', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84 (2003), 377–389.

Ridenour's *Sabbath Rest as Vocation*, for example, suggests that gratitude is 'an integral virtue for aging persons'.[5] Here Ridenour draws on gratitude as it is elucidated by moral theologian James F. Keenan, who foregrounds the convergence of gratitude with satisfaction, writing that 'gratitude can enter into the dry spirits of an unhappy person who… looks at his lot with a desire not for what is missing, but a sense of quiet satisfaction with where one is'.[6] Debbie Thrower gestures towards the same connection, of gratitude coalescing with the peace of satisfaction, in her theological reflection on the spiritual journey of older people, in which she notes 'that gratitude is not just a nice addition, to spice up one's more mature years, but an essential ingredient if we are to find contentment in our seventies…and beyond'.[7] The practice of gratitude is prized in these accounts for its role in facilitating the *contented*, *satisfied*, *'completion'* to which, it is implied, we all should aspire if we are to round off our lives in peace.

Nothing in the argument to come suggests as perverse the aspiration to a life that can be experienced as 'complete'. Yet, as left uninterrogated, the notion of a 'completed' life leads to a number of ethical quandaries. Formulated as questions, we might ask: What does completeness of life look like? Who determines what this completeness looks like? And which of a person's faculties could be relied on to determine a sense of this completeness? One possible range of answers to these questions is manifest in the proposals drawn up by legislators in the Netherlands in 2016, who advocated to extend the then current euthanasia laws to encompass assisted suicide for those aged over 70, without health problems, who nevertheless felt they had 'completed life'.[8] Here, what 'completeness' looks like was left consciously undetermined, to be decided by the subject alone, and to be determined solely by the subject's intellect (disregarding, for example, the body's own physiological inclination to continue to support life). I suggest that the distinctive quality of Gregory's giving produces a type of gratitude that may speak into what 'completeness' at the end means, which in turn makes possible certain responses to the ethical quandaries raised.

The giving that Gregory advocates, being rooted in *knowing* the givenness of all things and selves, produces gratitude that does *not* come paired with the feeling of being conventionally

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[5] Autumn Alcott Ridenour, *Sabbath Rest as Vocation: Aging Toward Death* (London: T&T Clark, 2018) 213.

[6] James Keenan, *Virtues for Ordinary Christians* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1996), 122; Ridenour, *Sabbath Rest*, 217.

[7] Debbie Thrower, 'Anna Chaplains', *Rural Theology*, 15.2 (2017), 124–27 (125).

[8] See Sjaak van der Geest and Priya Satalkar, 'Autonomy and Dying: Notes about Decision-Making and "Completed Life" Euthanasia in the Netherlands', *Death Studies* (2019), 1–10.

'satisfied'. We can see this in at least two ways. First, as Gregory's giver recognizes the givenness of *all* things and *all* selves – not only those things and selves that present as given, or that the giver herself has sight of – she comes to sense the incalculable quality of God's grace. She recognizes that there is much more to receive than can ever be expected or comprehended. Her gratitude, in this respect, unsettles in its acknowledgement of the very much more available for which to be grateful. Second, as Gregory's giver recognizes the givenness of all things and all selves, she comes to encounter things and selves as fathomless for their being rooted in the infinite God. Things and selves are not only what they seem, for Gregory's giver, but come to be known as steeped in the glory of God. The giver's gratitude, in this respect, stretches and deepens her perception of what is given. Rather than only producing a sense of satisfaction, Gregory's giver's gratitude alerts her to the very much more that is given, and the very much more that things and selves are. Trained in this style of gratitude, the thanks that Gregory's giver may offer up at the end of life is not of a piece with Ridenour's 'quiet satisfaction' for the things and selves that one can identify and recall as having enjoyed. Rather, such gratitude can be imagined as an 'alleluia' in thanks for *everything*, indeed, for *more* than everything; thanks in response to the incalculable grace that goes well beyond the purview of what a single human life can know. The completion to which such gratitude gives rise, then, is a completion that sees its incompletion. The giver rests joyfully in the knowledge that she has only – that she *could* have only – scratched the surface of the abundant goodness and grace of God. The completed life sees that it could only ever have been incomplete.

Indeed, Gregory's presentation of the end of Macrina's life offers a picture of what this completion in incompletion might look like. Macrina's giving, as founded in knowledge, has nurtured in her the practice of gratitude. This gratitude characterizes her final days, which are spent 'recount[ing] as much as she could remember' of her life, with the 'aim throughout' of 'gratitude towards God'.[9] The character of this gratitude is expansive and it stretches Macrina's perception of what is given. It does not arise only in relation to the good things Macrina can discern in her life, but, Gregory suggests, it celebrates the excessiveness of grace, the 'grace of God in it all'.[10] In this sense, Macrina's gratitude is presented as superior to Gregory's, whom she chastises for being 'insensible to the divine blessings' of his life as he focuses only on his 'troubles' and 'fails to recognize' the goodness beyond his immediate outlook.[11] By contrast,

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[9] *Life of Macrina*, 980C (49).
[10] *Life of Macrina*, 982B (51).
[11] *Life of Macrina*, 982A (51).

Macrina's gratitude senses the vastness of that for which thanks ought to be given. Meanwhile, the effect of this gratitude is to see things and selves as more than as they simply present. As Macrina gives thanks for her parents' life, she does so, Gregory notes, 'not so much from the point of view of the reputation they enjoyed in the eyes of contemporaries on account of their riches' (that is, how they appeared).[12] Rather, as she gives thanks she sees her parents as more for their relation to God, recognizing the fathomlessness of their offering for its opening out 'an example of the divine blessing'.[13] Such gratitude does not result in straightforward satisfaction: it points Macrina to the excess of what God gives, and the excess of what the gifts God gives are. It is resting in this gratitude, which senses the incompletion of life's discovery, that Macrina's death ends in completion.

To reconceive of the life, received in gratitude, as complete in its incompletion, is to make viable new responses to the questions of when a life can be said to be complete, and whose lives can be considered complete. With regard to the question of *when* a life can be said to be complete, if completion is experienced as a kind of incompletion, no single moment can demarcate a life's completion (prior to its physiological death). Insofar as an individual's sense of the excess of grace can necessarily always grow, always extend, always deepen, so too can the semblance of completion. Completion, by this analysis, comes to look as a state that can ever intensify, rather than a single temporal moment determined by a subjective measure. The individual, then, is dissuaded from the confidence of saying 'my life is now complete', and instead persuaded to see that a life moves into a state of completion that can be ever enriched.

With regard to the question of *whose* life may be said to be complete, if completion is experienced as a kind of incompletion, the division of some lives as 'complete' and others as 'incomplete' is blurred. All lives will be able to receive and know to a greater extent the excess of grace in their midst and so be able to grow further into the 'completion' that Gregory's vision suggests. Lives cut short by an early death, for example, or lives that are deprived of particular graces for reasons of affliction or poverty, will still strike us acutely sad. Yet in another sense all lives – even those that persevere into old age – end, according to this vision, in a kind of incompletion. No individual can know the totality of grace bequeathed to him or her. In this sense, the notion that some lives, well-lived, end completely, and others, less well-

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[12] *Life of Macrina*, 980C (49).
[13] *Life of Macrina*, 980C (49).

lived, end incompletely, is overturned by the vastness of grace, relative to which all lives are only beginning to know the extent to which they are beloved.

Gregory's giver, as she gives according to the *knowledge* that all things and all selves are given, is inducted into a gratitude that does not culminate in the conventional satisfaction with which it is frequently associated. Rather than encouraging the giver to rest in what she has and can see before her is good, it encourages her to rest in the grace of God whose goodness goes beyond what she has and what appears as good.[14] As this gratitude is practised at the end of life, it may give rise to a distinctive vision of 'completion', as we see modeled in the final days of Macrina's life. 'Completion', for the giver, may be found not only in contentment with what one has and has achieved, but in what one knows is ever beyond grasp and acquisition – the goodness and grace of God which surpasses the capacity of every life. Such a vision offers potential to speak into a number of quandaries that pivot on the measure of a 'completed' life.

2. Experience

In chapter 2 we considered the ways that giving, for Gregory, might come about not only in response to the *knowledge* of what things, selves, and the poor are, but in response to the sharpened *experience* of things, selves, and the poor before the prospective giver. It was suggested that the striking literality with which Gregory posits that the giver *sees* the truth and responds in giving, makes sense within the tradition of spiritual senses that Gregory developed. Gregory's giver is one whose physical and sensory maturation is inseparable from that of the soul. Acknowledgement of this intertwined trajectory of maturation sheds distinctive light on the value of life into old age. We shall see that the giver is one equipped to appreciate the unique gifts of maturation and the particular blessing of a life into old age. This adds to the insight developed in relation to *knowledge*: whilst all life, in the end, is incomplete, nevertheless, for Gregory's giver, there are clear reasons to hope for a long life.

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[14] Paul F. M. Zahl's memoir and guide, *Peace in the Last Third of Life: A Handbook of Hope for Boomers* (Charlottesville, VA: Mockingbird Ministries, 2020) testifies to this possibility. Zahl writes of the miracle by which it can be possible for one to 'look at your worst fall from grace, your worst stumble…and after 20 years there [might be] something, either within you or just outside, that developed out of it' (112).

Two implications are enclosed in the notion that the maturation of the body and soul are intertwined. Put simply: first, the growth of the body affects the growth of the soul; and second, the growth of the soul affects the growth of the body. I will explore these implications by turn, indicating that the effect of each is to suggest that old age constitutes a unique blessing.

The body's effect on the soul

It is as the giver *sees*, with heightened attention, that she goes on to give (in so doing, communing with Christ and receiving the gifts of things and selves). As Gregory recalls Macrina tell him in *On the Soul and Resurrection*, 'it is not possible for [the] reasoning faculty to exist in the life of the body without existing by means of sensations'.[15] The state of one's bodily perception and material life, then, greatly affect the possibilities of the soul. For this reason, Gregory is keenly attentive to what he takes to be the particular challenges and delights of different states of maturity. Commenting on Ecclesiastes, he underscores the fact that at different ages different temptations strike an individual: 'one thing is good in youth, another in the prime of life, another in middle age, and yet another in retirement, and another again in old age'.[16] He draws attention to the condition of sexual lust, which, he sees, is particularly 'characteristic' of youth, and the 'tranquility' he sees common to old age. These conditions and temptations that make up the body's experience at a given developmental stage are crucial, in Gregory's sight, to the possibilities and challenges of spiritual growth. An inclination to lust might distract a young person from the Divine, but such lust, Gregory implies in *On Virginity*, can be redeemed as it is redirected 'to divine love [*eros*] of wisdom' rather than 'bodily pleasures'.[17] While the older person, having overcome in Gregory's mind the virility of youth, and having taken up the 'practice of continence and temperance', might nevertheless fall into spiritual complacency owing to the 'weakness of age'.[18] As the body's sensory experience is seen to give shape to the soul's capacities, each season of life is relevant to the soul's progress:

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[15] Gregory of Nyssa, 'On the Soul and Resurrection', in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic Treatises*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wallace, trans. Philip Schaff and H. A. Wilson, Second Series: (New York, NY: Cosimo Classics, 2007), V, 428–71, (442). Or, as Roth's translation renders it: 'the rational power cannot enter into the bodily life otherwise than by entering through perception' (56).

[16] Gregory of Nyssa, 'Homilies on Ecclesiastes', in *Homilies on Ecclesiastes: An English Version with Supporting Studies: Proceedings of the Seventh International Colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa*, trans. Stuart George Hall (Berlin: Wde Gruyter, 2012), 31–144, 312.1 (58).

[17] Gregory of Nyssa, 'On Virginity', in *St Gregory: Ascetical Works*, ed. Virginia Woods Callahan, (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1967), 23 (72).

[18] 'Homilies on Ecclesiastes', 377.17 (102).

every age, with its differing inclinations and challenges, makes possible the exposure of differing potentialities of the soul.

The specific bodily realities of old age, then, appear indispensable. This is so not because the bodily realities of old age are advantageous (the tranquility that Gregory allots to old age, as we have seen, can work to the soul's detriment as well as benefit) but simply because, being a different phase of bodily life, old age promises to animate different dimensions of the soul's life. The writer Zadie Smith, reflecting on ageing without direct recourse to theology, offers words which nevertheless enlighten the sense we have arrived at in our reading. Commenting on the couplet 'This little light of mine/I'm gonna let it shine' as a vision of life's essential task, Smith responds that 'the idea of trying to make that light burn persistently at exactly the same wattage and intensity over decades' seems a 'terrifying task…not unlike lighting a candle and expecting no wax ever to melt'.[19] 'But', she goes on, 'what interesting shadows we throw on the wall, depending on the hour, and how various are the ways that wax can melt, how many different forms and shapes it can take!'[20] Gregory's giver, appreciating the body's role in spiritual maturation, is disposed to agree: in each new (delighting and challenging) constellation of the body's growth there arise new forms and shapes available to the soul. As in his treatise *In Regard to Those Fallen Asleep* Gregory writes:

> the expected limit of life is blessedness, and whatever is now discerned concerning the body – death, old age, youth, infancy, and the formation of the embryo – all these in some way like grass, kernels, and stalk, are a way and succession and potentiality of the perfection that is hoped.[21]

Indeed, this is so because, as Gregory writes in the third homily on the *Song of Songs*:

> The child Jesus born within us advances by different ways in those who receive him in wisdom, in age, and in grace. He is not the same in every person, but is present according to the measure of the person receiving him . . . Christ is never seen with the same form upon the vine, but he changes his form with time – now budding, now

[19] Zadie Smith, 'Why We Need to Celebrate the Inevitable', *Elle India*, May 2018 <https://elle.in/article/zadie-smith-swing-time-interview-elle-cover/>.
[20] Smith, 'Celebrate the Inevitable'.
[21] Gregory of Nyssa, 'In Regard to Those Fallen Asleep', in *One Path For All*, ed. and trans. Rowan A. Greer (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2015), 94–117 (107).

blossoming, now mature, now ripe and finally as wine. Thus the vine holds out a promise with its fruit. It is not yet ripe for wine, but it awaits maturity. Meanwhile it does not lack any delight, for it gladdens our sense of smell before our taste with its expectation of the future; by its fragrance of hope it sweetens the soul's senses.[22]

Each bodily phase consists of a different set of circumstances through which spiritual growth can be hoped for and pursued. The hour of old age, with its particular manner of softening and melting the candle's wax, will cast light in as yet undiscovered ways. To be 'spared' old age is, according to this, a great loss. To live into old age, by contrast, is to receive the opportunity to expand the soul's life in unsubstitutable ways.

The soul's effect on the body

The second implication of the 'spiritual senses' that Gregory's giver is inducted to recognize is that the growth of the soul affects the growth of the body. The giver is one whose bodily perception has been heightened by being sharpened in the spirit. Gregory articulates this possibility in his treatise *On the Soul and Resurrection*, where, as Coakley has pointed out, he posits that the physical senses can be refined through spiritual and ascetic practice. In undergoing 'purification' and 'purgation' by prayer and spiritual communion, the sense organs realize a capacity to 'develop from "small-souled" to "large-souled" apprehensions'.[23] As Gregory comments in *On the Beatitudes*, it is 'when the mind in you is unmixed with any evil, free from passion, and far away from stain' that 'you are blessed for your sharp sightedness, for by becoming pure you have perceived what is invisible to those not purified'.[24] It is once 'the materialistic fog [has been] removed from the eye of the soul' that 'you see clearly the blessed sight'.[25] It is when a person 'has purged his own heart of every tendency to passion' that he 'perceives in his own beauty the reflection of the divine nature'.[26] For Gregory, the development of the soul involves the literal development of the sensorial capacities.

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[22] Here I revert to Casimir McCambley's translation, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, ed. and trans. Casimir McCambley (Brookline, MA: Hellenic College Press, 1987) Homily 3 (95-97), as it is adjusted by Coakley, 50. Together, the sense of Christ's emergence is conveyed especially beautifully.

[23] Coakley, 'Gregory of Nyssa', 48, drawing on Gregory's 'On the Soul and Resurrection', 461, 449.

[24] 'The Beatitudes', Sermon 6 (148).

[25] 'The Beatitudes', Sermon 6 (148).

[26] 'The Beatitudes', Sermon 6 (148). Jean Daniélou delves into the profundity of purgation for Gregory, in his significant study *Platonisme et Théologie Mystique,* 242–52.

The development of the soul – its being purified of passion and 'materialistic fog' – is rarely fast. As Gregory writes, 'virtue is achieved by its seekers not without a struggle'.[27] It is here that old age, again, may strike us as a distinctively blessed opportunity. Not, in this instance, because of the particular conditions of old age, but because of the longevity that an individual has necessarily received in order to reach old age. The soul's development, for most, being slow and laboured, the gift of years, of time, makes possible an expanded range of developments.

Indeed, Gregory most sharply suggests that the conditions of enduring in time are conducive to spiritual growth in his treatise *In Regard to Those Fallen Asleep*, where he addresses the question of why (despite heaven's attraction, and the difficulties of life in the flesh) it is better to participate in life than die early. Life in the 'coat of skin', he writes, involves free choice and the opportunity to 'inclin[e] in either direction, to virtue and to vice, since the coat means becoming material', that is, changeable rather than static.[28] 'By this recurrent succession through voluntary acts' – inclining towards vice and then virtue – there eventually 'comes to be an inclination to the better'.[29] The implication is that as we live and change, the process of error is educative: having swung towards vice we learn to value virtue. Indeed, in the same vein, Gregory suggests that the experience of 'desir[ing] things alien to nature' will clarify the desire of 'what is innate'; we will see, as we live, that some desires 'do not last forever' but the desire for God will persist.[30] It is the experience of living and changing that clarifies the true divine-oriented desire that 'remains forever'.[31]

Enduring in time is central, for Gregory, to the soul's growth. A long life, in which there is the greatest space to notice what changes and what does not change, in which to err, fail and begin again, poses the opportunity for the soul's development that a short life, 'pass[ing] through [creation] with his mind in a kind of tender, unformed…state' cannot.[32] Yet Gregory is insistent that the gift of longevity is an *opportunity* to be realized rather than a good to be taken for granted. For those who choose to live their long lives in vice, by comparison 'the innocent

[27] Gregory of Nyssa, 'On Infants' Early Deaths', in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic Treatises*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wallace, trans. Philip Schaff and H. A. Wilson, Second Series: (New York, NY: Cosimo Classics, 2007), V, 372–81 (374).
[28] 'In Regard to Those Fallen Asleep', 109-110.
[29] 'In Regard to Those Fallen Asleep', 110.
[30] 'In Regard to Those Fallen Asleep', 109-110.
[31] 'In Regard to Those Fallen Asleep', 109-110.
[32] 'On Infants' Early Deaths', 378.

babe' who dies prematurely 'will be blessed'.[33] For the older person who has, with their gift of years, developed the soul towards God, particular blessings await. According to the spiritual senses tradition, these blessings may be bodily: the maturation of the soul that a long life enables may give rise to a bodily maturation in which senses may perceive (beyond the 'normal' range of sense perception) the presence of God in the world. Gregory's giver, alert to the development of the soul alongside the development of the body, is well placed to appreciate the gift of perception that those of old age are able – though never simply fated – to offer.

<div align="center">*</div>

As giving arises in response to the sharpened *experience* of what things, selves, and the poor really are, the giver encounters the shared trajectory of her bodily and spiritual growth. The physical senses enable the soul's growth, while likewise the soul's growth expands the range of physical perception available. To live with an appreciation of this intertwinement, it has been argued, is to revere life into old age as a blessing. On the one hand, the particular conditions of old age bear the possibility of exposing undiscovered facets of the soul's life. On the other hand, the gift of years given to the person of old age might, if turned to the task of spiritual development, enable a distinctively deep perception of truth. This point adds an important nuance to that explored above in relation to *knowledge*: no life may be 'completed' (except by way of accepting its incompletion), yet, all the same, a longer life bears with it the opportunity to discover in expansive ways the depth of the grace that renders all lives incomplete.

Once again, the final days of the *Life of Macrina* assist in vivifying the end to which the progress of giving points. Her physical agedness certainly appears as a blessing for its intertwinement with her spiritual development. The love that Gregory sees his sister direct so intensely to God from her deathbed has been clarified through the span of her life. She remarks as much in her final prayer, declaring that 'I have dedicated both my flesh and my soul [to God] from my youth up until now'.[34] The physical gift of time has afforded riches to her soul. Indeed, the gift of these years does appear to generate in Macrina what Gregory identifies as a clarified range of perception. She seems to him to see and hear beyond the range of the untrained senses. He describes Macrina's final orientation to Christ in physical terms, remarking that

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[33] 'On Infants' Early Deaths', 377.
[34] *Life of Macrina*, 984D (56).

> Such thoughts as these did she utter, no longer to us who were present, but to Him in person on Whom she gazed fixedly. Her couch had been turned towards the East; and, ceasing to converse with us, she spoke henceforward to God in prayer… we need not doubt that it reached God and that she, too, was hearing His voice. [35]

At her death, the gift of Macrina's life-course is clear to Gregory. The years of her life have expanded the apprehensions of her senses. Her eyes recognize Christ and her ears discern God's voice. [36] It is this blessing, realized by Macrina, that the giver, appreciating the intertwined growth of spiritual and bodily development, can sense in the possibility of a life gifted with longevity.

3. Insecurity

We saw in chapter 2 a third characteristic to the giving Gregory advocates: its inducting the giver into insecurity. It was argued that since, for Gregory, the act of giving is imagined primarily as a response to the truth of things, selves, and the poor, rather than contingent need or fleeting compassion, the occasion for giving was figured as perpetual and the call to give universal. Accordingly, Gregory's giver was found to give not once, from a place of material having, but continually. I suggest that in progressing by the unsteadiness of this continuous generosity (rather than by the ever-increasing security of accumulation) an integral element of Gregory's anthropology is less viably ignored. This particular anthropological tenet concerns the profound changefulness (just mentioned in part 2) of whole human persons; soul and body, both prone to fluctuate in such a way as to render the human person naturally in flux. It is a tenet of great importance to Gregory, as we had reason to note briefly in Chapter 1: while for the Platonist, human change is only a defect, for Gregory, human change permits degeneration but it also permits advance and growth towards God.[37] Living in the knowledge of this anthropological reality of human flux opens up, I will argue, new ways of recognizing the agency of those near to the end of life. This observation adds to the observations already made in this chapter: the giver sees (1) that all lives, in the end, are incomplete; yet sees,

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[35] *Life of Macrina*, 984B (54-55).

[36] *Life of Macrina*, 984B (54-55).

[37] Jean Daniélou, 'Introduction', in *From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa's Mystical Writings*, ed. Jean Daniélou (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997), 47-48. See ch. 1, part 1:A.

nevertheless, (2) that a long life is distinctively blessed; and, now, (3) sees more clearly the easily overlooked significance of the agency of those in old age.

The flux of personhood

As Gregory's ideal giver gives so recklessly – in all times and scenarios – she gives up the security of material accumulation, living more precariously at the edge between having and not. It is at the edge where Gregory's giver dwells that I suggest, according to his thought, a central tenet of his anthropology is confronted. This tenet consists in the claim that the whole of the human person is liable to change and fluctuate.

Gregory testifies to this characteristic of the human person across his corpus. In the *Making of Man*, he compares human life, being 'subject to flux' and 'never rest[ing] from its motion', to a stream which 'flow[s] on by its own impulse', keeping the 'channel in which it runs well filled', yet never with the same water twice.[38] Human life, akin to the stream, 'never can desist from change, but in its inability to rest keeps up unceasingly its motion alternating'.[39] In *On the Soul and Resurrection*, he describes the growth of the body 'advanc[ing] by means of internal alteration', 'always passing itself along and never remain[ing] the same'.[40] According to this state, he comments that 'a particular man is not the same even as he was yesterday, but is made different by this transmutation'.[41] In his *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, Gregory writes of the soul's changefulness, signalling how it is that persons mutate for better or ill, 'cooperat[ing] in our ascent toward higher things' or 'declin[ing] into evil'.[42] 'We are disposed to take on the shape of whatever we want' like mirrors: 'if [the soul] looks upon gold, gold it appears…and if it has the look of some hateful thing, it is imitating that ugliness through a likeness'.[43] The whole person, then, is subject to flux: the body is altered in every moment by its growth, while the soul flexes to bear the imprint of what it encounters.[44]

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[38] 'On the Making of Man', XIII.1 (388).

[39] 'On the Making of Man', XIII.1 (388).

[40] 'On the Soul and Resurrection', 463.

[41] 'On the Soul and Resurrection', 463.

[42] 'Homilies on the Song of Songs', Homily 8 (265).

[43] 'Homilies on the Song of Songs', Homily 4 (115). It is this quality of change that allows Gregory to consider change as good. Change, as the Platonists could see, did indeed facilitate change for the worse (degeneration) but change could also enable change for the better, that is, growth (Homily 8 (265)).

[44] In an investigation of the *imago dei* in her work *Christ the Key* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), Kathryn Tanner usefully draws out the connection in Gregory's thought between human

Gregory was well aware that this anthropological fact of human flux could easily be ignored. Indeed, one particular prop for ignorance he saw utilised in his own time was the hoarding of material wealth. The hoarding of wealth gave the semblance of security, posing as that which would endure in life and even last beyond it as passed down in the form of inheritance. Wealth, Gregory observed, could pose as stability and continuity against the human's lived experience of instability and death. For this reason, in his treatise *On Virginity*, it is wealth that Gregory critiques along the same lines as childrearing.[45] As childrearing has the appearance of succession and endurance, seeming to secure dynastic lines of power and identity, in fact, Gregory writes 'it is more an embarking on death than upon life for man' because 'corruption has its beginning' in birth; as soon as we are alive we are progressing towards death.[46] Just so with the 'fortune of power of beauty', which 'deceive the perception' by appearing to offer permanence, but which all have 'blossom for a short time and then fade away and turn into their opposites'.[47] The hoarding of wealth, like childrearing, is a 'deceitful show' that turns its partaker away from the reality that 'the glory of man…exists today and is gone tomorrow'.[48]

To live in such a way as to progress by material insecurity – generously giving not once according to need, but repeatedly according to truth, advancing by insecurity rather than accumulation – is to mitigate against the ignorance Gregory arraigned. By avoiding material wealth, the giver avoids its deception of apparent security in this life and the false promise of continuity after death. In avoiding this deception, the person, as she is truly in flux, is not concealed but exposed. The true changefulness of human life that wealth could hide, the giver is inured to see. We move, next, to suggest how this awareness, precipitated by the material

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mutability and the transcendence of God, indicating that the fact that humans change, being tied to no particular defining quality, is what enables them to participate in the transcendence of God (cf. 15).

[45] Gregory of Nyssa, 'On Virginity', 4 (20-28).

[46] 'On Virginity', 14 (48). This may seem to conflict with Gregory's anthropological insight, explored in Part 2 of this chapter, which asserted the glory and goodness of being alive. Gregory holds these positions together: life is good and glorious, but it is always tragic in that it must end in death. The harmony of these apparently conflicting positions will be explored in ch. 7.

[47] 'On Virginity', 4 (26-27).

[48] 'On Virginity', 4 (23). The argument Gregory pursues here is not completely convincing. We might wonder if it is the case that childrearing and inheritance are ways in which one's own limitations *are* confronted – in that investing hope in heirs is an acceptance of the fact that one's own life is not secure but will end. Whether or not this critique holds, what is important is that, in Gregory's sight, they constitute methods by which (at least partially) the reality of human flux was not heeded as he thought it ought to be.

insecurity concomitant with radical generosity, may shape the possibilities at the end of life for leaving an impression and blessing on those in one's midst: a legacy.

Legacy

On seeing the flux of personhood, the giver, not deceived by wealth's promise of stability, sees more clearly the extent of her own and others' susceptibility to be changed by what is outside of the person. This susceptibility, which means, Gregory writes, that 'whatever therefore we choose through our love, that we also become', is meaningful not only with respect to the divine relationship, in which the human (being changeable) can come to reflect the 'supernal purity' of God outside of herself.[49] It is, too, just as meaningful with respect to the material realities and relationships that humans encounter, which will likewise give fleeting shape and form to their fluctuating identities. Kathryn Tanner, reading Gregory in her 2009 work *Christ the Key*, condenses the crux of Gregory's anthropology thus: 'in contrast to other creatures, human beings are unusually flexible, capable of adapting, of altering their behaviours in order to adjust to changing social and natural environments'.[50] The flux of personhood, Tanner goes on, manifests in the quality of being 'unusually impressionable…like soft wax that a variety of seals', mundane as much as divine, 'might indent to their image'.[51]

As the person is recognized in flux, the scope of the kind of action regarded as meaningful and impactful will be widened. The effective act would not need to be thought of only in terms of the momentous and intentional single act, which dramatically transforms or cuts through a situation by force. In addition, it becomes possible to think of the apparently minor act, performed repeatedly, as profoundly significant.[52] The person in flux, being wax like, will be receptive to the influence and formation of even the most modest and understated of practices enacted by the other. They will be receptive to and affected by another's gaze, tone of voice, gesture, habit of attention, and so on. In view of this expansion, we might be struck anew by the efficacy and profundity of the *minor* act.

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[49] 'Homilies on Ecclesiastes', 422.9 (132).

[50] Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 41.

[51] Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 44.

[52] One could think here of the power in a human life of habit. See Clare Carlisle, *On Habit* (London: Routledge, 2008).

This insight is relevant in relation to the changes in activity experienced by those of old age, who may come to know diminished capacities and energy which restrict the apparent stridency of their action. Theologian W. H. Vanstone reflects on this transition in his short work, *The Stature of Waiting* (1982). In this volume, he outlines what he observes as a prevalent late twentieth century Western experience: a shift in old age from independence to dependence, from acting to waiting, from agency to passivity, writing that:

> many people enter, step by step, into a phase of life in which, although they may not actually be called patients, they depend, for all the satisfactoriness or unsatisfactoriness of life, hardly at all on their own actions and decisions and almost entirely on what is done to and for them by others.[53]

Vanstone observes the discomfort that the sight of those whose stature is passive, dependent, and waiting, provokes in their onlookers, who anxiously 'compliment and congratulate very elderly people on being "still so active", "still so independent"'.[54] Meanwhile, he comments, 'elderly people themselves emphasize and exaggerate' the ways in which 'they manage for themselves' as though the help they receive might impair 'self respect'.[55] These tendencies point towards the belittled value that those in old age are accorded in light of the diminished action they can undertake for themselves.

Vanstone responds to the belittling of the contribution that the old may make by emphasising the unrecognised dignity of the stature of waiting and passivity. Reading the passion narratives of the Gospels of Mark and John, Vanstone sees Jesus take on precisely the stature of waiting and dependence as he is 'handed over' in the final days of his life.[56] In so doing, the person of Jesus images God in passivity rather than action, imbuing the stature of passivity with far-reaching profundity. Vanstone's rehabilitation of passivity is taken up and cited by a number of theologians who have sought to dignify those of old age in their limitation.[57] Indeed, allotting

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[53] W. H. Vanstone, *The Stature of Waiting* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1982), 35.

[54] Vanstone, *Stature of Waiting*, 44.

[55] Vanstone, *Stature of Waiting*, 44.

[56] Vanstone, *Stature of Waiting*, 13.

