'Marvel at the Intelligence of Unthinking Creatures!':
Contemplative Animals in Gregory of Nazianzus and Evagrius of Pontus.

Eric D. Meyer
Carroll College, emeyer@carroll.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholars.carroll.edu/theology_faculty

Part of the Animal Studies Commons, Christianity Commons, Ethics in Religion Commons, and the Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons

Recommended Citation
https://scholars.carroll.edu/theology_faculty/6

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by Carroll Scholars. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theology Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Carroll Scholars. For more information, please contact tkratz@carroll.edu.
'Marvel at the Intelligence of Unthinking Creatures!': Contemplative Animals in Gregory of Nazianzus and Evagrius of Pontus.

Eric D Meyer

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/eric-meyer/7/
As with every bottomless gaze, as with the eyes of the other, the gaze called ‘animal’ offers to my sight the abyssal limit of the human: the inhuman or the ahuman, the ends of man, that is to say, the bordercrossing from which vantage man dares to announce himself to himself, thereby calling himself by the name that he believes he gives himself.¹

In *The Animal that Therefore I Am*, Derrida queries what (or who) feeds at the limit between the human and the animal. What is it that is nourished by this distinction? Who stands to benefit from maintaining a single line, a clean cut between the human and the animal. By the end of the text he has come to the conclusion that the thinking subject (the *je suis* that both ‘follows’ the animal and recognizes itself by means of the encounter with the animal) must be something neither dead nor alive; the ‘*je suis*’ is neither animal nor some *thing* that is added to the animal.²


Subjectivity is a reflexive activity that produces itself precisely by cutting itself off from ‘the animal’, a disavowal that produces ‘the human’ as that being who goes by a different name. For Derrida, then, the creature named ‘human’ is an animal that doubles back on itself in order to theorize itself as something other, to ‘announce himself to himself’. The human is a process by which an animal disavows its animality. But what is it that remains in this disavowal; and how should this remainder be figured theologically?

Following on Derrida’s analysis of a great disavowal of animals in Western philosophical thinking about human subjectivity, this essay examines the contemplative subjectivity described by Gregory of Nazianzus and Evagrius of Pontus.3 I argue that while both Gregory and Evagrius describe the activity of spiritual contemplation as humanity’s transcending above animality, nevertheless, the mode of subjectivity that they describe in the human who perfectly contemplates God corresponds exactly to the mode of subjectivity attributed to animals guided by their instincts. The much-vaunted transcendence of humanity over animality, then, turns out to be an empty ideological disavowal, the announcement of the self to itself in a gesture that actually signals the isolation of humanity from God and fellow creatures. Thinking with venerable figures

3 I have chosen to write on Gregory and Evagrius because of striking similarities within their theological anthropologies. While the significant differences between the two should not be ignored, both projects are basically Origenian, tripartite, and emphasize the νοῦς as the loftiest aspect of human life. Both figures have also exerted tremendous influence on subsequent Christian tradition—Gregory on the East through his orations and Evagrius in the West through his spirituality (as mediated by John Cassian). Incidentally, they were also acquaintances in Cappadocia and Constantinople; see J. McGuckin, Saint Gregory of Nazianzus: An Intellectual Biography (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), pp. 276-278.
like Gregory and Evagrius helps to locate some of the perennially recurring fractures and short-circuits within Christian anthropological projects and to explore alternate resolutions to their conceptual stalemates—crossing or uncrossing different wires, moving down avenues of thought which they have opened, but not taken themselves.

The essay proceeds in two parts: First, a summary of Gregory and Evagrius’ contemplative theological anthropology and an articulation of their conception of contemplation as the transcendence of humanity above animality; second, an exploration of the failed transcendence of humanity over animality within the terms of Gregory and Evagrius’ arguments and an attempt to figure differently the relation of humanity, animality, and divinity.

