

Infinite God, Eternal Progress

The Infinite in *Contra Eunomius* and *De vita Moysis* by Gregory of Nyssa

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Abstract

Among the three great Cappadocian Fathers of the 4th Century, Gregory of Nyssa is known for his theological contribution on the infinite nature of God which he developed at length in his polemical work *Contra Eunomius* (*Against Eunomius*), written in defense of the Trinity. Some 10 years later, and toward the end of his life, he revisited the infinite in his seminal work *De vita Moysis* (*Life of Moses*); a work of spiritual contemplation for a friend who desired to know the path to perfection. Each of these works emphasize the importance of infinity; the first, on the essence of the divine and uncreated God, and the second on created man's spiritual journey toward perfection. This is a brief overview of Gregory's *infinite* from two distinct but conjoined perspectives.

Contextual Background: Defense of the Holy Trinity

During the early history of the Church a definition of God's essence was not always agreed upon, in part due to disagreements surrounding the knowledge of God. One aspect of the debate stemmed from the interpretation of John 1:1-4 regarding the status or generation of the *Logos* (Word). In the second century there were two concurrent interpretations of the *Logos*. The first stated that the *Logos* was eternal in the thought of God and then was generated, and was with God. The second stated that the *Logos* came into being and was with God at the beginning, before the creation of the Universe.¹ Both theories of generation continued into the 4th century, and while different, they agreed that the *Logos* was understood *as* God. Arius, a priest of Alexandria, would change this understanding of *Logos-as-God* by introducing a strictly monotheistic theory whereby the status of the *Logos* was lowered to an inferior creation of the Father.²

After a long and complex history of disputation, Arius' teachings were condemned³, however, his denunciation did not quell further descension. In the post-Nicene era, there emerged a more radical group of non-Trinitarians

¹ Wolfson, Harry A. *Philosophical Implications of Arianism and Apollinarianism*. *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 12 (1958): 3-28. doi:10.2307/1291115.

² The status of the Son of God was the epicenter of the Trinitarian Controversy in the 3rd and 4th centuries.

³ In 325 AD by the first Ecumenical Council of Nicaea which proclaimed the Son of God to be consubstantial (ὁμοούσιος/homoousios) with the Father and in 381 AD at the Council of Constantinople.

called Anomoeans,⁴ whose principle advocates were Aetius and his disciple Eunomius of Cyzicus. Aetius and Eunomius were considered,

...men of great logical powers, skilled debaters who inspired such a mixture of reverence and terror in the eyes of their opponents that the empress Placilla herself was unwilling to expose her husband, Theodosius, to the subtle arguments of Eunomius.”⁵

While they agreed with Arius in denying the consubstantiality of the Son of God, the Anomoeans “took some ideas of what might be called mainstream Arianism and developed them in the eccentric and untypical direction.”⁶ The eccentric and untypical direction was to teach that the *essence* of God could be fully comprehended by man.

Contra Eunomius (Against Eunomius)

Contra Eunomius is the continuation of a series of theological diatribes which originated between Eunomius and Basil of Caesarea (Gregory’s older brother).⁷ Of the many topics debated between the two, one of the more critical was whether the *essence* of God could be known by man. After Basil’s death in 379 A.D. Gregory saw himself as having “received the legacy of Eunomius’ controversy,” to refute his treatises written “to abuse us and to controvert sound doctrine.”⁸ Gregory’s indignation was spurred by Eunomius’ assertion that God must be comprehensible to humans because He is simple, one, and indivisible. In his own words, Eunomius wrote,

God knows no more of His own substance, than we do; nor is this more known to Him, and less to us: but whatever we know about the Divine substance, that precisely is known to God; on the other hand, whatever He knows, the same also you will find without any difference in us.⁹

⁴ *Anomoean* is Greek for “dissimilar” or “unlike” used in the sense that the Son was unlike the Father in essence.

⁵ Anthony Meredith SJ, Gregory of Nyssa (London: Routledge, 1999), 12.