[57] Albert Jewell, *Spirituality and Ageing* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 1999), 118; Eileen Shamy, *A Guide to the Spiritual Dimension of Care for People with Alzheimer's Disease and Related Dementia* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2003), 37; Ridenour, *Sabbath Rest*, 160–65; Sarah Bachelard and Neil Millar, 'Growing Old: The Vocation and Practice of Ageing', *Health and Social Care Chaplaincy*, 4.2 (2016), 180–91.

dignity and esteem to the passivity and dependence disparaged in a Western contemporary context is a well-trodden move among theological meditations on the subject of ageing.[58]

Such a response may be pastorally useful, yet the present argument uncovers an alternative vision. This alternative vision does not seek to regard those of old age as valuable in their passivity and waiting, but looks, instead, with a discerning eye to the continued action of those of old age. As the giver progresses by an experience of perpetual material insecurity, so she is primed to acknowledge the flux of her personhood from which wealth could deceive. Knowing this personhood, the giver comes to know action as that which occurs not only in dramatic acts of transformation, but as powerfully present even in the most minor and repetitive of gestures. Those who no longer have the capacity for the single, transformative act may nevertheless be found exerting rich and remarkable influence on others in the simplicity of daily and repeated practices re-seen as deeply meaningful. Those of old age, in turn, may be valued and dignified, not only through a rehabilitation of passivity and its meaningfulness, but also through a revised scope of what constitutes action.[59] Those of old age and limited capacity can be thought of as profoundly engaged in meaningful, creative, enduring work in the simple acts that pattern their days, the effects of which form and shape those in their midst. Such acts, as the person who knows her own wax like state appreciates, may leave an enduring legacy, and form lasting pathways in the lives of others.[60]

Indeed, as Gregory tells the *Life of Macrina* he is attuned to the lasting power of the minor, repeated, habitual acts and gestures that characterise her life, are present at its end, and central to her legacy. Macrina's deep engagement with liturgy, cemented in her asceticism at Annisa, is

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[58] A very recent example of this can be seen in Lydia Dugdale's reflection, *Pandemic, Ageing and Agency*, Ageing and Despair Virtual Conference (McDonald Centre, Oxford, 2020) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VL0HO4aPZJI&t=1058s&ab_channel=McDonaldCentre> [accessed 30 October 2020]. For all the ways in which Dugdale's account might make possible much more promising and rich accounts of agency, in the end she falls back on the theological assertion that the value of the old can be re-evaluated because, for the Christian, 'true agency lies in surrendering'. See
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VL0HO4aPZJI&t=1058s&ab_channel=McDonaldCentre>. Further examples of this trend will be discussed in ch. 4 part 2.
[59] The disability theology of Frances Young resonates here. See her *Arthur's Call* (London: SPCK, 2014) for her account of the importance of discerning the particular gifts and ministry of her disabled son Arthur.
[60] A fascinating exploration of the significance of the minor act is found in Sinologist Jullien François's *The Silent Transformations*, trans. Krysztof Fijalkowski and Michael Richardson (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011). François attends to the significance of quiet, unseen changes and explores the reasons why the Western tradition has favoured a history attentive to revolution and jolt, rather than fluid, less easily perceptible dynamics of change.

one example of a daily and undramatic act that becomes integral to Gregory's memory of Macrina's final days and the enduring impression she leaves on others who live after her. Gregory suggests that the times of 'unceasing prayer' and 'uninterrupted hymnody' that punctuated Macrina's life moved from effortful to effortless, as he writes that her prayer became for her 'both work and respite from work'.[61] At the end of her life, the fruits of this repetition are visible, as Gregory recalls that Macrina withdrew to speak with 'God in prayer'.[62] When her waning strength disables her from speaking, Gregory sees that the language of her body, and the memory of muscles inscribed by years of habitual prayer, takes over: as 'her voice failed her…she fulfilled this intention [of prayer] in her heart by moving her hands, while her lips moved in sympathy with her inward impulse', if not in voice.[63] The command of this action is clear in the extent to which it has marked those in her midst. As her own liturgical participation ends with her dying, so Gregory can hear psalm singers summoning him to the thanksgiving lighting of the lamps.[64] Inspired by her life's habit, the community she has formed around the daily act of prayer will endure even after her life has ended. Her funeral, likewise, signals the imprint left by her habitual practice; an all-night vigil with 'hymn singing' and a 'whole neighbourhood breaking into psalmody' tells of the lasting patterns of worship her life has transferred on others.[65] Macrina's habit of prayer, formed by simple repetitive practice, is at the heart of the legacy Gregory recognises. It is a legacy to which she contributes by the wordless gestures of her body even in her final days.

This example speaks of the significance of the apparently minor, unremarkable, repeated act in creating an enduring legacy by which others may be blessed. The giver, attuned to the flux of personhood, the possibilities for such personhood therefore to be shaped, and the subsequent power of the minor act to imprint and mould the changeful other, will be alert to the continued ministry of those whose age limits their activity to what appears minor and insignificant.

4. Conclusion

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[61] *Life of Macrina*, 970D (35).

[62] *Life of Macrina*, 982C (52).

[63] Here I refer to Anna Silvas's translation of the 'The Life of Macrina', in her *Macrina the Younger, Philosopher of God*, ed. and trans. Anna Silvas (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008) 109–48, which most succinctly captures the embodied nature of Macrina's liturgical practice, 986B (135).

[64] *Life of Macrina*, 986B (57).

[65] *Life of Macrina*, 992D (68).

The act of giving generously and rejecting wealth is integral to Gregory's memory of the lives of his exemplars. Drawing on his wider corpus, the act of giving has been clarified, in Gregory's vision, as closely connected to the recognition of the *truth* of things, selves, and the poor, as that truth is (partially) approached through doctrinal *knowledge* and attentive *experience*. As related to the constant *truth* of things, rather than contingent need, the giving Gregory has in mind is perpetual rather than occasional, and, for this reason, resists the security of material accumulation. In this chapter, we have suggested three ways in which progressing by the action of this giving might confront the giver with particular facets of her anthropology, which in turn might shape a perspective of the end of life. First, the giver, reminded of the *knowledge* that things and selves are given, is inducted into the practice of gratitude. Such gratitude, being rooted in the vastness of God's giving, does not engender a sense of satisfied completion, but gives rise to the intimation that so much more is given than that which a human life can consciously receive. Second, as the giver *experiences* the spiritual reality of material things in *seeing* their givenness or Christ-likeness, she learns the intertwinement of the faculties of her soul and body. Appreciation of this intertwinement is what teaches her the blessedness of a long life, in which the soul may mature (and so particular perceptive capacities may be discovered) and in which the body encounters a new condition (which may uncover new dimensions of the soul's life). Third, as the giver, giving with such constancy and apparent recklessness, risks her own material insecurity, she less easily avoids the truth, as Gregory sees it, of her own human flux. Recognition of this condition of flux, we suggested, enables the giver to discern the profundity of even the most minor of acts that, nevertheless, can endure and last in the lives of others. In each case, Gregory's presentation of the end of Macrina's life serves as a picture of these conclusions: her life ends in a completion that testifies to its incompletion; her life embodies the blessing and enrichment of longevity; and the legacy of such a life lies, among other things, in its faithful and undramatic commitment to a life of prayer.

Chapter 4: Telling and Finding

We return to the daily lives of Gregory's exemplars in seeking to develop our understanding of the theological vision of progress beginning to emerge. Recognising, once more, that the lives he records are expository of *epektasis*, standing as enacted expressions of ever expanding virtue and love, we look again to the characteristics of Macrina, Moses, and Thaumaturgus's living. In this chapter attention is given to the three's committed practice of *telling* the good news of God. Under the descriptor of 'telling' are collected the activities of teaching, preaching, and sharing words and narratives about God. The telling under examination is, then, theological in nature. In what follows, the practice of the telling to which Gregory finds the lives of his exemplars called, and the vision of growth and progress such practice impresses, will be examined. In an accompanying next chapter, the anthropological implications of this vision will be investigated. Once again, we will ask what perspective and experience of the end of life such a vision of progress might yield.

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At the outset of this first part, (1), the activity of *telling* as it occurs in the biographies of Macrina, Moses, and Thaumaturgus will be recounted. In seeking to understand the shaping that such practice exerts on a life, in part (2) three threads will be identified as significant characteristics of the telling Gregory advocates: the three's telling witnesses to the *surplus* of their subject; initiates an *event* for their listener; and solicits the *spread* of the teller's message. I will argue that each of these characteristics is a reflection of the finitude of human language (as Gregory conceives that finitude in his debates with Eunomius). Such finitude has the effect of impelling the teller to *find* and depend on the words and sense making of others, as each characteristic at its heart does. The repetition of this finding and depending is what in part (3) I will suggest gives rise to a picture of progress that proceeds and develops, unpredictably, by encounter with the difference of others, rather than by the solo intent of an individual.

1. Telling

In Gregory's era, much energy was consumed exploring *how* to tell through the highly esteemed art of rhetoric. Greek and Roman society had been, since five centuries before Christ, a 'highly verbal world', 'fascinated by language, its mysteries, its formal structure, its ability to charm, [and] its uncanny power to motivate and persuade the human will', as Brian Daley has commented.[1] A lively rhetorical culture continued to flourish in fourth century Anatolia, enjoyed by members of the elite who expended much time training in rhetorical schools and learning from rhetorical manuals, as was a prerequisite for their advancement into many esteemed careers.[2] As Ruth Webb notes in her study of ancient rhetorical theory, in the Greek East the rhetorical training offered by men such as Libanios was frequently taken up by Christians: Gregory, his brother Basil, and their friend Gregory Nazianzus were certainly among those whose Christian oratory was full with rhetorical learning which strongly informed the styled acuity of their words.[3] Averil Cameron underscores the connection, seeing that it was precisely this deployment of rhetorical skill – the conclusions of how best to *tell* arrived at by centuries of rhetorical practice – that contributed to Christianity's becoming the political and cultural force it was in the late Roman Empire.[4] It was in part, she sees, because Christian homiletics, for example, resembled epideictic oratory that the Christian message could appeal to wide audiences; and in part as Gregory of Nyssa, among others, could not 'merely describe' but *persuade* with a 'whole armoury of classical technique at his disposal', that the Gospel would be heard.[5]

In addition to the rich rhetorical resources in Gregory's backdrop that concerned *how* to tell, there were also emerging settings in Christian practice that opened up new occasions for *when* to tell. Sophie Lunn-Rockliffe and Morwenna Ludlow chart these occasions as they investigate

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[1] *Speaking with the 'Art of Arts': Preaching as Leadership in Early Church*, John S. Marten Program in Homiletics (University of Notre Dame, Indiana, 2019) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=szBUmzv_U7c&feature=youtu.be> [accessed 27 May 2020].

[2] As Ruth Webb comments in *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), 'grammar and rhetoric were the root and heart of classical education', 14.

[3] Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion*, 16.

[4] Averil Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 1991).

[5] Cameron, *Christian Discourse*, 85. This is not to say that Christians deployed rhetoric uncritically. Indeed, Gregory's own critique is worked out in his *Life of Macrina*: Basil, he reports, 'was puffed up beyond measure with the pride of oratory', and is subsequently criticised by Macrina, who nevertheless herself speaks with memorably powerful and persuasive words, 966C (27-28).

Christian education in a late-antique post-Constantine church. The 'main "teaching" moment in church', they see, was a sermon which 'usually revolved around exegesis of the lessons read during the service, but which also often had distinctive moral and even polemical dimensions'.[6] The evolving liturgical year afforded particular seasons with climactic moments of sharing: in Lent, as Ambrose records in his treatise on *The Mysteries*, the meaning of the sacraments was explained to catechumens – not to 'all and any listeners', but those close to their baptism.[7] Indeed, those adult converts in the catechumenate were taught carefully devised and staged curriculums, whilst hymnody, seeming to have originated and been shared first in the Syriac East, 'had clearly educational functions, whether by expanding on the content of Scripture or expounding the mysteries of faith', as Lunn-Rockliffe and Ludlow comment.[8] Beyond church services, clerics were formed by teaching and instruction, in part through documents such as Gregory's own *Great Catechism*; and the elite shared with and taught one another through house groups of scriptural study, dialogue with one another via letters, or by listening together to the devotional and instructive poems written by the likes of Gregory of Nazianzus.[9]

Awareness of this backdrop attunes us to the significance of the telling Gregory recalls in the lives of his exemplars. Their teaching, preaching, and sharing the gospel sat within a context in which the importance of telling was taken for granted – both in society at large, in which status was accorded to those who could tell effectively; and in Christian circles, wherein emerging practices kindled a host of new pedagogical opportunities regarded as of deep spiritual significance. We turn, next, to the three biographies, looking at the telling Gregory recalls, as it is common to the three and particular to each.

(A) Macrina

Macrina's telling, in common with that of Moses and Thaumaturgus, takes the form of divine *teaching*. Gregory recalls how his sister 'discoursed to us on the nature of the soul and explained the reason of life in the flesh, and why man was made, and how he was mortal, and the origin of death and the nature of the journey from death to life again'.[10] According to Gregory, she 'inquire[s] into human affairs', 'reveal[s] in her conversation the divine purpose concealed in

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[6] Morwenna Ludlow and Sophie Lunn-Rockliffe, 'Education and Pleasure in the Early Church: Perspectives from East and West', *Studies in Church History*, 55 (2019), 6–34 (9).
[7] Ambrose, *De mysteriis* 1.1–2, quoted and translated by Ludlow and Lunn-Rockliffe, 8.
[8] Ludlow and Lunn-Rockliffe, 'Education and Pleasure', 9.
[9] Ludlow and Lunn-Rockliffe, 'Education and Pleasure', 9–10.
[10] *Life of Macrina,* 966C (46).

disasters', and 'discusse[s] the future life'. Her presentation here is in keeping with the biographical insight Gregory includes of Macrina in his Letter 19 as 'a teacher of how to live', as well as with the memory kept of her in his treatise *On the Soul and Resurrection*.[11] In that treatise, Gregory casts himself as the student of Macrina (herself cast as Socrates according to the model of Plato's *Phaedo* which the treatise consciously emulates in subject matter and form) and records the sharp theological teaching she offers on a vast array of topics.[12] Likewise in his biography of Macrina, from her early care of their brother Peter who was 'educated on a lofty system of training' by her, to the final telling of her life wherein 'with lofty mind' she 'continued to discuss up to her last breath the convictions she had formed from the beginning about this life', she is presented as *didaskalos* and the lasting power of her words to teach and convey the truth of God is central to Gregory's memory of her.[13]

Her telling takes too the form of daily instruction and advice which effects the growth of virtue in her community. She 'persuaded her mother to give up her ordinary life' and take up holy practice in exchange.[14] She 'took [Basil] in hand, and with such speed did she draw him toward the mark of philosophy'.[15] She was, as Gregory writes, the 'teacher, tutor…and giver of all good advice' – frequently sharing with others the practical wisdom of Christian life.[16] Indeed, after her death, it is the loss of the instructive quality of her *telling* that the sisters at Annesi most immediately miss, crying that 'the light that guided our souls has been taken away'.[17] Gregory urges them to 'remember her commands' and draw on the wisdom with which she trained them 'to be orderly and decent in everything' as they grieve.[18] Her telling, then, is practical as well as theological.

It is a telling that is presented by Gregory as mediating the words of God. Commenting on Macrina's final extended discourse, in which her theological insight is woven into a narration of her own life, Gregory writes that 'in all of which she told her tale clearly and consecutively as if

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[11] Gregory of Nyssa, 'Letter 19', in *Macrina the Younger, Philosopher of God*, ed. and trans. Anna Silvas, (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008), 83-92 (87); 'On the Soul and Resurrection', 428.

[12] For a comparison of Gregory's treatise and Plato's *Phaedo* see Susan Wessel, 'Memory and Individuality in Gregory of Nyssa's Dialogus de Anima et Resurrectione', *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 18.3 (2010), 369–392.

[13] *Life of Macrina,* 972C (37), 982D (53).

[14] *Life of Macrina,* 966D (28).

[15] *Life of Macrina,* 966C (28).

[16] *Life of Macrina,* 972C (37).

[17] *Life of Macrina,* 988A (59-60).

[18] *Life of Macrina,* 988B (60).

inspired by the power of the Holy Spirit, and the even flow of her language was like a fountain whose water streams down uninterruptedly'.[19] Indeed, the heavy concentration of scriptural allusion in the words recalled of Macrina by Gregory suggests the same: her own telling draws on and takes up in its own dialect the speaking of God.[20] Recognising the mediation that Macrina's speech facilitates makes sense of the effect of her telling on others. Like the telling of Moses and Thaumaturgus, Macrina's words operate as a balm: their steadfastness 'taught her mother's soul to be brave'; while the words she shares with Gregory via a messenger bade him to 'be of good cheer', and led him out of his initial distress.[21] Gregory remembers Macrina, like Moses and Thaumaturgus, as one whose telling made her a powerful teacher of theology, as well as a persuasive instructor on daily matters. The words she deploys in these related endeavours mediate and draw on the wisdom of God's speech, and for this reason can be found impressing and consoling the hearts of her hearers.

Alongside telling of God's truth via explanation and teaching, Macrina's telling, distinctive here from Gregory's other exemplars, is also shown to incorporate a form more intimate and familiar. Gregory sees that Macrina tells the truth of God through telling stories of her life. He recalls, for example, that she 'recounted as much as she could remember of the life of our parents, and the events that took place before and after' his birth.[22] She does so, Gregory sees, to gesture in gratitude to the 'divine blessing' inscribed and revealed in their lives.[23] We may discern this autobiographical character to her telling, further, in deducing that since it is recorded that Vestiana, a sister of Macrina's community, can share with Gregory a story of Macrina's being healed, Macrina must first have shared this story with Vestiana.[24] These intimate disclosures of the blessings Macrina has known, revealing the God she proclaims, sit alongside the doctrinal teaching she more formally offers elsewhere. In both Gregory perceives her telling of God's truth.

(B) Moses

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[19] *Life of Macrina,* 978D (46).

[20] Macrina's voice is not presented as one with God's, but in important respects inspired and shaped by God's.

[21] *Life of Macrina,* 970A (32), 980A (47).

[22] *Life of Macrina,* 980C (49).

[23] *Life of Macrina,* 980C (49).

[24] *Life of Macrina,* 990D-992D (66-68).

In common with Gregory's other exemplars, Moses is recalled as one whose telling teaches the truth of God. The climax of this teaching occurs as Moses 'received the divine ordinances'.[25] 'These', Gregory sees, 'were the teachings concerning virtue, the chief of which is reverence and having the proper notions about the divine nature'.[26] It is these teachings that Gregory reports Moses sharing, in necessarily partial and piecemeal ways, with the Israelites, on his return from the mountain.[27] 'After he was instructed…by the ineffable teaching of God', 'he then went down to his people to share with them the marvels which had been shown to him in the theophany, to deliver the laws, and to institute for them the sanctuary and priesthood according to the pattern shown to him on the mountain'.[28] Moses is taught on the mountain, and what he learns he attempts to pass on by his own teaching upon his return. The specificity of his role in telling is clear in Gregory's mind: 'the multitude was not capable of hearing the voice from above but relied on Moses to learn by himself the secrets and to teach the people whatever doctrine he might learn through instruction from above'.[29]

Once more like Macrina and Thaumaturgus, Moses's theological insight is manifest not only in lofty doctrine but in practical instruction. Moses's telling regularly concerns the daily matters of the community: he 'delivered to them the laws, and established the priesthood in keeping with the teaching given to him by God'.[30] Guided by Moses, the tabernacle is 'constructed… according to the pattern' shown by God.[31] The 'workmanship on the material objects', owing again to Moses's instruction, 'was done according to the divine directions'.[32] The priest's adornment, likewise, has a specificity commanded by Moses who himself has been commanded by God.[33] His telling, taking the form of instruction, directs his community to God and enables their participation in the life to which God has called them.

Such telling, again, is considered by Gregory to be mediatory of the word of God. Moses tells his people something of what he experiences God to have told him; the knowledge and

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[25] *Life of Moses*, I.47 (42).

[26] *Life of Moses*, I.47 (42).

[27] The ineffability of God that Moses encounters on the mountain cannot be communicated without shattering the vehicle of rhetoric, as we will have cause to consider in depth later in this chapter. For this reason, Moses's translation of what he encounters into law is a partial rather than total translation of what he encounters.

[28] *Life of Moses*, I.56 (45).

[29] *Life of Moses*, II.160 (93).

[30] *Life of Moses*, I. 61 (46).

[31] *Life of Moses*, I.51 (44).

[32] *Life of Moses*, I. 61 (46).

[33] *Life of Moses*, I. 55 (44).

instruction he imparts in his words are the partial passing on of the knowledge and instruction he has heard as he has been 'strengthened by the shining light'. [34] It is via this mediation that Moses's words have the effect of transporting to his recipients the divine gifts of God. As Moses tells, he nurtures hope: 'by spoken word he encourages the Israelites and exhorted them not to abandon high hopes'. [35] As Moses tells, he grows the desire of his recipients for the good: 'when Moses had spoken…excellent words', he 'strengthened [his hearers'] desire for [the] freedom' promised by God. [36] As Moses tells, he implants in his hearers the boldness to trust God: 'he exhorted the Israelites to be of good courage'. [37] Like Macrina and Thaumaturgus, his telling consists in teaching about God, instructing how to live in light of God, and mediating God's gifts in the process.

Particular to Moses's telling is the focus his teaching has of expressing and realising the divine promise of freedom. Gregory writes that through the 'illumination which came from above', communicated by Moses through teaching and instructing, Moses was 'to lead his countrymen to the life of freedom'. [38] In 'bringing to their remembrance the nobility of their fathers', provoking the memory of the earlier promises made by God, Moses prepares the way for the promise of freedom to be received and trusted. [39] Yet his telling not only actively primes and facilitates future freedom, but is presented by Gregory as initiating freedom in its very action: Moses 'boldly delivered to the people the words of freedom'. [40] His telling is distinctive in the solidity of the change and action it engenders. In the analysis that follows, much more will be said of this enacting and eventing quality of telling, prominent as this quality is in the example of Moses.

(C) Gregory Thaumaturgus

Central to the legacy of Thaumaturgus, like that of Macrina and Moses, is a commitment to the teaching theological knowledge. This is demonstrated in one particularly significant instance: Thaumaturgus's profession of a Trinitarian 'doctrine'. As Thaumaturgus deliberates 'matters

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[34] *Life of Moses*, II. 55 (65).

[35] *Life of Moses*, I. 55 36.

[36] *Life of Moses* II.56 (66). All these quotes point to a difference between the original word Moses encounters and the way it is heard and taken up. This difference will be explored in greater depth as we consider the theme of 'spread' in Part 2 of this chapter.

[37] *Life of Moses*, II. 55 (81).

[38] *Life of Moses*, II. 55 (74).

[39] *Life of Moses*, II. 55 (65).

[40] *Life of Moses*, II. 55 (65).

about which he was uncertain', Gregory reports that he experiences a miraculous vision in which 'he heard through a kind of word those who appeared to him discussing with each other the doctrine about which he was pondering'.[41] The vision instructs Thaumaturgus 'as to the true knowledge of the faith', 'so that the truth of the orthodox faith', in turn, 'might be disclosed'.[42] The doctrine he 'utter[s]' is 'balanced and clearly divined'.[43] He is said to have 'written down [the] divine initiation as soon as possible', and to have soon put it to work 'as the basis for teaching his successors as a kind of inheritance'.[44] 'To this day', Gregory notes, that Thaumaturgus's doctrine protects the faithful from 'heretical wickedness' by establishing the 'true knowledge of the faith'.[45] Indeed, Gregory himself compares the telling of Thaumaturgus, in this respect, to the telling of Moses, seeing both teachers of 'the knowledge of God' working by parallel patterns. Thaumaturgus:

> had not some visible mountain of earth [as has Moses] but the pinnacle of ardent desire for the true teachings: for darkness, the vision which others could not comprehend; for writing tablet, the soul; for the letters graven on the stone tablets, the voice of the one he saw.[46]

Once more, the telling of Thaumaturgus also manifests in daily guidance. The temple custodian who follows him takes up Thaumaturgus's 'divine philosophy and instruction', Gregory writes, while another group of people 'shared the goal that the Great One should stay with them to instil virtue and teach the laws of life', so compelled are they by his instruction.[47] His 'word', as it coincides on occasion with the miracles he enacts, 'taught servants to be dutiful', and 'people with power, to care for their subjects', and 'the poor person, that their sole wealth was virtue'.[48] It is a telling interwoven, then, with the lived concerns of the hearers he encounters.

Thaumaturgus's telling, akin to that of the other biographies, is strongly implied as mediatory. The doctrine for which he is renowned arises out of a vision in which he overhears two saints

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[41] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 912A; 912B (53).
[42] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 912B; 912A (53-54).
[43] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 912C (54).
[44] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 912C (54).
[45] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 912C; 912B (54, 53).
[46] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 913B (55).
[47] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 917C (58), 908A (50).
[48] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 924A (61-62).

discuss divine truth.[49] His doctrine, so Gregory implies, simply passes on the words of the faithful he has overheard. Moreover, it is 'by the power of the Spirit', that, Gregory writes, Thaumaturgus may share and tell 'in accord with the need of each in the crowd'.[50] Indeed, in what his words yield, their mediatory status can further be deduced. Through them, true peace and consolation are found by their recipients: 'the elderly [were] comforted by fitting words', and the 'mourner comforted' too.[51] Like Macrina and Moses, Thaumaturgus's telling – teaching, instructing, and mediating the truth of God – is central to his legacy.

Distinctive to the presentation of Thaumaturgus's telling, both as it is conceived and as it is transmitted, is its interaction with visual wonder. The telling of his doctrine, as has been noted, is based on what he had seen in the vision he received. As the telling is transmitted, it is, again, concomitant with visual wonder. Gregory recounts that as Thaumaturgus proclaims the good news of God, 'vision coincided with hearing'; as he preaches, by the power of God a river is dried up, a rock transposed, and a hill is shifted for a multitude to see.[52] These wonders are presented as complements to the proclamations of Christian truth offered by Thaumaturgus.[53] Gregory writes that 'his word amazed the hearing as his mighty deeds with the sick amazed the eyes'.[54] The slippage of *telling* between different senses, and the incapacity of one medium alone to contain its message, testifies to a kind of excess, about which more will be said in the analysis to come.

2. Finding

Having established the centrality of *telling* in the lives of Macrina, Moses, and Thaumaturgus as they progress in love of God, we turn now to analyse the characteristics of the activity as Gregory discerns it in the practice of his subjects. Unlike the practices of giving examined in chapter 2, the practice of telling is also explicitly performed by Gregory himself: in writing and recording the telling of his subjects, he himself exemplifies the act of telling he praises. In what

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[49] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 909C (52).

[50] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 924A (61).

[51] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 924A (61-62).

[52] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 924A (61), 932A (67), 917B (58), 948A (78-79).

[53] Raymond Van Dam's discussion in 'Hagiography and History: The Life of Gregory Thaumaturgus', *Classical Antiquity*, 1.2 (1982), 272–308 usefully elucidates a context in which visible marvels are received as meaningful forms of proclamation (275).

[54] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 924A (61).

follows, the telling of Gregory, as much as his subjects' telling, is treated as integral material through which to shed light on the dynamics of the practice advocated by him. Three related threads emerge as characteristic of the telling Gregory observes and enacts: (i) telling testifies to the *surplus* of its object; (ii) telling comes concomitant with *event*; (iii) telling invites its own *spread*. I suggest that these threads can be thought of under the title 'finding' since each, in its way, translates the act of *telling* into the act of *finding* other voices that may join the telling. These threads imbue the act of telling with energy to elicit and find what it is that the other might add and reveal.

To strengthen the suggestion that what I observe in the threads of 'finding' are indeed distinctively *Nyssen* threads, I will analyse the resonance of my observations with Gregory's wider convictions about the nature of language. His wider convictions are elucidated especially in his opposition to the neo-Arianism of Eunomius, as recorded in his work *Against Eunomius I* and *Against Eunomius II* (both written in response to the first book of Enomius's *Second Apology*, c. 378). These works develop Gregory's thought in multiple directions.[55] The selective deployment of them here makes use in particular of Gregory's philosophical insights on the nature of language. In bringing these insights to bear alongside the identified three threads, we shall see that the theological telling Gregory advocates models a use of language that recognizes (as Gregory sees) its true creatureliness and limitation. In summary we shall see that it is as the teller communicates in recognition of the natural finitude of her language that she, repeatedly, is impelled to find and depend on the words and sense making of others. In positing an alignment between the linguistic practices of Gregory's exemplars and the convictions of his philosophy of language, we also, along the way, raise a supplementary point in underscoring the relevance of the principles Gregory expounds 'polemically' to the ordinary speaking of Christian lay people. Gregory's philosophical theory, we shall see, is that which can be lived and embodied in human conversation.

(A) Surplus

The telling that Gregory records in the lives of Macrina, Moses, and Thaumatugus, and performs in his own biographical writings of them, distinctively testifies to the uncontainable abundance – the *surplus* – of the divine provocation in response to which telling proceeds, and the created potential for response. The telling he relays as central to the lives of the three

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[55] For a useful map of key themes, see ch. 2 of Andrew Radde-Gallwitz, *Gregory of Nyssa's Doctrinal Works: A Literary Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

testifies to this surplus by retaining evidence of an antecedent telling which it joins, pointing to the more extensive telling that its own partial offering sits within. Gregory himself takes up and expands this technique; first, by likewise witnessing to the antecedent telling which his telling joins; and, second, signalling the multiple tellings *within* his texts. In these ways, the surplus of the divine truth to which Gregory's ideal telling attests is pointed to by the suggestion of its lively generativity in producing not a single message but a stream of linguistic response, present before and within the texts in question.

1. Tellings before

Macrina's telling is loaded with scriptural citation as Gregory recalls it. In perhaps the most prominent moment of telling in the biography, 'whispering with a low voice, so that we could just hear what was said', Macrina offers the culmination of her life and thought in a prayerful discourse in which each of her final twenty-one lines refers to or rephrases (sometimes multiple) verses of scripture.[56] The finale of her theological thought points back to the origins of all her learning – the scripture that constituted the 'girl's studies' in her childhood, as Gregory reports in among the first of his comments about his sister.[57] Her own telling refers back to the biblical telling it borrows from and by which it has developed. In so doing, it witnesses to the fact Macrina joins a discourse that has already begun. Her own telling does not stand alone (but joins a telling prior to it); and the prior telling it joins had not reached conclusion (her telling could join and add to it). The divine provocation behind these tellings is clarified as highly generative and as yet incompletely described. Fitting, then, is the image Gregory reaches for as he describes the 'even flow of her language': 'a fountain whose water streams down uninterruptedly'.[58] Macrina's *telling* witnesses to the fecund *surplus* of its source as her language bears the marks of belonging to a more extensive telling before it.

A similar dynamic can be identified in the telling of Moses and Thaumaturgus. In the case of Thaumaturgus, the climactic moment of telling that occurs in his profession of a Trinitarian doctrine is steeped, by Gregory, in reference to the vision out of which it arose.[59] As noted above, the 'words of the initiation' are transferred from the 'word [of] those who had appeared

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[56] Anna Silvas's translation of the *Life of Macrina* cites the abundance of scriptural allusion. See *Macrina the Younger*, 984B-986A (133–35).

[57] *Life of Macrina*, 962D (22).

[58] *Life of Macrina*, 978D (46).

[59] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 912A; 912B (53).

to him discussing with each other' to the community to whom he professes the doctrine. [60] Once more, the telling practiced by the exemplar in question is not strictly initiated but joined to a more extensive telling already in play. In the case of Moses, the origins of his telling are particularly pronounced. The key moment of his proclaiming, in which he 'teach[es] concerning virtue', shares the 'marvels' of God, and institutes the laws to live by, is very consciously the repetition of 'the voice from the light' which presented Moses's 'hearing with undefiled teachings'. [61] As Gregory is clear, Moses tells only 'according to the pattern shown to him on the mountain'. [62] His own preaching is in continuity with the experience preceding it. Indeed, in another instance of Moses's telling, as he 'delivers the words of freedom' to the Israelites, Gregory notes that Moses 'brought to their remembrance the nobility of their fathers'. [63] That is, he has recourse to the wider telling of his ancestry, placing his words in that more extensive panoply. Like that of Macrina, the telling of Moses and Thaumaturgus points to what it joins: whether a prior scriptural narrative, the discussion of earlier saints, an antecedent experience of God, or a wider salvific story. To testify to this in the act of telling is to point to the fecundity and abundance of the source of that telling: prior tellings will not be the last, and present tellings are not the first, such is the surplus of God.

