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2012

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Eric D Meyer



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Gregory of Nyssa on Language, Naming God's Creatures, and the Desire of the Discursive Animal

The controversy between Gregory of Nyssa and Eunomius of Cyzicus over the origin and nature of human language might profitably be mapped across the tension between the two creation narratives in the opening chapters of Genesis. Eunomius, emphasizing the hexaemeron, finds the world a place of order divinely structured; Gregory reveling in Paradise, theologizes in a more mytho-poetic mode. Eunomius places great weight on the text's assertion that God verbally calls the light "day" and the dark "night"—a clear indicator for him of the divine origin of language.¹ In contrast, Gregory calls upon the moment in the Paradise narrative where God summons all the animals to Adam to see what he would call them. For Gregory, although the faculty to speak and understand is a gift of God, language itself is a creative human enterprise. Eunomius understands Adam to learn grammar and syntax directly from God,² but Gregory understands Adam's act of naming to be genuinely inventive—a creative interaction between the human and the animal that results in the production of meaning before God's attentive ear.

Our own claim is that he who made all things by wisdom, and who gave living form to this discursive creature [τὸ λογικὸν τοῦτο πλάσμα], merely by bestowing discourse [τὸν λόγον] on the species added the whole capacity to speak articulately [πᾶσαν τὴν δύναμιν τὴν λογικὴν]... We claim [that] the thinking power of the mind... observes things and to prevent the information falling into confusion, attaches signals in the form of words [σήμαντρά] as labels to everything. Such a doctrine was confirmed by great Moses when he said that names were attached to the dumb animals [τοῖς ἀλόγοις τῶν ζῴων] by Adam, writing in these words: [Gen 2:19-20].³

¹ All citations of *Contra Eunomium II* refer to the page number in Gregory of Nyssa, *Gregory of Nyssa: Contra Eunomium II: An English Version with Supporting Studies*, ed. Lenka Karfikova, Scot Douglass and Johannes Zachhuber, trans. Stuart George Hall (Boston: Brill, 2007); hereafter *CE II*, followed by a reference to the Greek text in Werner Jaeger, ed., *Contra Eunomium Libri*, vol. 1 of *Gregorii Nysseni Opera* (Leiden: Brill, 1960); hereafter *GNO*. Eunomius's argument from Genesis 1 in his non-extant *Apologia Apologiae* can be found (via Gregory) in *CE II*, 199 (*GNO* 1:269-70).

² According to Gregory, Eunomius "uses perverse exegesis of this passage to make a forced argument that the animal species were not named by Adam." *CE II* 159 (*GNO* 1:444); cf. *CE II*, 117 (*GNO* 1:263).

³ Gregory of Nyssa, *CE II*, 149-50 (*GNO* 1:400-02); translation altered. Throughout the paper I render λόγος, λογικός, etc. by means of the terms "discourse, discursive." This is not an unproblematic translation, but insofar as "discourse" connotes internally coherent patterns of both speech and thought, I think that it best approximates the semantic plasticity in Gregory's text. The reader should not collapse the term too quickly into either speech or thought, as I am relying on a measure of ambiguity to maintain the inner connection that Gregory assumes. In any case, for the purposes of this paper "discourse/discursive" is certainly preferable to both the traditional translation as "reason/rational" and to John Behr's rendering of Gregory's ζῶον λογικὸν as "word-bearing animal," John Behr, "The Rational Animal: A Rereading of Gregory of Nyssa's *De hominis opificio*," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 7, no. 2 (1999): 231.

This paper will take Gregory's emphasis on Genesis 2:19-20 as a starting point for examining the way in which Gregory's account of language structures his theological anthropology—particularly insofar as language is implicated in Gregory's articulation of the differences and similarities between humans, animals, and God. I will contend that while Gregory *explicitly* uses language to distance/differentiate the human from the animal and to connect/compare humanity to God, Gregory's careful attention to the limits of language sets up a basic structural parallel between human and animal life focused on the orienting and compelling power of desire. In light of this parallel, both God's image and God's redemption of humanity can be seen as events that stand open to the animal rather than points of differentiation and exclusion.