⁶ R.P.C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 636. It was a shift so drastic within the Trinitarian dispute that some modern researchers have speculated the root cause of the heresy was due to the replacement of theological assumptions with purely philosophical. c.f. Dr. Karolina Kochancyzk-Boninska, *Incomprehensibility of God and the Trinitarian Controversy of the Fourth Century*, p. 240.

⁷ Upon Eunomius’ publication of *Liber Apologeticus*, Basil was compelled to counter with *Adversus Eunomium*, which was then countered by Eunomius *Apologia hyper Apologie*.

⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *Collection 7 Books*, (San Bernardino: Aeterna Press, 2020), 122.

⁹ Socrates Scholasticus, *The Ecclesiastical History of the Church* (London: George Bell & Sons, 1892), 216.

Gregory's response to Eunomius' arguments would ultimately yield twelve books. Of these we will briefly explore the first three (written between 379 and 383 A.D.)¹⁰ highlighting Gregory's argument for *divine infinity* in relation to names, goodness, creation, and time.

Names

Eunomius claimed that the divine essence, in *toto*, could be understood by means of a definition whereby *name equals essence*. Utilizing this system, Eunomius changed the revealed names of God to conform to his desired definition, as seen in the following text where he changes the names of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit according to "being":

The whole account of our doctrines is summed up thus; there is the Supreme and Absolute Being, and another Being existing by reason of the First, but after it though before all others; and a third Being not ranking with either of these, but inferior to the one, as to its cause, to the other, as to the energy which produced it: there must of course be included in this account the energies that follow Being, and the names germane to these energies.¹¹

To counter Eunomius' idea, Gregory argued that the divine nature is *infinite* and as such it can never be sufficiently comprehended by the finite mind, let alone linguistically describable. By making an unprecedented move in substituting human-created names for the names of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Gregory accuses Eunomius of replacing the names in Sacred Scripture to support his argument that there is no consubstantial relationship between "beings," described above. For Gregory, what has been revealed is from God and there is no humanly attributable name to comprehend the essence of God. And when Eunomius espouses the name *Ungenerate* for God (the Father) he believes he has captured God's entire nature in a single word. Gregory, however, rebuts,

If then interpretation by way of words and names implies by its meaning some sort of comprehension of the subject, and if, on the other hand, that which is unlimited cannot be comprehended, no one could reasonably blame us for ignorance. For by what name can I describe the incomprehensible?¹²

Gregory concludes that while Eunomius presumptuously claims to comprehend God through the created name *Ungenerate*, he is in fact ignorant

¹⁰ *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, eds. Mateo-Seco, Lucas Francisco and Giulio Maspero, trans. Seth Cherney. (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 153.

¹¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Collection*, 149-150. In doing so, Eunomius ignores Sacred Scripture, Tradition, and Patristic writings.

¹² Gregory of Nyssa, *Collection*, 314.

for not understanding, “the infinity of God surpasses every verbal connotation or definition”¹³

Goodness

By exclusively naming the Father as *Ungenerate* Gregory charges Eunomius with diminishing the *goodness* of the Son and Holy Spirit. Gregory reasons that if only the Father is “proper and supreme” then the Son and Holy Spirit must be somehow diminished in *goodness*, and therefore capable of evil. Gregory refutes Eunomius by arguing for the *infinity* of divine goodness, stating,

Good, as long as it is incapable of its opposite, has no bounds to its goodness: its opposite alone can circumscribe it... If then he [Eunomius] supposes that the nature of the Only Begotten and of the Spirit can change for the worse, then he plainly diminishes the conception of their goodness, making them capable of being associated with their opposites. But if the Divine and unalterable nature is incapable of degeneracy, as even our foes allow, we must regard it as absolutely unlimited in its goodness: and the unlimited is the same as the infinite. But to suppose excess and defect in the infinite and unlimited is to the last degree unreasonable: for how can the idea of infinitude remain, if we posited increase and loss in it??¹⁴

By arguing that divine goodness is *infinite* Gregory asserts that there can be no application of ‘less or more,’ in relation to it.

