

CHAPTER 6

Eros and Distance: Transformation of Desire in St Gregory of Nyssa*

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Abstract: The paper aims to analyze the relation between the notion of love or desire (*eros*) for God, and the notion of distance (*diastema*) between God and the created beings in the works of St Gregory of Nyssa. These two notions are interrelated on different levels, because distance that separates God from the created beings is traversed out of desire for God of the latter. First, the distance as temporal interval will be investigated, which separates the present day from the Second Coming of Christ, which is elaborated by Gregory in his early work *On Virginity*. The focus will then be shifted to the distance between good and evil, that Gregory explicates in the works of his middle period such as *On the making of man*, *Against Eunomius III* and *The Great Catechetical Oration*. Finally, the distance as an inherent characteristic of created nature that never disappears will be analyzed by focusing on Gregory's later works, such as *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, *On perfection* and *The Life of Moses*.

Keywords: Gregory of Nyssa, distance, love, desire, period, perfection

Introduction

The concept of love belongs to those notions which everybody has experienced in his or her life, but to define it is difficult due to its complex character. One of the characteristics of love is the urge of the lover to dwell in the presence of, or to be united with, the loved one. While in the case of

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human relations it is not difficult to be united with loved ones in different ways, the same is not easily attainable if God is the loved one. The present paper aims to investigate how the distance between God and the loving human beings is traversed out of love by St Gregory, the fourth-century bishop of Nyssa in Cappadocia (modern-day Harmandali, Turkey).

Eros rendered as longing, love and desire for God, and *diastema*, understood as distance between God and creation, are two Greek terms that are central to the thought of St Gregory. Even other Greek concepts considered as the most distinctive features of Gregory's theological vocabulary, such as the concept of continual advancement, expressed by the term *epektasis*, can be explained by means of these two terms. Longing for God inspires the created beings to continually advance in traversing distance (*diastema*), which separates them from God. However, these two notions do not appear in Gregory's work in a single form or with fixed meanings. The term *eros*, which has a long history of usage before Gregory in both everyday and philosophical, mostly Platonic, language, occurs in this single form only nine times in Gregory's writings. Other terms with the similar meaning of desire and longing for God, such as *epithymia*, play a more prominent role in Gregory's theological vocabulary. Therefore, in the course of this paper it will be specified which term that refers to longing, desire or love is used by Gregory.

The other term, "distance" (*diastema*), is spread throughout Gregory's work, but with different meanings. The term itself, apart from being used in everyday language, is introduced by Aristotle as *terminus technicus*, with the meaning of spatial distance.¹ The Stoics later extended the meaning of the term to temporal distance or interval, in order to express the continuous nature of time between two world conflagrations (*ekpyrosis*).² Philo was the first author who, by employing the term in the Stoic sense as long temporal interval, argued in favor of the creation of time as temporal distance.³ Later on the term, in this cosmological context,

1 The short history of the meaning of the term is given in Simplicius, *In Aristotelis Categoriae commentarium*, 350, 15f.

2 Joannes Stobaeus, *Anthologium* I, 106,5–106,9; Stobaeus, *Eclogae* I, fragm. 509, 164,15–18.

3 Philo, *De opificio mundi* 26,4; *De aeternitate mundi* 6,4; 52,5–7.

was used by Origen⁴ and Methodius of Olympus,⁵ through whom it came to Gregory (Otis, 1976, pp. 332–336). Another context in which the term is used before Gregory is the Trinitarian context. St Alexander of Alexandria, the immediate predecessor of Athanasius the Great on the Alexandrine diocesan throne, argued against Arius's stance about the Son's beginning by denying any kind of distance between the Father and the Son.⁶ With this exact meaning the term is later used by St Athanasius against Arians,⁷ and by St Basil the Great against Eunomius.⁸ However, apart from the already imbedded meanings, the term acquired some new meanings in Gregory's thought. The term is not only used in a cosmological and Trinitarian context, but is applied in an ontological context too, thus becoming, for Gregory, a chief identifier of creation, and the creaturely feature that never disappears. All these contexts in which the term distance appears are somehow connected with desire, or rather with a certain transformation in desire. Therefore, this paper aims to analyze the connection between these two notions in regard to the transformation of creaturely desire into more perfect love for God, throughout various phases of Gregory's work.