The (Exclusively) Human Nature of Language

One of the more unexpected entailments of Gregory's argument in *Contra Eunomium* is that language is natural to human beings alone. The "proper" possession and use of language marks a difference between human beings and animals; but perhaps counterintuitively, Gregory also sees it separating human nature from God. Let us examine more closely how (or where?) language "places" Adam in the cosmos between the animals and God.

On the one (divine) side, language is unnatural to God on account of the formal necessities of *using* language. The use of language presupposes dimensionality in both space and time, because any speech presumes a listener, some interval of space that is spoken across, and the duration of time required to enunciate syllables in succession.⁴ Gregory mocks Eunomius for subordinating the Son, not only to the Father, but also to time and space by suggesting that language is proper to God.⁵ For the consubstantial persons of the Trinity meaning is shared without inhibition; the "action of the mind" itself is somehow communicative. It is foolish to think that the holy Trinity should have need of language to communicate

⁴ The best extended reflection on spatio-temporality as proper to creatures and not to God in Gregory's thought remains the first chapter of Hans Urs von Balthasar's, *Presence and Thought: An Essay on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa*, trans. Mark Sebanc (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 27-35, esp n.46. See also Johannes Zachhuber, *Human Nature in Gregory of Nyssa: Philosophical Background and Theological Significance* (Boston: Brill, 2000), 154.

⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *CE II*, 105 (*GNO* 1:212-14).

because there is no temporal or spatial medium—no separation of οὐσία at all—in which that linguistic communication could take place.⁶ While discursiveness (being λογικός) is shared by God and human beings, language is the necessary means of communicating meaning for intelligent beings separated by space and time:

No one, I believe, is so stuffed up with choking snivel as to be unaware that the only-begotten Son, who is in the Father, and perceives the Father in himself, has no need of noun or verb [ὀνόματος ἢ ῥήματος] for where the immaterial and intelligent nature is concerned, the action of the mind is a word [λόγος] which has nothing to do with the physical use of organs. As it is, since the thoughts which arise in us are unable to make themselves apparent because our nature is enclosed in its fleshly garment, we are obliged to attach various names to things as signs and thereby to make the processes of the mind accessible to other people.”⁷

Thus, Gregory sees language as a necessary corollary of the *enfleshment of intelligence*.

On the other (animal) side, while language is a function of the conditions of bodiliness, it cannot simply be attributed to materiality for Gregory, for not every body uses language. Gregory’s favored term for the animals is ἄλογοι (“non-discursive”)—which signifies both irrationality and the inability to communicate intelligibly.⁸ Yet, the distinction between discursive and non-discursive animals is not merely intellectual; it is inscribed in the *anatomical* differences between human and animal flesh. In human beings the shape and placement of limbs and organs has been altered to facilitate discourse. Human hands are Gregory’s favorite example. Because the human being was made upright she no longer needs forelegs to support half her weight. This means that her hands are free to carry and manipulate objects, to build and to sow according to the patterns set forth in her mind. But the shape of her hands also allows her face and mouth to be put to a different purpose than animals’. Where animals gather and tear their food with their mouths, using powerful lips and tongues and teeth, the human being does all these things (more or less) politely with her hands. In turn the mouth, lips, and throat are freed to become delicate instruments capable of the fine motor

⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *CE II*, 105-06 (*GNO* 1:212-18).

⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, *CE II* 147, (*GNO* 1.390-91).

⁸ For examples see Gregory of Nyssa, *CE II*, 150 (*GNO* 1:402); 152, (*GNO* 1:412); 154 (*GNO* 1:421); 159 (*GNO* 1:444).

movements that speech requires.⁹ Thus, while language is a function of intelligence enfolded, language exerts a counter-force that influences the very shape of flesh itself.