I. Contemplative Theological Anthropology

Gregory of Nazianzus is routinely boggled that the human being should be a mixture of dirt and spirit. For the creature who is named as the apex and ruler of creation to be made in such a composite manner seems manifestly unwise to Gregory. Surely a pure and unmixed intelligence, not subject to mortality and corruption would have been far, far superior to this odd mixture of mud and soul! The mystery of human nature for Gregory is the conjunction of two natures in one being. On Gregory’s reading of Genesis 1-2, God first constructs an intellectual-spiritual creation followed by a material creation, placing humanity right at the boundary between the two, the sole creature to be fully an inhabitant of both the intellectual and the material order. The human being is ‘another angel’, a worshipper of God and bearer of divine and angelic light; yet at the same time a debased bodily creature, who—like the animals—is subject to decay and corruption.

Then, gazing upon everything constructed and thinking,

[God] was delighted by the conceptually unified works of a masterful Child,
but, [God] sought someone acquainted with the wisdom of the Mother of all things (μητρὸς ἀπάντων),
of those drawn from the soil, a God-fearing ruler (χθονίων βασιλῆα θεουδέα). So [God] said:
‘Already, my pure and ever-living attendants
have the breadth of heaven. Holy minds! Noble angels!
Composers of hymns who never cease celebrating my praise in song and dance!
Yet Earth still glories in thoughtless animals (ζώοισιν ἀγάλλεται ἀφραδέουσι).
It is my pleasure to appoint a kind of mixture from both,
an intelligent light (νοήμονα φῶτα) between the mortals and immortals;
delighting in my works; a prudent initiate
into heavenly matters; of those sprung from soil, a great power (μέγα κράτος);
another angel;
from the soil, a singer of my mind and intentions (ὑμνητῆρά τ᾽ ἐμὼν μενέων τε νόου).

4 This, and all subsequent translations from the Greek are my own. Gregory of Nazianzus,
The paradox of the placement of the human at this limit is almost too much for Gregory to bear. But not only does the human being (alone of all the creatures) *straddle* the line between the intelligible and material creation, this limit also runs *interior* to every human being. The human being is a *microcosmos*, a mysterious conjunction that mirrors the mystery of the doubleness of creation.

Following Origen, Gregory and Evagrius both conceive of the human being as composed of σάρξ/σῶμα (flesh/body), ψυχή (soul), and νοῦς (mind).⁵ Humanity shares the σάρξ and ψυχή

---

with the animals, while νοῦς is the substance of both the human mind and angelic existence. But humanity’s composite construction is not entirely stable and settled. Gregory feels his σάρξ and his νοῦς pulling in opposite directions; the νοῦς naturally gravitates toward contemplation and illumination, while the σάρξ is burdensome and opaque. While other theologians (including Evagrius) associate the animality of the human σάρξ and ψυχή primarily with uncontrolled energies and desires, for Gregory, human-animality represents the corporeal ‘thickness’ (παχύτης) which impedes and distracts from contemplation.6 Animality figures only the ‘lower’ half of humanity, the σάρξ that the νοῦς must master and direct. Thus, within a human being there is a division or caesura that marks the point at which humanity-as-such transcends human-animality. While animality opens up to its apex and summit in humanity; humanity is partially closed off to animality, laying exclusive claim to the realm of contemplation, knowledge of the heavens, participation in the angelic intelligible creation. Humanity’s calling to transformative contemplation of God thus inherently involves transcendence over (or beyond) human animality.7