Gregory himself performs this witness in his own writing, joining the three in testifying to the antecedents of his biographies. As he sets about telling the holy life of his sister, a prefatory letter (addressed variously across different manuscripts) remarks that the current work arises out of the limits of a previous conversation: 'talk flowed on' with this interlocutor until they 'came to discuss the life of some famous person'. [64] It is that life that Gregory takes up again in his biographical letter; expanding on the previous conversation yet still offering an 'apology', since the 'subject…is greater than can be compressed within the limits of a letter'. [65] In the case of his *Life of Thaumaturgus*, the form-critical analysis offered by historian Raymond Van Dam illuminates much of the content included by Gregory as very likely the restatement of oral traditions passed down and already well known among communities and ecclesiastical traditions in Pontus. [66] Gregory, Van Dam implies, strung them together into an oration and then into a

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[60] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 924A (53).
[61] *Life of Moses*, I.47 (42); I. 20 (34).
[62] *Life of Moses*, I.51 (44).
[63] *Life of Moses*, II.54 (65).
[64] *Life of Macrina*, 960B (17). See Silvas on the setting and genesis of the *Life of Macrina*, 102.
[65] *Life of Macrina*, 960A (17).
[66] For Van Dam, the strong presence of aphoristic sayings upon which episodes in the *Life* appear to hang, as well as the late remark by Gregory himself in the work that, although people could remember

'biography'.[67] His telling is very likely the re-telling of a set of narratives already well known by his prospective audience. The *Life of Moses* likewise testifies to particular antecedents. Moses is already a well-treated subject, extensively commented on in Christian writings, among them Clement of Alexandria's *Life of Moses*, itself modelled on Philo's treatment of Moses. The form Gregory deploys similarly makes conscious use of established interpretative methods. The division of *historia* and *theoria* belongs to the Alexandrian school, while close parallels of Gregory's specific division of the 'inner' and 'literal' meaning' may be found in Origen's *Commentary on Lamentations*.[68] Gregory turns to a subject about which much has already been said, and does so using tools already handled. In so doing, he, like his exemplars, consciously harks back to a telling his can be considered joining. In so doing, once more the surplus of the subject in question is asserted: in accentuating the joins of his telling with those prior, Gregory, performing the habit of his exemplars, denies that the God to whom his words respond can be contained by a single telling.

2. Tellings within

In the *Life of Moses*, Gregory goes further still, not only, as we have seen, witnessing to an antecedent telling *outside* of his text, but, by way of his two-part structure, consciously generating multiple tellings *within* his text. The literal reading of Moses's life offered in his first book of *historia* is revisited in his second book of *theoria*, in which the 'plain' reading of the text is 'contemplated' with an eye to its 'deeper meaning'.[69] The process leads Gregory to read repeatedly into the contents of Moses's life, not only doubly (discovering a deeper meaning) but multitudinously (discovering multiple coinciding identifications). On revisiting Moses's rod in his second book, for example, it is, variously interpreted as 'the word of faith' (II.36); a picture of the 'doctrine of the incarnation' (II.31), an 'invincible rod of virtue' (II.64), and Christ's cross (II.277). As Graham Ward comments in his short study of the *Life*, this 'processive reidentifcation' extends to the 'I' who reads Gregory's text, who is 'continually

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other of Thaumaturgus's marvels, it would be too time-consuming to record them, imply that 'each wonder in the *Vita* was already a self-contained narrative unity within the oral tradition' (286). Van Dam offers the example of Thaumaturgus's power over demons, exemplified by an episode which begins and ends with a virtually identical statement: '[Thaumatugus] begins his heroic combat against the demons' (285).

[67] Van Dam, 285.

[68] Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson, 'Introduction', in *The Life of Moses*, ed. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1978), 1–23 (5).

[69] *Life of Moses*, II.219 (110).

renamed – as Moses, as an Egyptian, as an Israelite, as a pillar, as a sanctuary light'.[70] The multiple meanings which arise from Moses's life and the God he encounters are not, for Gregory, details which have been won by an effortful return to the plain reading – a closer look at a static story, uncovering hidden details. Rather, the persistence with which Gregory can suggest multiple and apparently conflicting meanings might be read as speaking of the fact that the God he seeks to witness to *continues* to generate and provoke new response as the narrative is re-read.[71]

Indeed, while Gregory does not explore the possible multiple meanings of the literal events he recounts in the biographies of Macrina and Thaumaturgus, he does, nevertheless, hint towards this exploration as a future possibility for his audience to take up. This is suggested by the reversion at the end of both chronologically staged texts to episodes early in the life of the exemplar. Ending by way of these returns offers a striking contrast to the conventions of encomia contained in the rhetorical manuals of Gregory's day, which prescribed strictly chronological structures.[72] Having written of the later years of Thaumaturgus's life and indeed detailed his death, the coda unravels in the final pages as Gregory thrusts his reader back into the midst of the life that had seemed to have concluded: 'for now, as I resume', writes Gregory, 'I will narrate what happened in the early days of his priesthood'.[73] In conclusion to Macrina's life, Gregory ends by recounting the earlier episode of an 'extraordinary agricultural operation in the famine time'.[74] These final inclusions place Gregory's reader back at the earlier portions of his *Lives*, as if inviting her to embark again on a second reading, to write her own work of *theoria* as Gregory does in relation to Moses. The multiplicity of tellings suggested as present within his texts testifies to a God who is not an object but is alive; whose glory is not containable but causative of an ever-present sense of its vastness.

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[70] Ward, 'Allegoria', 287.

[71] This would fit with Gregory's comment in 'Against Eunomius', in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic Treatises*, ed. and trans. Philip Schaff and Henry Wallace, Second Series (New York, NY: Cosimo Classics, 2007), V, 33–250, that the creature 'never halts at what it has reached, but all that it has acquired becomes by participation a beginning of its ascent to some - thing still greater', Book VIII.5 (210).

[72] See, for example, the description of encomium offered by Aphthonius (a student of Libanius, who may well have trained Basil). On this, Ronald F. Hock, *The Chreia and Ancient Rhetoric* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012).

[73] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 956B (85).

[74] *Life of Macrina*, 1000A (78). Indeed, the particular miracle with which Gregory chooses to end his *Life of Macrina* by citing is a more than apt encouragement for the task of re-reading and re-telling. It is a miracle of intractable abundance during a famine; a parable to tell of the surplus of Gregory's subject and the very much more to be tasted in a second, third, and fourth re-telling of his own work.

As the exemplars tell in such a way as to reference a prior (incomplete) telling, and as Gregory tells in such a way as to suggest a multiplicity of tellings, they point to the surplus of their divine subject. By way of these joins to what is before and what else is within, Gregory's vision of telling witnesses to the impossibility of its provocation being grasped or had in any single description. Rather, its lively surplus is testified to in its generation of a procession of *tellings*, each in itself incomplete yet fecund in its triggering of the further words of others beyond the single teller.[75]

<center>*</center>

In witnessing to the surplus of their telling, Macrina, Moses, and Thaumaturgus witness to the limits of their own language to tell the truth in a complete way. In this sense, their language is shown to be limited in exactly the way that Gregory elucidates all language is limited in his polemic against Eunomius's second treatise. In this work, Gregory makes clear that language is a human construction, which therefore renders words unstable and polysemic, rather than pure and fixed. The telling Gregory advocates is faithful to this linguistic insight.

For Gregory, it is our creaturely status as beings in time, who evolve through change and experience the world and its contents in flux, which necessitates the inception of language.

> For as we cannot always have all things before our eyes, we take knowledge of some of the things that are present with us from time to time, and others we register in our memories. But it would be impossible to keep memory unconfused unless we had the notation of words to distinguish the things that are stored up in our minds from one another.[76]

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[75] This might be contrasted with what Christopher Pelling discovers in his essay 'Is Death the End? Closure in Plutarch's Lives' in his *Plutarch and History* (Swansea: Duckworth, 2002), 265–386. Pelling observes Plutarch deploy a range of techniques to give each *Life* 'closure' at its end. Rather than drawing discussion of his subject to a final word, Gregory locates the closure of his lives in the invitation to others to re-tell their narratives.

[76] 'Answer to Eunomius' Second Book', in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic Treatises*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wallace, trans. M. Day, Second Series (New York, NY: Cosimo Classics, 2007), V, 250–342, 279.

Negotiating a world in which things pass and alter, in which *what was* is as necessary to thought as *what is*, requires the provisional labelling of one thing from another which nouns enable us to achieve. God, being one to whom 'all things are present', has no need of memory, 'all things being within the range of His penetrating vision'.[77] His vision is accompanied by a 'wisdom and power [which] embraces and holds the nature of all things distinct and unconfused'.[78] 'What need', then, asks Gregory, 'in [God's] case, of parts of speech?'[79] 'Things have their names, not for His sake, but for ours'.[80] Language is clarified as a function of the creaturely condition; a craft required by those living in fragmented time without access to the totality of experience.

Language being *for* the particular conditions of the human, language must too, Gregory sees, be understood as made *by* 'the arbitrary use of mankind', an 'invention of the human mind'.[81] For him this was demonstrated by the presence of different dialects: 'for a stone or a stick does not seem one thing to one man and another to another, but the different peoples call them by different names'.[82] This position stood in critical distinction to what Gregory read in Eunomius's thought, which, by contrast, seemed to assert a pure relationship between signs and referents, on the grounds that signs had been given 'prior to the creation of those who should use them' by God, who had 'seated Himself by our first parents, like some pedagogue or grammarian, [giving] them a lesson in words and names'.[83] For Eunomius, the sounds of words, divinely given, accorded to fixed meanings; for Gregory, words and their sounds, conceived by creatures, were unstable attempts to gesture to only ever partial knowledge.[84]

This instability of human language, founded on its being conceived *for* and *in* human limitation, is expressed in the characteristic of words ultimately to be open-ended. Frances Young comments on this in her study of the linguistic culture of early Christianity, writing that the Cappadocian standpoint, emphasising the instability of language, 'hints at the kind of "infinity"

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[77] 'Answer to Eunomius' Second Book', 279.

[78] 'Answer to Eunomius' Second Book', 279.

[79] 'Answer to Eunomius' Second Book', 279.

[80] 'Answer to Eunomius' Second Book', 279.

[81] That language is an invention does not mean it is not a gift, as Gregory puts it in 'Answer to Eunomius' Second Book', 'but God, willing that men should speak different languages, gave human nature full liberty to formulate arbitrary sounds, so as to render their meaning more intelligible. And if any one says that such names were imposed by the arbitrary usage of mankind, he will be guilty of no offense against the scheme of Divine Providence' (276).

[82] 'Answer to Eunomius' Second Book', 276.

[83] 'Answer to Eunomius' Second Book', 290.

[84] For a detailed account of this difference, see Raoul Mortley, *From Word to Silence II* (Bonn: Hanstein, 1986), especially 180.

found in postmodern linguistic and literary discussion', which validates 'an "expanding"… sense of ever more meaning to be discerned'.[85] For Gregory, the 'constitutional instability' of language, as Scot Douglass terms it in his study of Cappadocian language theory, renders 'every word polysemic' and makes impossible the capacity 'to stabilize discursively a particular "pure" meaning out of any word's plurality of meanings'.[86] Words in turn must be considered open to ever unfurling sense, better read as though partaking in 'the polyvalence recognized in poetry, rather than a…delimiting reduction of meaning to propositional definitions produced by deduction', as Young comments.[87]

The telling we have investigated in the practice of Macrina, Moses, Thaumaturgus, and Gregory, which distinctively witnesses to the *surplus* of its object, can be considered convergent with this linguistic insight. For in their telling of God, Gregory and his exemplars do not deny or seek to depart from the finitude of ordinary speech but faithfully abide within it as they preach the good news of God. They do so proceeding within the limitation of language by choice of accentuating its multiplicity. As we saw, the *telling* Gregory commends proceeds not by a single totalizing discourse, but by consciously being joined by the teller to tellings before and within. Such a technique is the corollary of Gregory's conviction that words cannot stand transparently and alone, but must be deployed by way of array, kaleidoscopically adding to one another in view of the finitude of each.[88] The telling embodied by Gregory's exemplars – testifying to its surplus – witnesses to the limits of language. In witnessing to these limits and acknowledging the incompleteness of a single voice, it is a telling which repeatedly seeks and finds the further voices and further sense making of others.

 (B) Event

The second thread I suggest is a notable characteristic of the telling of Gregory's exemplars is the quality of their theological utterances to effect an event. By 'event' I refer to the action that

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[85] Frances M. Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 144.

[86] Scot Douglass, *Theology of the Gap: Cappadocian Language Theory and the Trinitarian Controversy*, American University Studies (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2005), 73.

[87] Young, *Biblical Exegesis,* 144. Indeed, the words Gregory deploys in his *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, full with paradox, insisting on the simultaneity of what is mutually exclusive, express this conviction that words cannot be relied as stable single references but are ever pushed toward polysemic overflow.

[88] Indeed, such a conviction is at the heart of Gregory's attack on Eunomius's deployment of *agennetos* (which Eunomius took to denote the stable, fixed 'begotten' essence of Christ). Gregory insisted that one single word could not be valorized at the expense of other words: Christ was begotten, but he was also infinite, and good, etc. Cf. 'Against Eunomius', VIII.5 (206-210).

words may realise in the life of their recipient. This 'event', I argue, occurs *as a result* of words being spoken (event as consequence of utterance); and also *in the act* of their being spoken (event as simultaneous with utterance). Whilst all statements within dialogue may be said to effect an event, Gregory, as we shall see, is distinctively conscious of this dimension of his subjects' speech. Indeed, this consciousness is expressed in his own purposeful joining with what he discerns in his subjects. In not only offering a descriptive account of his exemplars but also additionally invoking their presence, Gregory brings about the event of a meeting of kinds between recipient and subject.

1. Event as consequence of utterance

Moses's words are effective in engendering the hope and freedom God promises. It is Moses who 'exhorted the Israelites to be of good courage' and 'not to abandon high hopes' and Moses who 'delivered to the people the words of freedom'.[89] Gregory reports that once he 'had spoken these excellent words and offered his hearers freedom', he 'strengthened their desire for freedom'.[90] Both freedom and desire for freedom are effected as consequences of his words. Macrina likewise is one remembered for the effective power of her words. As Gregory recalls her discoursing on 'the nature of the soul' and 'the reason of life in the flesh, and why man was made, and how he was mortal, and the origin of death' he comments on how she inspires those around her toward the 'contemplation of heavenly things'.[91] He himself recalls that his 'soul [was] lifted by the help of her words away from mortal nature and placed within the heavenly sanctuary'.[92] Macrina tells, and those who hear her are impelled towards God; her words trigger the event of contemplation. The power of Thaumaturgus's telling to effect change is central to his legacy in developing the church in Pontus. As Gregory records, on entering Neocaesarea Thaumaturgus was to be found 'sharing by the power of the Spirit in accord with the need of each in the crowd: proclaiming, discerning, directing, teaching, healing'.[93] 'His word amazed the hearing', and 'he won the multitude over by proclamation'.[94] What they had heard through his 'collaboration [with] the Spirit' made the people 'want to

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[89] *Life of Moses*, I.29 (36), II.54 (65).
[90] *Life of* Moses, II.56 (66).
[91] *Life of Macrina*, 978C (45).
[92] *Life of Macrina*, 978B (45).
[93] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 924A (61).
[94] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 924A (61-2).

build a temple'.[95] His words provoked this concrete desire to build and organise; his telling led to this event.

2. Event as simultaneous with utterance

Thaumaturgus's words enact an event, in addition, in their very utterance. This is clear in Gregory's recollection of Thaumaturgus's first miraculous conquest of demons in a temple. As Gregory reports it, the conquest takes place by way of a set of linguistic acts. First, 'he...brought terror on the demons by the invocation of the name of Christ', his utterance effecting the event of their diminishment.[96] Next, he kept 'vigil in prayers and hymnody, so that a house made abominable by the blood on its altars and its images was transformed into a house of prayer'; in the act of his praying and praising, the space necessarily becomes the place of prayer.[97] Finally, Thaumaturgus 'tore off a little piece of paper...inscribing a word of command to the demons'.[98] As the written petition is placed on the altar, 'the demons were evicted from the sanctuary'.[99] Once more, the words of Thaumaturgus forcefully enact an event simultaneous with their address.

Macrina's words, likewise, are presented by Gregory as effecting a change not only after but in the act of speaking. Gregory writes that it was a 'great and genuine rest to hear her noble words', recalling too that her voice 'delighted our ears with sweetness', and commenting that what he will most miss of his sister is her voice.[100] Gregory gestures in these remarks to the way in which Macrina's utterances bestowed on those in her midst an event in addition to their propositional value: they consoled, blessed, and delighted.[101]

3. Gregory's invocation of proximity and presence

Gregory's telling, in likeness to his exemplars, seeks to enact an event additional to the simple

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[95] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 924B (62).

[96] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 916B (56).

[97] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 916B (56)

[98] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 916D (57).

[99] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 917A (57).

[100] *Life of Macrina*, 978D (47), 982C (52), 982D (53).

[101] Gregory's interest here in the capacity of words to engender feeling makes particular sense when read against Gregory's advocacy – recently underscored by Ludlow and Lunn-Rockcliffe – for 'a pedagogical language which was *sensuous*' and emotionally resonant (32).

conveyance of description. His words invoke the imagined 'presence' of his subject, which effects proximity between the recipient of his telling and the subject in question. This, in turn, provokes an event in consequence: enabling his recipients to imitate their knowledge of the exemplar rather than retaining such knowledge disinterestedly.

As Gregory tells of the lives of Macrina, Moses, and Thaumaturgus, he does so by frequent recourse to inter-textual comparison, through which he contrasts his exemplars with figures belonging to other texts and eras. This inter-textual approach is key to establishing the proximity Gregory sets up. In describing Thaumaturgus, Gregory reaches for comparison with Moses. 'Just as the word says that Moses…learned the divine mysteries, and in person instructed the whole people in the knowledge of God, the same dispensation is to be seen in the case of this Great One'.[102] Further biblical resonances abound: Thaumaturgus's early maturity brings to mind the wisdom of David;[103] his schooling in philosophy but choice of Christianity recalls Abraham, 'who was learned in Chaldean philosophy' but who chose 'contemplation of the good';[104] and his kindness to his attackers brings to mind Joseph.[105] Macrina is likewise steeped in the resonance of scriptural typology. As she lies sick on her pallet, she evokes Job, who 'in spite of the pains of the body did not relax his activities nor interrupt the lofty sentiments of his discourse', like Macrina who continued to 'contemplate heavenly things, in no way injured by her terrible weakness'.[106] When Gregory sees her the next day, it is Paul she evokes, as she, 'already looking to the prize of her heavenly calling', 'all but uttered the apostle's words… "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith"'.[107] In her last hours, it is the thief on the cross: as she addresses God, she identifies herself with 'the man that was crucified with Thee', 'having nailed [her] flesh to the cross'.[108] To tell of Macrina, as for Thaumaturgus, is to tell of the various scriptural figures she re-enacts and exudes.

With respect to Moses, we see Gregory's inter-textual description at work, but here the comparison takes off in the opposite direction. While Thaumaturgus, in the second century, and Macrina, in the fourth, both exude resonance with biblical figures of the past, the biblical figure of Moses is remarkably open to identification with contemporary fourth century ascetics

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[102] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 913B (55).

[103] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 900C (46).

[104] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 901A (46).

[105] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 905B (49).

[106] *Life of Macrina*, 978C (46).

[107] *Life of Macrina*, 980 (48).

[108] *Life of Macrina*, 984D (56).

of Gregory's present. Michael Stuart Williams's 2008 work *Authorised Lives in Early Christian Biography: Between Eusebius and Augustine*, which argues that a typological approach to scripture is a definitive characteristic of fourth century Christian biography, makes exactly this point. In Gregory's work, Williams writes, 'reenactments operate in both directions'.[109] Moses's actions, as Gregory reports them, are steeped in 'the conventions and commonplaces of late-antique spirituality; he is a surprisingly modern figure in marked contrast to his biblical portrayal.[110] 'His approach to intercessory prayer', for example, 'its evident effectiveness, is much more the mark of a late antique Saint than it is of a biblical figure', Williams sees.[111]

These dynamics of inter-textuality — in the case of Thaumaturgus and Macrina, stretching back into the past; in the case of Moses, stretching forwards into the present — have two effects which make viable the event of proximity that Gregory's telling intends to set up. First, such inter-textuality implies the timeless quality of Gregory's subjects as figures who relate and resonate across the boundaries of historic contingency. Second, such inter-textuality, in eliding the distance between scriptural holiness and contemporary times, implies the sacredness of Gregory's recipients' own contemporary setting, which is now found interwoven with the sanctity of the scriptural past. In combination, these effects make possible the entrance of a Moses or Thaumaturgus, uninhibited by historical or geographical distance, into the reader's midst, whose own setting has been exposed as fertile ground for holiness. These exemplars are not confined to the echelons of transcendent otherness, from which they may only be described at a distance, but are transported by Gregory's inter-textual telling as figures that, in some sense, might be encountered among us.[112] His telling effects the event of this proximity and presence.

This event of proximity being established, the recipients of Gregory's texts are primed for a further event in turn. They are dissuaded from engaging with Gregory's subjects only as they might before a thing (taking in its qualities at a distance) and instead positioned to engage more like they might in an interpersonal encounter (hearing themselves addressed by the work's

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[109] Michael Stuart Williams, *Authorised Lives in Early Christian Biography: Between Eusebius and Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 16-18, 64-65.

[110] Williams, *Authorised Lives*, 88.

[111] Williams, *Authorised Lives*, 88, 89.

[112] Gregory's interest in contriving an encounter between exemplars of the past and recipients of the present can be understood as impelled by a conviction distinctive to early Christian thought. Namely, the conviction that the past is not the realm of myth but of history, a history where God was known, and therefore counted as deeply pertinent to the life of the present. On this, see Andreas Spira's study, 'The Impact of Christianity on Ancient Rhetoric', in *Studia Patristica: Papers of the 1983 Oxford Patristics Conference*, ed. Elizabeth A. Livingstone (Leuven: Peeters, 1989), XVII.2, 137–54.

subject rather than only receiving reports about that subject; encountering, so Gregory intends, that subject's living presence rather than a distant memory of it). Moreover, his *Lives* in turn present not primarily as descriptive material to be stored privately in the memory of his audience, but as guides to be imitated and joined with in daily and contemporary settings. Indeed, in concluding the *Life of Moses* Gregory is most explicit about his desire that such telling might provoke this event:

> we have briefly written for you, tracing in outline like a pattern of beauty the life of the great Moses so that each one of us might copy the image of the beauty which has been shown to us by imitating his way of life.[113]

As Gregory's telling provokes this event of imitation, a result of the event of proximity his words establish, he himself imitates the three exemplars, whose own tellings are so frequently remembered by him in relation to the events they had the effect of enacting.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

Once more, the quality of telling that Gregory emphasises and models can be seen to relate to his broader philosophy of language. As the theological telling he advocates engenders an event in or after its utterance, so the teller testifies to the limits of language to communicate essence. Words are shown as giving way to another mode of experience through which the recipient may be brought into the task of knowing the object at hand. Recognising that this quality of Gregory's telling is undergirded by the limits of language underscores the striking difference between some contemporary theories of performative utterance (which emphasise one speaker's power *over* another) and the dependence *on* others that is produced, in contrast, by Gregory's telling as it enacts a given event.

As in our first foray into Gregory's exchange with Eunomius we saw, language, being a function and invention of the creature, is marked for Gregory by instability and dynamism that negate the possibility of words conveying the fixed 'essence' of the things they purport to describe. We saw that such a perspective led Gregory to advocate the deployment of multiple words in theological description, in opposition to Eunomius's use of single and allegedly transparent labels. Yet even used multiply or paradoxically, Gregory was profoundly modest about the capacity of language to approach essence. It is the extremity of this modesty that is of

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[113] *Life of Moses*, II.319 (135).

interest in relation to the 'eventing' quality of the telling we have seen. For Gregory, we cannot know the essence of even something as apparently plain as a tree:

> Let us suppose the inquiry to be about some tree, whether it is cultivated or wild. If the former, we call it planted, if the latter, not planted. And such a term exactly hits the truth, for the tree must needs be after this manner or that. And yet the word does not indicate the peculiar nature of the plant.[114]

Much less can theological appellations 'avail to raise us above the limits of our nature, and open up the incomprehensible to our view'.[115]

It was this extreme epistemic modesty in Gregory that, in the twentieth century, would arouse the interest of Hans Urs von Balthasar. Balthasar was troubled by the epistemic starting point assumed by many of his own contemporaries, who, in his view, had been deeply shaped by Kant's transcendental subject and, in turn, had come to presume that the knowledge of any object depended on the determination of the human knower.[116] It was in the spirit of resisting this prioritisation of the subject that Balthasar offered a retrieval of Gregory in his classic work, *Presence and Thought*. In this exploration, Balthasar attends to an important dimension of Gregory's modesty. Namely, he sees that

> the great, eloquent passages in which Gregory demonstrates to Eunomius that we do not know the essence of any thing, of any element, not even of the smallest shoot of a plant, have no agnostic flavour to them. Rather they are atremble with the great mystery of the world.[117]

Balthasar points out an integral nuance in Gregory's apophaticism: language cannot communicate essence transparently, but that failure is not the end of communication. On the contrary, that failure, conveying the ultimate resistance of all truth to be possessed, makes positive way for the experience of wonder and, in the end, so Balthasar posits, adoration of the infinite God. In Gregory's terms, the failure of language exposes the fact that 'everything discoverable in the world is linked to the Being who transcends all existences' – and therefore

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[114] 'Answer to Eunomius' Second Book', 269.

[115] 'Answer to Eunomius' Second Book', 269.

[116] For a thorough account of this backdrop and its relevance to von Balthasar's interest in Gregory, see Anthony Cirelli, 'Re-Assessing the Meaning of Thought: Hans Urs von Balthasar's Retrieval of Gregory of Nyssa', *Heythrop Journal*, 50.3 (2009), 416–24.

[117] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought: Essay on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa*, trans. Mark Sebanc (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1995), 91.

that reality resists our full cognitive possession of it.[118] As it resists possession, so 'we then perceive the beauty and majesty of the wonderful sights in creation'.[119] This is acutely the case where the reality in question is divine: as Gregory puts it, our 'inability to give expression to such unutterable [divine] things, while it reflects upon the poverty of our own nature, affords an evidence of God's glory'; 'That he transcends every effort of thought, and is far beyond any circumscribing by a name, constitutes a proof to man of His ineffable majesty'.[120] In other words, the failure of language gives way to the event of wonder.

Recognising the fundamental 'event' contained in language, as a result of its inability to communicate the complete essence of all things mundane and divine, sheds light on the quality of Gregory and his exemplars' telling to enact an event. In some respects, the telling that Gregory advocates and models seems akin to the concepts of 'performative utterances' or 'speech-acts' as developed most notably by, and in response to, John Austin's seminal work, *How to Do Things with Words* (1971).[121] Austin was concerned to show the way in which ordinary utterance was 'performative' in the sense of 'doing' something, rather than only referring to something. Speech, he saw, consisted not primarily of statements that could be said to be 'true' or 'false', but, rather, was filled with illocutionary intent and force.[122] The concept of 'performative utterance', understood at its crudest, styles the speaker as powerful (doer and instructor) and the hearer as passive (obedient, or done to). For all its apparent similarity on the surface, we have seen that the eventing quality of language for Gregory, whereby words give way to wonder and encounter, stems not from the power and clarity of the speaker but from his limitation and constraint.

Recognising this, we may revisit the events enacted by the telling of Gregory and his exemplars as sites of linguistic limitation. Now, Gregory can be seen to event the presence of his subjects owing to the incapacity of his language to truly tell of them; Macrina's invocation to contemplate can likewise be cast as the last resort of words that cannot truly convey essence; Moses's call for freedom can be seen as a cry to realise what the language of promise could only point to; and the 'conversions' activated by Thaumaturgus's proclamations can be recast as experiences by faith of what his words alone could not translate. In this sense, the telling

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[118] 'Answer to Eunomius' Second Book', 309.

[119] This is integral to Gregory's philosophy of language: language is limited in light of the true depth of everything it seeks to describe.

[120] 'Answer to Eunomius' Second Book', 309.

[121] John Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975); also taken up by John R. Searle, 'How Performatives Work', *Linguistics and Philosophy*, 12.5 (1989), 535–58.

[122] Austin, *Do Things with Words*, 12.

Gregory advocates hands its task over to the recipient, who is not passive in this scheme (done to) but an essential partner in the work of sense making. Such telling is suggestive, inviting, and certainly points in a particular direction, rather than waving in any direction. Yet in its evocation of event, such telling *finds* and indeed depends on the interpretation and experience of others, who are guided by the telling's pointing to take unprecedented new steps.[123]

(C) Spread

The third of the threads we observe in Gregory's vision of telling concerns its inbuilt generativity, by which truths are told in such a way as to will their being 'spread' by being told again. This thread relates closely to the threads already cited: spread again implies the *surplus* of what there is to be said; whilst the act of 'spreading' also constitutes an *event* in response to what is said. In light of these connections, the fact that this particular thread comes to the fore less in the practice of Moses (and much more in the practice of Macrina and Thaumaturgus) does not undermine the useful contribution it can make to the full picture of Gregory's advocacy of telling. As we shall see, Macrina and Thaumaturgus model a practice of telling which spreads, while Gregory solicits the spread of his own texts beyond his recipients.

1. Modelling telling that spreads

Macrina and Thaumaturgus are both remembered by Gregory as sharers of stories. The central moment of Macrina's telling consists in her telling the stories of her life, 'beginning with childhood, and describing it all in order as in a history'.[124] A further episode reported by Gregory, after her death, indicates an additional instance of her sharing of stories. As Gregory dresses Macrina's body for burial with the help of Vestiana, the latter draws to his attention a scar on Macrina's breast.[125] Showing it to Gregory, she tells of an incurable tumour that once grew there, for which Macrina had besought the healing of God during a whole night of prayer.[126] She tells of Macrina mixing her tears with dirt to make a remedy, and asking her mother to make the holy seal on the tumour after which it disappeared. The story she tells Gregory is the story Macrina has already told her. In these examples, Gregory presents his

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[123] Gregory's opening address to those gathered to hear him tell the life of Thaumaturgus summarises the point: 'I think we both need to take equal care in this endeavour, you in listening, and I in speaking'. *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 893B (42).

[124] *Life of Macrina*, 980C (49).

[125] *Life of Macrina*, 990C-992A (65).

[126] *Life of Macrina*, 992B (67).

sister telling in such a way as to *spread*: she tells stories to Gregory that he likely already knew, provoking him to think on them again; she tells a story to Vestiana that was new and undisclosed, gifting Vestiana with what she can go on to tell again.

Thaumaturgus similarly passes on stories and invites their being told again. When he experiences a vision about the persecution of a Christian named Troadios, he shares the story of that 'noble youth' with those around him, divulging with them the 'great assistance at that hour [Troadios] had been contending in the struggles for the faith', telling them how Troadios had 'after many tortures…put on the crown of his testimony'.[127] The biography's inclusion of the 'Great One's' first conquest, in which he drives demons from a temple, also strongly implies Thaumaturgus's own dissemination of the stories of his own life.[128] Since the episode only involves Thaumaturgus and a temple custodian who joins Thaumaturgus's following after the event, we are invited to deduce that Thaumaturgus himself shared the story, or the custodian did in the likely knowledge of Thaumaturgus. What Thaumaturgus knows, either in the privacy of his own vision or the miraculous experiences he is graced with, he shares with his community. His community goes on (clearly, since both stories reach Gregory of Nyssa) to perpetuate its spread. In these examples, Thaumaturgus and Macrina model the right deployment of their telling: in actively sharing it themselves they authorize their recipients' sharing of it still further. They constitute internal models within the telling of the external 'spread' that such telling invites.