In summary, language arises out of humanity's unique place in the cosmos and has no proper "place" in the cosmos besides the human. This situation is reflected perfectly in Genesis 2. Adam stands among the assembled creatures as one of them in hair, flesh, and bone, and yet, even as he interacts with all the surrounding creatures, Adam's body and mind are the site of an intersection with a different plane altogether.¹⁰ For the sounds that Adam makes are subject to divine interest and divine scrutiny in a manner unlike the sounds of all the other animals. Because Adam shares derivatively in the discursiveness of God, human language is the enfleshment of meaning in the dimensions of space and time.

The Limits of Discourse: Language and the Eschatological Horizon

Having established that language is *unique* to human beings in Gregory's cosmology, this section examines the degree to which language is *essential* to the structure of human life. Answering this question, it will be instructive to examine both Eunomius's and Gregory's accounts of language more closely.

Eunomius sees a strong connection between language—particularly the words by which objects and actions are named—and the essences of language's referents; there is a *fit* between words and things. In Eunomius's understanding providence determines semantics; out of the bounty of divine wisdom God has placed words and things together so that language not only bears knowledge about the state of things, but also supporting arguments that shore up such knowledge as secure and certain. Eunomius's certainty applies not only to descriptions of terrestrial matters, but to theological language about God as well.¹¹ Through

⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *De hominis opificio*, X.1-2 (PG 44:152b); translations are drawn from *NPNF* vol.5, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1954).

¹⁰ Alden Mosshammer, "Disclosing but not Disclosed: Gregory of Nyssa as Deconstructionist," in *Studien zu Gregor von Nyssa und der Christlichen Spätantike*, (New York: Brill, 1990), 105.

¹¹ For Eunomius, if the Son is not *essentially* derivative and subordinate to the Father, then the terms "begotten" and "Son" are equivocal and misleading. The underlying premise for Eunomius's position—the very point at which Gregory disagrees so strongly—is that there is a strong, providential fit between language and reality that makes language a reliable tool for the production and exchange of genuine knowledge about God and the world. Eunomius of Cyzicus, "Liber Apologeticus," in *Eunomius: The Extant*

God's providential ordering of the linguistic realm, language is a reliable medium for secure knowledge and correct praise. Gregory caricatures Eunomius's epistemological confidence and rigorism as the ramblings of a rationalistic pedant more concerned with the integrity of his own (private) systematic theology than with a genuine encounter with God. Eunomius falsely regards discourse as a means of ensconcing essences in knowledge, so that, in the hands of the "truly wise," language is a clear map to navigate the world with mastery.¹²

In contrast, Gregory's understanding of language is marked by a chaste attention to its limits. He recognizes the limits of language on two fronts: first, the ineradicable slippage between reality, thought, and language that renders language imprecise and misleading; second, language is fundamentally inadequate for both description and instruction with regard to the transformative communion of human beings with God.

For Gregory, human finitude entails that every interchange between reality, thought, and language also marks a loss. Because Gregory eschews any providential determination of language beyond God's gift of the *ability* and *impetus* to speak, there can be no master signifier beyond socio-linguistic conventions that would metaphysically establish firm connections between words and things. Gregory sees language as a creative endeavor undertaken by the human community in attempts to guide, instruct, entertain and control one another. Even so, language never communicates perfectly. Some unrecoverable remainder is always lost in moving from perception, to conception (ἐπίνοια), to speech.¹³ This loss, however, is not a cause for

Works, trans. Richard Vaggione (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 45. See also John Demetracopoulos, "Glossogony or Epistemology? Eunomius of Syzicus's and Basil of Caesarea's Stoic Concept of Epinoia and its Misrepresentation by Gregory of Nyssa," in *CE II*, 388-90.

¹² Gregory argues that by trying to metaphysically interweave names and essences, Eunomius naturalizes language, attributing to it a definitive grip on reality more powerful than any other human capacity for sensation or thought; *CE II*, 94 (*GNO* 1:163-66). From Gregory's epistemologically reserved perspective, this amounts to an arbitrary absolutizing of one narrow linguistic and cultural moment. The strong metaphysical component to Eunomius's notion of language cannot account for the multiplicity, fluidity, and diversity of languages across time and space *CE II*, 192-93 (*GNO* 1:546-47); 114-16 (*GNO* 1:246-61); 122-23 (*GNO* 1:284-88); 151 (*GNO* 1:406-409). See also Georges Arabatzis, "Limites du Langage, Limites du Monde dans le Contre Eunome II de Grégoire de Nysse," in *CE II*, 379-80.