The concept of desire will be analyzed a) in the context of *diastema* as temporal interval, which separates the present day from the Second Coming of Christ, then b) in the context of vertical *diastema* as the distance between good and evil, and c) in the context of *diastema* as an inherent characteristic of created nature that never disappears. Second, transformation of desire will be discussed in three different theological contexts: ascetic, ethical and eschatological. Third, the transformation of desire will be examined diachronically, that is, in the context of the works from different periods of Gregory's life, from the earliest to the latest.

The paper consists of three case studies. The first case study deals with the relationship between desire and temporal *distance* in the context of Gregory's early ascetical writing *On virginity*, dating from 371. The second

4 Origen, *De principiis* II 3,2.

5 Methodius, *De resurrectione* II 25,2.

6 Alexander Alexandrinus, *Epistula ad Alexandrum Constantinopolitanum* 23,14.

7 Athanasius Alexandrinus, *De synodis Arimini in Italia et Seleucia in Isauria* 26,9,1.

8 Basilus, *Adversus Eunomium* II 12.

case study is an analysis of the concepts of desire and vertical *distance* in the ethical context of the works from the middle period, such as *On the making of man* (*De hominis opificio*), *Against Eunomius* (*Contra Eunomium*) III and *The Great Catechetical Oration* (*Oratio catechetica magna*), that emerged in the late 70s and early 80s of the fourth century. The third case study refers to the mystical and eschatological context in which desire is associated with *distance*, and is restricted to Gregory's late works *Homilies on the Song of Songs* (*In Canticum canticorum homiliae*), *On perfection* (*De perfectione*) and *The Life of Moses* (*De vita Moysis*), composed between 389 and 394.

On Virginitate (De Virginitate)

In his early work, *On virginity*, Gregory describes virginal life as an introduction to “the philosophical life”⁹ and “a certain art and faculty of the more divine life, teaching those living in the flesh how to be like the incorporeal nature”.¹⁰ During the elaboration of the main features of the virginal life, Gregory draws an ontological difference between the Holy Trinity and the creation. The virginity belongs to the incorruptible Father who passionlessly begets the Son, who, in turn, may be known only through virginity, because His nature, as well as the nature of the Holy Spirit, is pure and incorruptible.¹¹ Here, Gregory refers to a double paradox: on one hand the virginity of the Father is comprehended together with his begetting of the Son; on the other hand, the Son is conceived through virginity.¹² Both cases are paradoxical if they are related to human reality, in which virginity precludes conception, and therefore precludes giving birth. However, the most familiar example of the conception of the Son through virginity is Mary's immaculate conception of Jesus. Mary's conception and begetting of Jesus is modeled on the Father's conception of the Son. As such, the motherhood of Mary is a consequence of her virginity, just as the divine generation of the Son

9 English translation *On Virginity* (pp. 4–75), p. 6.

10 *De Virginitate* (= *DeVirg*), 4,9.

11 *DeVirg* 2,1.

12 *DeVirg* 2,1.

from the Father is the result of divine virginity. The paradox seems to be resolved in this way, but a question arises concerning the nature of virginity. Gregory's understanding of virginity is much broader than the absence of sexual intercourse, to which the usual sense of the word refers. He is very clear, already at the beginning of his treatise, that virginity as a state of blamelessness and holiness leads to divine purity and incorruptibility.¹³ This means that the possession of virtues is necessary for virginity to bear fruits of generation. Nonna Verna Harrison distinguishes between four kinds of generation: "the Father's begetting of the Son in the Trinity; Mary's conception and bearing of Christ as human; ordinary human generation; and the spiritual generation of virtues of Christ and of oneself" (Harrison, 1996, p. 39). The Father's generation of the Son out of virginity serves as model for Mary's virginal generation of Jesus. Thus, in both cases the begetting is the consequence of virginity understood in a broader sense as possessing divine virtues, either by nature, like God the Father, or by participation, like Mary the Mother of God. Ordinary human generation reflects human bodily constitution, in which sexual relationship precedes conception and generation, and thus it excludes virginity in the strict sense of the word. Finally, by imitating both God the Father's and Mary's blameless and pure way of life which bore fruit, one may generate virtues from one's virginity.