2. Soliciting re-tellings that spread

While Gregory's exemplars model a telling that spreads, his own telling of their lives goes further to actively solicit that spread. In the case of Macrina, Gregory persuades his recipients to take up and tell again the narrative he shares through the subtle workings of the structure by which he orders the biography. The biography is structured as a series of fragments, each consisting of a narrative attempt made by a different voice.[129] The first voice is Gregory's own, which narrates the historical record of Macrina's 'noble career', spanning decades and touring

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[127] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 949C (80-81).
[128] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 913C-920A (56-59).
[129] M. B. Pranger offers a more detailed analysis of this fragmented structure in 'Narrative Dimensions in Gregory of Nyssa's Life of Macrina', in *Studia Patristica*, ed. E. A. Livingstone (Leuven: Peeters, 1997), XXXII, 201–208.

the headlines of her life up to his visit of Macrina in her final days.[130] At this point, Gregory's narration gives way to that of Macrina herself. She tells of her life 'clearly and consecutively as if inspired by the power of the Holy Spirit'; 'the even flow of her language' is compared to 'a fountain whose water streams down uninterruptedly'.[131] Macrina's narration in turn is handed over to the recollection of her mourners; specifically to Vestiana, who, as mentioned, shares with Gregory the story attached to Macrina's scar.[132] The narrative voice is handed over for a final time to a soldier who Gregory meets on his return home after the funeral of his sister.[133] The soldier tells how he and his wife visited Macrina with their young daughter, herself afflicted by an illness of the eye. It is a striking passage, in which the structure of Gregory's whole biography is replicated in a single episode. The soldier tells Gregory that when he and his wife left the separate quarters of the monastery at Anessi, on coming back together his wife 'told every detail as in a history' (here deploying the same phrasing Gregory offers of Macrina's autobiographical telling).[134] As his wife goes on to share 'the point at which the promise was made to cure the child's eyes, she broke off her tale', as the two realize that they have left the monastery without the salve-cure promised by Macrina.[135] On this realization, they look to their daughter, miraculously healed, and discover that 'the true drug which cures disease…comes from prayer'.[136]

Close attention to this final episode clarifies the possible significance of Gregory's structure. It contains a finale-like multiplication of narratives (after the pattern of the biography as a whole) – from the soldier, to the wife, back to the solider, and back to Gregory. The junctions between narratives are revealed as highly charged moments in this episode. It is in passing the narrative to his wife that the miracle of their daughter's healing is discovered. It is in the soldier's passing the narrative to Gregory that the latter is consoled; having met the soldier 'downcast and tearful', he leaves having 'discover[ed] blessing', as Derek Krueger writes, able to 'shift from lamentation to remembrance'.[137] This episode makes visible the ways in which the spread of stories adds riches to the stories themselves: as narratives about Macrina are shared, more of Macrina's goodness unfolds; her miracles become visible, as the consolation

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[130] *Life of Macrina*, 960A-980C (17-49).
[131] *Life of Macrina*, 980C-986B (49-58).
[132] *Life of Macrina*, 988C-992D (61-68).
[133] *Life of Macrina*, 996B- 1000A (74-78).
[134] *Life of Macrina*, 998B (76).
[135] *Life of Macrina*, 998B (76).
[136] *Life of Macrina*, 998C (77).
[137] Krueger, 'Writing and the Liturgy', 501.

she could offer falls down afresh. The same has been true throughout the biography. As each time the narrator's voice has shifted, so the blessing of new knowledge has been received. Gregory's placement of this episode at the end of his biography implores the reader to take up the next narrator's shift – spreading the story of Macrina, by the same pattern, in order to discover and therefore add to the riches of her life.

In his biography of Thaumaturgus, this same encouragement to spread the telling Gregory offers is evident not at the conclusion but at the outset. Gregory's opening address primes his recipients to apprehend the benefit of re-telling in the future the tale he is poised to share with them. This he does through suggesting that his own *telling* of the narrative is what permits him a distinctively rich encounter with its contents, implying that those hearers who seek to engage deeply ought likewise to engage by re-telling what they hear themselves. In the third line of his discourse Gregory remarks that:

> as I see it, one and the same power is required both for achieving virtue in deed and for describing what is good worthily in a speech. Consequently the same ally must be called upon for help as the one through whose aid [Thaumaturgus] achieved in his lifetime. This, I am convinced, is the grace of the Holy Spirit, which empowers both for life and for discourse those who with its help endeavor at each of them.[138]

Gregory proposes that the process of telling the narrative of Thaumaturgus's life is a process that requires him to depend on and encounter the same spirit that Thaumaturgus depended on and encountered in his life, drawing closer to his person by drawing closer to the Spirit. This point stands at the top of a number of points in which Gregory offers advice concerning how his hearers ought to 'take care' in listening to the address he will go on to offer.[139] Its placement alongside these instructions indicates Gregory's intention that it too will be taken up practically; that his hearers from the outset will recognize what he shares as that which, to be better understood, is properly shared again. Indeed, it is on the basis that his hearers will go on to re-tell what they hear that the image Gregory deploys of the narrative ahead as a 'beacon fire' is profoundly fitting: not only does it promise to guide, it also has the potential to spread.[140]

The telling of Macrina and Thaumaturgus models the spread it invites. Gregory's own telling of

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[138] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 893A (41).
[139] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 893B (42).
[140] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 893B (42).

their *Lives* intensifies this invitation. Both at the end of the *Life of Macrina* and at the beginning of the *Life of Gregory Thaumaturgus*, the case Gregory makes for his recipients to pass on the narrative he offers pivots on the proposition that to do so will uncover further (and therefore add to) the riches within the story at hand. To tell again and spread, for Gregory, is not merely to repeat the narrative he shares but to positively enrich it. His own heightening, then, of what is modeled by his exemplars shifts their invitation closer to a command: to tell-again and spread the good news encountered is *the* truly befitting rejoinder such telling intends to generate.

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Again, Gregory's advocacy for a theological telling that spreads is continuous with the linguistic insights he articulates against Eunomius. In this case, the insight that theological telling rightly invites the further offerings of others is demonstrated less by the statements Gregory makes and more by the argumentation he models in the polemic. While Gregory is insistent that Eunomius's attempts to name God and propagate doctrines from these names are 'densely stupid' and 'ignorant', he himself nevertheless refuses to say 'what God is', only, as Ludlow comments, 'that God is'.[141] Indeed, once his arguments have dismantled those of his opponent, their subsequent constructive work in mapping an alternative vision often appear open-ended and unfinished.

We may recall as an example the imagery of light and lights that Gregory offers in his first letter to Eunomius in an effort to rebut the assertion that the different persons of the Trinity each have distinct roles. As Gregory argues that divine, unified nature operates by a divine, unified will, he begins by invoking the image of a single 'Ungenerate Light'.[142] As the discussion progresses, this single light changes into three lights: the sun, the 'Light that streams from [the sun], whose cause indeed is in the sun, but whose existence is synchronous with the sun'; and 'another such Light after the same fashion sundered by no interval of time from that offspring Light'.[143] The Son and Spirit are both rays of light beaming from the Father (sun), and also sources of light in themselves. As Andrew Radde-Gallwitz notes as he comments on this particular imagery, the combination of singular and plural depositions 'makes for an odd illustration'.[144] As much as Eunomius's ranking of the three persons is deconstructed, the positive vision that Gregory offers of light and lights does not entirely clarify the tension

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[141] Ludlow, *Ancient and (Post)modern,* 288.
[142] 'Against Eunomius', Book I (85).
[143] 'Against Eunomius', Book I (85).
[144] Radde-Gallwitz, *Doctrinal Works*, 101.

between a unified and triplex account of the divine will.

Of crucial significance, however, is the fact that Gregory himself draws attention to the dynamism of his illustration. Having written first of the one light, he goes on to state that 'there is no necessity to be slaves to this similitude', but to go on, rather than repeating the image slavishly, to reinterpret and reprocess it; in his case, to rework the same imagery into a picture of three lights rather than one. Not only does Gregory offer this second working in addition, he also leaves the way open for others to do so by acknowledging the 'inadequacy' or 'looseness' (as Radde-Gallwitz's translation renders it) of the illustration he contributes.[145] In stating as much, Gregory invites the illustration's being taken up and worked on, clarified by others who will add to and tighten the outline he offers as only (and knowingly) provisional.[146] His theological method in this illustration, as in the telling he advocates, has a spaciousness to it that is generative in its invitation to be taken up, spread, and enriched.

Indeed, the proposal that Gregory's telling does intend to generate this spread is supported not only by the presence of what appears to be a kindred method at work in the polemic against Eunomius, but too by the fact that Gregory's broader corpus provokes such a wide array of constructive responses. This diversity, wherein Gregory has appealed 'to theologians of surprisingly diverse views, from radical feminists to conservative evangelicals', is demonstrated and analysed by Ludlow in her volume *Gregory of Nyssa: Ancient and (Post)modern*.[147] Ludlow's argument adds weight to our observations, for in addition to noting the particular ways in which readings site Gregory in Christian 'tradition', and the various interpretations of the period in which Gregory wrote, Ludlow sees that it is possible that the diversity of interpretation Gregory is subject to also owes to the possibility that Gregory 'consciously constructed his texts in such a way that they would even be capable of generating future meanings which Gregory himself was unable to predict'.[148] Indeed, in this respect, writes Ludlow, Gregory might be 'compared to a good poet' in his capacity to keep texts open and

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[145] Radde-Gallwitz, *Doctrinal Works*, 103.

[146] Indeed, Gregory's writing of the letter in which this illustration is included is itself a conscious taking forward and clarification of Basil's prior response to Eunomius. In taking up Basil's arguments and tightening them in his own words, Gregory models the constructive re-deployment that his own illustration invites of others. In this respect we see how Gregory's concern for the stringent limitation of language does not negate the possibility of linguistic progress: just because words are limited, does not mean they cannot be used in better or worse ways.

[147] Ludlow, *Ancient and (Post)modern*, 4.

[148] Ludlow, *Ancient and (Post)modern*, 287.

protect the potential for 'future meanings' even he could not control.[149] Once more the intention that theology should spread is confirmed.

This commitment to theological language that wills and invites its own spread reflects the limits of language we have addressed already. In reaching out for the constructive work of the recipient, Gregory continues to assert the instability of one voice alone to convey fixed 'essences' in their totality.

3. Conclusion: Progressing by telling

The lives of Macrina, Moses, and Thaumaturgus offer images of the enactment of *epektasis*. They stand as records of the practical and daily pursuit of the soul's growth in virtue and love. In looking across the biographies, we have identified the practice of *telling* of God as integral, in Gregory's sight, to the holiness of the three. On looking closely to their modelling of this telling, and Gregory's imitation of it, we observed three characteristics belonging to the activity in question: its testifying to surplus, enacting an event, and inviting spread. These three characteristics place the telling Gregory advocates as an example of the finite, creaturely utterance that Gregory construed as true to human language. As the three speak of God in this way their theological telling has the effect of inviting and finding the voices of others to nuance, add to, tighten, and refresh the words they offer as provisional rather than final.

Such telling gives distinctive shape to the progress of one engaged in it. The teller's progress proceeds not by independently triumphing over limitation but by becoming ever more attuned to it. Telling, as Gregory exemplifies it, requires the teller to witness to the incompletion of her words and their incapacity to fully communicate the truth to which they are directed. Progressing by recognition of this limitation, the teller learns to depend ever more on the contributions of others. As we have seen, Gregory's tellers are repeatedly impelled to collaborate with the different words and creativity of those in their midst. The consequence of depending on others and soliciting encounters with their difference is to speak without knowing the final conclusion of one's words. For Gregory's teller, to tell is to do so without a clear view of a conclusion, and to be unable to fully predict or control the different directions an utterance

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[149] This methodological preference for the open text over a final answer is more than a Platonic inheritance, Ludlow argues. It is 'something which [Gregory] himself clearly believed to be evident in the fruitful ambiguity of Scripture itself'. Ludlow, *Ancient and (Post)modern,* 288.

might take as it is joined to, or joined up by, the sense making of another.

The theory of action Hannah Arendt outlines in her 1958 work *The Human Condition* lies a great distance from the particularities of this chapter and a full assessment of her work lies far beyond the breadth of this chapter. Nevertheless, Arendt's insight that action is unpredictable owing to its occurrence within existing relational webs is helpful in articulating the conclusion we have reached. As Arendt seeks to distinguish the categories of labour, work, and action, in an attempt to rejuvenate the latter's place in human life against the prioritization of the 'higher ends' of contemplation, she writes that since we always act into a 'web of relationships', the results of every deed are 'boundless'.[150] Every action touches off not only a 'reaction [but] a chain reaction', every process is the cause of unpredictable new processes:

> The smallest act in the most limited circumstances bears the seed of the same boundlessness; because one deed and sometimes one word, suffices to change every constellation. In acting…it is indeed true that we can really never know what we are doing.[151]

The meaning and output of any human action cannot be predicted because that meaning emerges via the responses and reception of other actors over time. This principle is what Gregory's teller participates in as, time and again, she sees that her solo utterance is drawing upon and responding to utterances that already exist as well as standing accessible to utterances that will exist.[152] As the teller experiences her own utterance as that which has a conclusion beyond her control and evaluation, she is inducted into the vision of human action that Arendt offers words for: action, which, because of its interrelation with the life of others, resists the project of calculation or control. In this respect, the teller recognizes her progress as, in important respects, unpredictable for its being interwoven with the progress of others.

Conclusion

There are a number of conclusions that emerge from the analysis we have undertaken. First, on the basis of the juxtaposition we have pursued in this chapter between Gregory's writings in response to Eunomius and his biographical works, we can state the strong resonance between these elements of Gregory's corpus and their relevance to one another. Specifically, in

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[150] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 190.

[151] Arendt, *Human Condition*, 190.

[152] This is clearest in ch. 4, part 2:A and C.

analysing these texts together we have been able to recognise the significance not only – as we might readily – of *what* the three exemplars tell in their evangelism, but *how* they go about such telling. Second, we can note a theological implication underwriting the dynamic by which Gregory's tellers are impelled to *find* and join the voices of others. Namely, whatever theological truth the teller shares is implied as offered in addition to theological truth already presumed to be in the recipient's midst. The teller comes not as conqueror, to solidify truth, but as collaborator, handing truth over to the anticipated gifts and effort of another. The other's voice is relied upon for its own capacity to share in the gesturing of incomplete and faltering words towards the truth. While Gregory does not state it as such, our reading of his work points towards the notion that the truth of God is not bestowed by one onto another but is discovered mutually in company. Third, and most integral to the argument of this thesis, our analysis has led us to see that to engage in the practice of telling over a life is to progress by becoming ever more aware of limitation rather than becoming ever closer to overcoming it; to be formed by regular dependence on and collaboration with others in a collective pursuit of progress; and, ultimately, to recognise the unpredictability concomitant with life lived closely alongside others. It is this final conclusion that we will be concerned to take forward into the accompanying next chapter. There we will consider how partaking in the activity of telling, and progressing therefore by means of limitation, dependence, and unpredictability, might make possible certain perspectives pertaining to the experience of ageing and the end of life.

Chapter 5: Telling and Ageing

We considered in chapter 4 the significance of theological telling as a practice belonging to Gregory's exemplars as they model love of God. Through analysing their telling, as well as Gregory's imitation of it in his own telling of their biographies, we identified three recurrent threads to their practice: their telling testified to its own *surplus*, enacted an *event* in its reception, and solicited its own *spread* by future recipients. These characteristics, I argued, have the consequence of positioning the three, as they tell, to seek and find the voices of others. This telling by finding, I finally suggested, fosters a sense of progress in which human limitation is recognised rather than denied; in which dependence on others is discovered as stimulating growth rather than inhibiting it; and in which unpredictability (the consequence of life lived in dependence on others) is a state recognised rather than denied. We turn now to ask: how might progressing by these means, becoming used to the anthropological realities of limitation, dependence, and unpredictability, affect the experience and perception of ageing and the end of life? We shall see that in progressing by such means: (1) the limitations of old age will appear more continuous with the whole of life; (2) the dependence common to old age will strike us anew for its exposing the significance of *difference*; and, (3) the legacy of a human life will be clear as a shared, rather than individual project. While the insights that I bring to bear on the matter of ageing here are those that have arisen from the reading of all three lives in chapter 4, going forward, additional use is made of the *Life of Macrina* for its inclusion of its subject's old age and dying.

1. Limitation

In our analysis of chapter 4, we saw how each of the threads running across the telling Gregory advocates was rooted in the finite, creaturely quality of language itself as it falters at the task of conveying a world of profound depth and meaning. As the three witness to the *surplus* of their telling, consciously connecting their own utterances to the utterances of others before them, they testify to the absence of fixed and stable words to describe what is infinite, reveling instead in the polysemy of language. As the three tell in such a way as to engender an *event* in or after their utterance, they signal the incapacity of words to communicate the depth of meaning

residing in what a speaker intends to describe. As the three tell in such a way as to invite the *spread* of what they say, they admit the incompleteness and want of their words before the wonder they encounter. To tell as Gregory proposes we ought, is to come up time and again against the fact that words ultimately fail to 'indicate the peculiar nature' of this or that, and that language, for all its promise, will not 'avail to raise us above the limits of our nature', it being itself created within those limits.[1] The recognition of this linguistic limitation as a fact of human life can be considered a practice that nurtures two contrasting responses to the experience of ageing and dying. Via such recognition, old age, as frequently an experience of explicit bodily limitation, can be conceived as continuous with, rather than alien to, integral characteristics of the whole of human life. However, the recognition of linguistic limits also protects against the possibility of this continuity being too straightforwardly defined. We treat these points by turn.

Continuity

First, to repeatedly encounter rather than deny the weakness of words is to come up repeatedly against one's deeper creaturely limitation. In each attempt to tell which falters and strains, in which the teller must admit of the unfinishedness of their attempt and their need of the other's creativity in taking the task further, the status of language recalls the creatureliness of its creator and user.[2] As the teller concedes the instability of her words, so she is called to remember that she herself 'cannot always have all things before [her] eyes' but is limited by temporality and changefulness.[3] Telling, as Gregory advocates it, inures the teller to the limits of language, through which the teller encounters the fundamental limitation of her creatureliness (of which her language is just one expression).

To be brought up against this fundamental limitation changes the experience and perception of the physical and mental limitations that arise in old age. In understanding limitation as a constant condition, rather than only an exceptional circumstance, the teller may come to perceive the frailty and illness common to old age as on a spectrum with, rather than as an intrusion into, the rest of life. Such a point runs parallel with the logic articulated in the disability theology of Deborah Creamer in her 2008 work *Disability and Christian Theology: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities*. Creamer proposes a 'limits model' of theological

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[1] 'Answer to Eunomius' Second Book', 269.
[2] See ch. 4, part 2:A.
[3] 'Answer to Eunomius' Second Book', 279.

reflection, whereby disability is approached not from the starting point of 'assumed able-bodied "normality"' (which looks first to the able-bodied, and then, for example, to the person in the wheelchair, commenting on what the latter cannot do in comparison), but which begins from the perspective of the 'normality' of disabilities (of varying kinds) inherent to humans in their limitation.[4] From this beginning, Creamer opts to compare different limitations and disabilities, but resists seeing any as divorced from the limited condition that is an 'unsurprising characteristic of humanity'.[5] Along similar lines, the teller in Gregory's vision is prepared to perceive the physical frailty and diminishment of old age as in some sense in keeping with – rather than as change from – the limitation that in varying forms characterizes the whole of human life.

This perspective poses a stark challenge to the dominant presentation in our own times of ageing as additional to and interruptive of life as properly lived. This presentation of ageing's 'additional' status can be discerned from two different angles. On the one hand, ageing is frequently framed as a *crisis*. In her shared reflection with Saul Levmore on the subject of old age, Martha Nussbaum evidences this frame in her observation of the recent 'obsessive concern' that productions of Shakespeare's *King Lear* have had with 'the theme of ageing'.[6] In these productions, the character of Lear is represented as a man prone to memory loss and confusion, shuffling in his physical frailty around the stage.[7] Nussbaum sees that such a reading inserts a vision not present into the text.[8] Yet it is a revealing insertion. Lear's story, Nussbaum writes, is of 'the effect of sudden powerlessness on a person who has been totally hooked on his own power'.[9] It is this sudden powerlessness that is interpreted by contemporary producers as the event of *ageing* combined with, rather than secondary to, the political orchestration of Lear's daughters who undermine him for their own gain.[10] This now common rendering of the play expresses the presumption that the biological processes of old age are a *crisis* and a shock, inflicting a sudden jolt from power and control to their lack.

On the other hand, ageing is regularly presented as a *choice*. In his 2003 essay *The Virtues of*

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[4] Deborah Beth Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 94.

[5] Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 94.

[6] Martha Nussbaum and Saul Levmore, *Aging Thoughtfully: Conversations about Retirement, Romance, Wrinkles, and Regret* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 8.

[7] Nussbaum and Levmore, *Aging Thoughtfully*, 8.

[8] Nussbaum and Levmore, *Aging Thoughtfully*, 10.

[9] Nussbaum and Levmore, *Aging Thoughtfully*, 10.

[10] Nussbaum and Levmore, *Aging Thoughtfully*, 8.

Aging, ethicist Charles Pinches recollects a billboard he used to pass which offers an example of this presumption at work. The billboard advertised a new geriatric facility with an image of a 'grinning older man…snowboarding'.[11] Juxtapositions in the media of those in old age living lifestyles associated with the young are, Pinches sees, prevalent.[12] These juxtapositions suggest the message that 'one can grow old without becoming elderly'.[13] Indeed, such a message can likewise be heard in a vast literature of 'successful ageing' strategies, which prescribe a growing range of practices purporting to guarantee a healthy old age.[14] Such strategies support the presumption that elderliness can, with the right will and resources, be avoided.

These two presumptions sit in tension. Old age is regarded as a *crisis* happening to a subject caught unawares, inflicting sudden powerlessness. Old age is regarded as a *choice*, looming but avoidable. Yet both presumptions hinge on the point that old age is ultimately an *intrusion* on a self otherwise stable. In contrast to this conclusion, Gregory's teller, inured to the deep limitation of the human condition, is open to experience and perceive the frailty of the end of life as in important ways continuous with the human experience that precedes it.

Distance

The first response that progressing by limitation may nurture – seeing as continuous the limits experienced in all life and those intensified at life's end – is nuanced by a second response to which we turn now. While the teller may see the limitation frequently experienced in old age in continuity with a limitation fundamental to human life, her practice of telling, nevertheless, inculcates in her a particular hesitation to make total claims of understanding any other's experience. Telling in such a way as to falter repeatedly by the weakness of words and their incompleteness, the teller encounters the truth that there are real constraints to her understanding of others and her own being understood by them.[15] The limitation of language confirms to her the distance between speakers, which can be narrowed but never overcome. In relation to those of old age, for all the proximity that a shared condition of limitation sets up between the older and the younger, the teller continues to regard the particularities of the

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[11] Charles Pinches, 'The Virtues of Aging', in *Growing Old in Christ*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and others (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 202–25 (204).

[12] Pinches, 'Virtues of Aging', 203-4.

[13] Pinches, 'Virtues of Aging', 204.

[14] The term 'successful ageing' is indebted to John Rowe and Robert Khan's landmark work of the late nineties, *Successful Aging* (New York, NY: Dell Publishing Group, 1998). More will be said of the strategies of successful ageing in ch. 7, part 3.

[15] See ch. 4, part 2:C.

older person's limitation as beyond straightforward comprehension, as something other than an intensified form of her own experience.

This protects against the eagerness of speculative attempts to understand or even explain the particularities of another's experience of limitation. The teller, used to the limits of language, instead reserves the space for some limiting conditions and experiences to surpass explanation or empathic understanding. In this respect, Gregory's teller cultivates the capacity for what theologian Karen Kilby has described as 'something like an apophatic moment in our response to some kinds of suffering'.[16] Rather than seeking to clarify or comprehend the suffering caused by acute limitation as (for example) the result of personal sin or as an opportunity for growth, the teller can preserve the 'bafflement' that some experiences of disability or suffering may provoke.[17]

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Abiding, through telling, to the linguistic limits that Gregory sees as integral to the human condition nurtures two apparently contrasting responses to the end of life that we may now bring together. Telling in such a way as to recognize the limits of language exposes the deeper fundamental limitation of our creaturely condition. This reveals the basis upon which those in old age may not be *othered*, in the sense of distanced, for their limitation, but by it located within the shared condition of the whole human community. While they may not be othered for their limitation, nor may the particularities of their limitation be generalized. The teller remains constrained by the limits of language and the distance between persons, knowledge of which might curb an instinct to explain the limiting experience of the other. Limitations are not reduced as equal and alike.

Gregory offers an example of these responses in his account of his own engagement with Macrina's suffering. Macrina, he recalls, was 'terribly afflicted with weakness', 'her strength being…drained by fever'.[18] He notes 'the difficulty of her breathing', and the force of her illness 'driving her on to death'.[19] Clearly such suffering does not discount the contribution

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[16] Karen Kilby, 'Negative Theology and Meaningless Suffering', *Modern Theology*, 36.1 (2020), 92–104 (92).

[17] Kilby, 93. Kilby analyses the work of Thomas Weinandy's *Does God Suffer?* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000) as an example of an approach that seeks with much confidence and clarity to explain the meaning of all suffering.

[18] *Life of Macrina*, 976D (43).

[19] *Life of Macrina*, 978A (44), 978C (46).

Gregory is confident that Macrina can make. His work does not move quickly beyond her affliction, but is alert to the 'beautiful words' that 'pour out' amid her 'short and difficult breathing'. [20]

While her suffering is not made the grounds of Macrina's being 'othered', neither is it reduced and explained by any fully-fledged explanation. The lack of an attempt to comprehend Macrina's suffering is especially striking considering the fact that Gregory does, elsewhere in his corpus, develop possible theorizations of suffering and limitation. Most notably, Gregory's homily on the eighth Beatitude, *Blessed are they that suffer persecution for justice's sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven*, offers several routes through which to understand external adversity. As Siiri Toiviainen Rø has indicated in her recent work on this homily, while Gregory's theorization is far from an unqualified affirmation of suffering, he does venture to explore the spiritual benefit of pain in its 'destroying the power of [carnal, worldly] pleasure', as well as the relevance of pain to redemption. [21] A thorough analysis of Gregory's theorization here is not our primary concern. Of interest, rather, is the fact that Gregory avoids bringing this theorization, developed in the early years of his episcopate, to bear on the suffering of his sister in front of him. Any explanatory power on the matter he once appeared to possess, he suspends in the course of writing up his account. While the suffering of her final days makes Macrina close to Christ (she exclaims that 'I, too, was crucified with Thee'), there is no indication that such suffering has brought her *closer* to Christ than she was prior to her suffering. [22] In these dual reactions, of, on the one hand, finding no reason for Macrina's suffering to set her at a distance, and yet hesitating to theorize that suffering, Gregory models the perspective his teller might come to possess through abiding by the limits of language.

2. Dependence

Our analysis of chapter 4 showed that while the three encounter the limitation of language, that limitation does not lead them to abort the linguistic project, but to find and depend on others in the task of sense making. In testifying to *surplus*, the three joined the telling of others before

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[20] *Life of Macrina*, 982C; 982D (52).

[21] Siiri Toiviainen Rø, 'Gregory of Nyssa on Pain, Pleasure and the Good: An Early Christian Perspective on Redemptive Suffering', in *Suffering and the Christian Life*, ed. Karen Kilby and Rachel Davies (London: T&T Clark, 2019), 33–42 (33), Gregory of Nyssa, 'The Beatitudes', Sermon 8 (172).

[22] *Life of Macrina*, 984D (56).

them; in enacting an *event*, they gave priority to the active interpretation of their recipients; and in promoting the *spread* of their telling, they handed the task over to the re-telling of others.[23] These instances of dependence on another's voice are presented not as merely reparative but creative, bearing the potential to contribute positive, enriching, 'realising' supplements. To recall an example from the *Life of Macrina*: it is as the soldier's wife tells her husband what Macrina has told her that they both discover the deeper meaning of Macrina's message – realising, in the process of re-telling, the healing quality of prayer.[24] It is as the soldier re-tells his wife's re-telling to Gregory that Gregory is gifted with consolation.[25] Depending on the difference of others in the task of sense making actively adds value, uncovering a deeper vividness to the truth towards which conversation gestures.

This practice of depending on the sense making of others may initially seem a relevant preparation for the experience of old age as old age is, for many, a period of unavoidable physical dependence. Sufferers of the brain disease dementia, increasingly common at the end of life, pose intensified examples of such dependence.[26] In the later stages of the illness, limited verbal communication and severe memory loss, coupled with physical decline, very often necessitate constant care for a sufferer.[27] It could be suggested that to tell in such a way as to encounter the goodness of depending on other voices may prime the teller to see and experience the dignity and even, in some faint way, benefit of the intensified, visible, forms of dependence known to many in old age.

Indeed, to articulate as much would be to find common ground with a number of contemporary theologies of dementia that have sought to express the profundity as well as educative value of the dependence present in those suffering with the illness. John Swinton, for example, in his eloquent and valuable work, *Dementia: Living in the Memories of God*, sees that while the experience of intensified dependency in dementia certainly involves suffering and loss, it nevertheless also entails the blessing of insight. Swinton writes that the 'the radical dependence and emerging recognition of contingency that people with dementia experience

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[23] See ch. 4, part 2:A, B and C.

[24] See ch. 4, part 2:C.

[25] *Life of Macrina*, 996B- 1000A (74-78).

[26] World Health Organisation, *Dementia*, 2020 <https://www.who.int/en/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/dementia> [accessed 21 September 2020].

[27] For an account of the lived experience of this dependence, see Steven R. Sabat, *The Experience of Alzheimer's Disease: Life through a Tangled Veil* (Malden, MA: Wiley, 2001).

comprise a poignant and revelatory instance of what it means to be a human being'.[28] 'People with dementia', he goes on, 'are reminded and remind us of this fundamental fact': that 'we are not the authors of our own stories' but our 'essential state as human beings is one of radical dependence'.[29] In a similar vein, Ridenour comments, in her recent work *Sabbath Rest as Vocation: Aging Toward Death*, that 'the deeper we embody the awareness of our relational dependence, the stronger we image God', which in turn, she writes, 'holds import for aging individuals', since 'relational dependence' is a 'quality that many older persons experience'.[30] Ridenour's contention that confrontation with one's 'creaturely status', exemplified in the older person's dependence, precipitates a 'more genuine' imaging of God rests on the Christology she finds in her reading of Augustine. Since Christ, Ridenour reads Augustine to posit, unifies 'the temporal in relation to the eternal', *scientia* (knowledge of the temporal realm) in relation to *sapientia* (wisdom pertaining to the eternal good), our own engagement with 'authentic self knowledge' of our dependent condition will lift us more fully to see and embody our eternal 'relation to God'.[31] For Ridenour as for Swinton, the experience of dependence, exemplified in acute ways in the lives of those with dementia, can be seen to enrich.

While Gregory's teller has much practice in seeing the enrichment that dependence on others can contribute to the linguistic task, this should not, I suggest, lead us to presume its converging upon the kind of consolation Swinton and Ridenour offer with respect to old age. While Swinton's and Ridenour's accounts powerfully push back against a prevailing Western culture that, in Swinton's words, 'priz[es] freedom, autonomy, and individualism', and strongly associates dependence with the loss of personhood, the confidence with which they move on the cited occasions to *affirm* conditions of stark dependence, rather than only acknowledge them, leads their accounts to assert, rather than hope for, goodness in the midst of suffering.[32]

A return to the detail of Gregory's telling will expose why his exemplars would not converge upon the same conclusion. For Gregory, the linguistic dependence that the teller has on the

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[28] Swinton, *Living in the Memories of God*, 163.

[29] Swinton, *Living in the Memories*, 164.

[30] Ridenour, *Sabbath Rest*, 134. Ridenour does not put it so directly, but the logic she deploys would appear to suggest that those who are more intensely dependent are more visible images of God.

[31] Ridenour, *Sabbath Rest*, 134.

[32] Swinton, *Living in the Memories*, 161.

other to interpret, listen, augment, and supplement her telling owes ultimately to the incapacity of one single voice to convey a totality of meaning. As we have seen Gregory elucidate against Eunomius, this incapacity owes to the fact that language is creaturely; for Gregory, it is a limited tool arising from the limited, temporal, fallen condition of the creature. Linguistic dependence is a reality of human life, but it does not in itself constitute a good. Rather, where the teller depends linguistically on the other, what *is* good is the additional, different contribution the other makes in response to her dependence. To return to the example of Macrina, it is not so much her *need* of the soldier and his wife to take up her limited words and re-tell them that is good, but it is the *different* contribution that soldier, and his wife can *add* to her telling, that enriches it and casts it in new beauty and profundity.[33] What Gregory's tellers seek out are not opportunities to depend on the other for its own sake, but to depend on the other in such a way as to solicit the unsubstitutable contribution that the other can offer as they are called on. Relationships in which dependence is a part may be useful settings in which to encounter the difference of others, but it is fundamentally the community such dependence can afford, rather than dependence on the other in itself, which Gregory's account prioritises.

The practice of this delight in the *difference* of the other holds import with respect to the perception and experience of the end of life. Insofar as each person is different, each person must be considered the possible contributor of a unique perspective, a perspective that the teller alone cannot possess. Every person, in their difference from the teller, is indispensable and full of promise for the unique addition or distinctive light only they can offer and shed. By this measure, those of old age or near to the end of life, those who experience intellectual disability or weakness of body, are to be held in the same regard as any person. They are to be revered for the fact they are other and looked to expectantly for the difference their presence may make. That those of old age or those who suffer severe illness, on the surface may *appear* to be radically different — to be the 'stranger *par excellence*' — only speaks more powerfully of the significance of their presence and the need for its embrace.[34]

To consider all individuals, irrespective of their possession of any particular characteristic, as the potential bestowers of blessing is to seriously critique the frequent and public depreciation

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[33] See ch. 4, part 2:C.