7 Beeley (Trinity, pp. 79-83) is correct that the tension within Gregory’s anthropology between σάρξ and νοῦς does not ultimately amount to a hatred and rejection of the body as such. Nevertheless, it is worth asking why the rigor of Gregory’s κάθαρσις (purification) is frequently mistaken for such a rejection. There is a violent sort of separation that takes place through κάθαρσις, but rather than an escape of the νοῦς from the body, κάθαρσις effects the eradication of the body’s animality. Gregory does not reject embodiment per se, so much as an ongoing essential continuity with other animals, so that the corporeal human who enjoys union with God
Giorgio Agamben turns the perspective of Gregory’s wonderment precisely upside down, so that it becomes a solution in search of a problem. Where Gregory gapes at the human being as the *mysterium coniunctionis*—the strange conjunction of alien natures, Agamben puzzles at the widespread perception of internal tension that gives rise to the notion of the human being as a ‘mixture’ in the first place. Why does this creature, he asks, insist on everywhere and always picking itself apart in order to better discern itself? From where does this sense of internal tension come, this fractured self-understanding composed of two natures pulling in opposite directions? Agamben observes thinkers like Gregory theorizing one portion of their being as animal and another portion of their being as human, and marvels that no one should have asked yet why this careful dismantling is such a prevalent activity. The mystery of humanity is a *mysterium disuinctionis*—an inexplicable sense that human beings are internally complex, or composite. He argues that coming to grips with this ceaseless activity whereby humanity parses itself out as a mixture of animal and angel and ‘jamming’ this ‘anthropological machine’ is a task has been stripped of his or her animality. For example, examine the relationship between κάθαρσις and animality in Orat. 28.2, PG 36:28a-d; Orat 28.15, PG 36:45bc; Orat. 39.6, PG 36:341a; Orat. 39.7, PG 36:341c. Beeley is answering the supposition of a mind-body dualism which he finds in A.S. Ellverson, *The Dual Nature of Man: A Study in the Theological Anthropology of Gregory of Nazianzus* (Stockholm: Uppsala, 1981), pp. 28-32; and R.R. Ruether, *Gregory of Nazianzus: Rhetor and Philosopher* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), pp. 134-6, though he perhaps oversimplifies Ellverson’s nuanced understanding of Gregory’s paradoxical anthropology in order to heighten the difference with his own.

more imperative than ‘to take positions on the great issues, on so-called human rights and values’.\(^9\) Agamben invokes a theological register in naming the goal of this project as a ‘Shabbat of animal and man’.\(^10\)

Agamben perceives two models of the anthropological machine, an ancient and a modern version.\(^11\) The ancient model of the anthropological machine incorporates animality within humanity so that truly exceptional (and therefore distinctively human) traits may appear in greater relief. The ancient concern with centaurs, werewolves, and half-bred creatures (always placed in far away lands, living among the barbarians who were themselves ‘marginally’ human) was a way of recognizing the continuities between humans and animals precisely in order to find—and emphasize—the discontinuities. Likewise, when animals are simultaneously denied moral agency and yet described with a negative moral valence as vile, reprehensible, or disgusting, it is the boundary between humanity and animality that is being limned. True humanity then, is that part of the human, which exceeds and transcends its own animality (and all other animals). The human contains both animality and a core of humanity-within-the-human. The purpose that drives the ‘anthropological machine’ forward is the production of a pure humanity, conceptually standing over-against human animality. Necessarily, however, the machine’s operation also produces a concept of pure animality.\(^12\) So, for example, the thick,

---

\(^9\) Ibid., p. 16.

\(^10\) Ibid., p. 92.

\(^11\) Ibid., p. 37.

\(^12\) Though there are important differences between the two projects, I discern a fundamental affinity between Agamben and Derrida’s analyses with regard to animality. Agamben’s
material density which hinders human contemplation is paradigmatically ‘animal’ for Gregory. Animality is that which must be strained out through κάθαρσις (purification) in order to safeguard the contemplative νοῦς as truly and authentically human as it draws near to God.\(^\text{13}\)

This division within the human being corresponds to a conception of animals (categorically) as spiritually blind, unthinking brutes too caught up in their corporeal concerns to be cognizant of God.

Agamben’s anthropological machine is at work in the thought of Evagrius of Pontus as much as Gregory’s. Evagrius accepts from Origen the (Stoic) notion that animals are moved to action by images that arise internally.\(^\text{14}\) So, an ox lowers his head and takes a bite of grass when the image of grass arises within, motivating him to eat; the image of a predator incites the deer to flee. Humans, Evagrius believes, are no different on this score. Humans too are driven by the arising of internal images (νοήματα). But unlike animals, humans are equipped with a νοῦς, a function of participating in the intelligible creation. This νοῦς has the task of passing judgement


on the images that arise, discerning which images are to be given attention and which are to be ignored. The human alone has the ability to act freely relative to the images that arise internally, a freedom that comes from the rational function of the νοῦς, which stands over and above the ‘animal’ level at which the images arise. Internal images are susceptible to demonic corruption. So, for example, a demon might take hold of the image of a woman within an ascetic and cause ‘her’ figure to move in sexually inviting ways, in order to lure the monk’s νοῦς into committing conceptual adultery with the image, joining the image in mental copulation. In order to prevent this from happening, the νοῦς must tirelessly work as a shepherd of the images, keeping them safely grouped together, secure and tame:

The Lord handed over to the human the mental representations (Τὰ νοήματα) of this age just like sheep to a good shepherd. . . . It is necessary, therefore, for the anchorite to keep watch (φυλάττειν) over this flock by night and day, so that one


16 Evagrius, *To Eulogios*, §18 (text and translation in R. Sinkewicz, *Evagrius*).
of these mental representations does not get snatched by wild beasts or fall into the possession of thieves (θηριάλωτον ἢ λῃσταῖς περιπέσῃ). But if something like that happens down in the glen, then immediately he should tear it out from the mouth of the lion and the bear [cf. 1 Kg 17]. The mental representation of a brother (τὸ νόημα τὸ περὶ τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ) gets snatched by wild beasts if it is set to graze in us along with hatred (μίσους); the mental representation of a woman, if it is nurtured in us with base desire (αἰσχρᾶς ἐπιθυμίας); the mental representation of silver and gold, if it passes the night with avarice (πλεονεξίας); and the mental representation of holy gifts, if it is fed with conceited (κενοδοξίας) intentions. The other mental representations happen to be stolen by the passions in like manner.17

When the (animal) images get loose and go astray, they are devoured by demons, corrupted, and turned against the monk. The monk’s task, then, is to keep all the images that reside in the irrational animal portion of his soul well-fed, well-groomed, and tame. Evagrius’ spirituality approaches human animality with the logic of taming and slaughter. In Agamben’s terms, ‘humanity’ is produced by means of control over internal animality. It is cultivated, preserved, and produced through the virtue of ἀπάθεια, the virtue which names a continuous throttling of animal (and inhuman) agency.18 Unlike other theologians who think of ἀπάθεια primarily as a

17 Evagrius, On Thoughts, §17.

18 ‘Of the impure demons, there are some who tempt a human as a human (τὸν ἄνθρωπον ὡς ἄνθρωπον ἐκτεινόμενος), and there are some who confound a human as an irrational animal (ζῷον ἄλογον ἐκταράσσουσι). Approaching, the first inflict upon us mental representations (νοῆμα) of conceit (κενοδοξίας), arrogance (ὑπερηφανίας), envy (φθόνος), or fault-finding (κατηγορίας), for none of these touch the irrational animals (τὸν ἄλογον). Drawing near, the
divine attribute and distant goal of human spirituality, Evagrius considers ἀπάθεια to be an attainable precondition for genuine and undistracted contemplation.¹⁹

Evagrius tells the story of a monk who had achieved ἀπάθεια who stood outside his desert cell chanting through the psalter. In an attempt to distract this monk from prayer, a demon took the form of a lion and rushed at the monk, digging his claws into the monk’s side. This monk, Evagrius boasts, continued to pray through the remainder of the psalter with the lion’s claws embedded in his flesh, before dismissing the demon and walking away unharmed.²⁰ That the demon should take the form of a lion is no coincidence in Evagrius’ cosmology because animals and demons have a special affinity.²¹ In the Kephelaia Gnostika Evagrius names the elements and dispositions most prominent in all God’s creatures, because discerning the second set desire or irascibility (θυμὸν ἢ ἐπιθυμίαν) in motion unnaturally (παρὰ φύσιν). For these passions are common to us and the irrational animals, though they are covered over in us by the rational nature (ὑπὸ τῆς λογικῆς καλυπτόμενα φύσεως).’ Evagrius, On Thoughts, §18; cf. The Monk/Praktikos, §§54-56 (text: Évagre le Pontique: Traité Practique ou Le Moine (A. Guillaumont and C. Guillaumont (eds); Sources Chrétiennes, nos. 170-71; Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1971); translation: R. Sinkewicz, Evagrius).