For Gregory, virginity, conceived in an ontological sense, represents an essential difference between Creator and creation. The main difference between the divine and human nature is that the divine being lacks desire and passions (*apatheia*),¹⁴ while the human nature is subjected to certain dispositions of the soul, such as desire and passions. The dispositions of the soul may be twofold. Gregory distinguishes between lowly desires or passions, which are dispositions toward the corruptible realm, and lofty desires toward the incorruptible world that can be only achieved through the imitation of the incorporeal powers.¹⁵ Therefore, the virginal or the philosophical life is the way to weaken physical passion and to

13 *DeVirg* 1,1

14 *DeVirg* 2,1.

15 *DeVirg* 4,8–9.

discover the true desire.¹⁶ The true desire, rooted in our nature in the creation, is the desire for heavenly things and for union with God. According to Gregory, the natural movement, as endowed to human nature by the Creator, should be the fulfillment of lofty desires.¹⁷ This movement never stops, even if it does not derive from the lofty desires but from the lowly passions. The human being in his or her original state did not know the passions. They entered into human nature when the desire for God was replaced by the desire for creation. Thus, the human being became subjected to passions and death,¹⁸ because they directed their movement not towards the incorruptible God but towards the ontologically unstable and changeable creation.

According to Gregory, after the transformation of lofty into lowly desires, and by clothing the human nature in “the garments of skin”,¹⁹ the path of human beings toward God became much longer. Gregory claims that the return of human beings to the original state is possible only if they come back to God by choosing the same path from which they fall away from Him. The last stop on this path is marriage as compensation to human beings for experiencing death,²⁰ and as the ability to stay in life by continuing the species. Since marriage is the last stop in the human separation from God, it should be the first stop on the way to Christ.²¹ Therefore, according to Gregory, marriage should be replaced with the virginal life because marriage is a life according to the body that leads to death, while virginity is a life according to the Spirit that saves from death.²² The virginal life is an image of splendor that comes with the future age.²³ According to Gregory, virginity brings the gifts of the Resurrection into this life, while through procreation marriage distances people from the future age. Therefore, Gregory proposes a universal, for some too drastic, solution to replace marriage and procreation with virginal monastic

16 *De Virg Praef.* 1.

17 *De Virg* 6,2.

18 *De Virg* 12,2.

19 *De Virg* 13,1. Cf. also Genesis 3:21.

20 *De Virg* 13,1.

21 *De Virg* 13,1.

22 *De Virg* 13,3.

23 *De Virg* 14,4.

life. For Gregory, marriage is only the postponement of Parousia, while the virginal life transcends time, because it does not introduce distance between the present day and the Second Coming of Christ by procreating new generations:

Having put an end to his carnal life, as far as this is within his power, he awaits the blessed hope and the epiphany of the great God, putting no distance between himself and the presence of God because of the generations in between.²⁴

Gregory actually argues that by abstaining from procreation and by persisting in a state of physical virginity, as well as virginal virtuous life, one abolishes the distance between God and himself. Gregory links directly the desire for God with the distance that separates the present age from the second coming of Christ. The desire for God can be fulfilled only if the temporal distance is shortened or totally abolished. The universal way to abolish this distance and to fulfill the desire is to stop procreating. Mark Hart considers odd Gregory's argument "that virginity overcomes the power of death by preventing mortal bodies from being born" (Hart, 1992, p. 11). Hans Boersma challenged Hart's claim by referring to Gregory's "overall position, linked as it is both to divine incorruptibility and to the incorruptibility that comes to us through the virgin birth of Christ" (Boersma, 2013, p. 124).

The incorruptibility might be seen as the final fruit of virginity, as Boersma aptly proposes, but Gregory here argues on two levels, one that is long-term and another immediate. On the long-term level Gregory's focus is on the Second Coming of Christ and the eschatological realm. Boersma's argument is applicable here, because, by both abstaining from procreating through bodily virginity and generating virtues through virtuous virginity, an appeal is made to Christ to come and to bring the fruits of incorruptibility. The long-term fruit of bodily virginity – abstaining from procreation – is the absence of new generations that might prolong Christ's Second Coming. However, this may look like a provocation for Christ to come earlier than he planned, but if it is accompanied with the generation of virtues then it reveals the meaning of virginity in a broader sense. The virginal life as a combination of the notion