¹³ "What word is not fleeting as soon as it is spoken?...If therefore what makes him [Eunomius] characterize the word as a concept is that it does not remain a word but vanishes together with the sound of the voice, he cannot avoid calling every word a concept, since no substance remains to any word once it is uttered." Gregory of Nyssa, *CE II*, 69 (*GNO* 1:44-45); see also Mosshammer, "Disclosing but not Disclosed," 102, 104. Demetracopoulos argues that by deploying ἐπίνοια linguistically in addition to its more traditional epistemological application, Gregory introduces a slippage between words and thoughts that (according to Demetracopoulos) causes Gregory to misunderstand and slander Eunomius (as well as over-extending Basil's use of the term).

despair in Gregory's mind; rather, it generally necessitates a multiplication of words and images (all of which remain partially inadequate) to more accurately mark out what is meant, even though that asymptotic process always remains incomplete.¹⁴

The everyday limitations of language, however, are overshadowed by its theological inadequacies. According to Gregory, our faltering attempts to describe God are instructive, capable of guarding against false conceptions and guiding toward better ones, but are ultimately only preliminary sketches that fail in all but the most rudimentary description of God. Even the language of Scripture does not describe God in the mystery of the divine essence, but points to God's modes of self-presentation and to God's acts.¹⁵ Theological language is a series of illuminating gestures in the direction of the divine, attempts to find the most fitting concepts and language for God, who exceeds every boundary of thought and speech.¹⁶ The intensity of God's infinity overwhelms every discursive approach, so that all language about God remains a hermeneutic attempt to render sensible that which outstrips sense entirely.

Not only does language fail to convey the deepest knowledge possible of God, it is also impotent in the human spiritual ascent toward God—language can convey only so much knowledge. This limitation marks a transition to another mode of approach to God, rather than the terminus of that approach.¹⁷ Thus, the

Demetracopoulos provides a great service in clarifying Eunomius's position against all his many detractors; nevertheless, in the process he crucially mischaracterizes Gregory's disagreement with Eunomius as an *ignoratio elenchi*, when in fact, Gregory marks *both* Eunomius's epistemology and his understanding of language as being over-confident. Gregory does not restrict his criticism of Eunomius concerning *ἐπινοια* to the latter's failure to recognize the validity of *linguistic* inventiveness, but regards Eunomius's confidence in the "fit" between concepts, words, and things to be unfounded. Demetracopoulos mistakes this more comprehensive disagreement for confusion on Gregory's part. Demetracopoulos, "Glossology or Epistemology," 393-94.

¹⁴ "Therefore, when the mind is exercised upon high and invisible subjects, which the senses cannot reach—and I am speaking about the divine and ineffable Nature, on which it is rash to seize on anything hastily with the mind, and still rasher to commit the interpretation of the idea engendered in us to casual words...No suitable appellations being available for these [ideas] which might adequately represent the subject, *we are obliged to reveal the idea of the Deity engendered in us by many and various titles, in whatever way we can.*" Gregory of Nyssa, *CE II*, 189 (*GNO* 1:576-77), emphasis added. See also the very ambitious and perhaps insufficiently nuanced study by Anna Williams, *The Divine Sense: the Intellect in Patristic Theology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 131.

¹⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *CE II*, 83 (*GNO* 1:105).

¹⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *CE II*, 72 (*GNO* 1:60-61). See also Mosshammer, "Disclosing but not Disclosed," 108-09.