[34] Ethicist Medi Ann Volpe describes how the person with an intellectual disability may present as the 'stranger *par excellence*' in her 'Irresponsible Love: Rethinking Intellectual Disability, Humanity and the Church', *Modern Theology*, 25.3 (2009), 491–501 (500).

of those of old age in a Western context. It is, for example, to condemn the reassurance circulated during the Coronavirus pandemic that since the disease affects those of old age and underlying ill health predominantly, its threat is placated.[35] It is likewise to condemn the common practice of designing care homes for the elderly that curtail the opportunities for those of old age to be visible and active among their localities.[36] It is to condemn any practice that implies, even in the faintest way, the irrelevance of any individual. Rather, the teller, formed by delighting in the difference of others, looks to her own experience of old age, and to those already in old age, with continued anticipation of the grace performed in every unique life.

Gregory models this reception in relation to Macrina. In the final days of her life, he remains attentive to the every move and utterance of his sister. He records his memory of how 'those beautiful words of hers poured out', and how her 'mind continued to discuss up to the last breath'.[37] The attention he lovingly gives is rewarded by a final contribution given to him, as Macrina, on her deathbed, 'revealed pure love of the invisible bridegroom'.[38] The attention Gregory gives to Macrina, and the rich revelation Macrina gives to him in her last hours, speak of her irreplaceable value: there are things that she can uniquely see and say that cannot be substituted by another. Indeed, Gregory explains the depth of his grief in relation to the loss of Macrina's difference: 'for nature herself was afflicting me and making me sad; as was only to be expected, since I could no longer hope ever to hear such a voice again'.[39]

3. Unpredictability

As we have seen, Gregory's teller is shaped by the conscious limitation of her own words, and therefore impelled, repeatedly, to depend on the difference that the other can add. We explored above how such dependence brings the teller to experience her action and progress as unpredictable. In enacting an *event* in their utterance, and handing over the priority of sense

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[35] On this, see Elizabeth Bruenig, 'He Was Already Sick. Was His Life Worth Less Than Yours?', *The New York Times*, 1 April 2020, section Opinion <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/01/opinion/coronavirus-death-elderly.html> [accessed 29 September 2020] which points to the prevalence of this 'reassurance' .

[36] See Theodora Bowering, 'Ageing, Mobility and the City: Objects, Infrastructures and Practices in Everyday Assemblages of Civic Spaces in East London', *Journal of Population Ageing*, 12.2 (2019), 151–177.

[37] *Life of Macrina*, 982C (52), 982D (53).

[38] *Life of Macrina*, 984A (53-54).

[39] *Life of Macrina*, 982D (52-53).

making to a recipient, Gregory's tellers risk the unknown interpretive creativity of their recipients.[40] In promoting the *spread* of their own telling, opening their words to a future of unknown recipients, they allow their utterances to be transported to a horizon not yet seen. Indeed, as the tellers witness to the *surplus* of their utterance, testifying to the tellings of others that precede their own words, they enact what they invite: they add to the words of others before them by unanticipated means (just as they are open to the same additions being made to their work by others). In this sense, the teller progresses unpredictably, knowing with Arendt the 'boundlessness' of action as it occurs in a 'web of relationships', in which another's input can 'change every constellation'.[41]

The teller's recognition of the unpredictability of her action has powerful import in shaping the perception of a life at its end in two ways. First, as the teller is used to the unpredictable 'chain reactions' provoked by human deeds, so she is primed to consider the expansiveness of human contributions and the impossibility of their simple measure and evaluation.[42] At the end of a human life, as writers of eulogies attempt to discern the character and contribution of a deceased person, Gregory's teller is able to come to these tasks resisting the temptation to close and complete any final image of that person. Rather, the contribution of the deceased, the teller can see, continues to unfold and impinge on the world that person has left behind. Rather than being over, his words and actions, directly or indirectly, rebound in the lives of generations to come.[43] The teller knows that the final legacy of any individual extends beyond the reduction of a summary. Indeed, for the older person, this insight might be experienced with joy, as signs of the fruits of one's own active life can be hoped for in the lives of those who will go on.[44]

Second, the teller, being alert to the ongoing legacy of the deceased person, recognizes her own role in creating that legacy, in so doing challenging the presumption that 'legacy' is the

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[40] We saw this most clearly in ch. 4, part 2:B.

[41] Arendt, *Human Condition*, 190.

[42] This point supports the implication we explored in ch. 3, part 1, where we discussed the 'incompletion' of a complete life.

[43] The nature of human contribution, in this vision, becomes akin to 'casting one's bread upon the water' as Ecclesiastes has it: giving what one has, unsure of its return or contribution in one's own lifetime.

[44] There is also an intensely tragic dimension to the fact that individual action has unpredictable consequences. As much as one's life can be taken up to bear fruit, the goodness of one's life can also be dangerously misconstrued. Donald MacKinnon's essay 'Atonement in Tragedy' in his *Borderlands of Theology and Other Essays* (London: Lutterworth, 1968), 97-104, discusses such reality in relation to the life of Jesus, part of the 'effect' of whose life is the condemnation of Judas expressed in a history of violent anti-Semitism. We will discuss the tragic dimensions of the corruptibility of good in a life in ch. 7, part 3.

possession of an individual alone. If the actions of a human life continue to unfurl beyond death, those who continue to live are involved in the meaning of those actions. The effects of the actions undertaken by the deceased person in life are those that can be discerned, taken up, and augmented (repented of, or taken further) by his community who continue to live.[45] According to this, the teller is primed to keep the memory of those who are dead alive: in faithful remembering, in attention to the actions of that life and their ongoing effects; and in discernment of the goodness embodied in the life of that person, the teller collaborates in the creation of a legacy.

In summary, as through her practice of telling the teller learns of the unpredictable end of human action, she prepares to see the 'finished' life as unfinished in its reverberations; and she prepares to consider her own constructive role in remembering such a life, adding to the legacy that unfurls. The eulogy she may offer might be characterized by its knowing unfinishedness ('who can know the full legacy of the individual in question?') and yet its investment in searching for the ongoing grace of such a life ('it is up to us to take forward the meaning and goodness of the life in question').

Gregory can be found modeling such a eulogy in writing the *Life of Macrina*. For all the historical details he offers, his text does not ultimately solidify his sister but repeatedly testifies to the incalculable nature of her contribution. His subject 'is greater than can be compressed within the limits of a letter'.[46] Meanwhile, Gregory also clearly engages with Macrina's legacy as a collaborator in it. In writing up her life to be read and re-told, he urges others to discover the grace of her life and the inspiration of her example. As we noted above, the structure of the *Life* points towards this intention; being ordered around the memory of several different tellings, Gregory exemplifies the use of the biography he intends to promote.[47] His sense of the finished life models that which the teller is inducted to share: the life of the deceased person is over, but the depth of her contribution is immeasurable, in part because the community who go on living have a creative role in realizing that contribution.

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[45] A resonance might be found here with the argument John Milbank makes in his essay titled 'Forgiveness: The Double Waters' in his *Being Reconciled* (London: Routledge, 2003), 44-60. Milbank underscores how the ongoing effects of the past become the responsibility of those living in the present who can determine how the past will be realized in the future.

[46] *Life of Macrina*, (960A) 17.

[47] See ch. 4, part 2:C.

4. Conclusion

In this chapter, we have been concerned to investigate the difference that progressing by telling might make to the experience and perception of old age and the end of life. It has been argued that the quality of telling examined in chapter 4 gives rise to a distinctive form of engagement with the fact of ageing and dying. First, as the teller is conscious of the limits of her language, so she is inured to the creaturely limits that describe the human condition, and prepared to see the limits encountered in old age in continuity with the rest of life. Yet the constraints of her language nevertheless dissuade her from speculating as to the precise meaning of the suffering of another. Second, as the teller grows by depending on the contribution of others, she has fostered in herself a delight in the difference of the other. In this vision, the person of old age remains of unique importance and value, indispensable for the difference their presence offers and the unsubstitutable perspective their life grants them. Third, the unpredictability that the three become practised in through their telling prepares them to appreciate life at its mortal conclusion as (humanly) immeasurable in the expansiveness of its contribution. The teller can see that the community who go on living must understand themselves as realizing the legacy of their lost member. In each case, Gregory's account of his own involvement in the ageing and dying of Macrina offers resources with which to picture these ethical conclusions.

Chapter 6: Forgiving and Freedom

Asking, for a third time, what kind of progress arises from the lived expression of *epektasis*, and in turn, what shape of life it implies, we look to a third shared emphasis in the lives of Macrina, Moses, and Thaumaturgus as Gregory remembers them: an engagement in the work of forgiveness. The complexity of this activity will demand further expansion, but for now we may draw attention to *engagement* as a choice descriptor of the three's interaction with it. We opt here for *engagement* since the three are not only purveyors of forgiveness, but also recipients of forgiveness as it is given interpersonally and divinely. Moreover, the forgiveness they encounter is less often punctiliar and more often extensive as a practice and spirit exhibited over time. Further, the forgiveness they encounter is not always named as such, but sometimes is implied in its exposition of fundamental 'forgiving' qualities without formal identification. In this chapter, we explore the significance of forgiving and examine the progress that it engenders in the lives of the three. In the accompanying chapter to follow, we will consider how the vision of progress that arises from the practice of forgiving might shape our perception of and engagement with ageing and dying.

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In investigating the significance of forgiving in Gregory's vision we will (1) begin with a descriptive account of Macrina, Moses, and Thaumaturgus's engagement with the practice. To deepen our understanding of how the presence of forgiveness gives shape to a life, we will (2) look to Gregory's account of divine forgiveness at the resurrection to come as a means of clarifying the meaning of imitative human forgiveness in this world. Especially relevant here will be three treatises that patristics scholar Giorgio Maturi observes can be regarded as the 'three stages' of a project in which Gregory puts anthropological concerns at the foreground of his theology.[1] The first stage of this 'unified project', relevant here, will be *On the Making of Man* (c. 379), wherein Gregory takes up the themes of his brother Basil's earlier work on the topic, contributing his own additions and corrections as he speculates on the structure of the human being. The second stage is his constructed dialogue with his sister Macrina from her

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[1] Giorgio Maturi, 'An et Res', in *Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, ed. Lucas Francisco Mateo-Seco and Giulio Maspero (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 27–29 (27).

deathbed in 379 (likely written up c. 381), *On the Soul and Resurrection*. The third stage, Gregory's shorter treatise, *On Infants' Early Deaths* (c. 381), in which Gregory explores 'what we are to think' of the future judgement and resurrection 'of those who are taken prematurely', will be referred to briefly.[2] It is via these primary texts that we will (3) recognise that, for Gregory, to forgive in the context of human relationships by participation in divine forgiveness (exemplified at the final resurrection) is, fundamentally, to reinstate the wrongdoer's *freedom* for the good and thereby restore to the *future* its promising novelty. To do so is, among much else, (for both forgiver and forgiven) to encounter the *risk* of repeated sin.

1. Forgiving

Before we move to describe the presence Gregory allots forgiveness in the lives of the three exemplars, the place of such a concept in Gregory's philosophical backdrop will briefly be examined. Intriguing here is the notable absence of interest that Gregory's key philosophical influences appear to take in the notion of forgiveness. Chief among those influences is Plato, who is working in a context, philosopher Charles Griswold observes, 'that supplies ample examples of vocabulary for pardon, excuse, mercy, forbearance, indulgence, all in response to wrong-doing intentional or not'.[3] Yet these conceptual resources fail to find the foreground, Griswold argues, owing to their irrelevance in the face of Plato's fundamental commitment to perfected souls (which have escaped the cares of this world and so have no need for forgiveness as a means of reconciling interpersonal and worldly affairs), and his recurrent thesis that a good person, as well as having nothing to forgive, would come to no harm (and therefore have no need to forgive).[4] In summary, according to Griswold, it is what can be termed Plato's 'fundamentally perfectionist' ethical scheme that leads him to know of forgiveness and yet not count it as praiseworthy.[5] The same ethical perfectionism, Griswold suggests, is also characteristic of Gregory's secondary philosophical influences: the Stoics, whose sages 'are invulnerable to injury'; the Epicureans, whose model of the perfected soul could not be injured; and, most importantly, Aristotle, for whom the fault of others is of little interest to the

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[2] Gregory of Nyssa, 'On Infants' Early Deaths', 373.

[3] Charles L. Griswold, 'Plato and Forgiveness', *Ancient Philosophy*, 27.2 (2007), 269–287; *sugnome* is Plato's closest expression to forgiveness, meaning pardoning, or excusing (277).

[4] Griswold, 'Plato and Forgiveness', 279–80.

[5] Griswold, 'Plato and Forgiveness', 281.

man of complete virtue.[6] Indeed, the recent work of Carissa Phillips-Garrett goes further, to suggest, beyond Griswold, that the justification Aristotle gives for *sungnome* and the nature he attaches to it can be taken to indicate the active incompatibility of his thought with forgiveness.[7]

Such a picture of Gregory's philosophical backdrop is consistent with the cultural picture recalled by classicist David Konstan, whose studies of late classical Greek literature demonstrate that strategies of reconciliation were regularly depicted but these were not primarily matters of forgiving; for rather than seeking 'confession and apology, they looked rather to excuse or exculpation'.[8] Kathryn Gutzwiller's study of dramatic genres in the same era similarly concludes that 'forgiveness was clearly not a valued part of the moral code, which evolved from the warrior's posture of aggressive self-aggrandizement'.[9] While no single view can be deduced from the vast expanse of pagan philosophy and literature, it would seem that Gregory's interest in forgiveness must be considered to stand at odds with at least dominant presumptions of relevance expressed in his classical philosophical and cultural inheritance.

Rather, Gregory's understanding of forgiveness is rooted in his response to Hebrew and Christian scriptures.[10] Recognising this does not immediately clarify the concept of forgiveness Gregory is responding to, since the scriptural account of forgiveness is itself complex.[11] Yet the difficulty of pinning down a precise concept can helpfully be re-evaluated by contemporary scholarship on the subject of forgiveness. Here we bring to bear the insight of philosopher Adam Morton, who sees that the subject of forgiveness is not well served by the standard procedure of analytic philosophers to begin by 'mak[ing] a theory of forgiveness, laying out the conditions that have to be met for one person to forgive another', according to which 'if a

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[6] Griswold, 'Plato and Forgiveness', 282, 282–84.

[7] Carissa Phillips-Garrett, 'Sugnome in Aristotle', *Apeiron*, 50.3 (2017), 311–333 (311). Namely, Phillips-Garrett argues that Aristotle sees that *sugnome* is a fitting response insofar as a wrongdoer is not, on close observation, blameworthy. *Sugnome*, she sees, is primarily for Aristotle about fairness rather than mercy.

[8] David Konstan, 'Assuaging Rage: Remorse, Repentance, and Forgiveness in the Classical World', in *Ancient Forgiveness: Classical, Judaic, and Christian*, ed. David Konstan and Charles L. Griswold (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 17–30 (17).

[9] Kathryn Gutzwiller, 'All in the Family: Forgiveness and Reconciliation in New Comedy', in *Ancient Forgiveness: Classical, Judaic, and Christian*, ed. David Konstan and Charles L. Griswold (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 48–77 (49).

[10] Indeed, his writings on forgiveness largely consist in an exegetical genre.

[11] Griswold points out, for example, the complex range of translations that have been offered of Matthew 6.12, each implying a different sense of what forgiveness might mean: its translations have included to acquit (in a legal sense), release, send away, cancel a debt, excuse. One significant example, he points out, is the Latin vulgate's use of '*dimitto*', 'meaning at base to release from, discharge, send away', which offers a primary context of forgiving 'a debt'. Griswold, 270 n. 50.

person or a text uses a word in a way that violates these conditions, we would take it that forgiveness is not really the topic'.[12] The problem with such an approach, Morton argues, 'is that reference and sense have some degree of independence', so that 'any analysis we produce' under a pre-defined title of forgiveness 'is making a hypothesis rather than describing what is evident'.[13] Further, to begin with a pre-defined reference, especially as one looks for forgiveness across a range of times and places, is to risk making assumptions about the practice that might lead us to miss the similarities and differences of enactments that might challenge and expand the investigator's sense of what forgiveness is.[14] This latter point is supported by the work of theologian Haddon Willmer. In analysing the presence of forgiveness in an account of human psychological development, Willmer sees that 'some forgivings we do not name are the most important in opening the way of life to us', writing that it is 'possible to speak of forgiveness (and to speak and act forgivingly) without using the word or having a simple definition of it'.[15] Thus he invites us to discern forgiveness in contexts additional to conflicts or law breaking, additional to its Christian steeping in the terminology of *confession* and *repentance*; forgiveness seen, for example, as it is quietly 'integral to ordinary everyday being'.[16] Morton and Willmer expose the positive value of not beginning with a single reference to forgiveness but looking to the full breadth of 'forgiveness territory' and 'resemblance' even in unnamed and unexpected scenarios.[17]

We will take up such an approach in what follows, attempting to attend to Gregory's sense of forgiveness where it is present in the lives of the three, rather than restricting observation only to where it is named. We will look, then, to the very rough contours of forgiveness – the presence of a changed relation to past harm, subjects who are wronged and who move beyond the wrong, and relationships that progress towards better futures – rather than the fulfilment of a single definition of it. For this reason, it is under the categories of *named* and *unnamed*, rather than the common and particular of previous chapters, that our observations will be organised. As at the outset we recognised in opting for 'engagement with' as a choice prelude to

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[12] Adam Morton, 'What Is Forgiveness?', in *Ancient Forgiveness: Classical, Judaic, and Christian*, ed. David Konstan and Charles L. Griswold (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 3.
[13] Morton, 'What Is Forgiveness?', 4.
[14] Morton, 'What Is Forgiveness?',15.
[15] Haddon Willmer, 'Forgiving Constitutes the Person', in *The Logic of the Spirit in Human Thought and Experience: Exploring the Vision of James E. Loder*, ed. Keith White and Dana Wright (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2015), 58–77 (62).
[16] Willmer, 'Forgiving Constitutes the Person', 64.
[17] Morton, 'What is Forgiveness? ', 6; Willmer, 'Forgiving Constitutes the Person', 64.

'forgiving', the activities we will observe operate in different directions. The three will be recorded as they (A) are forgiven by God; (B) forgive others; (C) are forgiven by others; and (D) mediate forgiveness between others. These different directions are in reality inseparable, but for the purposes of identifying the emphases of each in the biographies (as well as attending to the reverberations of forgiving in different directions), we will deploy this rough taxonomy in what follows. Casting our eye to the full 'territory' of forgiving will mean that some of our examples are far from the scenes of forgiveness to which we are accustomed. As in the course of this chapter we examine the integral qualities of forgiveness according to Gregory we will see their pertinence in time.

(A) Macrina

Named

The most prominent element of Macrina's engagement with forgiveness, as named by Gregory, is her seeking the forgiveness of God in her dying prayer (A). The account of Macrina's dying prayer can be thought of as the centrepiece of Gregory's memory of her: it is placed close to the centre of the work; it is the longest obvious unit of Gregory's text; it serves as the culmination of Macrina's self-narration, following Gregory's repeated insistence that the words of his sister are of great power; and it is intensely suffused with scripture, lifting it to heights that the rest of the text less self-consciously exudes. It is thus striking that Macrina's dying words are a prayer, above all, engaging with divine forgiveness. Following a confession of her life's narrative, Macrina asks God to 'let not the terrible chasm separate me from Thy elect', 'nor let my sin be found before Thy eyes, if in anything I have sinned in word or deed or thought'.[18] In her plea, Macrina draws heavily on an established imagery of repentance: 'forgive me, that I may be *refreshed* and may be found before Thee…without defilement'…'may my soul be received into Thy hands *spotless* and *undefiled*'.[19] The model for this episode, not entrusted subtly to the backdrop but plainly stated as such, gives no doubt that what is depicted is an engagement with forgiveness. It is 'the man that was crucified with Thee and implored Thy mercies' to which Macrina compares herself.[20] The thief on the cross is remembered

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[18] *Life of Macrina*, 984D-986A (56).

[19] *Life of Macrina*, 984D-986A (56-57). See Rowan Greer's discussion of the imagery of water and repentance in *One Path for All: Gregory of Nyssa on the Christian Life and Human Destiny* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2015), 139.

[20] *Life of Macrina*, 984D (56).

because he sought mercy. So too, Gregory's central placing of Macrina's plea for forgiveness implies the importance of this episode in his memory of her whole life.

Unnamed

In addition to the distinct engagement with divine forgiveness we have described as emphatic to Gregory's memory of Macrina, her *Life* also contains a number of engagements that bear the contours, if not the name, of forgiving. Such an engagement can be identified in the way in which Macrina is shown to reorient and heal the lives of those she encounters – with the effect of having mercy on their (own or imposed) shortfalls and offering an alternative way forward. Such a practice shows itself to be subsumable under the category of forgiving others (B). Basil comes to Macrina thick in the flow of a misguided career in rhetoric, 'puffed up beyond measure with the pride of oratory', Gregory recalls, 'and look[ing] down on the 28 local dignitaries'.[21] '*Nevertheless*', Gregory comments, 'Macrina took him in hand' and draws him in an alternative direction.[22] The ills of Basil's career do not lead to his denunciation. Instead, his subsequent conversion to the 'mark of philosophy', which would go on to define his life, appears all the richer for its convicted forsaking of 'the glories of this world'.[23] Macrina's mother, too, comes to know this same capacity of her daughter to draw others on to better possibilities. When she learns of the death of her son, Naucratius, Macrina's mother is overcome by grief. Gregory reports this in terms of disordered passions: 'her reason failed her' and 'nature dominated her'.[24] She has her 'heavy load of sorrows' not erased but 'shared' with Macrina, who 'gradually draw[s] her on' to a life filled with good things, and teaches, 'by her own steadfastness…her mother's soul to be brave'.[25] Such interactions express a resemblance to forgiving: Macrina draws those she encounters towards a future not easily anticipated from their past. In her presence, Basil is able to step towards a future that breaks with the arrogance to which he has become inured, while her mother is enabled to take up a fresh perspective 'of rejoicing over the blessings she enjoyed rather than grieving over those that were missing'.[26] While these are not identified as explicit instances of (B) forgiving others, Macrina's role in

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[21] *Life of Macrina*, 966C-966D (27-28).

[22] *Life of Macrina*, 966C (28), emphasis added.

[23] *Life of Macrina*, 966C (28).

[24] *Life of Macrina*, 968D (32).

[25] *Life of Macrina*, 966B (27), 970A (32).

[26] *Life of Macrina*, 970B (33).

enabling those in her midst to move from the facts of past decision and present emotion towards a better future might be located within its territory.

Macrina is presented not only as one purveying this unnamed forgiving work on others; she is also presented as the posthumous recipient of it herself (C). To assert the inclusion of Macrina's imperfection is tenable not only because of particular differences Macrina maintains against other 'ideals' of her era, but because of the subtle inclusion of falls as well as rises in Gregory's account of her life, as this present point is concerned to address.[27] Indeed, as Gregory recalls Macrina's life, he preserves its roughness and its interruptions — incurred by loss, illness, distress, calamity, and near collapse.[28] Her 'noble character' was 'tested' by 'different ascensions of trouble';[29] she knew, sometimes, the 'distress' of her soul;[30] and her life's course could seem as painful as a 'furnace'.[31] While clearly enamoured by her life, Gregory nevertheless is able to testify subtly to its marks and missteps; to the location of such 'treasure', we might say after Paul, in its 'clay jar'.[32] We begin to see the forgiving sight of Gregory in the *Life* as we attend to the hints within his work that his writing is a form of reassembly rather than reproduction. Derek Krueger's seminal reading of the *Life* is helpful here, for he sees in his paper 'Writing and the Liturgy of Memory in Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Macrina*' (2000), first, the organization of Macrina's story as punctuated by the memory of liturgical offices (thanksgiving prayers, evening prayer, and prayers of lament after her death) and, second,

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[27] To argue this is to propose a reading of Macrina more complicated than some contemporary feminist readings have posited. While Roth (in her 'Platonic and Pauline Elements in the Ascent of the Soul in Gregory of Nyssa's Dialogue on the Soul and Resurrection', *Vigiliae Christianae*, 46.1 (1992), 20–30) and Virginia Burrus, (in her *'Begotten Not Made': Conceiving Manhood in Late Antiquity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, (2000)) have played down the particularity with which Gregory remembers Macrina (contrasting Macrina with Socrates' constructed and literarily useful Diotima), there are good reasons to see Macrina with a complexity that makes her harder to handle, and thus to take seriously the possibility of her particularity as recorded, and, indeed, her imperfection as witnessed to by Gregory. Key differences between Macrina and the 'holy woman' type visible in texts of Gregory's era include the extent to which her intellectual learning (and not just her virtue) is celebrated (as Arnaldo Momigliano points out in his 'The Life of Saint Macrina by Gregory of Nyssa', in Arnaldo Momigliano, *On Pagans, Jews and Christians* (Middletown, CO: Wesleyan University Press, 1987)); and the setting and sphere of her influence apart from the city (that is, in contrast to Elizabeth Clark's presentation of the 'holy woman' type in her 'Devil's Gateway and Bride of Christ: Women in the Early Christian World', in *Ascetic Piety and Women's Faith: Essays on Late Ancient Christianity* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1986)).

[28] *Life of Macrina*, 968D (32).

[29] *Life of Macrina*, 974C (40).

[30] *Life of Macrina*, 974C (40).

[31] *Life of Macrina*, 974C (40).

[32] 2 Corinthians 4:7. Such is in keeping with his account of Macrina in *On the Soul and Resurrection* wherein Gregory preserves the occasional misreckoning and subsequent emendation Macrina must undergo.

more fundamentally, the modeling of Gregory's act of recollection on the Eucharist, wherein Gregory makes the absent (Macrina) present (in story) and offers her life as a sacrifice for others' growth in holiness.[33] Krueger's insight is that Gregory places 'Christian *anamnesis* [in] participation [with] the divine logos'.[34] As Gregory's memory is indeed animated by God, so can he read her life forgivingly: recounting it with its falls as well as rises; retaining her life as a set of complementary fragments rather than sealing over them as a perfect whole; re-organizing the narrative such that his account ends not with her death but with 'a marvellous episode in her life'; recounting the trials of her life in light of their liberating 'the metal of her soul'.[35] While clearly Macrina does not knowingly receive this forgiveness, nor receive it in relation to any isolatable sin (which complicates the inclusion of this example under our category (C)), nevertheless we sense a forgiving quality in the way in which Gregory remembers the fragments of Macrina's living in such a way as to clarify the goodness of God in her life.[36]

In Gregory's sight, Macrina is presented as one who primarily engages with forgiveness in the context of divine forgiveness (A). Yet this central engagement is matched and worked out in practices bearing the resemblance of forgiving others (B), and, though complicated by its posthumous context, being forgiven by others (C).

(B) Moses

Named

It is primarily in the interactions Gregory records of Moses with the Israelites that Moses is made known as one who, in his mercy for the weak and straying, forgives others (B). 'The multitude' frequently fall 'into disorderliness' and 'transgression', 'drawn down to the slavish passions', and prone to a 'lack of moderation'.[37] When at one point rebels among them rise up it is Moses whose 'compassion' leads him not to revenge or punishment but to make

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[33] Krueger, 'Writing and the Liturgy'.

[34] Krueger, 'Writing and the Liturgy', 491.

[35] *Life of Macrina*, 996C (74), 974C (40).

[36] That Gregory can be seen to 'forgive' Macrina even as he does not name her particular sins affirms the point he makes in relation to the Lord's Prayer: as he writes in Sermon 5 of 'The Lord's Prayer', in *The Lord's Prayer and The Beatitudes*, ed. and trans. Hilda C. Graef (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1953), 21–84, even 'those who are most approved by Divine Scripture' are implicated in the 'common debt of human nature in which everyone… has a share, because he participates in the common lot of man's nature' (55). Macrina is a saint in Gregory's eyes, but she is a saint who still lives in Adam and therefore has a life in need of forgiveness.

[37] *Life of Moses*, I.58 (45), II.271 (123), I.63 (46).

'supplication to God' with them in mind.[38] When Aaron and Miriam raged against him, 'Moses showed patience most worthy of admiration'.[39] Gregory says this as he observes that 'when God punished [Miriam's] irrational envy', '[Moses] made his nature prevail over anger and appeased God on behalf of his sister', responding with forgiveness over retribution.[40] As the Israelites continue to transgress, Gregory recalls that 'not only was [Moses] not moved to defend himself against those who caused him sorrow, but he even besought God for mercy on their behalf'.[41] In these examples, we see the enmeshment of Moses's forgiving others (B), with his mediation of forgiveness between others (D). This is implied in the commentary Gregory offers to suggest that as Moses forgives those who have erred, he is fulfilling (in some instances) and even persuading (in others) the forgiveness of God of the wrongdoer in question. That Gregory takes Moses to be one engaged in forgiving others (and so mediating God's forgiveness) is summed up forcefully in the allegorical reading he layers upon him: Moses's outstretched hands are read allegorically as those which promise 'the healing of pain and the deliverance from punishment'; the water Moses sources in the desert speaks, for Gregory, to the mystery of repentance; while his handling the sin of others makes him comparable to a 'physician', whose 'treatment prevents a disease from prevailing'.[42] Moses's forgiveness is seen most explicitly as he is merciful towards the weakness of others; compassionate in the face of sin; and repeatedly committed to his community, seventy times seven times, despite their repeated transgressions.

Unnamed

The prominent quality of Moses's forgiving as *mediating* (D) is apparent more widely, if implicitly. It is apparent as we look to the greater narrative arc of Moses's life and action in mediating God's liberation of the Hebrew people from slavery to freedom. It is Moses who commands a release from 'Egyptian bondage'; and Moses who 'delivers to the people the words of freedom', rescuing them from their subjugation, enacting and pursuing the liberation God intends.[43] This movement, from darkness to light, from an oppression that seemed inescapable,

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[38] *Life of Moses*, I.69 (48).
[39] *Life of Moses*, I.69 (48).
[40] *Life of Moses*, I.62 (46).
[41] *Life of Moses*, II.261 (120).
[42] *Life of Moses*, II.84 (72), II.269 (122), II.272 (123). In interweaving the language of healing with forgiveness, Gregory draws on a well-developed trope in early Christian literature visible especially in the work of Clement and John Chrysostom.
[43] *Life of Moses*, I.21 (34), II.54 (65).

to a new horizon of life, stands as an enactment of the emphasis Gregory makes in the *Life* of the possibility of beginning again. The possibility of beginning again is suggested by Gregory's commentary across the work: we are said to be 'in some manner our own parents giving birth to ourselves by our own free choice', able to 'enter upon a better birth… in which free will serves as the midwife… [wherein we can] make a totally new beginning in life'.[44] That it is Moses who mediates these beginnings to his community places him as one engaged in what resembles God's work of forgiveness – for over and over Moses points to the different future available to his people, the alternative gift to be grasped that will offer light over dark, life over death, a beginning again over the fatalism of a decided history. In leading the liberation of his people, he mediates the liberation God offers (D).

Further to this, we see Gregory alert to Moses's being forgiven by God (A). Gregory recalls Moses's life as full with the mercy and providence of the good. Unexpected generosities pepper his story in such a way that Moses's past poverty and persecution are not granted the last word on his life: he is plucked from the river by 'the very person who laid down the murderous law'; he is gifted a 'highly esteemed education'; he is led by divine presence with the 'elements…cooperating with him in [the] attack on the Egyptians'; he is accompanied by Aaron; and granted the 'holy tablets' as a 'divine gift'.[45] There is an excess of possibility given to Moses, beyond the constraints imposed upon him in any given moment. This presence of possibility exudes a resemblance to forgiveness in its enabling Moses to progress towards a future un-dictated by his circumstances and capabilities alone. The God Gregory sees Moses encounter is a God who 'will not cease at all from leading on toward the Good', but bends down to meet his people forgivingly in their weakness, knowing 'not only to be bread but also to become milk and meat and greens and whatever else might be appropriate to and desired by the one who receives him'.[46] Again, the intertwinement of the different directions of forgiving should be noted: God's forgiveness of Moses (A), gestured towards in the steady provision of mercy, is frequently mediated by others (C). It is others who in practice offer moments of generosity, which cumulatively can open out onto the unimaginable future gifted by God's forgiving mercy.

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[44] *Life of Moses*, II.3 (54), II.4 (55), II.126 (83).
[45] *Life of Moses*, II.308 (132), I.25 (35), I.57 (45).
[46] *Life of Moses*, II.140 (87).