²⁴ *DeVirg* 14,4.

taken in both the strict and the broad sense can have, as a direct result, the coming of Christ and the entering into the uncorrupted life of the heavenly realm. This model would work only at a universal level, which means that it should be practiced by all and in all respects. Probably aware of its improbability, Gregory refers to the immediate plan, which consists of the human imitation of the future life similar to that of angelic powers here and now. This imitation of future life is by means of virginity. Thus, virginity is at the same time human goal, means and self-fulfillment. The virginal life of God is the goal toward which the human beings are directed. Attaining the virginal life of the Holy Trinity is a lofty desire of human beings. Humanity may attain its goal and fulfill its desire only by means of virginity. Only virginity, both bodily and virtuous, can practically abolish the death of present and future generations by eliminating the temporal *distance* that separates the present moment from the Second Coming of Christ. Finally, already experiencing the fruits of the future life through virginity in this life, humanity has already undergone transformation by fulfilling some aspects of the life to come.

Contra Eunomium III, De hominis opificio and Oratio catechetica

A number of Gregory's works produced between the late 370s and the early 380s, such as *On the making of man (De hominis opificio)*, *Against Eunomius (Contra Eunomium)* III and *The Great Catechetical Oration (Oratio catechetica magna)* deal with the notions of being and non-being, or good and evil.

According to Gregory, movement caused by desire is not simply one of the qualities with which God endowed creation, but it is the essential feature of creation. The doctrine of creation "out of nothing" indicates that God as Creator moved the creation from the state of non-existence into being. Thus, due to this transition (*parados*) from non-being into being the very nature of creation is changeable.²⁵ Since nothing created

25 *De hominis opificio* (=DeHom) 184,43; *Oratio catechetica magna* (=OrCat) 21,7; *Contra Eunomium* 6,79.

has remained the same, it is in constant transition from one state to another. The created beings oscillate between non-being, from which creation came to existence, and the fullness of being that is not reached yet by creation. This means that every created being is able to move within the existing distance either back toward non-being, which is a change for the worse, or toward the fullness of being, which is a change for the better. From an ethical perspective, one may distinguish two kinds of movement. The first kind of movement, according to Gregory, is always toward good, while the other, which is in the opposite direction, is toward something that does not have its hypostasis.²⁶ In order to underline that evil has no ontological foundation, Gregory considers that which is contrary to the good as absence of good (Mosshammer, 1990, pp. 136–167). Thus, for Gregory evil has its existence in non-being.²⁷ Gregory emphasizes that God is neither the creator of evil, nor is evil created together with other things. On the other hand, evil is not an absolute non-being or nothingness, because then it would not exist, but it is relative to being. The vertical distance, unlike horizontal temporal distance, may be thus defined as the distance between good and evil.

The movement of angels and human souls along the vertical distance toward goodness is characterized by constant and continuous motion, because goodness is infinite, and it cannot be reached by any pursuit.²⁸ Gregory argues that these creatures are eternally and constantly moving since their movement never stops.²⁹ The creatures are moved by desire to reach the goal of their movement. The desire is the only cause of movement of the spiritual beings towards goodness.

The main reason for the movement of spiritual beings toward something opposite to the beautiful or to the good is their perception of something opposite to the good as naturally good and beautiful. Therefore, according to Gregory, there is beauty by nature and, as its opposite, an illusory appearance of beauty. The criteria for distinguishing them are

26 *OrCat* 21,23–4.

27 *Dialogus de anima et resurrectione* (=DeAn) 93,20–21.

28 *DeHom* 201,19–24.