¹⁷ Tina Dolidze, "The Cognitive Function of *Epinoia* in *CE II* and its meaning for Gregory of Nyssa's Theory of Theological Language," in *CE II*, 447.

failures of discourse carry as much significance for Gregory as do its successes. In spiritual ascent, *discourse* is swept up and subsumed in *desire* as the propulsive force drawing the human being onward into a deeper knowledge of God. God's epistemological elusiveness and the failure of language to comprehend the divine nature become a kind of lure that spurs the human being on to seek another path beyond discourse's limitations.¹⁸ Thus, from Gregory's perspective, by exaggerating the capacity of human discourse to know and communicate about God, Eunomius cuts off the path of desire and makes God an object of knowledge rather than a focal point of human longing. Eunomius's rationalistic theology appears to Gregory not only as a linguistic circumscription of the divine, but also as a truncation of human nature, a premature collapse of the human into the symbolic realm of discourse, and a failure to recognize that the whole structure of human life stretches out beyond even the lofty reach of reason.

One key piece of evidence in this regard is Gregory's discussions of incomprehensibility as a primary mark of God's image.¹⁹ Every attempt of discourse to come to grips with human consciousness—whether it be to explain it, or to guide human life toward full satisfaction—necessarily excludes, divides, and reduces so that whatever comprehension results is only a parody of the human. Human nature eludes every attempt to grasp it, so that for Gregory, human life is fundamentally structured in God's image around a void of incomprehensibility. Paradoxically, this gap at the heart of human nature is not a deficiency or a problem to be solved, but is integral to humanity's perfection insofar as, at the heart of human nature there lies an inexhaustible impulse for ascent, a structuring desire that carries the human being beyond the limits of discourse toward the divine.²⁰ The epistemology of discourse gives way to an alternate epistemology of

¹⁸ For this reason, the anti-Eunomian writings should be regarded as the hardened edge of a much more expansive body of thought. The restrictions of polemic writing and the precision and narrowness of focus required by the genre necessarily exclude more expansive, metaphorically rich accounts of the subjects under treatment. The polemic is only the hard shell protecting a complex, living and moving body of thought. Sarah Coakley is surely right to insist that Gregory's pastoral and exegetical writings are equally representative (if not more so) of Gregory's theology. Sarah Coakley, "Rethinking Gregory of Nyssa: Introduction," in *Rethinking Gregory of Nyssa*, ed. Sarah Coakley (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 6-8.

¹⁹ Incomprehensibility is one of many expressions of the divine image in humanity and is developed at several points in Gregory's writings. *De hom. op.* XI.3 (PG 44:156a); *CE II*, 83 (*GNO* 1:106-08).

²⁰ According to von Balthasar, Gregory's attribution of incomprehensibility to the human soul "is perhaps the first time a Greek thinker considered the incomprehensibility of a thing...as a perfection." Von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought*, 94. See also

desire, productive of a very different kind of knowledge—the sort that Gregory describes best with the imagery of the blessed darkness of the cloud on Sinai, or the rapture of union in the Song of Songs. Language, for all its power to shape human life, remains secondary to desire within the human being's salvific transformation. Thus Adam's ability to name, and the corporate function of human language more generally, must finally be seen as secondary to desire in inhabiting the divine communion that finally envelops human life. Gregory does indeed speak of the human as the discursive animal,²¹ yet there remains plenty of evidence within Gregory's writings that any reductive inattention to the *animal* who is discursive will produce an aberrant distortion. God's intensive mystery only grows darker and richer the more the human is enveloped in grace and love, and the growing immediacy with the divine only fans the insatiable drive to reach further.²²

The Function of Discourse Along the Trajectory of (Animal) Desire

At this point, having articulated the opacity of the thinking human subject to herself as an aspect of the *imago dei* and the terminus of discourse in desire, we are prepared to return to Adam and the animals with fresh insight. I submit that Gregory's attention to the limitations of language and the centrality of desire to both Gregory's theological anthropology and his account of spiritual ascent mark a fracture where the purity of his distinction between the discursive human and the non-discursive (ἄλογοι) beasts breaks down and the animal returns to play a theologically positive role, despite Gregory's disavowal. That by which Gregory marks off human difference from the animal, namely discourse, finally turns the human back toward

Lewis Ayres, "Deification and the Dynamics of Nicene Theology: The Contribution of Gregory of Nyssa," *Saint Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 49, no. 4 (2005): 393.

²¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *De hom. op.*, VIII.8 (PG 44:148c).

²² Recognizing the function of (animal) desire in the trajectory of spiritual ascent somewhat reduces the tension in Gregory's soteriology (between the cosmic/bodily aspect and the contemplative/psychic aspect) noted by J. Warren Smith, "The Body of Paradise and the Body of the Resurrection: Gender and the Angelic Life in Gregory of Nyssa's '*De hominis opificio*,'" *Harvard Theological Review* 92, no. 2 (2006): 227.

the animal by virtue of its limits. Or, in other words, the *imago dei* does not *exclude* the animals Adam names so much as it blesses and leads them forward.

First, Gregory describes a *dependence* of human life on animal life at three points, of which I will articulate one. In addition to a developmental or evolutionary dependence based on Gregory's notion of vegetable, sensual, and discursive soul, and a physical dependence that directly correlates to dominion, another point of dependence is found where human virtue and vice are built from the "raw material" of animal desire. For Gregory, the passions of the animals are simply "natural" or "fitting," that is, without *moral* weight. Gregory mentions examples like the "greed" that enables herbivores to gather enough grass to sustain themselves, the "lust" that enables rodents and insects to reproduce in such great numbers, or the "fear" that drives animals into flight for self-preservation. All these are present within the human being as well, but discourse sets these movements within an *ethical* plane. The particular enactment of the animal drives present within human life is subject to ethical judgment and indicative of a broader moral and spiritual trajectory. Nevertheless, both virtue and vice draw upon the energy of animal passion and thus, despite Gregory's predominant stress on the latter, *both* virtue and vice are *materially dependent* on animal passions.²³

The second point in this synthesis is to note that although Gregory generally invokes the *imago dei* to shore up human difference relative to animals, its function within his theological anthropology when he is *not* focused on differentiating human beings actually sets up a precise structural parallel between human and animal life. In Gregory's conception, animals are creatures of necessity whose lives are determined by

²³ Thus, under the proper guidance of a well-trained discursive faculty, animal drives become the strength of virtue. "So, on the contrary, if discourse assumes sway over such emotions, each of them is transmuted to a form of virtue; for anger produces courage, terror caution, fear obedience, hatred aversion from vice, the power of love the desire for what is truly beautiful; high spirit in our character raises our thought above the passions, and keeps it from bondage to what is base." Gregory of Nyssa, *De hom. op.* XVIII.5 (PG 44:193bc); translation altered. On the other hand, if a subject gives himself over to the plain expression of his animal passions and subordinates discourse to the pursuit of animal drives, he will inevitably (and "unnaturally") become a greedy, lascivious, or cowardly person. "These attributes, then, human nature took to itself from the side of the brutes; for those qualities with which brute life was armed for self-preservation, when transferred to human life, became passions; for the carnivorous animals are preserved by their anger, and those which breed largely by their love of pleasure; cowardice preserves the weak... The rising of anger in us is indeed akin to the impulse of the brutes; but it grows by the alliance of thought: for thence come malignity, envy, deceit, conspiracy, hypocrisy; all these are the result of the evil husbandry of the mind." *De hom. op.* XVIII.2-4 (PG 44:192b-193b).

desires for food, bodily well-being, and procreation.²⁴ But whereas the lives of animals are subject to necessity, transparently ordered toward self-preservation and reproduction, the lives of humans are opaque, because, although human beings share the activities associated with these animal desires, human life is marked by the freedom and self-reflection of discursiveness.²⁵ Yet for all the difference that discourse inscribes, the fundamental structuring element of both human and animal life is propulsive desire, not discourse, inasmuch as human life is ultimately oriented toward a communion with God that floods the human capacity for understanding or description. The human approach to God depends on a willingness to be fundamentally oriented by a lack or hunger wherein discourse is powerless to grasp either the object of desire (God), the *path* of desire's ascent, or even the nature of being a desiring subject.²⁶ It is no accident in Gregory's mind that Scripture speaks of desire for God with metaphors of hunger, thirst, shelter, warmth, and sexual drive, for it is through and with these desires that the *whole* human person might be oriented toward the transcendent and drawn into spiritual ascent.²⁷

All of this affinity with animal life decisively settles the propriety of assertions (such as those made by Harrison, Laird, Burrus, and Hart) that, for Gregory, the points of greatest continuity with animal life are also the sites where divine grace breaks in and draws the human creature forward in its transformation.²⁸ It

²⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *De hom. op.* XVIII.2-9 (PG 44:192b-196a).

²⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *De hom. op.* XV.2 (PG 44:177a); XVIII.3 (PG 44:192cd); see also Smith, "Body of Paradise," 210.

²⁶ "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." Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, trans. Abraham Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1978), I.5-7, (PG 44:300d-301a). See also Rowan Williams, "Macrina's Deathbed Revisited: Gregory of Nyssa on Mind and Passion," in *Christian Faith and Greek Philosophy in Late Antiquity: Essays in Tribute to George Christopher Stead*, ed. L.R. Wickham and C.P. Bammerl (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 242; and Von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought*, 45.

²⁷ "She calls him who cannot be comprehended by any name, is taught by the guards that she loves him who is unattainable...Because the desire for her beloved is frustrated, her yearning for his beauty cannot be fulfilled. But the veil of despair is removed when the bride learns that the true satisfaction of her desire consists in always progressing in her search and ascent: when her desire is fulfilled, it gives birth to a further desire for the transcendent. Thus the veil of her despair is removed, and the bride will always see more of her beloved's incomprehensible beauty throughout all eternity." Gregory of Nyssa, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, trans. Casimir McCambley (Brookline, MA: Hellenic College Press, 1987), 225 (*GNO* 6:370-1).

²⁸ Verna Harrison "Allegory and Asceticism in Gregory of Nyssa," *Semeia* 57 (1992): 113-30; Martin Laird, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith: Union, Knowledge, and Divine Presence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Virginia Burrus, "Begotten, not Made": *Conceiving Manhood in Late Antiquity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 81; Mark Hart, "Gregory of Nyssa's Ironic Praise of Celibacy," *Heythrop Journal* 33, no. 1 (1992): 10.

becomes abundantly clear in Gregory's *Commentary on the Song of Songs* that the area in which Gregory regards human nature as closest to the animals—the consuming grip of sexual passion—also provides an indispensable metaphorical anchor for human desire for God.²⁹ The *rhetorical* freight borne by this metaphor points to a *theological* freight that Gregory conscientiously avoids thematizing, namely the centrality of “animal” life within the economy of human salvation. Thought and language are incapable of conceiving or naming God in all but the most oblique and indirect terms, yet the incomprehensible gap at the core of human subjectivity generates a straining desire that reaches out toward the even more incomprehensible allure of God and draws the human being onward and upward in a simultaneous rapture and craving that are indiscernible from one another.

In this vein, the ἀπάθεια that Gregory enjoins upon his readers can be seen as the refusal to prematurely seize on any aspect of creation as the site of fulfillment. So long as human beings are overcome with passion, they are deceived into thinking that some object or action present to experience is capable of resolving the discordant interval within their own psyche into a full and complete harmony. Discourse is not to eradicate passionate desire altogether, but to oversee and enforce a refusal of any closure of the gap within subjectivity (named by the *imago dei*) that should properly propel the human to seek and contemplate God.³⁰ The height of human wisdom consists in recognizing that even the presence of God does not close or heal this gap in subjectivity, but opens it even wider as the fitting receptacle for the dark immediacy of God's

²⁹ “What could be more paradoxical than to make nature purify itself of its own passion and teach detachment (ἀπάθεια) in words normally suggesting passion (πάθος)? Solomon does not speak of the necessity of being outside of the flesh's impulses or of mortifying our bodily limbs on earth, or of cleansing our mouths of talk of passion; rather, he disposes the soul to be attentive to purity through words which seem to indicate the complete opposite and he indicates a pure meaning through the use of sensuous language.” *Song* 50, 6.29. See also Harrison “Allegory and Asceticism,” 124.