²¹ Evagrius, On Thoughts, §§12, 15,16; Chapters on Prayer, §§50, 107-109.
composition (the inner λόγος) of creatures is an intermediary step on the way to theological contemplation. Angels are characterized by fire and νοῦς (mind); humans by earth and ἐπιθυμία (desire); animals by earth and θύμος (irascibility); and demons by θύμος and air. The monk who understands that irascibility, θύμος, is a bond shared by the demons and the animals can employ his knowledge against the demons. When demons introduce lustful or greedy thoughts, it is right and proper for the monk to allow his irascible, animal part to arise in anger and drive the demons away, ‘fighting fire with fire’, as it were. Evagrius frequently employs the image of a guard dog who barks at the approach of an intruder in order to illustrate the spiritual use of θύμος and ἐπιθυμία:

8. Irascibility (Θυμός) is a power of the soul, destructive of thoughts (φθαρτικὴ λογισμῶν).

9. The contemplative mind is like a dog (Κυνικός ἐστι νοῦς θεωρητικὸς) chasing away all the passion-ridden thoughts (ἐμπαθεῖς λογισμοῦ) through the movement of irascibility.

22 Evagrius, Kephalaia Gnostika, 1.68 (Text: [Syriac] Les six Centuries des ‘Kephalaia Gnostica’ d’Évagre le Pontique (A. Guillaumont (ed. and trans.); Patrologia Orientalis 28.1, no. 134; Paris: Fermin-Didot, 1958); [and Syriac with Greek retroversion] Evagrius Ponticus (W. Frankenberg (ed. and trans.); Abhandlungen der königlichen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen, Philologisch-historische Klasse, Neue Folge, 13.2; Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1912)). The manuscript tradition of the Kephelaia Gnostika is particularly convoluted and unreliable. The vocabulary and concepts here are not at all atypical of Evagrius, and could be gleaned from a number of other texts.
10. The practical mind is like a dog (Κυνικός ἐστι νοῦς πρακτικὸς) barking at all the unjust thoughts (ἀδικους . . . λογισμοὺς).\textsuperscript{23}

Animal anger at the approach of the demons of lust and gluttony is good and natural. But this anger must always be under the control of the νοῦς, the dog must be tame and obedient. For some especially nefarious demons will introduce lustful or gluttonous thoughts precisely in order to draw out an uncontrolled animal anger in the monk.\textsuperscript{24} So, Evagrius cautions, the νοῦς—that core of humanity within the human—must be hyper-vigilant to patrol the internal limit keeping control over the animals (the inhuman or ahuman ἐπιθυμία and θύμος) that reside within.

Gregory and Evagrius both task humanity with contemplating the divine through understanding the true nature of created things (the λόγοι of creatures which reflect the creative Λόγος). Both argue that in order to do this, the human must cultivate a life of virtue and restraint. If someone gives herself over to the concerns of the animals, her faculties of rational contemplation will atrophy, and she will become more like an animal, blind to the intelligible world. Instead of feeding the inner animal, she must exercise her rational faculties, and feed the human-within-the-human on the λόγοι that structure creation and point to its creator. For both Gregory and Evagrius, the trajectory of virtue is a transformation whereby the human becomes less and less animal, and more and more angel. For Evagrius, this trajectory of transcendence takes place through the absolute control of the νοῦς over a tame and malleable ἐπιθυμία and θύμος. For Gregory, this transcendence takes place through the purification (κάθαρσις) whereby


\textsuperscript{24} Evagrius, \textit{On Thoughts}, §§13, 16, 17; Evagrius, \textit{The Monk/Praktikos}, §24.
the animal σάρξ is rarefied so that it no longer impedes the contemplative illumination of the νοῦς. The grace of the divine Λόγος initiates a journey in which the redeemed leave animality behind, abandoning the inhuman or ahuman other within.

II. False Transcendence and True Contemplation

In the remainder of this paper, however, I want to query and problematize this trajectory of spiritual departure from animality—not by arguing that it is altogether misguided (though it may be), but by demonstrating that Gregory and Evagrius’ theological projects are both marked by a necessary failure on the terms of their own arguments. In fact, the particular conceptual slippage in their anthropological projects opens the possibility that animality may be the key to salvific transformation rather than its offscouring. Instead of either effacing the fractures to recover a ‘more positive’ Gregory and Evagrius, or blaming them anachronistically for shortsightedness concerning animality, I hope to demonstrate their inconsistencies in order to ‘start over’ from the anthropological cracks in these projects. This approach holds the possibility to change the role of human-animality in our theological descriptions of contemplation and salvation in a manner that continues in conversation with the tradition of Gregory and Evagrius.