29 *DeHom* 201,33–7.

in the mind.³⁰ However, the mind sometimes cannot determine what the right choice would be, and deceived by illusion it chooses to move towards the non-being and evil, perceiving them as goodness.³¹ Gregory compares this human choice with the choice of the dog that abandons real food in order to follow its shadow hoping for a larger meal. In the case of human beings, the reason for moving towards evil is twofold. Primarily this is a deception of the devil as the inventor of evil, and secondarily it is the human acceptance of the deception.³²

The movement toward evil is movement away from God, and unlike the first kind of movement it is limited, because evil as the lack of being is not infinite. There are different scholarly interpretations regarding the limitations of evil. According to some claims, the evil is limited because it is related to the created order (Daniélou, 1970, pp. 186–204; Zemp, 1970, pp. 186–187). Some other scholars, such as Marriette Canévet and Alden Mosshammer, reject this interpretation because it places evil at the same ontological level as creation, a claim that is countered by Gregory (Canévet, 1968, pp. 87–95; Mosshammer, 1990, p. 151). They offer an alternative interpretation of the limitations of evil from a soteriological perspective – that the movement of beings towards evil would ultimately result in reaching non-being. Therefore, divine intervention in the form of the Incarnation and salvation of human nature took place when the limits of evil reached critical proportions. However, Gregory’s denial of evil’s infinity can also be interpreted from the aspect of this movement. Since evil has no ontological foundation, the movement toward evil would actually be movement away from the good. The goal of the movement would not be toward something, but away from something, and it would consist only of the desire to move away from the good. According to Gregory, movement toward something is a matter of free will, and if the will is not directed towards the goal of its motion, but toward the absence of the actual goal, it results in the cessation of movement.³³ Since the being by its nature cannot stop moving, it must continue its

³⁰ *OrCat* 21,32–4.

³¹ *OrCat* 21,33–41.

³² *OrCat* 21,44–50.

³³ *OrCat* 31,12–14.

movement in the opposite direction. Thus, the being that moves toward non-being will continue, at some point, its movement toward being, by regaining this as the goal of its movement:

Now that which is always in motion, if its progress be to good, will never cease moving onwards to what lies before it, by reason of the infinity of the course to be traversed: – for it will not find any limit of its object such that when it has apprehended it, it will at last cease its motion: but if its bias be in the opposite direction, when it has finished the course of wickedness and reached the extreme limit of evil, then that which is ever moving, finding no halting point for its impulse natural to itself (*ek physeōs stasin*) when it has run through the lengths (*diastema*) that can be run in wickedness, of necessity turns its motion towards good: for as evil does not extend to infinity, but is comprehended by necessary limits (*anangáiois pérasi*), it would appear that good once more follows in succession upon the limit (*peras*) of evil; and thus, as we have said, the ever-moving character of our nature comes to run its course at the last once more back towards good, being taught the lesson of prudence by the memory of its former misfortunes, to the end that it may never again be in like case.³⁴

Gregory here argues for the absence of the final goal of aspirations or stasis in evil that makes beings change the direction of their movement from evil to good. However, although beings continue to move toward the same created distance, the real change or transformation happens at the level of desire. The transformation of desire is reflected in the weakening of the very desire, because evil has no ontological foundation and therefore it cannot inspire movement. By exhausting all the possibilities of evil as something unreal, the human being undergoes again the transformation of his desire into the movement towards God as goodness and fullness of being. Since the desire for God is the only real desire able to inspire continuous movement, the desire for anything other than God is therefore limited, and ultimately it is re-transformed into the desire for God. Similarly, the vertical distance between good and evil does not imply traversing the distance between two equal opportunities, but

34 *DeHom* 201,19–36. English translation in Moor and Wilson (Eds.), 1892, p. 70.

rather shortening the distance between achieved level of goodness and the goodness by nature. The evil is just a stop on this ethical distance.

De Vita Moyses, De perfectione and In Canticum Canticorum

In his later writings, such as *De Vita Moyses*, *De perfectione* and *In Canticum Canticorum*, Gregory explored some mystical and eschatological themes. One of the fundamental questions that Gregory deals with is why the soul yearns to know what cannot be known. This question, which at first glance is paradoxical, actually reflects the *quintessence* of Gregory's late view on desire. Gregory's claim that Moses reached that for which he longed by failing to fulfill his desire³⁵ resolves this paradox. This claim should be considered on two levels, on the epistemological and on the moral. The first level deals with divine infinity that renders God unknowable,³⁶ because the divine being cannot be comprehended by mind due to lack of boundaries. Therefore, Moses's desire to know God remains unsatisfied. At the second, moral level, Gregory argues that love towards the one, who is beautiful and good, causes movement toward him. Since the divine being is good by nature,³⁷ God is the goal of every movement towards good. Linking the infinity of God with His goodness by nature resulted in movement toward good that never stops, because the desire of someone who strives for God cannot be fulfilled. This movement is actually a spiritual growth in virtue, or in perfection.³⁸ Since God is the fullness of perfection, this again means that perfection cannot be achieved. Gregory explains further human motivation to persevere on this path that has no end. He describes the mechanism of human desires and aspirations as something closed in the perpetual cycle of cosmological time.³⁹ As soon as the human being satisfies his desire for something by the possession of the objects of his desire, he again begins to yearn for

35 *De Vita Moyses* (= *De Vita Mo*) II, 8.