While Moses emerges most centrally as one who mediates the forgiveness of God (D) as he forgives others (B); we see that he is presented as engaged tacitly in the territory of forgiveness as he receives a life suffused with gracious possibility (A). That possibility is mediated through the work of others' generosity and mercy (C).

(C) Gregory Thaumaturgus

Named

The principal engagement with forgiveness we observe in the life of Thaumaturgus, as Gregory tells it, is Thaumaturgus's role as a mediator of forgiving between those he encounters who are unreconciled (D). When two brothers, 'in the process of dividing their inheritance between them', reach an impasse, 'each competing' for the whole land bequeathed 'and neither ready to admit the other to possession in common', it is Thaumaturgus who 'promote[s] reconciliation through arbitration, urging the young men to come to agreement through affection and to prefer the reward of peace to gains in income'.[47] The reconciliation that follows is clear as the brothers' future is tangibly changed: Thaumaturgus 'transformed their eagerness to kill into positive peaceful sentiments', as 'once again Nature showed itself in the brothers'.[48] Coupled with this is an account of two women who come to Thaumaturgus, each asserting the same child as their own, in the style of the story of the Judgement of Solomon.[49] It is Thaumaturgus who 'knew how to trace the hidden truth', exposing the facts of the past, from which a new future could be drawn beyond the 'complicated entanglement'.[50] In such a future, mother and child are reunited by way of Thaumaturgus's arbitration. As Gregory's words summarize, Thaumaturgus yielded 'good order and peace for the community and for each and every one, and great increase of good things both private and public, since no wickedness destroyed their mutual understanding'.[51] In fact, Gregory sees that it is this capacity of Thaumaturgus to make possible forgiving between others that engenders his fame; he was known as much for his consoling role in the 'disputes of daily life' as he was for his wonder-filled miracles.[52]

Unnamed

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[47] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 925B; 925C (63).

[48] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 928C (65), 928A (64).

[49] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 925A (63), 1 Kings 3:16-28.

[50] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 925A (63), 924D (62).

[51] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 924D (62).

[52] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 925A (62).

Two particular habits of perspective exemplified by Thaumaturgus express the wider contours of forgiving others (B). The first habit of perspective is to be found in Thaumaturgus's generosity of perception. While those he meets may have clear shortcomings, Thaumaturgus habitually sees the 'more' of who the person before him is, and what they nevertheless can become. We may recall the temple custodian, whose initial overwhelming anger, on meeting Thaumaturgus, leads him to threaten 'every kind of terrible thing', including to 'haul [Thaumaturgus] off to the authorities'.[53] After some time, the custodian, having 'shook off the... rage', finds himself compelled by the wonderworker, and indeed opts to join his following with great fervency.[54] That Thaumaturgus stays with the custodian long enough for such a change to occur, that he does not chastise the custodian and leave, implies a perception on his part that remains open beyond the shortfall and transgression visible in the one he encounters. Such a perspective can be thought of as proximate to forgiving, insofar as it retains the possibility for good in the face of what appears its unambiguous lack. We may likewise recall Gregory's meeting with Alexander. 'Clad in dirty rags, and not fully at that... covered with soot on his hands and face and the rest of his body from the charcoal', Alexander does not exude the anticipated look of a future bishop.[55] Yet, again, Thaumaturgus's sight of him remains wide enough to imagine the possibilities beyond what the surface presents. He sees in Alexander the qualities of a future bishop and presents him as such to those tasked with appointing one to Comana. Forgiveness is resembled in his imaginative gaze, which sees beyond surface faults to what might yet be, not filling the future with the projection of the present.

A second habit of perspective in which we see Thaumaturgus implicitly forgiving of others (B) is to be found in his characteristic compassion with the frailty of those he leads. In this perspective, Thaumaturgus is sensitive to the imperfection of those in his midst. As Thaumaturgus is at once hopeful for his community (urging their development) and aware of their propensity to falter (gracious with them and kind in their failure), he forgives in his bearing with imperfection and continued trust in those who are imperfect. When, for example, 'there was total confusion among the people and much helplessness' in a time of persecution, Thaumaturgus, 'seeing the weakness of human nature, how most people were unable to fight to

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[53] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 924D (62).
[54] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 916C (57).
[55] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 936B (70).

the death for true religion', accommodates the people.[56] He neither gives up on them nor demands what they cannot give, but gently 'advised the church to pull back a little from the fearful attack, thinking it better that they should save their lives by flight than that, by standing in the battle line of the contest, they should become deserters from the faith'.[57] Elsewhere, as Thaumaturgus's followers become confused, questioning Thaumaturgus, 'and at a loss', he does not condemn them in return for their failure to keep up, or impose on them a full answer to their question which would overwhelm their understanding, but pushes them a little further with a question of his own.[58] There is a forgiving quality to these exchanges, which hopes and trusts as it acknowledges weakness, aspiring to the good as it is practically graspable rather than reaching for utopic projections. This forgiving of others (B), by way of generous and gentle sight of them, stands as an implicit corollary of the explicit forgiveness Thaumaturgus mediates between those who are starkly un-reconciled (D).

2. Freedom

Having seen an engagement in forgiveness in the lives of Macrina, Moses, and Thaumaturgus, as Gregory remembers them, we inquire now into the characteristics of this activity as we seek to understand how it gives shape to the lives of those engaged in it. To do so requires delving into Gregory's understanding of interpersonal forgiveness, a task complicated by the fact that Gregory does not treat the topic of forgiveness extensively in any one place. His most direct treatment can be found in his fifth homily *On the Lord's Prayer*, in which he discourses on the Matthean form 'forgive us our debts, as we also forgive our debtors'.

While his treatment here is brief, it is emphatic on one particular point: that 'the forgiving of debts is the special prerogative of God, since it is said, *No man can forgive sins but God alone*'.[59] Since forgiveness is, properly speaking, a *divine* occupation, the human person who forgives is, in Gregory's sight, 'almost no longer shown in terms of human nature, but, through virtue, is likened to God Himself, so that [the forgiver] seems to be another god, in that he does those things that God alone can do'.[60] Indeed, this is consistent with Gregory's presentation of the

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[56] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 945B (77), 945D (78).

[57] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 945D (78).

[58] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 921A (60).

[59] 'The Lord's Prayer', Sermon 5 (71).

[60] 'The Lord's Prayer', Sermon 5 (71).

protomartyr Stephen, whom he sees could forgive his 'bloodthirsty murderers' only because he had 'come to be outside human nature and had been transformed to angelic grace' having seen the 'lawgiver of forbearance'.[61] As David Balas sees, forgiveness can then be thought of for Gregory as a matter of *theosis*; as one forgives one imitates God, and in so doing, as Gregory puts it, 'becomes somehow that which he imitates'.[62] This imitation moves beyond resemblance to the forgiveness of God and permits forgiving in partnership *with* the forgiveness of God. It is as we forgive *like* God that, Gregory goes on, we can hope that God will ratify our forgiveness of others. Gregory articulates this partnership in the boldest of terms:

> Just as in us the good is accomplished by imitating the Divine goodness, so we dare to hope that God will also imitate us when we accomplish anything good…so that you, too, may say to God: Do Thou the same as I have done… I have forgiven the debts, do not Thou demand them back[.][63]

In Gregory's sight, as we forgive by imitation of God, so God will imitate and confirm our forgiving of others. What begins in imitation ends in partnership. This point constitutes a guiding clue to the enquiry which follows: if human interpersonal forgiving is an imitation of and partnership with God's forgiving, to understand human interpersonal forgiving more deeply we may look to understand God's forgiving activity more deeply. Indeed, on the topic of God's forgiving activity at the eschaton, Gregory writes extensively. It is to these eschatological writings that we will turn in our analysis, examining God's forgiveness at the resurrection to come as a route into understanding interpersonal forgiveness as its worldly imitation and anticipation. Gregory's universalism, which asserts that all human beings will be redeemed by forgiveness to final salvation, will be our focus. Through looking to this doctrine, we will, first, see that divine forgiveness, in Gregory's view, is concerned with the restoration of human freedom to choose the good, rather than a blanket amnesty on all human sin. We will then be equipped to move, second, towards a fuller understanding of the character of the

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[61] Gregory of Nyssa, 'In Praise of Stephen, Saint and Protomartyr', in *One Path For All*, ed. and trans. Rowan A. Greer (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2015), 64–70 (60).

[62] David L. Balas, 'Deification', in *Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa* (Leiden: Brill) ed. Lucas Francisco Mateo-Seco and Giulio Maspero (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 210–13, 210. Illaria Ramelli points out, in her 'Forgiveness in Patristic Philosophy: The Importance of Repentance and the Centrality of Grace', in *Ancient Forgiveness: Classical, Judaic, and Christian*, ed. David Konstan and Charles L. Griswold (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 195–215, that, in this respect, Gregory follows Origen, who likewise stresses that in forgiving one another's sins human persons acquire similarity to God, 'becoming ourselves, according to the ideal of theosis' (202).

[63] 'The Lord's Prayer', Sermon 5 (73).

interpersonal forgiveness that Gregory sees originate in the divine example. It will be argued that understanding the forgiveness in which the exemplars are engaged as a participation in the divine forgiveness exemplified at the final resurrection clarifies two central characteristics belonging to a human engagement in forgiving practices: the restoration of a wrongdoer's *freedom* to choose the good, and the restoration of the *future* as genuinely undecided and open.

(A) Divine forgiveness: Universal salvation

Gregory's statement of universalism

As Ludlow remarks in her comprehensive treatment of the universal salvation in Gregory of Nyssa, 'Christian eschatological beliefs appear to have been very fluid in the first four centuries of this era', with two broad options having emerged by Gregory's day, neither seeming to have been considered plainly heterodox at the time: the oppositional eschatology, dividing *sheep* from *goats*, exemplified by Irenaeus and adopted by Gregory's brother Basil, on the one hand, and the universalistic theology, propounded most notably by Origen, and before him by Clement, on the other.[64] It is the latter that Gregory decisively opts for, seeing that the whole cosmos will be saved at the resurrection, that 'nothing made by God will be excluded from his kingdom'.[65]

Gregory states this universalism directly on a number of occasions across his corpus. In the *Life of Moses*, Gregory interprets Moses's expelling the plagues besetting Israel with his outstretched arms as invoking the outstretched arms of Christ crucified, bringing *all* sinners to salvation. Just as 'Moses banished even the plague of darkness', so too for Gregory, as Ludlow has it, 'Christ's salvation might extend even to the outer darkness of hell'.[66] In *On the Soul and Resurrection* he offers the image of 'a universal feast kept around the Deity' after 'all the inveterate corruption of sin has vanished from the world'.[67] The feast is 'spread for all…for those that are now

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[64] Morwenna Ludlow, *Universal Salvation: Eschatology in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa and Karl Rahner* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 30. It is interesting to note Ramelli's suggestion that it may have been through Gregory Thaumaturgus (a disciple of Origen) that Gregory of Nyssa learnt of Origen's doctrine of universalism; cf. Ramelli, *Forgiveness in Patristic Philosophy*, 275-276.

[65] Gregory of Nyssa, 'When (the Father) Will Subject All Things to (the Son), Then (the Son) Himself Will Be Subjected to Him (the Father) Who Subjects All Things to Him (the Son)—A Treatise on First Corinthians 15.28 by Saint Gregory of Nyssa', trans. Brother Casimir, O.C.S.O., *Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, 28.1 (1983), 1–25, M.1313 (17).

[66] Ludlow, *Universal Salvation*, 79, here paraphrasing Gregory's *Life of Moses*, cf. (II.82) 72, (II.72) 69.

[67] 'On the Soul and Resurrection', 461.

excluded by reason of their sin will at last be admitted'.[68] In the same text Gregory asserts that even the devil will be redeemed, since 'when evil shall one day have been annihilated…*nothing* shall be left outside of the world of goodness, but that even those [evil spirits] shall rise in harmony the confessions of Christ's Lordship'.[69] Nothing shall be left outside of the world of goodness because, as Gregory puts it in his treatise *On First Corinthians 15.28*, 'in Christ shall all be made alive', since 'God [is] everything to everyone'.[70] Every being will know the ubiquity of God's presence as God is revealed as all in all forever.

Gregory describes this state, in which all will know God's presence and be saved, using the language of 'return'. He re-phrases in a number of places his sentiment that 'the resurrection promises us nothing other than the restoration of the fallen to their ancient state… for the grace we look for is a certain return to the first life bringing back again to Paradise him who was cast out of it'.[71] Indeed, Gregory's conviction that our resurrected bodies will be none other than those described in Genesis from which we fell would seem to be a detail that fits his thesis that the eschatological end will consist in a return to our primordial life at the beginning. While Gregory describes these bodies in conflicting ways – his earlier work asserts that resurrected bodies will be sexually differentiated, while his later work presumes that they will not – at stake in these conflicts is the question of which state Genesis should be read as suggesting is *original*. Gregory's choice of which of these bodies will be that to which we are restored depends on which of Genesis's creation accounts Gregory takes to be primary.[72]

Gregory's eschatological vision appears a simple return to an original state: divine forgiveness cancels sin and restores us to ourselves before life in the world compromised our relation to the divine. The process appears not dissimilar to resetting: the human is resurrected, their guilt and sin cancelled, and they are restored as befitting recipients of salvation.[73] Yet the notion of return and restoration to a prior state, elucidated most explicitly in *On the Making of Man*, is not as straightforward as it may appear. Daniélou describes Gregory's vocabulary of return as a

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[68] 'On the Soul and Resurrection', 461.
[69] 'On the Soul and Resurrection', 461.
[70] 'A Treatise on First Corinthians 15.28', M.1316 (19).
[71] 'On the Making of Man', XVII: 2 (407).
[72] The two creation narratives of Genesis can be found, by Gregory, to support both a sexualised and de-sexualised prototype. For a full account of Gregory's wrestling with their difference, see Cadenhead, *Body and Desire*, 96-101.
[73] There are a range of theological problems with such a proposition. Among them, such a proposition severely compromises the value of life as we experience it now. It is not clear what the meaning of a time the effects of which will be completely undone and reversed can be. Moreover, there is nothing to suggest that humanity's return to its original state will not play out by way of another fall, and so the extent to which it is truly salvific is ambiguous.

'concession to a psychological mirage', deployed by Gregory to describe the phenomenon of how 'the Paradise towards which we march always *appears* to us as a lost Paradise'.[74] Gregory's eschatology may seem to evoke a cyclical reset to a pure beginning but in fact it is insistently directed towards an as yet undiscovered end. In clarifying this, Ludlow offers the important insight that the first creation from which Gregory sees humans to have fallen (and to which they will be restored) is not a temporal location in the past, but an original 'idea or plan', 'akin to a Platonic form in the mind of God'.[75] In this respect 'the idea of the perfection of humankind is more a forward-looking attainment of an ideal than a retrospective restoration to an actual previous state'.[76] Yet a reading of Gregory's divine forgiveness as mere 'resetting' can be challenged not only on the cited grounds that his language of 'return' seems far from literal, but on the additional grounds of the status of punishment as purification. As we shall see next, this position pivots on the positive value of an individual's freedom to choose the good going forward rather than their passively being rewound to a prior beginning.

Punishment as purification

In addition to Gregory's direct assertions of universalism, his belief that all will know salvation is also asserted, indirectly, by his statement that punishment for sins will not be eternal but finite. For Gregory, the finite nature of punishment at the eschaton is suggested by the scriptural statement that punishment will occur commensurate to the particularities of an individual's sinfulness. As Gregory comments in *On the Soul*, responding to Jesus's parable of the two debtors reported in Luke 7.36-50, the debts incurred by sins committed in this world must be repaid in full: just as 'the indebted man was delivered to the tormenters until he should pay the whole debt' by way of 'the coin of torment', so too the sinner will pay for their accumulated sin by way of enduring his particular 'share of pain'.[77] Such repayment is clearly deemed correspondent with the sin committed and, on this basis, is a limited process rather than an infinite state.[78] As repayment is a limited process, even the most sinful individual will not be destined to punishment forever. This position offers an insight into the character of Gregory's universalism. The punishment Gregory anticipates taking place – from which salvation for all is secured – is functional. It occurs over a course of duration and achieves a

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[74] Jean Daniélou, 'L'apocatastase Chez Saint Gregoire de Nysse', *Recherches de Science Religieuse*, 30.3 (1940), 342, quoted by Ludlow, *Universal Salvation*, 49. My own translation.

[75] Ludlow, *Universal Salvation*, 49.

[76] Ludlow, *Universal Salvation*, 49.

[77] 'On the Soul and Resurrection', 452.

[78] Ramelli, *Forgiveness in Patristic Philosophy*, 204.

particular end after which an individual is able to enjoy their salvation. Its function, as Gregory frequently writes, is purification rather than retribution.[79] Indeed, this is suggested by Gregory's choice of imagery for the process. In his treatise *In Regard to Those Fallen Asleep*, he figures the fire of Gehenna as a fire that refines rather than destroys, akin to the technique of refining gold. In *On the Soul*, punishment is pictured as a rope, plastered with mud, pulled 'through a narrow opening' to strip the rope of its debris. These images serve to assert the process of punishment as means rather than ends, as purification for an alternative future rather than as retribution in the form of an eternal state.[80]

It is as we appreciate *what* this purification achieves that we see the significance of Gregory's universalism as oriented towards a particular future (towards which an individual can act), rather than as the enforced return of all people (passively) to their origin. Namely, the purification Gregory describes is intended to teach resurrected selves to distinguish effectively between what is good and bad. The resurrection will afford this education in several ways. First, the pain of punishment will teach the one who undergoes it the negative end to which the choice of evil leads. Gregory articulates this in *In Regard to Those Fallen Asleep*, writing that

> God's wisdom found this device to permit humanity to become what he wished, so that by tasting the evils it desired and learning by experience what sort of things it had exchanged for the kinds it chose, it might return willingly by desire to its first blessedness… having been purified during the present life by diligence and philosophy, or after removal from here by the purifying furnace of fire.[81]

Those who have not yet learned to distinguish between evils and their opposite will be furnished with this aptitude by way of the 'furnace of fire'. Second, the purification will refine the human passions in order that they can perceive accurately the good from evil. As Gregory writes in *On the Soul*, since it is the unrefined passions that can disrupt and confuse the right perception of what is good, the soul must, either by way of 'forethought here, or by purgation hereafter… become free from any emotional connection with the brute creation', that is, from what is irrational.[82] Once this is so, 'there will be nothing to impede its contemplation of the

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[79] Ludlow, *Universal Salvation*, 83.
[80] Ludlow draws attention to a minority of occasions in which Gregory appears less insistent on the limited nature of punishment (cf. *Universal Salvation*, 83). Nevertheless, the thrust of his writings is undeniably towards punishment as limited.
[81] 'In Regard to Those Fallen Asleep', 109.
[82] 'On the Soul and Resurrection', 449.

Beautiful'.[83] These two teachings will occur, for Gregory, in the context of a total manifestation of Christ that will expose the resurrected to the overwhelming glory of God, which will orient their desire to the true good. Gregory describes this process in his Easter sermon, writing that when 'Christ is manifested to all…having convinced every unbelieving soul and bridled every blaspheming tongue… then… all will bow low and offer up the homage of surrender'.[84] The sight of Christ (painful to those who rejected him) will clarify to all their heart's true desire.[85] As Ludlow puts it, 'the recognition of Christ will be part of the learning experience'.[86]

The purification that resurrected people will undergo, then, will gift them the aptitude to distinguish good from evil. As Ramelli points out, Gregory cites Colossians 3.10 to summarise his overarching point: 'you [will] put on a new nature, which is renewed in knowledge, in the image of the Creator'.[87] According to Gregory's vision, the risen person will acquire this knowledge as they learn the pain with which evil is concomitant, as their passions are refined beyond their tendency to mistake the good, and as they are presented with the glory of Christ according to which the heart will learn its true desire. This purification points to the role of human agency in Gregory's universalism. It is as people, with the clarity of knowing what is good and what is not, *choose* the good – rather than being reset to some prior original good – that they are eternally saved. Punishment conceived in these terms, as intellectually purifying, exposes the integral role that human freedom plays at the eschaton in Gregory's sight, to which we now turn.

Freedom

As Gregory writes in *On the Soul*: 'having put off from him all that foreign growth which sin is, and discarded the shame of any debts, [the resurrected person] might stand in liberty and fearlessness'.[88] Gregory's embrace of this position owes much, as Ramelli points out, to the 'ethical intellectualism' arising from both the fourth Gospel and Plato: 'it is truth that makes

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[83] 'On the Soul and Resurrection', 449.

[84] Gregory of Nyssa, 'Discourse on the Holy Pascha', in *The Easter Sermons of Gregory of Nyssa : Translation and Commentary : Proceedings of the Fourth International Colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa, Cambridge, England, 11-15 September,1978*, ed. Andreas Spira and Christoph Klock, trans. Stuart Hall (Cambridge, MA: Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, 1981), 5–25, (246) 5-6.

[85] Ludlow, *Universal Salvation*, 101.

[86] Ludlow, *Universal Salvation*, 101.

[87] Ilaria L. E. Ramelli, *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 429. Cf. 'On the Making of Man', XXX.33 (427).

[88] 'On the Soul and Resurrection', 452.

one free'.[89] It is in these restored conditions of freedom that the resurrected person can (and indeed, for Gregory, *will*) choose their salvation. In asserting this Gregory is indebted again to a Platonic line of thought preceding him, which posits that humans naturally and reliably choose what is good (and therefore sin originates not in malice but ignorance). 'Everything', writes Gregory, 'that is free will be found in virtue'.[90] Thus does Gregory deduce universalism: all will have their knowledge purified, therefore all will be free; since all will be free, all will prefer the Good; since all will prefer the Good evil will cease and salvation will be the destiny of all.

There are a number of questions that could be raised in challenge to Gregory's logic. Is the Platonic dictum Gregory adopts, that people naturally choose what is good (and therefore to be good, only requires knowledge of what is good) true? Is it not essential for freedom to protect the space for a person to choose what is not good? For our purposes, the answer to these questions is less pressing than what we can observe of Gregory's intent to convey: that at the final resurrection God will gift all the conditions of perfect freedom. The divine forgiveness implied by Gregory's universalism is not a reversal that forgets all that has passed and starts afresh. It is not, as Ramelli describes Gregory's position, a 'general amnesty independent of each sinner's repentance and moral improvement'.[91] Rather, divine forgiveness as imagined by Gregory at the resurrection consists in the gift of freedom: the sinner, through punishment, is mercifully invited into conditions that make him free to choose the good. He is not obliged to live eternally in sin but is gifted a future that is his to act into and choose. That, for Gregory, such a future will always mean the sinner's salvation (for knowledge means freedom, and freedom means virtue) does not detract, in his mind, from its genuine openness. Gregory's universalism, we may say in summary, recognises the forgiveness of God not as indifferent cancellation of sin but as the gift of renewed freedom to choose the Good in an undetermined future.

(B) Interpersonal forgiveness: Freedom and future

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[89] Ramelli, *Apokatastasis*, 427.

[90] 'On the Soul and Resurrection', 452. For Gregory, as for Plato, freedom cannot be the freedom to do evil. Those who do evil are enslaved to evil, and not free as those who choose the good are.

[91] Ramelli, *Forgiveness in Patristic Philosophy*, 215. In this respect, Ramelli points out that Gregory stands aligned with Clement, Justin, Basil, Cyrpian of Carthage, and Gregory Nazianzen who likewise hold to forgiveness as *conditional* (215).

At the outset of this section (2), we identified Gregory's most direct statement concerning the activity of human forgiveness: that human forgiveness operates by imitation of and participation in divine forgiveness. In accordance with this statement, we inquired into the character of divine forgiveness as Gregory believes it will occur eschatologically. In so doing, we discovered how such forgiveness, from the perspective of Gregory's universalism, will consist in God's gifting conditions of *freedom* in which sinners may choose the good as they move into a *future* uncontrolled by prior sin. In what follows, we shall suggest how this character of divine forgiveness might be translated in two ways in the interpersonal forgiving that takes place in the present. It will be argued that the forgiving exemplified by Macrina, Moses, and Thaumaturgus can be understood as expressing such a translation, imitating and anticipating divine forgiveness as Gregory conceives it.

Forgiving in partnership with God: opportunity of freedom

Gregory anticipates that the divine forgiveness at the resurrection will give sinners the opportunity to choose again and incline towards the good. Sinners are not determined by the sin of the past (their evil inclination is not solidified), nor are they cajoled against their will onto an alternative course (the good will be *freely* chosen). Joining and imitating this divine vision, Gregory's interpersonal forgiveness would, in likeness, operate not by erasing the offense of the past, but by the positive invitation to possibilities beyond offence and pain, and the effort to make such an invitation visible and graspable to the offending party.

Yet as this characteristic of divine forgiveness is enacted in worldly conditions, among people, a significant experiential difference emerges between the two scenarios. While the opportunity that God will give at the resurrection will be given alongside perfect knowledge enabling the better future to be an assured reality, this is not so in present and earthly conditions. As Gregory spells out in his *In Regard to Those Fallen Asleep*, in our fallen condition 'reasoning in judgement of the good is prejudiced by sense perception', while 'the soul accepts what has been prejudged by custom without testing it'.[92] We regularly mistake the good and bad, failing to differentiate between them. In such conditions, the opportunity that the human forgiver gifts to her offender is not given in the assurance that the offender has now learned reliably to distinguish good from bad. Nor can the forgiver herself, living in the same imperfect knowledge, be relied on to evince a wholly uncomplicated will to a fully reconciled future.

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[92] 'In Regard to Those Fallen Asleep', 105.

Rather, the human forgiver gifts to her offender another opportunity in the knowledge that her offender may choose again to inflict hurt. Meanwhile, her offender can only hope that the offer of forgiveness will not be exchanged for accusation and revenge. To imitate and join with divine forgiveness in human conditions, as Gregory asserts that humans must, is an act of hope and risk. Those engaged hope that the offender will choose the good and the forgiver will remain forgiving, but both risk the other's change of heart, being unable to guarantee the other's lasting conversion to the good.

Forgiving in partnership with God: the open future

Gregory anticipates, further, that as the opportunity of free choice and conversion to the good is gifted, the eschatological future is an undecided future. That is, the eschatological future is neither predetermined by the sin of the past nor by any one-sided divine mercy, but remains affected by the actions of human freedom. As discussed above, the fact that Gregory is certain that all will choose the good does not imply the foreclosure of the eschatological future (a divine scripting of the end) but is the result of a set of propositions regarding the characteristics of freedom and virtue that enable Gregory to deduce their logical playing out. As far as the paradox is possible, Gregory sees the salvation of all as completely predictable but not predetermined. In this sense, the divine forgiveness known at the resurrection, in its gift of the opportunity to incline towards an alternative path, does indeed depend on a future that is not foreclosed (despite the appearance of the certainty of his universalism). The deduction that all will incline towards the good is no detraction from the fact that in Gregory's mind such inclination is still a real choice. Interpersonal forgiveness, in imitation of divine forgiveness, would operate in turn by a commitment to the undecidedness of the future.

As we imagine this characteristic of divine forgiveness enacted in earthly conditions, the recent analysis of ethicist Oliver O'Donovan on the topic of 'historicism' offers much insight. O'Donovan names as 'historicism' the ethical tendency by which future action is determined simply by looking to 'the way things are going', and discerning 'the direction that can be read off the present'.[93] The future, according to such a method, is 'transparent'; the present experience treated as the crucial indicator of what will come to be, since history itself is thought of as a straightforward unfolding, 'a seamless continuation of the present', in effect

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[93] Oliver O'Donovan, *Finding and Seeking: Ethics as Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 233.

collapsing into the present as though already belonging to it.[94] This fatalistic outlook, O'Donovan writes, contrasts with an outlook that sees 'the future as a horizon of action'.[95] Whereas historicism passively receives the future as the mere repetition of what already is, its opposite perspective regards action as alive in shaping the future that is as yet undecided. O'Donovan sees that it is this opposite perspective that we ought to cultivate, and concludes that since action does shape the future, we must take seriously the moral discernment of action through thoughtful deliberation.[96] It is this regard for 'the future as a *horizon of action*' that we may say one engaged in Gregory's forgiveness will possess. In emulating divine forgiveness, greeting the future as marked but not determined in any single way by past offence and present hurt, the forgiver and forgiven are committed to the real significance of creative intervention now as forming the future to come. Joining with divine forgiveness in earthly conditions finds expression, we conclude, in a perspective (against what O'Donovan calls 'historicism') that reveres the significance of action and imagination to shape the future, which is not regarded as bearing an inevitable form.

Divine forgiveness as translated in the forgiving of the exemplars

The forgiving in which Macrina, Moses, and Thaumaturgus are engaged models the 'translation' we have discussed: freedom for the good is renewed, and the open future is protected, just as Gregory believes will be exemplified perfectly at the resurrection to come. In the case of Moses, the forgiving we observed readily took the form of mercy for the multitude who fell repeatedly into 'disorderliness' and 'transgression'.[97] Revisiting these scenarios we can recognize the significance of Moses's response as one of gifting opportunity in the light of sin rather than merely absolving it. When Moses returns from having 'participated in that eternal life under the darkness for forty days and nights' to discover the golden calf he 'destroyed the idol'.[98] He returns to God and fashions the tablets of law he had broken on discovering the calf, and, mediating the freedom God gives the Israelites to try again, he 'delivered to them the laws and established the priesthood in keeping with the teaching given him by God'.[99] The nature of Moses's forgiveness, I suggest, is in keeping with that which Gregory believes will greet us at

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[94] O'Donovan, *Finding and Seeking*, 230.
[95] O'Donovan, *Finding and Seeking,* 233.
[96] O'Donovan, *Finding and Seeking*, 230–37.
[97] *Life of Moses*, I.58 (45), II.271 (123).
[98] *Life of Moses*, I.58; I.60 (45).
[99] *Life of Moses*, I.61 (46).

the resurrection: the sin of the Israelites is not blankly erased but nor is it permitted to fix the future; the law is given as another opportunity in which the good might be chosen; the future remains full with possibility.

The forgiving encounter of Thaumaturgus with the temple custodian can, likewise, be framed as a translation of divine forgiveness. The custodian threatens Thaumaturgus with 'every kind of terrible thing'. [100] Thaumaturgus's response is not to leave nor condemn but, as we noted above, to stay long enough to see the custodian 'shake off the rage' and to join the wonderworker as a follower. [101] As Thaumaturgus stays with the custodian he gifts to him the freedom to change and choose the good, the freedom that will be known perfectly as gifted by God at the resurrection. It is this freedom that enables the custodian not to know the future as dictated by the threat he has made but as able to accommodate possibilities beyond the unpromising first encounter. Macrina's life, as we noted above, is full with examples in which in her presence others appear able to turn unexpectedly against the tide of their situations. Basil, for example, coming to Macrina 'puffed up beyond measure', is 'nevertheless' moved in her presence towards an alternative career through which he cultivates humility. In this scenario Macrina makes clear the alternative route that Basil is able to choose. As we see divine forgiveness in the backdrop of this example, the significance of Macrina's invitation is clarified. Such an invitation, we now see, is not an afterthought to forgiveness but integral to it; it is in the act of enabling Basil to dare to consider another life that Macrina mediates to him something of the freedom that God mercifully gifts all: the freedom to freely climb down and incline anew towards the unwritten next moment. These examples indicate the way in which Gregory's sense of divine forgiveness gives distinctive character to the interpersonal forgiving that Gregory underscores in the lives of his exemplars. While Gregory does not himself offer an analysis of the forgiving he records, through taking seriously the clue he gives in his sermon *On the Lord's Prayer*, I suggest that the forgiving of the three conveys and anticipates something of the freedom and future that Gregory believes will be known to us in the final divine mercy promised to all.

3. Conclusion: Progressing by forgiving

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[100] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 916C (57).
[101] *Life of Thaumaturgus*, 916C (57).

Having clarified the character of the interpersonal forgiveness Gregory advocates by investigating the promise of the divine forgiveness that Gregory suggests is its model and origin, we are now able to offer an answer to the question of how interpersonal forgiveness might give distinctive shape to the progress of one engaged in it. We will draw out how the particularities of this engagement require its undertaker to encounter significant *risk*. This insight suggests that one giving or receiving human forgiveness progresses in most instances by way of incomplete struggle rather than straightforward ease (as some recent accounts of forgiveness suggest is possible). In expounding this insight, accounts of forgiveness offered by contemporary thinkers will assist in drawing out the implications of Gregory's vision.