³⁰ In this regard, Rowan Williams definition of passion as an “impulse or affect divorced from the proper ends of a reasoning being, impulse as leader not as instrument” (“Macrina's Deathbed Revisited,” 237) is to be vastly preferred to that of Anthony Meredith: “Passion is whatever originates in the elements either of desire or of aggression within us, born of our animal nature and not strictly belonging to our rational nature”; Anthony Meredith S.J., “What Does Gregory of Nyssa Mean by Pathos,” *The Downside Review* 126, no. 442 (2008): 64-65. Though he is correct to note Gregory's overwhelmingly negative assessment of passion (πάθος), Meredith certainly cannot sustain the argument that Gregory views “our rational nature” as the primary means for the human approach to God over and against desire and those elements of the human that are continuous with “animal nature.” Both definitions, however, miss the point that what is destructive about passion is its *closure to transcendence* through fixation on what can be grasped immanently, whether in understanding or in pleasure.

love.³¹ In Gregory's ἀπάθεια, discourse functions to direct desire toward its transcendent goal by militating against any premature collapse of desire into its "merely" animal expression, or worse, its misdirection in vice. By contrast, Eunomius's disavowal of the animal is thorough and decisive. Given that discourse is the medium of certainty concerning the divine essence (as ἀγγένητος) and suffices as an approach to God, Eunomius relegates both desire and the animal to the margins of theological irrelevancy. The animal is merely the object of human dominion; desire only fogs the precision of discourse.

The fracture in Gregory's thought whereby the animal escapes Gregory's disavowal and re-enters his theological anthropology with a positive role indicates the fluidity of the human-animal distinction and the possibility of rethinking the role of animals in conceptualizing humanness. Gregory's recognition of discourse's limits might reconcile discourse with the animal through the openness of animal desire to a transcendent trajectory of transformation that exceeds the capacity of any discursive grasp.³² So, although Adam's language sets him apart from the animals, that separation ultimately creates the space for a deeper synthesis. *The human is not the animal* because of the presence of discourse, but at its limits discourse is subsumed and "animal" desire draws the human further in divine communion. What remains is a negation of the negation: the final function of discourse is not to differentiate the human from the animal but to guard and guide the animal that stretches out toward the glory of God. The continuity between human and animal and the limits of discourse entail that humanity's spiritual service to creation in God's image is not a "pulling up" from above, in which human beings raise animals to a higher plane of existence; instead, it is a reconciliatory "getting down into," in which a deeper, ecosystemic integration (guided by wisdom) guards the multivalence of desire as an approach to God.

³¹ "This truly is the vision of God: never to be satisfied in the desire to see him. But one must always, by looking at what he can see, rekindle his desire to see more. Thus, no limit would interrupt growth in the ascent to God, since no limit to the Good can be found nor is the increasing of desire for the Good brought to an end because it is satisfied." Gregory of Nyssa, *Moses* II.239 (PG 44:404d-405a).

³² This argument should not be mistaken for an attempt to argue that Gregory was a proto-environmentalist, nor an attempt to exonerate Gregory from contributing to theological patterns that underwrite illegitimate exploitation of creation. It is my hope that careful attention to the strange thought-world of ancient Christian writers can dislodge ecologically destructive "commonsense" notions of being human and open up space for a relocation of the human in the cosmos that remains faithful to the tradition and open to the Spirit's leading in the present.

Adam's naming of the creatures in the garden is a mode of description undertaken before God that labors to understand *in order to guide, protect, and foster desire*. Naming, properly speaking, produces an understanding that is not closed (with pretense to a totality of comprehension, or a grasping of essences), but is an understanding in transit—desirous of divine communion and open to the transformation effected by divine grace. Adam's naming, a speech that is borne on the breath of the incomprehensible God, is a gift of the human to creation whereby its ecosystemic integrity might be guarded, directed, and preserved—provided that discourse does not close itself off from both the animals and from God in a presumption to mastery. Adam's naming is not the establishment of a “grip” on reality, but an opening (through God's image) for the “meaning” of animal life to stretch out toward communion with God.