36 *De Vita Mo* II, 236.

37 *De Vita Mo* Praef. 7 and II, 237. *De An* 93c.

38 *De Vita Mo* Praef. 5.

39 Cf. introduction of Jean Daniélou in Daniélou, 1979, pp. 49–51.

something else and again feels empty until he acquires it.⁴⁰ Thus every desire ceases when it reaches its object, and as the desire reappears, it also disappears.⁴¹ However, if the desire is directed toward something that can never be achieved, then it cannot be satisfied. Thus, desire for the unattainable object never ceases, but on the contrary, it constantly increases. Such desire is not characterized by successive iterations, but it acquires permanence, in which there is no cessation, because it does not attain the object of its desire. This continuity can be seen as a gradual increase in the intensity of desire. Thus, the human being departs from the perpetual cycle of changes and he establishes his unstable nature on the stability of his determination. This stability is attained only on the way towards good, because it has no end, and any tendency that is the opposite to good has its limits and it cannot maintain the stability of desire or movement. Therefore, human desire is defined by divine infinity and divine goodness. By moving towards good, which is God himself, the human soul realizes that God is unattainable because He is infinite, and that its desire to reach the good will never be fulfilled. However, while realizing her inability to reach the good, the human soul recognizes that reaching only a part of good is a significant advancement.⁴² Therefore, according to Gregory, the human being tends to advance along a road whose end he will never reach. By continuous advancement towards good, the human desire to reach an infinite goal is constantly satisfied by the achieved advancement, but it never ceases to strive towards that which lies ahead. Constantly moving towards good, human and other spiritual beings will constantly pursue the goal of their movement, although they cannot reach it. Therefore, Gregory argues that the perfection of human nature consists in its very growth in goodness.⁴³ Gregory does not perceive the changes to which human beings are subjected as negative, but rather as a possibility for further human growth. The change represents a gradual growth in goodness, because the movement “from glory to glory” (2 Cor 3:18) is continuous advancement and a continuous process of coming ever

40 *De Vita Mo* II, 61.

41 *In Ecclesiastem* (= *In Ecc*) 2.

42 *De Vita Mo* Pref. 9.

43 *De Vita Mo* Pref. 10.

nearer to perfection, without reaching the fullness of perfection. Therefore, the perfection consists in continuous human growth in goodness, which is without restrictions.⁴⁴

Perfection is therefore associated with a permanent increase of the desire to achieve goodness. By the soul's ascent to goodness, the desire to attain it constantly grows.⁴⁵ However, Gregory claims paradoxically that the constant movement towards perfection happens by standing still. Gregory draws this identification of movement and stillness from Exodus 33:21, where Moses says: "You must stand on the rock". If it is obvious that the one who ascends does not stand still, nor the one who stands still ascends, how then, Gregory asks, are movement and stillness the same?⁴⁶ The solution to this paradox consists in the fact that the human being ascends towards perfection in proportion to the extent of his steadfastness in goodness. By establishing himself in goodness, the human being actually achieves stability. The steadiness represents continuity of movement towards goodness, in which the movement assumes the character of stillness. Jean Daniélou rightly remarks that this stillness which one may establish in goodness opens the possibility of movement as real advancement, while the constant movement in the physical world does not include advancement, and therefore represents stagnation (Daniélou, 1979, 53).⁴⁷

Gregory describes how a human being who is not established in goodness, and who, in the words of the Apostle Paul, is "tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind" (Eph 4:14), unsuccessfully tries to climb in the sand, because even though he takes long steps, his feet slip backwards and down.⁴⁸ This is the answer to the initial question of how it is possible that Moses received that for which he longed by failing to fulfill his desire. By establishing himself in the desire to reach God, he attained stillness, which both satisfied and increased his desire to continue his movement.