Nemesius of Emesa, a contemporary of Gregory and Evagrius, notes that every species of animal is endowed with an ‘image of skill and a shadow of rationality’ that guides its behaviour.25 He adduces the cunning tricks of both rabbits and wolves whereby they intelligently

25 ‘Each kind of irrational animal (τῶν ἀλόγων) is moved by the drive proper to it (οἰκείαν ὀρμὴν), which has come about from the beginning in relation to its requirements and activity, which, in turn, it has in relation to its purposeful formation. The Maker did not abandon them totally helpless, but into each nature that [the Maker] did not cast a rational intelligence, [the
hunt and evade one another. The intelligent behaviour among animals appears for all purposes to be rational, but Nemesius disavows its rationality because every rabbit and wolf acts, so he says, in the same manner as every other, while truly rational human behaviour varies from individual to individual.

Alongside Nemesius’ rabbits and wolves, other strains of pseudo-rational creatures infest the textual tradition of Christian Late Antiquity; bees and ants seem to swarm into every discussion of animality and rationality. It is Philo who initiates the use of bees and ants for theological reflection, noting their complex social structures and manifestly well-ordered homes as evidence that divine providence has structured the world.26 Nemesius too has recourse to ants and bees as testimony to providential care over large communities.27 For Origen, the behaviour of bees and ants proves the superiority of rational beings over irrational beings—for even

______________________________


irrational creatures imitate the rational!\textsuperscript{28} Evagrius mentions bees and ants as ‘skilled workers’ and marvels at their craft,\textsuperscript{29} Jerome’s \textit{Life of Malchus} turns to ants as exemplars of monastic love and virtue, models of a community in which each one serves the collective good.\textsuperscript{30} Gregory too

\textsuperscript{28} ‘Neither has [Celsus] observed the difference in these matters [the behaviour of bees and ants] between things completed by reason and thought (τὰ ἀπὸ λογοῦ καὶ λογισμοῦ) and things that come about through irrational nature and basic constitution (ἀπ᾽ ἄλογου φύσεως καὶ κατασκευῆς ψυλῆς). Reason takes up responsibility for none of these [latter] realities in those who act, because none of them possess reason! But the eldest, the Son of God, the Ruler of all who are subordinate, has made the irrational nature as an irrational assistance to those who were not deemed worthy of reason (φύσιν ἄλογον πεποίηκε, βοηθοῦσαν ὡς ἄλογον τοῖς οὐκ ἀξιωθεῖσι λόγου).’ Origen, \textit{Contra Celsum}, 4.81, cf. 4.81-85 (text: \textit{Origène: Contre Celse} (M. Borret (ed.); Sources Chrétiennes, no. 136; Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1968); translation: \textit{Contra Celsum} (H. Chadwick (trans.); Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965)).


marvels at the quasi-rationality of ants and bees as evidence of God’s Λόγος giving structure to
the whole of creation.

Where does the industry and artistry (φιλεργὸν καὶ φιλότεχνον) of bees and
spiders come from? They fabricate and hold honeycombs together with
hexagonal, alternating pipes, the stability of which is systematically worked out
through partitioning walls and alternately interweaving the straight lines of the
corners. And all of this in such dusky light that the formations of the beehive must
be invisible! [Spiders] weave complex webs stretched in many shapes with
threads so very fine and nearly aerial that these are invisible from the beginning.
Of the same web they make worthy homes and hunting grounds where they enjoy
weaker creatures as food. What Euclid could mimic these—contemplating lines
(γραμμαῖς ἐμφιλοσοφῶν) without substance and struggling in their
demonstration? . . . And I remain silent with regard to the well-known
observations of the chambers and chamber-masters among the ants with food laid
up in store perfectly measured for the season, and again with regard to their many
roads, and leaders, and the good order of their projects.31

These authors, however, explain the ‘rational’ behaviour of ants, bees, and other animals by
externalizing the reason which guides their behaviour. In other words, it is not animal reason at
work, but a rationality mediated by the animal’s nature, or finally divine rationality which
instructs these creatures in the way that they should act. Much like Origen’s claim about
irrational mimesis of reason, Gregory exclaims (without, so far as I can tell, a sense of irony), ‘I
beg you, marvel at the intelligence of irrational nature and present your explanations! (Σύ δὲ μοι

31 Gregory of Nazianzus, Orat. 28.25, PG 36:60cd-61b.
The intelligence that is manifest in the lives of these creatures is not their own, but an intelligence which guides their lives from beyond. Ants and bees do not make plans and follow them through, they do not respond to the world around them, but merely react on the basis of implanted instinct. There is no space for reflection; these creatures behave ‘rationally’ in accordance with God’s will precisely by lacking their own rationality. Unthinkingly, they participate in the Λόγος of God implanted within them—and they are better for it.