Risk

Interpersonal forgiveness, as Gregory understands it, may resemble divine forgiveness in gifting an offender an opportunity in which to freely choose an alternative path beyond the sin of the past. To do so, as it was suggested, is also to open one's self up to the future as genuinely undetermined rather than fixed by projections relating to past offense and present hurt. To enact the character of divine forgiveness in a world not fully converted to the good, in which 'reasoning in judgement of the good is prejudiced', however, is to encounter the risk of an offender's capacity to re-offend and the forgiver's capacity to withdraw their offer, both of which possess the power to fill the future with further pain.[102] It is on this point, of the risk that forgiveness poses, that we can note an alignment between Gregory's account and elements of the seminal work offered by contemporary theologian Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*. Recognising this brief alignment is useful insofar as the vocabulary Volf offers assists in articulating the upshot of the vision we identify in Gregory. While in important respects the nuances of Volf's theological account of forgiveness differ from the nuances of Gregory's,[103] as Volf explores the practical terrain of how it is possible metaphorically to 'embrace' rather than 'exclude' the other (who we have hurt or been hurt by) he witnesses to a 'risk' similar to that expressed in the forgiving practice

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[102] Greer, *One Path*, 166, paraphrasing Gregory, 'In Regard to Those Fallen Asleep', 105.

[103] Volf's account does not fail to confront sin but does discuss the 'eschatological forgetting' of it, whereas Gregory is committed to the precise weighting of individual sin. See Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 106.

Gregory advocates.[104] In his account of the 'drama of embrace', Volf identifies four structural elements to forgiveness: opening up arms for the other (acknowledging desire of community with the other); waiting on the other (inviting the other's free response); closing the arms around the other (both parties mutually receive each other); and opening them again (receiving the outcome of the embrace).[105] As he analyses the third element, the moment of 'embrace', Volf writes

> I open my arms, make a movement of the self toward the other, the enemy, and do not know whether I will be misunderstood, despised, even violated or whether my action will be appreciated, supported, and reciprocated. I can become a saviour or a victim – possibly both.[106]

An engagement with interpersonal forgiveness, for Gregory, is key to the holiness of his exemplars. Yet such an engagement, imitating and joining with the divine gift of restored freedom and an undetermined future, inducts those engaged into a similar risk to that which Volf articulates. The forgiving Gregory glimpses does not retreat into the safety of cancelling sin and having nothing more to do with the reality of the sinner. Rather, in enabling an alternative future, Gregory's vision of forgiveness requires those involved to risk the freedom of the other, to 'embrace' the other, in Volf's terms, and render one's self vulnerable in hope without certainty of the good.

Aside from the particular characteristics that interpersonal forgiving will have as it is rooted in the forgiveness of God, the very fact that Gregory roots interpersonal forgiving in the forgiveness of God is revelatory. Interpersonal forgiveness, for Gregory, is a secondary echo imitating and established by the primary forgiveness that God enacts and promises. The rooting of interpersonal forgiveness in the priority of divine forgiveness signals that, as the human forgives, in Gregory's sight, she conforms to a nature beyond her instincts, belonging to the coming Kingdom of God. As we noted at the outset of this chapter, for Gregory forgiveness is not a forthcoming habit in human people; the one who forgives 'is almost no longer shown in terms of human nature, but…. he seems to be another god'.[107] A more forthcoming response to being wronged, Gregory sees, is to feel 'the fury of your heart', and be 'roused to take

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[104] Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace*, 77.

[105] Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace*, 107.

[106] Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace*, 110.

[107] 'The Lord's Prayer', Sermon 5 (71).

revenge for these things' and 'to think out all sorts of devices to punish those who have caused you pain'.[108] For Gregory, the choice to forgive belongs to another world and relies on God for its attainment. To forgive and accept one's being forgiven is to live as though the Kingdom of God has already arrived, it is to break beyond one's inclinations and risk living by the nature to which one is called, rather than the nature which one already possesses.

In this respect, the forgiveness that emerges from Gregory's account bears resonance with the framing of reconciliation that Richard Lischer offers in his 1987 study of the Sermon on the Mount. There, Lischer argues that the Beatitudes are 'not rules' in the sense of new and more stringent laws but are rather ingredient to the Rule of God'.[109] Those who live the Beatitudes, according to Lischer, do not fulfill criteria in order to enjoy blessedness as self-interested return, but live eschatological blessedness now because that is the true End to which the Christian is called. 'We seek reconciliation', Lischer writes, 'not merely as an individualistic response to a command', but 'because the End toward which we journey will be characterized by the reconciliation already effected in Jesus Christ'.[110] Lischer's conviction that seeking reconciliation conforms the Christian to an eschatological reality here echoes Gregory's clear sense that human forgiving occurs within and because of divine forgiveness. As Lischer points out, conforming to what is beyond is not the same as finding 'personal fulfillment' and 'the happy life'.[111] In the case of both Lischer's reconciling and Gregory's forgiving, conforming to what is beyond entails the risk of becoming a stranger to one's own instincts by alignment to the promise of what is not yet.

As we draw out the risk integral to Gregory's vision of interpersonal forgiving, we are able to see the significant contrast that his vision bears against the prevalent 'therapeutic' forgiveness identified and critiqued by L. Gregory Jones in his study *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (1995). There, Jones calls attention to the notion that 'the purpose of forgiving is "for our own sakes"', primarily useful as 'an internalized process of healing ourselves of our hate'.[112] Such an account of forgiveness locates forgiving as an act that is 'internalized and privatized' by

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[108] 'The Lord's Prayer', Sermon 5 (81).

[109] Richard Lischer, 'The Sermon on the Mount as Radical Pastoral Care', *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology*, 41.2 (1987), 157–169, 161.

[110] Lischer, 'Sermon on the Mount', 161.

[111] Lischer, 'Sermon on the Mount', 164.

[112] L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), 50, 64. A key example Jones identifies and engages with is Lewis Smedes' bestseller *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve* (San Francisco, CA: Harper) 2007.

a 'preoccupation with individual feelings and thoughts at the expense of analyses of culpability, responsibility, and repentance'.[113] Such an account of forgiveness might seem to fit alongside a universalism that writes off all sin and resets the offender to an original state, denying who they are and refusing to engage with who they have become. Far from it, the interpersonal forgiveness that Gregory advocates, and the distinctive universalism in which it partakes, emphasizes service to the other's freedom in risking a shared future (at the cost of one's own comfort) and stretches the forgiver to risk conformation to a call beyond her inner inclinations.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have examined the forgiving that Gregory's exemplars model as they grow in holiness and love of God. I have argued that the distinctive character of their forgiving, bearing the other's freedom and living into the future as undetermined, marks their progress as oriented towards (rather than away from) risk and challenge. In the course of making this argument we have uncovered a number of insights with which we may conclude. First, we have had reason to look closely at Gregory's universalist eschatology and to explore the ways in which it departs from its surface appearance. As we have argued, God's restoration of all to salvation does not consist in a blanket amnesty that disregards the lived life of sinners. Rather, to Gregory's mind, the certainty of every person's salvation accords to the freedom that God will perfectly give them. While universal salvation can be predicted, then, this does not undermine the open future that Gregory asserts it is the divine will to protect. Second, we have offered a worked example of how Gregory's eschatological thought can be deployed to enlighten the ethics of forgiveness he advocates in this life. To do so is to rebut the notion that Gregory's eschatological orientation denies the significance of life now. As we have seen, to be formed by the promise of what is to come, far from removing a person from the reality and demands of the present and immediate future with the promise of 'pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die', is here precisely what opens up that person to the fullness of the present and immediate future's unwritten possibility. Engaging in the promise of what is at the *end* of time yields, in Gregory's thought, the fullest experience of the reality of time now. Of most significance, however, to the chapter that follows, is the picture of progress that has arisen from our discussion. As Gregory's exemplars engage in forgiveness, they make room for the *freedom* of the other to act in their midst, they greet the *future* as undetermined, and through both of these

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[113] Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness*, 50.

pursuits they live with *risk* and *challenge*. It is to the question of what progressing by these means might reveal about what it is to be human, and, in turn, how progressing by these means might shape one's perception and experience of ageing and dying, that we move in Chapter 7.

Chapter 7: Forgiving and Ageing

In chapter 6 we analyzed the significance of an engagement in forgiving as integral to the lives of Gregory's exemplars. Taking up Gregory's assertion that interpersonal forgiveness constitutes an imitation of and participation in divine forgiveness, we began by investigating divine forgiving as Gregory elucidates it in his doctrine of universalism. Such a doctrine, we argued, underscores the significance to forgiveness of renewing a sinner's freedom to choose a better path apart from that of sin, and, therefore, the significance of protecting the future as unfixed by the offence committed. This backdrop, we suggested, illumined the character of forgiveness engaged in by Macrina, Moses, and Thaumaturgus. We ended by positing that the presence of these eschatological characteristics in the practice of forgiving render the progress of its practitioner shaped by risk and challenge: forgiving and being forgiven require, for Gregory, conformation to the Kingdom of God before it has fully arrived. In this chapter, we turn to ask how the practice of this forgiveness might entail particular encounters with or propositions about what it is to be human. In parallel with chapters 3 and 5, we investigate here how such a practice and the progress it nurtures might shape an experience and perception of ageing and the end of life.

In proceeding, we will focus on three related features of forgiving as Gregory's theology details it: (1) a reverence for the other's *freedom*; (2) a concern to imagine the *future* as open rather than predetermined; (3) an acceptance of the *risk* to which such freedom and imagination lead as they are enacted in imperfect earthly conditions. It will be argued that the practice of these features and the anthropological realities to which they draw their partaker's attention prepare those engaged for the fact of ageing in distinctive ways. Such practice: (1) diminishes the determining importance of age; (2) nurtures the perspective that death is unnatural; and (3), additionally, nurtures the perspective that, nevertheless, death is inevitable and can even be figured and experienced as relief and release. Once more, while the insights of this chapter remain rooted in the reading of all three of Gregory's *Lives* offered in chapter 6, in going forward, particular use will be made of the *Life of Macrina* for its inclusion of a detailed account of its subject's ageing and dying.

1. Freedom

As the three engage in interpersonal forgiveness, they encounter something of the freedom that Gregory believes all will know at the merciful restoration of the resurrection. Rather than sin being cancelled, and human persons 'reset' to a prior state, Gregory posits that divine forgiveness will consist in the gift of a further opportunity, in clarified and perfect freedom, to choose what is truly good. Interpersonal forgiving, imitating and joining with this divine vision, operates, for Gregory, by way of a parallel renewal of human freedom. Those who forgive attempt to offer the other the space and opportunity to exercise their freedom to turn from shortcoming and make moves in an alternative and better direction. Those who are forgiven are invited to recognise their true freedom and the real possibility of climbing down. They are also invited to trust the freedom of the forgiver, who must be believed in their offer to begin again against an instinct of revenge. In Gregory's sight, the forgiver reveres the other's freedom, while the forgiven one reveres both parties' freedom.

For Gregory, as the forgiver and forgiven revere this freedom and live into its reality they recognize and live a fundamental dimension of what it is to be human. As Gregory articulates across his corpus, freedom is an integral component of human personhood. In *On the Making of Man*, Gregory writes that

> 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 natural power, but have decision in our own power as we please.[1]

Such freedom, indeed, is what for Gregory contributes to our divine likeness. As he writes in *In Regard to Those Fallen Asleep*, 'humanity was made godlike…because it had been honoured with free autonomy'.[2] Our actions, like those of God, are not naturally determined by external powers but self-initiated.[3] Where external power over-determines the actions of a human, the

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[1] 'On the Making of Man', XVI:11 (405).
[2] 'In Regard to Those Fallen Asleep', 54 (108).
[3] There are significant differences between our freedom and divine freedom. For a discussion of this, see Nonna Verna Harrison, *God's Many-Splendored Image: Theological Anthropology for Christian Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 16.

divine image in them is severely disrespected. On such a basis Gregory would become among the first Christian voices to condemn slavery in unqualified terms: 'you legislate in opposition to God' and 'against the law of nature', Gregory argues, if 'you condemn to slavery the human being, whose nature is free and self-ruling'.[4] Such freedom is key to our salvation as creatures living in time. Since, living in time, we are always 'passing from one state to another', essential to us is our choice of direction – the freedom to 'bring about something better or worse'.[5] As he writes in the *Life of Moses*,

> In mutable nature nothing can be observed which is always the same…We are in some manner our own parents, giving birth to ourselves by our own free choice in accordance with whatever we wish to be, whether male or female, moulding ourselves to the teaching of virtue or vice.[6]

As Lucas Francisco Mateo-Seco comments, while Gregory does not offer a precise explanation of how human freedom relates to divine grace, it is clear that for him 'grace serves nothing if freedom does not accept it'.[7] For Gregory, freedom, taken here to describe open-ended agency, is constitutive of what it means to be human. By freedom, we are like God, and through freedom, we can grow towards God. The practice of forgiveness draws our attention to and relies on our acknowledgement of this human freedom. It sees in one particular moment (after the event of sin) what Gregory sees is true (if not visible or possible) in all moments: that humans are not defined by any single state but can choose the good according to their changeable desire and intent.

As we come to appreciate the freedom to know the good as essential to each moment of a person's life, so the apparent specificities of any one stage of life come to appear less significant. In his own exploration of old age in volume III.4 of his *Church Dogmatics*, Karl Barth articulates this connection as part of a discussion of what it is to live both in 'freedom' and 'limitation'. The opportunity to be obedient to the command of God – or, in Gregory's categories, to freely choose the good – is posed, writes Barth:

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[4] 'Homilies on Ecclesiastes', 335.5 (73).
[5] 'On the Soul and Resurrection', 463-4.
[6] *Life of Moses* II.3 (54-55).
[7] Lucas Francisco Mateo-Seco, 'Grace', in *Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 363–67 (365).

[At] the stage in his psycho-physical development in time where he now finds himself. It is clear that he is not to take his age as such seriously, but rather himself at his various ages as the creature of God and object of His providence subject to His judgement… He is to take himself seriously as the one who at this present age must be ready, willing and open for the doing of the command. The particular seriousness of every age does not consist, therefore, in a special attitude which one has to assume in youth, maturity, or old age, but in the seriousness with which at every age one has to go from the Lord of life to meet the Lord of life and therefore to try to live as though for the first time or as though this were the only age.[8]

One engaged in Gregory's vision of interpersonal forgiving, revering so strongly the fundamental character of humans to be properly free, moves towards the same conclusion Barth articulates: the determination of any given age is meaningful only insofar as it poses the opportunity in which one may lean into the good.[9]

Such freedom is not the disembodied freedom simply to *choose* in open circumstances, but is freedom to choose *the good* in open circumstances in such a way as to enrich and make better those circumstances. Because what is valued here is not opportunity itself, but opportunity to encounter God, the free moment is not allotted value outside of its concrete and material context (the context where God is available to be encountered and chosen). Insofar as the concrete and material context of a human person *is* a particular location within a life-course, such a position shapes the freedom to choose the good. As in chapter 3 we discussed, the physical properties of human maturity bear on the spiritual growth that forms a person's capacity to choose the good. Different bodies witness to the good and receive the good in different ways. Further, it is not only the physicality of age that gives character to one's aptitude to choose the good, but also *consciousness* of one's age. As O'Donovan observes, 'knowing [one's] span of life as differently located in time from the span of other people' is of ethical consequence to '*how* [people] emerge'.[10] According to this temporal consciousness, in

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[8] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. Thomas Forsyth (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), III.4 (276).

[9] Gregory's unwillingness, in his 'Homilies on Ecclesiastes' to explore the 'proper time' for virtue, instead arguing that 'the right moment to seek the Lord [is]…all your life', can be seen to converge with Barth's point; cf. 401.2 (118). Virtue, for Gregory, is not chronologically specific.

[10] Oliver O'Donovan, *Entering into Rest* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 16.

which those of young age know themselves as 'successors' and others as soon to be 'predecessors', the discernment and free grasp of the good takes different shape and urgency.[11]

One engaged in Gregory's forgiveness, revering the freedom of each person to choose the good, might come to inhabit the 'stages' of life distinctively. Their sight of the other's freedom for the good as integral warns them (to borrow Barth's words) against 'tak[ing] his age as such seriously' and abiding too fixedly to any prior determination of action according to any given 'order' of life.[12] Yet the recognition that freedom is freedom that responds to the good as it is *here* and *now* impels the one engaged nevertheless to recognise the particular character that a particular age gives to the free grasp available to the person. In forgiving and being forgiven, Gregory's vision suggests, one nurtures this distinctive middle ground: one's age is less significant in view of the freedom that it is always the human's nature to exercise; and yet as the human exercises that nature by choosing the good addressed to her where she is, she chooses as one whose faculties and perspectives are given form by their temporality.

It is in the spirit of this middle ground that Gregory deploys the categories of age somewhat playfully. Praising his brother Basil in *On Virginity*, Gregory celebrates a 'wonderful mixture of opposites in each age…for when he is approaching old age, time does not dim the strength and vigor of his soul, nor is his youth distinguished by the activities in which youth usually engages'.[13] Indeed, Gregory urges his recipients, following Basil, to 'imitate the old age in his youthfulness and the youthfulness in his old age'.[14] The same playfulness is present in his appraisal of his sister Macrina, who is recalled as exhibiting a 'determination… more steadfast than could have been expected from her age'.[15] In relation to her brother Peter, she is remembered as having enacted a whole set of roles, 'bec[oming] all things to the lad – father, teacher, tutor, mother'.[16] In her old age she has remarkable 'eagerness' and focus; she 'gaze[s] fixedly', with intense acuity, on the spiritual truths to which she is committed.[17] The muddling here, appropriating the presumed character of one age to a person of different years, unfixes the seriousness of a life ordered by stages. As Basil and Macrina choose the good in their

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[11] O'Donovan, *Entering into Rest*, 216.

[12] Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III.4 (276).

[13] 'On Virginity', 23 (72).

[14] 'On Virginity', 23 (72).

[15] *Life of Macrina*, 964C (24-25).

[16] *Life of Macrina*, 972C (37).

[17] *Life of Macrina*, 984B (54).

context, it affects 'release from what is peculiar to each [age]'.[18] Yet the fact that Gregory remarks on these 'releases' signals his abiding awareness that it is, nevertheless, *from* our particular age that we may freely choose the good in such a way as to depart from the characteristics bound to it. It is such a perspective that the work of forgiveness nurtures, in recognizing the freedom of the other to choose the good in all moments, exercised, nevertheless, from the particularities and contingencies of the *present* moment.

2. Future

As we explored in chapter 6, freedom for the good, central to Gregory's vision of forgiveness, is concomitant with a reception of the future as genuinely open to the effects of present action rather than fatalistically predetermined by past act. Despite the appearances of Gregory's universalism, the certainty with which he holds that *all* will know the full mercy of God is not, as we explored, an indication of the foreclosure of the future. The interpersonal forgiveness that joins with and imitates the divine forgiveness of the resurrection, I argued, greets the future as marked but not controlled by past offence or present hurt. It invites those engaged to consider what is possible but not yet manifest; to see not simply what people are but to hope for what they might yet become; and to imagine a scenario beyond what can be derived from what is immediately present.

A sense of human possibility

As those engaged in forgiveness reckon with what each involved *might* or *could* become, they are called to a heightened sense of the possibilities belonging to a human life. That human life has possibility to it, that the human person can decide to choose virtue instead of vice, is a function of the profound changefulness with which Gregory sees both soul and body operate.[19] This changefulness 'cooperate[s] in our ascent toward higher things', as Gregory puts it, since it is as the soul can expand and grow that it can participate in the infinite God.[20] Indeed, this is the central claim of the doctrine of *epektasis* outlined in chapter 1: the soul's movement and growth becomes a good, because it is only by that movement and growth that the soul can partake in

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[18] 'On Virginity', 23 (72).
[19] See ch. 3, part 3 of this thesis for a discussion of Gregory's interest in human mutability.
[20] 'Homilies on the Song of Songs', Homily 8 (265).

what it is not – the infinite divinity of God.[21] That humans have before them open futures in which different possibilities can be realized, alternative directions taken, and a present condition broken with, signs the reality of their profound changefulness, behind which lies the reality, for Gregory, that humans are made for ever-growing and never-ceasing relationship with God. The changefulness that the act of forgiving relies upon implicitly speaks of the human's eschatological destiny: we *can* change because, for Gregory, we are *made* to change from glory into glory forever. Exposited this way, persons who both forgive and are forgiven, in taking seriously the reality of future possibilities apart from a given deadlock, encounter a characteristic of human life that Gregory identifies as integral to everlasting life with God.

The end of life

Taking seriously the possibilities belonging to the other's life, and keeping in view the change of which they are capable, has powerful implications when the 'other' in question is of old age. These implications are visible as we turn to an example in recent theological literature that exhibits the power of attentive listening directed to those towards the end of life. Attentive listening is, in a number of ways, an embodied exercise in taking seriously the possibilities of an other's life, and keeping in view the change of which that other is capable. Helpful in describing how this is so is Rachel Muers's 2004 work *Keeping God's Silence: Towards a Theological Ethics of Communication*, central to which is a study of listening, developed in conversation with the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and philosopher Gemma Corradi Fiumara. Drawing on these thinkers, Muers describes the task of the listener as 'ceasing to control the discursive space' by making space for the other and their 'unknowability'.[22] Such listening is not, as Bonhoeffer describes its opposite, 'a kind of listening with half an ear that presumes already to know what the other person has to say….[which] is only waiting for a chance to speak and thus get rid of the other person'.[23] Rather, to listen and keep silence before the other, writes Muers, 'is what allows unexpected or unexplored possibilities to emerge'.[24] Such listening is temporally oriented: as Muers writes, the listening silence 'awaits future speech' and recognises the 'future speaker'.[25]

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[21] See ch. 1, part 1:A.

[22] Rachel Muers, *Keeping God's Silence: Towards a Theological Ethics of Communication* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 55, 66.

[23] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. John Doberstein (London: Harper & Row, 1954), 98.

[24] Muers, *Keeping God's Silence*, 59.

[25] Muers, *Keeping God's Silence*, 65.

Listening is that which enables the 'emergence of genuine novelty or creativity'.[26] It makes space for the next moment to be genuinely unanticipated and of the future. In this respect, attentive listening constitutes one example of what it might mean to take the other's capacity to change and grow in undetermined ways seriously.[27]

The recent work of theologian Hina Khalid offers an account of the profundity of these characteristics of listening as they are directed to one very near to the end of life. Khalid sees that the act of sitting with a person near to the end of life in silence is a particular 'act of embodied presence and love' which (quoting Rowan Williams) says 'I mustn't wrap this up too quickly', but must 'give that little bit of extra space to allow [the other] to be [who she] is'.[28] In this sense, the attentive listening Khalid discusses, which does not seek to manage the other or control the scenario, resists the foreclosure of the dying one's future.[29] In saying nothing, in relinquishing any semblance of mastery over the other, in simply waiting on the other, the other's life is not prematurely concluded or narrated to its end. The space for the dying one to continue to live – even where that life is fully known to be quickly ebbing away – is protected by the practice of attention and listening.

In this example, the listener, waiting on the other, makes a bold if implicit statement. In staying in silence with the dying one in recognition that their life, though near its end, is not yet over, the listener asserts that the one to whom they listen has a future (however short it is anticipated to be). In continuing, until the very end, to presume the significance of the other's future, the listener treats the other as one whose life properly goes on. Death, seen from this perspective, which emphasizes the continuing possibilities and future belonging to the other, poses as

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[26] Muers, *Keeping God's Silence*, 50, 57. Muers cites Nelle Morton's accounts of listening experiences in her *The Journey Is Home* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1985) to illustrate this.

[27] It is unsurprising that forgiveness very often relies on attentive listening for its practice, each being reliant on the same recognition of the other's future possibility. One obvious intersection concerns the act of confession, integral to some forgivings, in which the sinful person is given space to confess fault and be heard. A second intersection can be located in the 're-narration' that a number of commentators discuss as central to forgiveness. Jones, for example, writes in *Embodying Forgiveness*, that in the re-narration that listening facilitates, we invite others to cast their lives 'as truthfully as possible in relation to God's perspective' (191). In doing so, exercising 'redemptive silence', we 'can help reshape' the other's 'memories and desires' and 'unlearn…destructiveness [and] violence' (191). Parallel points are made by John Milbank, in his 'Forgiveness and Incarnation', in *Questioning God*, ed. John Caputo, Mark Dooley, and Michael J. Schanlon (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), 92–128 (102) and Rowan Williams, *Resurrection* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2014) (25).

[28] Hina Khalid, 'At the Bedside: A Theological Consideration of the Role of Silence and Touch in the Accompaniment of the Dying', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 73.2 (2020), 150–59 (155), quoting Williams, *Being Human* (89).

[29] Indeed, for Khalid, it 'relinquish[es] any attempts at human finality', 159.

interruption. Indeed, for Gregory death *is* an interruption. His wider theology holds to the patristic conviction that humans are subject to death owing to sin, that death is a departure from the immortality for which humans were made as bearers of the divine image, and our mortality – the 'tunic of hide' in which Adam and Eve are clothed after their sin – is not integral to us but 'is something external put on us, lending itself to the body for a time, but not indigenous to its nature'.[30] In listening to the other near to the end of life, the other is received as one whose life retains possibilities and a future. In receiving the other in this way, the listener encounters the wrongness of death, which negates the other's possibilities and futurity.

For Gregory, the fact that human life bears vast possibility, and properly experiences the future as undetermined, is a dimension of the true eschatological identity of human beings: humans are made for more than they can achieve in any given moment; they are made for eternal growth in and towards God who is infinite. When human persons are recognized as creatures of profound possibility the wrongness of death will be felt keenly. Death will be known, in keeping with Gregory's wider sense of it, as that which contradicts and undermines the true destiny of human life, which is the unimpeded and uninterrupted capacity to change and become. One engaged in Gregory's forgiveness is positioned to approach the same conclusion. Their gaze, akin to that of the attentive listener, reveres the other for what he may go on to do and be in the next moment. It is a gaze that glimpses the possibilities that are integral to a human life, and which therefore laments death for its severing of the other's capacity to ever expand in goodness.[31]

Indeed, Gregory's own reception of Macrina on her deathbed offers a picture that assists us in joining together these insights. Gregory's attentive listening to his sister is an example of the listening that Khalid describes. He listens closely to 'hear her noble words', as 'she recount[s] as much as she could remember'.[32] As Macrina's own strength fails and she is forced to 'whisper with a low voice', Gregory continues to strain so that he can 'just hear what was said', keeping

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[30] Gregory of Nyssa, 'The Great Catechism', in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic Treatises*, ed. and trans. Philip Schaff and Henry Wallace, Second Series (New York, NY: Cosimo Classics, 2007), V, 471–512, VIII (483).

[31] While in what remains of this chapter, this position will be significantly nuanced, it is worth noting here that to assert that death is unnatural does not entail denying death. One can prepare for as inevitable that which nevertheless is at least undesirable and, in Gregory's scheme, plainly an intrusion of life as it was intended.

[32] *Life of Macrina*, 978D (47), 980C (49).

vigil till the very end.[33] Even as he is fully aware of Macrina's proximity to death – Gregory recalls that he was 'constrained by gloomy anticipations' – he still asserts the futurity that is proper to her life, commenting that he 'longed for the length of the day to be further extended, that she might never cease delighting our ears with sweetness'.[34] In continuing to wait on the future and possibilities of a life near to its end, Gregory proclaims 'the hope of the Resurrection': God's creatures were not made for death but for everlasting life; not for an end but an ever-open future.[35] The act of forgiving and being forgiven, as Gregory conceives it, habituates one to the possibilities properly belonging to a human life. Such a habituation, in turn, disposes its possessor to resist resting too easily in the notion of a 'good death'. While Macrina's death could not be avoided, and while it comes, clearly, as a prayerful closure of a well-lived life, for Gregory this in no sense makes death in itself good.

3. Risk

Our analysis of chapter 6 concluded that the forgiveness advocated by Gregory is an endeavour of significant risk. This conclusion is the combined result of the two characteristics of forgiving we have already drawn out and discussed. As those engaged in forgiveness revere the *freedom* of the other, and respect their shared future as undecided rather than predetermined, the forgiver has no assurance that the offender (in earthly conditions of imperfect freedom) will choose the good, nor does the offender have any assurance that the forgiver (who, likewise, is not yet perfectly free) will not go on to withdraw mercy and retaliate. This risk, it was argued, is the consequence of acting in accord with the eschatological rule of the coming Kingdom of God, before that Kingdom has been fully realised. While in the fully realised Kingdom, where Gregory sees that all will be restored to perfect freedom and therefore will incline consistently to the good, forgiveness will bring a joyful return, in the constraints of the imperfect present, attempts towards forgiveness cannot take place with the same confidence of their result. What this dimension of interpersonal forgiveness draws to our attention is the complexity of human implication in sin. In what follows, we, first, consider the encounter of this sin, and, second, argue that, through such encounter, an additional perspective on death might be nurtured. The

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[33] *Life of Macrina*, 984B (54-55).
[34] *Life of Macrina*, 980A (47), 982C (52).
[35] *Life of Macrina*, 982D (53).

perspective with which we conclude adds a contrasting nuance to the proposal, explored above, that death is unnatural.

The risk of forgiveness and the encounter of sin

Gregory's account of interpersonal forgiving reckons with human sin and shortcoming in that the forgiver in question confronts, rather than overlooks, the hurt or threat they have suffered. Certainly the divine mercy Gregory anticipates, which will consist in each person being purified and healed in proportion to the sin they have committed, is not at all 'a sort of general amnesty' but an exacting judgement and call to repentance in response to the specificities of one's sin.[36] The sin with which Gregory's interpersonal forgiving reckons, however, is not only the specific sin that provokes the need for forgiveness. In addition (and as I have argued), Gregory's interpersonal forgiving reckons with sin as it is an *on-going* possibility that may undermine the very act of forgiving and the good future to which that forgiving aspires. Acting towards the good in conditions that are not yet wholly conducive to the good (i.e., conditions of imperfect freedom), alongside and as people who are not yet reliably good, requires the forgiver and offender to live with what we termed the *risk* of on-going sin and its subsequent pain. To forgive and be forgiven is not, then, to encounter sin as a one-off event from which those involved may recover, but to contend with the reality that such sin continues to be present and threatens the fragile good towards which the act of forgiving nevertheless grasps.