44 *DePerf*

45 *DeVitaMo* II, 238.

46 *DeVitaMo* II, 243.

47 Cf. also Daniélou, 1944, p. 282.

48 *DeVitaMo* II, 244.

Gregory's notion about Moses's unfulfilled desire may be the key to solve some difficult passages which puzzle contemporary scholarship, such as the *Commentary on the Song of Songs* 15.6.8 (Verghese, 1976, p. 255):

For when at the beginning the created order came into existence by God's power, it was the case for each of these that its start and its full actualization were achieved together without any interval (*adiastátōs*), since for all that were brought from nonexistence to existence their perfection coincided with their beginning. Now the human race is one of the things that were created, and it did not, like the others, go forward to perfection by promotion, but from its first moment of existence it was formed simultaneously with its perfection, for humanity, it says, came to be "after the image and likeness of God" (Gen 1:26–27). And this is manifestly the highest and most perfect of goods, for what can be found that is nobler than being made like God? In the case of the first creation, then, the final state (*peras*) appeared simultaneously with the beginning, and the race took the starting point of its existence in its perfection; but from the moment it acquired a kinship with death by its inclination toward evil and so ceased to abide in the good, it does not achieve its perfect state again all at once, as at its first creation. Rather does it advance toward the better along a road of sorts, in an orderly fashion, one step after another, and rids itself bit by bit of its susceptibility to that which opposes its fulfillment. For when it was first created, since evil did not exist, there was nothing to prevent the race's perfection from going hand in hand with its birth, but in the process of restoration, lapses of time (*diastēmatike parátasis*) necessarily attend those who are retracing their way toward the original good. Hence our mind, which because of its vice is locked into a passionate attachment to materiality, scrapes away, bit by bit, with the help of a cunning discipline, the wrong that has grown together with it like a tree bark that encloses it.⁴⁹

Here, Gregory argues that in the beginning, when created nature came into existence through the divine power in each of the existents, the beginning was "without distance" linked to the end, i.e., each of the creatures that was brought from non-being into being received – together

49 *In Canticum canticorum (=InCant)* 15,6,8. English translation in Gregory of Nyssa, 2013, p. 487.

with its beginning – its perfection. Gregory offers an example of the human being, which in the beginning, like other spiritual beings, did not have to traverse the road from its beginning to its perfection, because his nature was from the beginning created perfect. Since human nature was created in the image and likeness of God, it is endowed with the highest goodness and perfection. Gregory's argument in the *Commentary on the Song of Songs* 15.6.8 raises questions because, contrary to his earlier views on the ever existing created distance, he claims that the beginning of the first creation coincided with the end, without any distance between them, and that nature was perfect when it first existed.

However, against the background of our discussion on Moses's unfulfilled desire, I would like to argue that the two positions do not contradict each other. If the end, the goal, of created beings is to be in a state of perfection, then they attain perfection by moving on the way to the fullness of perfection, which they can never attain. Thus, there is no distance between them and their perfection, because their perpetual commitment to goodness brings them perfection. However, this does not mean that there is no distance between beings and God, which exists due to the fact that the divine being can never be reached. By stating that, at the beginning of the creation, its beginning coincided with its end without any *distance* in-between, Gregory points to several issues.

First, God the Creator made all things good and perfect, without introducing between him and creation anything that may separate them. The existence of distance, which separates beings from God, points rather to the divine nature, which is infinite and therefore incomprehensible for creatures, than to divine intention to create obstacles that separate God from creation. Therefore, as soon as the beings are brought into existence they begin to exercise their perfect nature by their movement towards God that is also stillness from the point of perfection.