Time

Related to Eunomius’ understanding of the *Ungenerate* Father having a place of superiority, he further supports his theory by advocating an interval of time between the Father and the Son. Gregory questions Eunomius’ usage of time as a factor for determining the superiority of the Father, wondering by what measurement Eunomius establishes “more length of life to the Father, while no distinctions of time whatever have been previously conceived of in the personality of the Son.”¹⁵

Claiming an interval of time between the Father and the Son, Eunomius inadvertently opens an argument for a beginning of the Father. Gregory refutes the usage of time, stating, “He who asserts that the Father is prior to the Son with any thought of an interval must perforce allow that even the Father is not without beginning.”¹⁶ When Eunomius places time between the Father and the generation of the Son, Gregory argues that,

¹³ Gregory of Nyssa, *Collection*, 149-150.

¹⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *Collection*, 152.

¹⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *Collection*, 153.

¹⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *Collection*, 179.

...he places a certain interval between the two: now he must mean either that this interval is infinite, or that it is included within fixed limits. However, the principle of an intervening mean will not allow him to call it infinite; he would annul thereby the very conception of Father and Son and the thought of anything connecting them, as long as this infinite were limited on neither side, with no idea of a Father cutting it short above, nor that of a Son checking it below.¹⁷

Time and space exist within the context of limitation. The infinite, however, is extended in any direction without boundaries and thus impossible to quantify or calculate, hence Gregory argues that,

...this view of theirs will bring us to the conclusion that the Father is not from everlasting, but from a definite point in time. ... for they conceive of this difference as in the past, and instead of equalizing the life of the Father and the Son there, they extend the concept of the Father by an interval of living. But every interval must be bounded by two ends. Their assumption leads directly to some beginning of their Ungenerate which undermines their argument.¹⁸

By proposing an interval of time between the Father and Son to support the superiority of the Father, Eunomius places his *Ungenerate* within the limited context of space and time. Logically, this cannot be possible if the Creator is infinite in nature and outside of limitation in an ineffable way that he can only be comprehended by the created through faith.

Creation

Our final argument for Gregory's infinite nature of God showcases God as Creator; the limitless source of all *being*. Gregory divides *being* into the Intelligible and the Sensible, quoting the Apostle Paul (II Corinthians 4:18) that the Sensible is "that which is seen" and the Intelligible is "that which is not seen."¹⁹ In the created Sensible bodily organs are utilized to comprehend and know that the "differences of qualities involve the idea of more and less, such differences consisting in quantity, quality, and the other properties."²⁰ In the created Intellect, however, Gregory notes that, "the idea of such differences as are perceived in the Sensible cannot find a place: another method, then, is devised for discovering the degrees of greater and less."

¹⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, *Collection*, 180.

¹⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *Collection*, 180.

¹⁹ That "which is not seen" is further divided into the *uncreated* and the *created*; the uncreated is that which effects the creation, and the created is that which originates with the uncreated.

²⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, *Collection*, 167

Gregory comments, "...by withdrawing all idea of comprehension by the senses he [Paul] leads the mind on to the immaterial and intellectual."²¹

By arguing that the origin of every good is from the world of the *uncreated*, and that the "whole creation inclines to that,"²² Gregory argues that the created Intellect straddles the fence between good and evil; capable of either as so inclined by nature. Uncreated Intelligence, however, is removed from any such distinction because it does not,

...possess the good by acquisition or participate only in the goodness of some good which lies above it; in its one essence it is good, and is conceived as such: it is a source of good, it is simple, uniform, incomposite...not conceived of with quantity, as Eunomius supposes.²³

Based upon Eunomius argument that the Son and Holy Spirit are inferior, created beings who only became good by sharing in the properties of something greater, Gregory concludes that prior to their participation, and according to logic of Eunomius, the Son and Holy Spirit were not good; a blasphemous conclusion.²⁴ Gregory summarizes,

The Divine nature is a stranger to these special marks in creation: It leaves beneath itself the sections of time, and the before and the after, and the ideas of space: in fact, higher cannot properly be said of it at all. Every conception about the uncreate Power is a sublime principle and involves the idea of what is proper in the highest degree.²⁵

In *Contra Eunomius* Gregory of Nyssa's defense of the Nicene Creed produced a definitive work on the infinite nature of God. In further contemplation on the infinite, Gregory would produce another great work, *Di vita Moysis*; where the infinite plays a central role in the spiritual journey of the Christian.