Now, for Gregory and for Evagrius, the goal of ascetic contemplation is a more perfect participation in the divine Λόγος—whether in comprehending the manifold ways in which material creatures show forth the Λόγος of the intelligible creation or in the immortal joy of being drawn into the divine life. Being conformed to the divine Λόγος carries not only spiritual, but psychological, and physiological implications—it is the transformation of one’s whole being.

For Evagrius, the truly virtuous person simply reacts in accord with the divine will because she has internalized the divine Λόγος to such a degree.

50. What is it to the demons that they wish to affect in us gluttony, sexual immorality, greed, wrath, grudges and the rest of the passions? It is so that the mind might be fattened upon them, and thus unable to pray as is necessary. For these passions—since they begin from the irrational animal part (τοῦ ἀλόγου μέρους πάθη ἄρξαντα)—do not permit the mind to be moved in a rational manner (λογικῶς) to seek after the Word of God (τὸν Θεοῦ Λόγον).

---

32 Gregory of Nazianzus, Orat. 28.25, PG 36:60c
51. We pursue the virtues because of the reasons of beings (τοὺς λόγους τῶν γεγονότων), and [we pursue] these because of the Word who brings them to being, and this one most often appears in a prayerful condition.

52. A prayerful condition is the attainment of *apatheia*, for the most highly beloved, seized up to the intellectual height of philosophy and the spiritual mind (ὕψος νοητὸν ἁρπάζουσα τὸν φιλόσοφον, καὶ πνευματικὸν νοῦν).

53. To hasten to pray truly, it is necessary to master not only irascibility (θυμοῦ) and desire (ἐπιθυµίας), but also the passion-ridden mental representation (ἐµπαθοῦς νοήµατος) that comes out of them.33

The perfected human is ἰσάγγελος—equal to the angels in understanding the λόγοι of created things, an initiate into the γνῶσις of the divine life.34 In order to attain such a state, the monk must attune his nature to God such that contrary thoughts (λογισµοὶ) do not even gain enough traction on the ascetic mind to require consideration and rejection. The monk who attains ἀπάθεια remains utterly unmoved by the wiles of the demons.

Gregory describes contemplative participation in the divine life through the metaphor of *illumination*. Although illumination is fundamentally a metaphor about knowledge for Gregory, the knowledge that is gained through illumination and union with the divine is more experiential.


34 Evagrius, *Chapters on Prayer*, §113.
intimacy than discursive comprehension. Light expresses a continuity between God and humanity that bridges the Creator/creature distinction without rendering God accessible/comprehensible. The apex of spiritual perfection for Gregory is complete illumination.

By fear they are rectified, purified, and (so to speak) rarefied (λεπτυνομένους) in order to rise up to the heights. For where fear is, there is heeding of commands. Where heeding of commands is, there is purification of flesh (σαρκὸς κάθαρσις)—that cloud eclipsing the soul (τοῦ ἐπιπροσθοῦντος τῇ ψυχῇ νέφους), not allowing it to see the beam of divine light in purity. But where purification is, there is illumination (ἐλλαμψις), and illumination is the fulfillment of yearning (πόθου πλήρωσις) for those longing for great things, the greatest thing, or what lies beyond greatness.35

Furthermore, light is intimately bound up with λόγος within Gregory’s theology. Thus, ‘Indeed, the highest light is God—unapproachable, inexpressible, susceptible neither to being grasped by the mind nor defined by reason (οὔτε νῷ καταληπτὸν οὔτε λόγῳ ῥητόν), yet the illumination of every wholly rational nature (πάσης φωτιστικὸν λογικῆς φύσεως)’.36 Paradoxically, the light of God illumines rational—or perhaps better, ‘discursive’—creatures, yet can never be comprehended or encompassed in human discourse/rationality (λόγος). What is the nature of this gap between human λόγος and divine Λόγος—especially when animal behaviour is caught up so closely with divine wisdom?