Second, by referring to the beginning of creation, Gregory points out that the creation did not exist in any other state than the state of perfection. This state of perfection is disturbed by the determination of spiritual beings to move towards something which is not the Creator of their beings and the source of their goodness, on the basis of which they possess perfection. To the natural distance, which represented more an inability to

reach God than an obstacle intentionally established by the Creator, was added an artificial distance created by creatures moving in the opposite direction from goodness. The imperfection as a result of the abuse of freedom began to exist in the originally perfect creatures, and at once their beginning became different from their end. The created nature has fallen from perfection, which characterized the beginning, and it was intended to serve as the end in their way to the Creator. Gregory is explicit in stating that in the first creation there was no hindrance or obstacle impeding the development towards perfection of nature, because evil is not present, while in the second creation distance is attached by necessity to the first goodness.⁵⁰

In his later works, Gregory points out that in addition to the horizontal distance as the period between the present moment and the end of the world, and to the vertical distance as the distance between good and evil, there is a third distance that is intrinsic and that existed before the fall. This distance actually consists in the human impossibility to comprehend the infinite divine nature. The existence of this distance actually guarantees that the longing for God will never stop, because God cannot be reached or grasped. The transformation of desire happens when the goal of desire is redirected from reaching and grasping God to continuous and steadfast growth in Him. Therefore, the perfection is not achieved in reaching and grasping the divine being, because this is impossible, but in the persistence to reach and grasp God.

Conclusion

The desire for God and distance are two important concepts that can be found in various stages of Gregory's work. Throughout his works Gregory explores and defines the notion of desire in connection with distance. Gregory presupposes that desire exists only when the object of desire is out of our immediate reach. This means that we are separated from the fulfillment of our desire either by a special or temporal distance, as it is the case with Gregory's early writings, or by ethical and ontological distance,

⁵⁰ *InCant* 15,6,8.

as he claims in his latter works. In order to fulfill one's desire, one has to reach the object one longs for by traversing the existing distance. Therefore, in his early ascetic treatise *On virginity*, Gregory proposes abstaining from procreation and pursuing the virtuous life of virginity as a means to abolish temporal distance between the present age and Christ's Second Coming and to fulfill the desire for Christ. Gregory argues for the reverse transformation of desire in this early work. The first transformation of desire consists of its redirection from God to corruptible nature. As a result of this transformation the lofty desires become lowly passions. As the reverse process of transforming the lowly into lofty desires, Gregory proposes a virginal life that consists both of abstaining from procreation and of multiplying virtues. The passion to prolong the existence of the human species for the period (*diastema*) until the Second Coming by procreation is replaced by the desire to induce the Christ's Parousia. In *De Virginitate* the virginal life, which abolishes temporal *distance*, is the only solution proposed for the immediate fulfillment of the desire for God.

However, in the writings from the middle period of his career, by facing the concept of divine infinity, Gregory transforms the horizontal temporal distance into vertical distance, as distance between good and evil. The longing for good becomes infinite, because the object of desire is infinite. In this period, Gregory begins to identify the created nature with the distance. Thus, the distance ceases to be something that should be abolished, but it becomes something that secures the permanence of created nature on the basis of its desire to reach goodness. This desire for the fullness of being or good that is embedded in human nature causes the permanent movement toward good. However, when the human being due to deception replaces the movement towards good with the movement away from good, he chooses the path toward evil, as the absence of good. Reaching the end of evil, which due to the lack of any ontological substance is just privation of good, human beings re-establish themselves in the movement toward good. Thus, desire toward evil is transformed in the desire toward good when human beings pass the distance of evil on their movement toward God.

By the end of his life, Gregory again transforms the ethical distance, into an ontological one. Gregory argues that at the beginning of creation

there was no distance that separated created beings from the perfection. He refers here to the artificially added distance to creation as the consequence of the fall. This distance appears as twofold: a temporal distance by which creatures are separated from God, who is at the end of time, and an ethical distance that separates evil from goodness. When human beings fix themselves in the way toward the good, then they experience a third distance. Distance gains its ontological status when human beings realize that God as goodness cannot be achieved. Human beings, thus, may build their perfection only on the steadfastness of their desire for God. Distance itself – as inability to reach and grasp the divine being – ensures that the human desire for God will never stop and that human beings will constantly attain perfection. The transformation of desire consists in redirecting the focus from attaining God as goodness to eternally reaching toward Him.

Even if, at first glance, it seems that Gregory is inconsistent in dealing with desire and distance throughout his works, in my opinion there are no contradictions in his thought because the transformation of both desire and *diastema* happen at different levels of reality, and in different contexts of Christian life. Both *diastema* and desire for God undergo transformation because human and angelic beings pass “from glory to glory” in their continual advancement toward God.

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