Di vita Moysis (Life of Moses)

In his work *Life of Moses*, Gregory transitions from doctrinal defense to spiritual instruction by applying *divine infinity* to the spiritual journey of the Christian. In his Book *Gregory of Nyssa*, Andrew Meredith states that Gregory's defense of the Nicene Creed and argument for divine infinity in *Contra Eunomius* would play "a great role in his own account of the spiritual

²¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Collection*, 167.

²² Gregory of Nyssa, *Collection*, 168.

²³ Gregory of Nyssa, *Collection*, 168.

²⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *Collection*, 169.

²⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *Collection*, 184. It is interesting to note that in asserting the divine infinity, Gregory and his brother Basil were charged with agnosticism. See Meredith, *Nyssa*, 13.

life.”²⁶ This ‘great role’ was manifested in *Life of Moses* where the theme of the infinite continues in what Gregory calls, “eternal progression.”

*On the Life of Moses or On Perfection in Virtue*²⁷ is a treatise written around 390-392 A.D. to Caesarius who desired to know more about the life of perfection²⁸. The work is traditionally divided into two books; the first summarizes Moses’ life based upon the Books of Exodus and Numbers, and the second is a spiritual contemplation of the first. From Moses’ experiences, Gregory provides an example,

...for the journey of the mind (*nous*) to God, Gregory continues an already established exegetical tradition. What follows is an apophatic ascent that begins with the language of letting go (*aphairesis*) and culminates in oxymoron. The mind lets go of everything it comprehends and keeps going deeper until it enters the incomprehensible and there sees God.”²⁹

The theme of the infinite - as applied to eternal progression - begins in relation to *virtue* where in the Prologue he writes,

...in the case of virtue, we have learned from the Apostle that its one limit of perfection is the fact that it has no limit. For that divine Apostle, great and lofty in understanding, ever running the course of virtue, never ceased straining toward those things that are still to come.³⁰

He continues demonstrating the relationship between the pursuit of limitless virtue and the unlimited nature of God stating,

Certainly, whoever pursues true virtue participates in nothing other than God, because he is himself absolute virtue. Since, then, those who know what is good by nature desire participation in it, and since this good has no limit, the participant's desire itself necessarily has no stopping place but stretches out with the limitless.³¹

Gregory continues by introducing Moses as an illustration of this pursuit,

Let us put forth Moses as our example for life in our treatise. First, we shall go through in outline his life as we have learned it from the divine Scriptures. Then we shall seek out the spiritual understanding which corresponds to the history in order to obtain suggestions of

²⁶ Meredith, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 13.

²⁷ The full title

²⁸ *Brill Dictionary*, trans. Seth Cheny, 158.

²⁹ *Brill Dictionary*, trans. Seth Cheny, 203.

³⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, trans. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 29.

³¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, trans. Malherbe and Ferguson, 31.

virtue. Through such understanding we may come to know the perfect life for men.³²

The theme of eternal progression in relation to divine infinity begins in Book II, where, based upon his foundation of God as infinite, and thus incomprehensible to finite minds, he proposes an infinite quest, a “continuous and endless progress in participation which dominates the topics of time and eternity.”³³

Eternal Progression

For Gregory, Moses’ life was one continual advancement toward what is perfect. Ascending steadily through consecutive events of his life, highlighted by three progressive theophanies,³⁴ Gregory ponders,