36 Gregory of Nazianzus, Orat. 40.5, PG 36:364bc.
For both Gregory and Evagrius, the ‘gap’ that currently separates the human from God and causes so much misery is overcome—not because the human overcomes the creature/Creator distinction, and emphatically not because the human mind (νοῦς) is able to comprehend the divine essence in the terms of its own discursive thought (λόγος)—but because the human is conformed to God to such a degree that her instincts match God’s intentions perfectly. Thus although the human νοῦς with its λόγος is the aspect of human life most proximate to God, nevertheless in perfect union with God the νοῦς is flooded with light such that God is never the stable object of a complete human discourse (λόγος), but the incomprehensible subject whose nearness changes the whole human being endlessly and unimaginably. The redeemed human is outstripped and transformed by the ever-active Λόγος and πνεῦμα of God.

Where should the distinctively human λόγος so lauded by Gregory and Evagrius be situated relative to this utterly transparent suffusion of the redeemed creature in the Λόγος of God? For Gregory and Evagrius, human beings are rational and therefore do not merely react to the world, but are able to discern what is better and worse and respond. Rational vigilance distinguishes the human from the animal, who simply obeys unthinkingly the voice of instinct. Yet the space of independent response is also the space of resistance and rebellion to the divine Λόγος, and if the human being is going to be conformed more fully to the image of God, it may be the case that this space of response is precisely what is forfeited. Paradoxically, if one follows Gregory and Evagrius’ conceptions of salvation through, it is precisely the space of pure humanity generated by the anthropological machine that separates the beings called human from God. With a view toward subjectivity and freedom, the total transparency of the redeemed human λόγος to the divine Λόγος remains completely indistinguishable from the deterministic instincts attributed to animals. Who (or what), then, is the paradigmatic religious subject? The saintliest humanity, in
other words, may be found in the moral and spiritual animal, who—like the ants and the bees—participates in the order of justice, love, beauty, and humility instinctively, not because these are the products of her own reason, but because she is interpellated, subjectivized within an external rationality, the rationality of God. Once the anthropological machine is jammed and the compulsion to produce pure humanity is left in its tracks, Gregory and Evagrius might seem to suggest (inadvertently) that animals might be our best spiritual teachers, and that—were we quieted and tamed of our distinctive, discursive anthropological self-concern—our own animality might draw us further into communion with God.

The calling in which humanity is supposedly most differentiated from other animals—approaching God through disciplined contemplation—turns out to return human beings to a mode of subjectivity which is indistinguishable from that attributed to other animals. God’s Λόγος becomes the perfected human being’s most native and natural instinct so that her disposition, desire, and behaviour are completely aligned with God’s effulgent life. What substantial difference can remain between this perfected religious subjectivity and the instinctual subjectivity of other animals? If none can be found, then it would seem that clinging to the gears of the cultural machine that generates a hermetically exclusive domain for ‘humanity’ simultaneously produces the alienation that divides humanity from God. Paradoxically, even though they both labour to set humanity off from animality in a categorical manner, following the spiritual wisdom of Gregory and Evagrius may entail a deeper attention to—and perhaps even emulation of—the religious subjectivity of fellow animals. To return to Derrida’s question: What is it that feeds at the limit of the human and the animal? What is nourished by this boundary? What does the anthropological machine actually produce? Is it not a lifeless, inanimate, human λόγος—a non-animal suspended between life and death?
Bibliography:


— *Evagrius Ponticus* (W. Frankenberg (ed. and trans.); Abhandlungen der königlichen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen, Philolologisch-historische Klasse, Neue Folge, 13.2; Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1912).


— *On God and Christ: The Five Theological Orations and Two Letters to Cledonius* (L. Wickham and F. Williams (trans); Crestwood, NY: Saint Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002).


Somos, R., ‘Origen, Evagrius Ponticus and the Ideal of Impassibility’, *Origeniana Septima*.

(Louvain: Peeters, 1999).