To know this risk – to recognise the on-going possibility of sin – is to approach an anthropological reality about which Gregory was certain: human sin runs more deeply than discrete events of malice or violence. For Gregory, human sin runs more deeply than discrete events because it is located not only in human choices of action but in the un-chosen human condition. Gregory describes this reality in his homily on the final line of the Lord's Prayer, *Forgive us our debts*, which centred our discussion of forgiveness in chapter 6. In this homily, Gregory asks why it should be that even one 'like the rich young man, [who] had made the Commandments the rule of his life', or one of exemplary upstanding, 'most approved by Divine Scripture', like 'Peter or Paul or John', should be instructed to 'use [the prayer's] words'.[37] In answering this question, Gregory writes that

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[36] Ramelli, *Forgiveness in Patristic Philosophy*, 215.
[37] 'The Lord's Prayer', Sermon 5 (75, 76).

the passage enjoins us not to look at the things that have been accomplished but to call to mind the common debt of human nature in which everyone including himself has a share, because he participates in the common lot of man's nature, and to beseech the Judge to grant forgiveness of sins. For since Adam is, as it were, living in us, we see each and all these garments of skin round our nature, and also the transitory fig leaves of this material life which we have badly sewn together for ourselves after being stripped of our own resplendent garments.[38]

If a person regards himself as being 'pure from defilement' and therefore without use of this final line of Christ's prayer, he is thinking too narrowly of sin as an act he commits or does not commit. Rather, Gregory argues,

even though one be a Moses or a Samuel, or any other man of outstanding virtue, in so far as he is man, he does not consider these words [of the prayer] less fitting to himself, seeing that he shares Adam's nature and participates in his exile. For since the apostle says, *in Adam we all die*, the words that are suited to Adam's penance are rightly applied to all who have died with him[.][39]

To share 'the common lot of man's nature' (that is, to live in a material body) is to live in sin without conscious choice of it. Gregory makes two points to elucidate how it is that the body implicates the self in this un-chosen sin. First, he is convinced that the body's senses, into which humans are born, are disposed to lead individuals astray (with or without any malicious intent on their part). 'Whose eye is without sin, whose sense of hearing without reproach?', asks Gregory.[40] For if the eye, for example, 'observes one enjoying greater prosperity than he deserves, it burns with envy'; just as if one's taste is delighted it gives over to the 'brutish pleasure of gluttony'.[41] The senses in themselves incorporate sinful instincts even in the lives of those who commit no intended harm.[42] The body's mortality is a second participation in Adam: in *Adam we all die*. As discussed in section (2) of this chapter, death for Gregory is the fruit of sin. It is not the end intended for God's creation, but 'an inescapable prison' brought about by

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[38] 'The Lord's Prayer', Sermon 5 (76).
[39] 'The Lord's Prayer', Sermon 5 (77).
[40] 'The Lord's Prayer', Sermon 5 (77).
[41] 'The Lord's Prayer', Sermon 5 (78).
[42] It is for this reason that the senses need, taxingly, to be clarified and spiritualised, as discussed in ch. 2, part 3:A.

the fall.[43] Since all who live do so in bodies, whatever the degree of their virtue, 'the nets of sin are…spread around us on every side'.[44]

As sin is understood as our condition as well as our choice, our pursuit of the good is radically complicated. What is good can easily be distorted by the body's instincts. 'Our capacity to choose, which is in itself a good thing, and a gift of God granted to our nature', becomes, in the context of the body, 'a force tipping the balance the opposite way'.[45] Any good we do achieve can easily be mangled as others who have 'been shaken by the sinning hand' receive it.[46] Indeed, even if they are able to preserve it, all our own good as well as the good we do to others, in the end, comes to death (our own as well as theirs).[47] One engaged in Gregory's forgiving, reckoning with the fragility of the good, the weakness of human conversion to it, and the risk of on-going pain, recognises something of the vast 'nets' of sin surrounding a human life that make perfect goodness impossible. In response to a specific shortcoming, those engaged in forgiveness move towards a fuller awareness of the 'mire' of sin in which humans flail: in which what is good can so easily be lost or distorted; in which what is bad may nevertheless be rooted in what was once good; in which no one 'shall glory, as Wisdom says, that his heart is clean'; in which all good will be interrupted by the failure of bodies to go on living and being able to pursue good.[48]

Death

The one who approaches a sense of the complexity of un-chosen sin, sensing the ways in which our own bodies, as well as minds, are complicit in human brokenness, is well positioned to take in the inevitability of death. While, as we have seen in part (2), to revere the possibility and growth that is proper to human persons means interpreting death as interruptive of life intended for everlasting progress; to be aware of the steeping of life in un-chosen sin is to see,

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[43] Greer sums up Gregory's perspective on death, as outlined in *The Catechetical Oration*, with the use of this phrase in his *One Path* (138).

[44] 'The Lord's Prayer', Sermon 5 (79).

[45] 50, As Gregory writes in his 'Homilies on Ecclesiastes', 'man through folly use[s] God's *good* gifts in the service of *evil*'. Specifically, 'the good gift of God, that is, freedom of action became a means to sin' through its being exercised in a body that drags the self 'towards the urges of the natural passions' (50).

[46] 'The Lord's Prayer', Sermon 5 (79).

[47] 'The Lord's Prayer', Sermon 5 (79).

[48] 'The Lord's Prayer', Sermon 5 (79). This fuller awareness of the 'mire' of sin does not make the work of forgiveness futile (as if there were too much to forgive) but exposes its continued necessity and calls for its expression not once but repeatedly (what is required is unlikely to be a single, isolated 'act' of forgiveness and more likely to be an on-going spirit of forgiving).

nevertheless, that such interruptive death is 'an inescapable prison' which cannot be denied or avoided.[49] Death may be unnatural, because human persons are made for unimpeded growth towards God and not for sin, but death is inevitable, because human reality, for all its goodness, has been marked by the fact of sin.

The realism of this position proposes a sobering caveat to the prevalent messaging of much popular gerontological literature. Ethicist Michael Mawson has recently charted the character of this messaging. In Mawson's view, the abundance of references to 'positive', 'active', 'healthy', and 'conscious' ageing that pervade current bestsellers on the topic of old age is indebted to John Rowe and Robert Khan's landmark work of the late nineties, *Successful Ageing*.[50] Rowe and Khan's work, Mawson sees, shifted the emerging discourse of gerontology away from an interest in understanding the suffering of old age in genetic and biological terms, towards an interest in the extrinsic, and largely controllable, environmental factors that determine the 'success' of one's ageing.[51] The character of much recent literature takes up this confidence that 'with the right kind of strategies and behaviour we can prevent a range of illnesses and conditions'.[52] Mawson's critique of these strategies underplays their practical success and significance in promoting real flourishing in later life.[53] Nevertheless Mawson is right to point out the limitation that these strategies can avoid conceding: that no amount of dieting, exercise, or positive thinking will, in the end, forestall death.[54] One who knows the risk involved in forgiveness, who knows something of sin as that which cannot be wholly avoided, and something of the limits of all attempts towards goodness, is well placed to see through the

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[49] Greer, *One Path*, 138.

[50] Michael Mawson, *Pursuing Success and Spirituality in Ageing*, Ageing and Despair Virtual Conference (McDonald Centre, Oxford, 2020) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QZz90G_uf1s&ab_channel=McDonaldCentre> [accessed 17 October 2020]. John Rowe and Robert Khan, in their *Successful Aging* (New York, NY: Dell, 1998).

[51] Mawson, *Pursuing Success*.

[52] Mawson. *Pursuing Success*. Examples include: Steven Grundy, *The Longevity Paradox: How to Die Young at a Ripe Old Age* (London: HarperCollins, 2019); Annabel Streets and Susan Saunders, *The Age-Well Project: Easy Ways to a Longer, Healthier, Happier Life* (London: Piatkus, 2019); Alan Castel, *Better With Age: The Psychology of Successful Ageing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[53] Mawson describes the successful ageing movement as 'utopianism or idealism that fails to fully acknowledge the complexities of ageing on the ground' (Mawson, *Pursuing Success*). Mawson requires nuance here: the popular literature belonging to such a movement (for instance, the recent examples cited above) does not I think seek to describe ageing as good but to change its experience so that it can be better. It reads as strange to greet with such hostility messages that, when stripped of their strikingly vivacious tone, amount to encouraging time spent with others, in the outdoors, exercising, eating well, or cultivating gratitude. The reluctance of thinkers like Mawson to see the propositions of the successful ageing movement as anything but perverse can itself seem perverse.

[54] Mawson, *Pursuing Success*.

optimism of accounts of 'successful ageing'. Despite the real progress towards flourishing we can and should attempt to make, 'in Adam we all die'.

Besides this realism that asserts death's inevitability, a sense of the complex 'nets of sin' in which human life is caught enables an additional insight through which to consider the meaning of dying. As it has been argued, one engaged in forgiveness, reckoning with human freedom in imperfect conditions, recognizes the susceptibility of our sense of what is good to become confused or polluted by 'the sinning hand'. This difficulty for even those close to perfection to obtain a straightforward good in an earthly context casts death as a kind of relief from the effortful and easily confused strivings of life. Indeed, Gregory articulates this sense of death's relief in *Concerning Perfection*, writing there that 'the civil strife between virtue and vice' is a 'war within us' that 'is destroyed by death'.[55] He goes on to explain that, on dying, 'the mind maintains peace, having left the disputed frontier of the battle', enabling the person to find release from her vexed soul.[56] As beautiful and fulfilling as life can be, the suffering and strife that mar our experience of it only end by way of life's end. In this sense, Gregory's anthropology, which one engaged in his vision of forgiveness approaches, draws us surprisingly near to the kind of folk piety that says of a recently deceased person 'she is at peace now'.[57] Indeed, to return to the presentation of Macrina's death, we see that while Gregory indicates the unnaturalness of her dying (as discussed above) he simultaneously testifies to the peace such dying visibly heralds. Looking at his dead sister, he notes that 'her eyes needed none to compose them', and her 'lips were suitably closed' and the 'hands laid reverently on the breast'.[58] Her repose reminds him of one 'in natural sleep', an image that speaks of freedom from the labour of waking hours, often drawn on in contemporary idiom to describe the release that onlookers perceive the dead to know.

These perspectives on death, arising from an engagement in forgiveness and the anthropological implications such an engagement leads to, may appear to sit in tension: in one direction, death is perceived as unnatural, as outlined in part (2); in another, death is perceived as inevitable; and in yet another, death is perceived as a relief. Yet in fact these perspectives are closely

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[55] 'Concerning Perfection', 180 (28).

[56] 'In Regard to Those Fallen Asleep', 43-44 (103).

[57] This folk piety can, quite lazily, be dismissed as attempting to avoid confronting the realities of death and dying. Theologians must be wary of such a line of critique, if only because the folk piety surrounding death very often seems to bear biblical resonance. Consider the likeness of 'she is at peace' and Psalm 4's 'in peace I will lie down and sleep' as it is referenced in Compline.

[58] *Life of Macrina*, 986C (58).

interwoven. Death, for Gregory, is unnatural to human life, which was not made for sin but for everlasting growth. Yet because sin, Gregory is clear, *is* a part of life, death must be understood as inevitable. Moreover, because sin is a part of life, death, we can say, may even be understood as a relief in its bringing to a close the endless struggle to obtain the good in conditions which complicate and pervert it.

4. Conclusion

An engagement in forgiveness, we argued in chapter 6, is central to Gregory's presentation of his three exemplars as they progress in virtue and love of God. Our investigation into the character of this forgiving led us to consider interpersonal forgiveness as the imitation of and participation in divine forgiveness (as Gregory anticipates it will be exemplified at the resurrection). As we considered divine forgiveness to be the model and origin of interpersonal forgiveness, we came to appreciate the significance of human forgiving as concerned to revere the other's *freedom*; to imagine the *future* as undetermined by present or past offense; and to accept the *risk* of enabling the other to act freely into an undecided future in conditions of incomplete conversion to the good. In this chapter, we have explored the anthropological implications of an engagement in forgiveness, and the particular experience and perception of the end of life that an engagement in forgiveness can therefore be seen to foster. We argued, first, that attention to the freedom properly belonging to every person does not make age irrelevant (since it is *from* an age that one exercises freedom) but does diminish the determining importance of age. We argued, second, that one who progresses by looking to the open, undetermined future, is one who comes to recognize that lives have constant possibility and promise. Foregrounding this quality of human life exposes death as the unnatural interruption that Gregory is convinced it is. We argued, third, that the risk one encounters in forgiving or being forgiven confronts the depth of our propensity to sin. Approaching knowledge of this sin sheds further light on death as unnatural but inevitable, and also even a kind of mercy, saving one from the very sin of which such death is a part. Once more, we have seen in Gregory's work pictures which assist in vivifying the ends to which an engagement in forgiving might lead: Macrina, indeed, is one untethered to the expectations of her particular age; and she is one whose death is figured as both unnatural (Gregory continues to assert her future in the act of listening to her) and peaceful (her death looks like pure rest).

Chapter 8: Conclusion

In this thesis, I have sought to investigate how the life to which Gregory hears the Christian called – that is, the life of *epektasis*, embodied in the practices of *giving*, *telling*, and *forgiving* – might give rise to a distinctive vision of human progress. In turn, I have sought to ask how progressing by this vision and these practices might uncover particular facets of what it is to be an embodied, changing, ageing, and mortal person. It has been my contention that the practices of giving, telling, and forgiving encompass and confront a range of anthropological implications with which the perception and experience of old age and the end of life might be shaped. In what follows, I, first, respond to three challenges that could be posed to the argument I have developed, and, second, reflect on the implications that the picture at which we have arrived, and the method through which it was discovered, have both for the field of theological reflection on the end of life and the study of Gregory of Nyssa.

1. Three challenges and responses

Three challenges

The first challenge that might be posed to the argument of this thesis concerns the optimism of presuming that the practices Gregory advocates are practices that are possible for a person to enact. As much as Gregory holds that the ordinary Christian should pursue perfection, he also knows the depth with which earthly life is steeped in chosen and un-chosen sin (as discussed in chapter 7). Is it naïve to imagine that Gregory's demanding account of the Christian life might be meaningfully addressed to Christians without the exceptional verve of his exemplars? How possible is it for individuals caught between 'nets of sin' to proceed by way of giving perpetually rather than occasionally, or by telling with words that are fitting and humble, or forgiving, against an instinct of revenge? If such practice is beyond an ordinary individual's range, ought the anthropological implications of such practices be considered fanciful rather than practical?

If such practice *is* deemed within the range of ordinary possibility, a second related challenge arises concerning the presumption that such practices could, once enacted, effectively form their partakers to experience the ageing body along the lines that have been suggested. Even if we can bring ourselves to give, tell, and forgive, can we be confident that such activity will change us? Arguments put forward against the recent theological return to virtue ethics might seem relevant to raise in response to the interest in practice and its consequences present in this thesis. We might think, for example, of Simeon Zahl's recent retrieval of Martin Luther's experiential opposition to the project of virtue: 'living, praying, and working in a monastic context specifically designed for the cultivation of virtue', Luther 'found himself unable, despite enormous effort… to cultivate the virtue he thought he had gone to the monastery to develop'.[1] The claim that action and practice can nurture durable transformation – integral to virtue ethics – does not, according at least to Luther's example, stand up to the experience of intransigence and repeated sin.[2] The same pessimism might seem to challenge the account we have constructed, which investigates as significant and real the consequences of practice.

A third challenge strikes as we move beyond the question of whether practice can have durable consequences (assuming that it can), to the question of whether the formation that practice attempts to wield is appropriately directed to human persons. The project of formation might seem to threaten the nature of human persons as 'free and self-ruling', as well as unique and wonderfully unlike others, as well as ultimately mysterious and beyond reductive control.[3] To accept the use of practices to shape identity might fail to revere the characteristics with which humans have been masterfully created. Our argument might be seen to have missed the positive significance that lies in the fact humans can resist formation.

Three responses

We respond, first, to the question of whether the practices we have discussed are too demanding to be able to consider the anthropology they reveal as widely relevant. We must begin by conceding that such practices indeed *are* demanding. It *is* hard to imagine the wholesale adoption of such practices in the light of the prosaic failures common to the lives of Christians

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[1] Simeon Zahl, 'Non-Competitive Agency and Luther's Experiential Argument Against Virtue', *Modern Theology*, 35.2 (2019), 199–222 (221).
[2] Zahl, 'Non-Competitive Agency', 221. Even the holiest individuals we may bring to mind would likely attest to the frustration of sin.
[3] 'Homilies on Ecclesiastes', 335.5 (73).

beset by the depths of sin. While each of the practices we have examined is, for Gregory, a work undertaken in and through God – we give, because we see Christ and receive from God; we *tell*, because of the good news given of Christ; we *forgive*, in participation with God, the first forgiver – nevertheless, the aptitude of different individuals to receive these graces and collaborate in partnership with God is different. Gregory sees that these different capacities partly owe to circumstances. As he underscores in his early work *On Virginity*, the monastic life permits a particular focus on God that is blurred (so Gregory sees) by the demands of marriage and childrearing. [4] The reality of different capacities owes, further, to the different opportunities available to individuals. Gregory's sense of this is pronounced in his discussion on the spiritual senses (recapitulated in chapter 2), where he considers distinct levels of perception accessible to those who are receptive and well placed to pursue purification. [5] While Gregory advocates the practices of giving, telling, and forgiving for all (the exemplars are taken as models for wider imitation), he clearly anticipates that not all Christians will be able to take up these activities with identical rigour.

Yet that these practices *are* so demanding does not relegate the relevance of the anthropological implications that they call to our attention. Contemplating ideal human action, even if that action is realised in only failing and partial ways in the life of the contemplator, can produce a certain aspiration capable of shaping action from the present context of shortfall. Indeed, insofar as looking towards an ideal life from a state that is not yet ideal produces guilt, it also produces a sense of one's need for forgiveness: one of the very practices that the ideal life encompasses. Our more fundamental answer to this challenge is located in the fact that the practices of giving, telling, and forgiving uncover facets of what it is to be human that can be glimpsed not only in carrying out their practice but in *receiving* their practice. As we have seen, it is not only the forgiver who comes to see the wonder and gift of her freedom, it is also the one who is forgiven who comes to contend with this dimension of his humanity. Likewise, it is not only the one who gives a gift, but also the one who receives it, who, through the process, may recognise the extent of grace in their midst. In this respect, if it is the case that, while all are able, only some will cultivate these practices with the same profundity as a Macrina or a Moses, the humanity that their practice reveals nevertheless implicates the whole community.

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[4] We might make an additional statement: the opportunity of childrearing, for example, might also permit a particular, if different, focus on God precluded by a life without relation to children.

[5] See Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 138–39 for a discussion of the distinct levels of perception characteristic to Origen and Gregory's systems (and how this apparently 'elitist' system is replaced by Calvin with the doctrine of double predestination).

Such a conclusion finds support in the recent argument made by Rowan Greer in his posthumously published *One Path for All: Gregory of Nyssa on the Christian Life and Human Destiny* (2014). There, it is Greer's contention, founded on a close reading of ten of Gregory's short works, that

> while Gregory clearly recognizes differences with respect to the progress that different people have made in the Christian life, he rejects the idea that these differences represent any division within the body of Christ. All Christians are on the single path; and at least once this path goes beyond the confines of this life, all humans will journey on it.[6]

Greer argues that in Gregory's sight some are called, for example, to be martyrs, others teachers, and others ascetics. The virtuosity of each of these roles, however, serves the whole church.[7] In parallel, the activities of giving, telling, and forgiving, effectively expose facets of what it is to be human pertinent not only to their individual enactors but to all who encounter them. While such practices are (for contingent reasons) beyond the range of some, all can access their benefit.[8]

In response, second, to the question of whether the practices of giving, telling, and forgiving can be considered as 'formative' (for those who enact them, and, as we have suggested, for those who encounter them), we must recall the rather more modest remit of the argument of this thesis compared with the grander hopes upon which some projects of virtue ethics might rest. In brief, the acquisition of virtue is commonly regarded, by those following Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, to be a product of the repetition of virtuous actions over time.[9] The implication behind such a theory is that outward practices transform the inward person. If one repeatedly undertakes a virtuous action, it will become a part of one's character. Practice is here held as a powerful agent of transformation. The intention of this thesis has been less to

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[6] Greer, *One Path*, 4. Indeed, Greer finds in Gregory an alternative to 'thin' concepts of community: in Gregory's vision, individual differences are accentuated rather than attenuated, but they are oriented towards a collective end.

[7] A problem arises where these roles are placed in a hierarchy, but if each role is on its own terms received as a good, elitism need not become an issue.

[8] Indeed, given that Gregory is so interested in imitation as a means of our moral growth, it may well be that receiving these gifts from others (thereby placing one's self close to a good example) might make us more likely to become enactors of these good actions ourselves.

[9] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. and trans. Roger Crisp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), cf. 1104a27-b3 (102-103).

examine what practice can *change* and more what practice can *reveal*. We have turned to the activities of giving, telling, and forgiving, not, primarily, with hopes for how they might, in themselves, transform human life, but to explore what these practices expose and prioritise about the character of human life and about what God has made. A growing recognition of the human condition will go on to shape our ethical conceptions of what is fitting action (in regard, we have suggested, to our behaviours and perception of the end of life). But these ethical conceptions, it must be remembered, are rooted not in an aspiration towards a particular enhanced condition, but in the recollection of a person's true identity.

Different facets of what Gregory sees in our anthropological identity emerge and are made visible through the practices of giving, telling, and forgiving as he advocates them. As we look across the three practices, for all their difference we see a common quality key to each. Namely, each of the three practices calls the enactor to recognise an aspect of their relation to their recipient, that is, their essentially social identity. The giver is shaped by their perpetual generosity to the other; the teller is shaped by the contribution the recipient makes to their telling; the forgiver and forgiven are shaped by the risk and gift of the other's capacity to act freely towards a shared future. This key characteristic of the practices we have addressed allows us to speak to the third challenge we identified, concerning whether the formation of people is a fitting aspiration. As each practice turns the partaker to encounter the other, each practice contains the potential to unsettle any trajectory the partaker feels herself to be on. Far from curtailing the individual towards a particular rigid set of characteristics, these practices open her life up to be shaped by the living gifts of others rather than conforming to any predetermined course. If the practices of forgiving, telling, and giving, are to be considered formative – in that they re-'form' their partakers and recipients to see and act in accord with their true anthropological identity – then they form their partakers and recipients in such a way as to 'un-form' them, poising them to encounter the genuine, unpredictable difference and freedom of others. In this sense, the progress of *epektasis* can be thought of less as a straight and predetermined march, and more as an expansive spiralling in which a person journeys towards their clear *telos* in God, yet does so by a route repeatedly curved and moulded by engagement in the lives of others who may seem to reroute and waylay the advance. This progress of *epektasis*, I have argued, in which the Christian engages so wholly with the lives of others, reckoning along the way with her own freedom, agency, limitation, and sinfulness, resources her in particular ways to engage with the challenges and gifts of a bodily life that diminishes, decays, suffers, and dies. We turn, next, to explicate the key implications of this conclusion.

2. Implications

The conclusion we have reached and the method by which we have reached it contains much that might resource and challenge both the fields of theological reflection on old age and the end of life, and of Gregory studies. We expand on the implications to these fields in turn.

Chapters 3, 5, and 7 have each suggested how ethical questions surrounding the end of life might be engaged in differently in the light of the particular anthropology to which Gregory's practices draw our attention. Discussion has included, for example, how the fact that human life is given might speak into conceptions of what a 'complete' life is; how the steeping of human life in sin might give us reason to reassess what a 'good death' can mean; and how the value of human difference might have us engage with the challenge of increased bodily dependence.[10] I have indicated how these discussions challenge theological literature on the topic of the end of life. Perhaps most notable are the facets of Gregory's anthropology that would cause us to question the positive reading of 'passivity' and 'dependence' that a number of recent significant contributors to the field have proffered.[11] The discussions raised in these chapters, then, contain insights that may speak on their own terms as resources to nuance theological reflections on the subject. Yet the more substantial offering this thesis makes lies in the point that these discussions serve: namely, that the progress and shape of a whole life are profoundly relevant to how the end of life will be perceived and experienced.

The connection at the heart of what this thesis has pursued, between the shape of life and the perception and experience of its end, has at least two major implications relevant to theological reflection on the end of life. First, in demonstrating the pertinence of the whole life – and its ordinary contents and practices – to the ethical demands at its end, we point to how a much wider body of insight is relevant to the question of old age than is often acknowledged. The much-quoted 2003 anthology *Growing Old in Christ*, edited by Stanley Hauerwas, Carol Bailey Stoneking, David Cloutier, and Keith G. Meador, begins, in its first part, with three chapters to set the backdrop for the constructive work of parts II and III. These three chapters consist, first, of a survey of biblical references to ageing; second, of a survey of perspectives of old age in the

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[10] Cf. ch. 3, part 1; ch. 7, part 2; ch. 5, part 2.
[11] Cf. discussion of ch. 5, part 2.

early church; and, third, of a similar survey within the remit of medieval literature.[12] Such an approach is not unusual in theological accounts of old age, which frequently begin with recapitulations of unambiguous biblical references to the theme. Yet the argument we have made, which sees old age as enlightened by a fuller picture of living, invites inspiration from resources that go beyond literal reference to old age. By this perspective, we might look beyond the aged Simeon and Anna for guides in reflecting on old age, drawing further on the faithfulness of Joseph, the weakness of Judas, the child whom Jesus places in the midst of the disciples, and Christ himself. Indeed, reflection on the topic might speak not only to the themes of wisdom, suffering, and dying, for example, but to principles of accumulation, agency, responsibility, and completion.

The second implication arising from the connection posited between the full shape of life and the perception and experience of its end concerns *who* such theological reflection seeks to address. The suggestion that how one progresses and shapes a life informs the perception of its end is meaningful not only within the remit of individual life (the practices *I* undertake now will inflect the end that *I* experience), but are also meaningful collectively, that is, across generational boundaries. The ways by which those who are not yet at the end of life choose to progress through it, the priorities they hold, and the facets of their humanness they expose, have consequences for the way in which those of old age in their midst are received and perceived. The upshot of this is that reflection on the topic of old age is limited by only having an individual of old age, or individuals who are directly engaged in the lives of those of old age, in mind as their central ethical subjects. Rather, all who are consciously engaged in their own progress through life are involved in shaping the perception and experience others undergo of old age. To see the involvement of one generation in the experience of another in this way moves beyond the kind of sentiment expressed by Kathleen R. Fischer in her work, *Winter Grace: Spirituality and Aging*, wherein she posits such involvement in terms of commonality. Fischer writes, 'the challenges and blessings of the later years are ones we all share… we all know grief, loss and failure, [and] face limitations'.[13] We must, she sees, 'recognize the common character of these dimensions of existence, to acknowledge our deep similarity'.[14] The

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[12] Richard Hays and Judith Hays, 'The Christian Practice of Growing Old: The Witness of Scripture', 3–18; Rowan A. Greer, 'Special Gift and Special Burden: Views of Old Age in the Early Church', 19–37; David Aers, 'The Christian Practice of Growing Old in the Middle Ages', 38–59, all in *Growing Old in Christ*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and others (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).

[13] Kathleen Fischer, *Winter Grace: Spirituality and Aging* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 1998), 19.

[14] Fischer, *Winter Grace*, 19.

involvement that this thesis posits is not based wholly on similarity, however, but also on implication. The lives of the young implicate those of the old. The practices that one generation engage in gesture towards the significance of certain realities concerning those of another. Whereas Fischer's suggestion that the young can relate to the old might inspire better inclusion of the old, the suggestion that the lives of the young *implicate* those of the old inspires the young to see their responsibility. As this responsibility is taken seriously, reflection on the end of life cannot only address the older person in isolation. Rather, such reflection ought to address those whose own presumptions about what constitutes growth and progress contribute to forming the conditions and frame through which the meaning of life's end is experienced.

Chapters 2, 4, and 6 have offered readings of Gregory's under-studied biographical works. In these chapters, the lives of the exemplars have been received as embodiments of *epektasis* (contrary to more typical readings of the doctrine). In order to most fully appreciate the weight of the exemplars' practices, we placed their actions in dialogue with apposite doctrinal expositions offered elsewhere in Gregory's corpus. Once more, these discussions contain in themselves deployable insights that relate to current debate or indeed initiate it. Certainly the suggestion that the giving Gregory praises is based on ontology (what things really are *now*) enables us to challenge the temporal emphasis Holman gives to Gregory's philanthropy in emphasising its eschatological reward *to come*.[15] Moreover, the proposal that the eschatological forgiveness Gregory anticipates helps us detail the interpersonal forgiving he advocates might precipitate new readings of his homilies *On the Lord's Prayer*. Again, however, it is the framework of study in which these discussions come about that constitutes the primary contribution this thesis makes to the study of Gregory of Nyssa: placing Gregory's ascetic, biographical works, concerned with ordinary Christian practice, in conversation with the doctrinal ideas he articulates elsewhere. This conversation has occurred in two key ways. The *doctrine* of *epektasis* has been read through a consideration of the *practices* that embody the life of one living its ascent; and those *practices* themselves have been read with reference to Gregory's wider doctrinal backdrop in order to grasp their significance. To connect practice with doctrine is not in itself new, but the particular connections this thesis posits advance two related opportunities to understand Gregory's thought more fully.

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[15] Holman, *Hungry Are Dying*.

First, in expositing *epektasis* in relation to holy practices, and expositing the practices of holy lives in relation to Gregory's wider doctrinal thought, we have spent considerable space exploring precisely *how*, in Gregory's vision, doctrinal propositions make their way into the practice of those who assert their truth. We have considered, for example, how the progress of *epektasis* is reflected in the act of giving; and how the logic of Christ's poverty in the doctrine of the incarnation elicits the anticipation that Christ will be discovered among the poor, and so shapes the particular vigour with which Gregory advocates such giving. We have considered how the progress of *epektasis* is expressed in the activity of telling, and how Gregory's doctrinal proposition that God is infinite is integral to the kind of linguistic humility that creaturely telling properly entails. We have considered how the progress of *epektasis* is embodied in the practice of forgiving; and how the nature of that forgiving relates to the significance of human freedom expressed in the doctrine of universalism. In the process, we have advanced a discourse that dwells with the *particulars* of how Gregory sees doctrine shape practice and experience. Casting Gregory's theological exposition of *epektasis*, the incarnation, universalism, and his debates with Eunomius in the light of the practices of giving, telling, and forgiving, complements, for example, the recent work of Volpe, whose own reading of the *Homilies on the Song of Songs* investigates how Gregory sees Christian doctrine as worked out in 'shap[ing] the imagination' and 'suppl[ying] good actions'.[16] In this respect, the work of this thesis adds to on-going attempts to parse out more effectively how doctrine and practice relate, beyond repeating the intuition that they do.

A second implication of moving from the practical vision of the biographies to Gregory's doctrinal texts concerns our capacity to more fully appreciate the context of Gregory's theological thought. The seminal works of Mühlenberg and Heine in the second half of the twentieth century have been instrumental in underscoring the polemical backdrop of Gregory's theology.[17] Their work rightly pushes against the idea that Gregory's works could be considered systematic, indicating rather the ad hoc and sporadic nature of his writings, very often formed in the context of argument with others.[18] The juxtaposition of Gregory's *Lives*

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[16] Medi Ann Volpe, *Rethinking Christian Identity: Doctrine and Discipleship*, (Chicester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 194, 207.

[17] Mühlenberg, *Die Unendlichkeit Gottes*; Heine, *Perfection in the Virtuous Life*. See ch. 1, part 2 of this thesis.

[18] The lens of polemic rightly continues to be integral to contemporary readings of Gregory, as is evidenced in the very recent work of Radde-Gallwitz. Radde-Gallwitz assesses Gregory's Christology not be reference to a single systematic model but shows how the governing models and metaphors by

with his doctrinal positions suggests a further element to this context to be considered. As we see the lives of his exemplars as places that embody doctrine and teaching, we are drawn to consider the fact that Gregory's own doctrinal positions were formed and precipitated not only by cferebral engagement with individuals he disagreed with, but by the deep impression left on him by his experience of individuals in whom he recognised profound holiness. It is possible, for example, to imagine that what Gregory understood of the incarnation was informed by the fact that the people in whose company he sensed a certain holiness were committed to giving, and that they seemed by their giving to encounter something of the divine. It is possible, further, to consider that the sense of creatureliness Gregory allots to humans, in relation to which he develops a doctrine of infinity, was not reached in the abstract but informed by his experience of conversing with his sister, the humility of whose words clearly struck him as conveying what it would be for a human person to speak aright. These wonderings, though preliminary, can be located within a growing interest in the relation between the chronology and events of Gregory's own life and the doctrinal conclusions he reached at different times. Such a relation has recently been probed in the work of Coakley (and, after her, Cadenhead), who has noted the striking convergence, for instance, between Gregory's grieving the death of his siblings and his reassessment of the physicality of the resurrection.[19] The impression that the lives of holy people left on Gregory is a key part of the biographical picture we can access of him. It is this biographical picture that Coakley and Cadenhead compellingly argue ought to inform our sense of the backdrop from which Gregory's doctrines emerge.

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These implications – pertaining both to theological reflection on the end of life and the study of Gregory of Nyssa – supplement the overarching invitation of this thesis: to hear in Gregory's *epektasis* one answer to the question of how we might conceive of the passage of time in which human life exists and ends. His answer, it has been argued, sees that the progress of our days and years ought ideally to be set upon the particular end (which is in fact, always a beginning) of

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which Gregory articulated his position shifted as he responded to criticism. See Radde-Gallwitz, *Doctrinal Works*.

[19] Namely, the death of Gregory's siblings 'seem[s] to have caused him to reconsider the whole matter of the resurrection and its implications for transformed physical life even in this life, in the era of the church', such that the 'Platonic' body/spirit dualism of his earlier work diminishes in the work following their death. See Coakley, 'Gregory of Nyssa', 52; Cadenhead, *Body and Desire*.

life with God: 'to be known by God and become his friend'.[20] Yet such progress, the lives of his exemplars show us, will travel vertically to God by way of a whirling horizontal engagement in the lives of others. In such an engagement, via the practices of giving, telling, and forgiving, the progress of life will involve discovery, among much else, of our own givenness, limitation, difference, and sinfulness. The discovery of these facets of what it is to be alive will, I have argued, make for distinctive possibilities in our ageing and dying. Gregory's answer invites us to interrogate our own imaginings of progress through life. It invites us to ask if those imaginings allow us to receive the freedom of the other as a gift. It invites us to ask if those imaginings have space in them for the surprising grace of God. It invites us to ask if those imaginings revere the unimaginable wonder of being alive.

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[20] Life of Moses, II.320 (136).

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