If nothing comes from above to hinder its upward thrust (for the nature of the Good attracts to itself those who look to it), the soul rises ever higher and will always make its flight yet higher—by its desire of the heavenly things straining ahead for what is still to come, as the Apostle says. ...Activity directed toward virtue causes its capacity to grow through exertion; this kind of activity alone does not slacken its intensity by the effort, but increases it. For this reason, we also say that the great Moses, as he was becoming ever greater, at no time stopped in his ascent, nor did he set a limit for himself in his upward course. Once having set foot on the ladder which God set up (as Jacob says), he continually climbed to the step above and never ceased to rise higher, because he always found a step higher than the one he had attained.³⁵

Ever stepping upward, Gregory asserts that Moses’ desire to progress is never quenched, but continues to build upon itself. Even after Moses descended from the Mount,

... he is still unsatisfied in his desire for more. He still thirsts for that with which he constantly filled himself to capacity, and he asks to attain as if he had never partaken, beseeching God to appear to him,

³² Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, trans. Malherbe and Ferguson, 33.

³³ *Brill Dictionary*, trans. Seth Cheny, 291.

³⁴ The first theophany, discussed in Book II 19-41, is found in Exodus 3:1-14 where Moses encounters a burning bush from whence, in verse 14, God reveals himself as “I am who I am.” The second theophany, discussed in Book II 162-166, is taken from Moses’ experience of darkness on the mountain, and especially in Exodus 20, 21, “Then the people stood at a distance, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.” The third theophany discussed in Book II 219-235 is primarily an exegesis of Moses’ request to behold the face of God and of the divine reply in Exodus. 33:23, ‘My back parts you will see, but my face you will not see.’ God is infinite in his own essence (*ousia*), and the object of an eternal desire that can never be sated (Book II section 233).

³⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, trans. Malherbe and Ferguson, 225-227.

not according to his capacity to partake, but according to God's true being.³⁶

Moses was exposed to True Being, “the Really Real...the true life...that lies beyond our knowledge which in turn means what we have grasped cannot be the life.”³⁷ Gregory concludes that what Moses truly desired was satisfied by his *lack of satisfaction*; an oxymoron reflective of Gregory's apophatic approach to theology.

When Moses requests to see the face of God, Gregory explains that his eagerness to behold God is answered by God with *follow my lead*. We see this in the third theophany where Moses, hidden in the cleft of the rock, is told by God that he will pass by and Moses will see the back side of him. To see the back side of God, Gregory surmises, is to behold God as a guide with Moses as a follower. One who is ignorant of the way must follow his guide if he wishes to complete his journey safely, and to follow the guide is to not see his face, but his back. If the follower faces the guide, his way will certainly be in the opposite direction, for good does not look good in the face, but follows it.³⁸

Life of Moses provides an example, that to partially experience God (to “behold” God), is by a constant following of him. This following, this *eternal progress toward God*, exemplifies the only ‘perfection’ available to humanity; *Epektasis* (Επεκτάσεις),³⁹ where,

...the soul continually longs for God, continually reaches out for knowledge of him. But there is no ultimate satisfaction, no final union, no ecstasy in which the soul is rapt up out of the temporal sequence and achieves union.⁴⁰

Summary

In *Contra Eunomius*, Gregory established that God is *infinite* in essence where, “every concept relative to God is a...false likeness, an idol.”⁴¹ In *Life of Moses*, the infinite essence of God reveals an eternal journey where

³⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, trans. Malherbe and Ferguson, 230.

³⁷ Meredith, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 235.

³⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, trans. Malherbe and Ferguson, Book II 252-253.

³⁹ Coming from Phil 3:14 where Paul says that he has not yet attained perfection but “I pursue” διώκω forward to the prize that lies ahead. *Epektasis*, as coined by Jean Daniélou, refers to the Gregory's view of perfection, not as rest in God (as in an Aristotelian or Augustinian view of perfection), but as the soul's eternal movement into God's Infinite being. Brill 221.

⁴⁰ Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 89.

⁴¹ Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1957), 33.

satisfaction of the soul is only in pursuit of unattainable perfection. “For God makes his dwelling there where our understanding and our concepts can gain no admittance,” and where “filled with an ever-increasing desire the soul grows without ceasing...the ascent becomes infinite, the desire insatiable.”⁴²

⁴² Lossky, *The Mystical Theology*, 35.

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