

Dunamis and the Christian Trinity in the Fourth Century

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Abstract

The teaching of Gregory of Nyssa on the Trinity has been explored in the light of late antique logic by a number of recent authors, notably Johannes Zachhuber in *Human Nature in Gregory of Nyssa* (Berlin, 2000) and in his subsequent exchange of articles with Richard Cross. The evolution of Aristotelian logic in late antiquity has also been the subject of perceptive and innovative works by scholars such as Ricardo Chiaradonna, Sten Ebbesen and Steven Strange. Most of these studies have been undertaken without reference to theology; the present article will consider whether the difficulties of Gregory's argument could be tempered, not so much by the direct application of ancient logical theories, as by reflection on what the theorists have to say about the *nature and purpose* of Aristotelian logic. A secondary goal of the article will be to reconcile the simile of the rainbow in [Basil], *Letter 38* with the meteorological phenomena, making use of other ancient writings on the same topic and of modern work on ancient perceptions of colour.

The Greek noun *dunamis*, like its English equivalent 'power', is used in a variety of senses. When we admire the power of a shot or attribute some success to the power of God, we refer to an active exercise of force upon some object; when, on the other hand, we complain of failing to do all that is in our power, or decide to refrain from playing a radio at full power, we are speaking of a capacity or potential which remains partially unemployed. Aristotle characteristically differentiates *dunamis*, the capacity to act or be acted upon, from *energeia*, the realisation of either capacity. Before one object acts upon another, each is the agent or substrate of the action *dunamei*, that is, in mere potentiality; the performance of the act is simultaneously the realisation of the agent's power to act and the substrate's power to be acted upon (see e.g. *Physics* 1.1-3). This being acted upon can be described as the actualising of matter by form, or its conversion into form; an entity which was free from matter would be a pure *energeia* or actuality, possessing no capacity to be other than it is, and therefore wholly identical with its form. God, for Aristotle, is the one example of this pure *energeia*; he also has the capacity for *energeia* in the sense of activity, but, since the activity of such a being must be eternal, and its substrate therefore equally eternal, it would seem that the sole activity of Aristotle's God is thought, and its sole object himself.¹

¹ *Metaphysics* 1074b; see J. Brunschwig, 'Metaphysics Λ9: "A Short-Lived thought-Experiment?"', in M. Frede and D. Charles (eds), *Aristotle's Metaphysics Lambda: Symposium Aristotelicum* (Oxford, 2000), 275-306, and A. Kosman, 'Metaphysics Λ9: Divine Thought', in M. Frede and D. Charles (eds), *Aristotle's Metaphysics Lambda: Symposium Aristotelicum (of Time)* (Leiden, 2006), 142-4. (can you check this reference)

In a paper delivered to a previous conference, I have argued that in Christian literature before Constantine the term *dunamis* typically denotes the manifest power of God, above all the manifest power of recreating his fallen creatures in Jesus Christ, whom Paul extols as the wisdom and power of God at 1 *Cor.* 1:21-4. Since, however, the deity is eternal and his creation temporal, Christians before this epoch had been apt to distinguish between the eternal being of the Son as the Father's reason and his coming forth as the Word through whom the world was to be created. Origen, who denied that there was ever a time when the Son was not distinct from the Father (*First Principles* 1.2.1-2),² had been obliged to posit an eternal creation in the noetic realm so that the Son would always have a world to govern. Arius took the contrary position: if the world has a finite history, the Son too has a finite history, which we need not prolong by positing an eternal incubation within the undivided Godhead. This indivisibility is for Arius a theological axiom, and since it would be compromised in his view by the generation of the Son from the substance of the Father, he surmises that, whatever term we use to describe his origin, the Son was in fact produced from nothing by the Father's will. The rejection of this thesis by a majority at the Council of Nicaea in 325 did not put an end to all dissent. Indeed we discern as many as four positions, each of which implies a different understanding of the term *dunamis* when we predicate this of God. We may distinguish first between those for whom Christ is the active *dunamis* of the Father and those for whom he is the realisation of a latent *dunamis*. In the former case *dunamis* is almost a synonym for *energeia*, while in the second it signifies potentiality. Next we may distinguish those who maintain that the active *dunamis* of the Father is eternal from those who set a temporal limit to this activity; and on the other side, we may distinguish those for whom *dunamis* is a capacity to be actualised from those who understand it as the capacity to act. In the immediate aftermath of Nicaea, all four parties were represented;

1. Athanasius, now remembered as the arch-champion of the Council, may be numbered with those for whom the Son is the eternally active *dunamis* of the Father. He is not, says the eloquent patriarch, a product of the Father's will but the will itself, and he exists as a hypostasis distinct from the Father not because the latter needs an instrument of creation but because he must have some object for his love.
2. To the second class, for whom *dunamis* is active but not eternal, we may assign Eusebius of Caesarea, who, without expressly denying the Son's coeternity with the Father, always stops short of affirming it and certainly regards the Son as the Father's instrument and intermediary in his dealings with the temporal creation. His bugbear was not Athanasius but Marcellus, whom he accuses of denying the hypostatic existence of the Son before the incarnation.

² Origen, *De Principiis*, ed. P. Koetschau (Leipzig, 1913).

3. Whether or not he is fairly represented by Eusebius, Marcellus contrasts the existence of the Son *en dunamei* from his existence in actuality, contesting the general assumption that the Son is to be identified with the Wisdom of *Prov.* 8:25 who declares that she was begotten before all the world to be the coadjutor of the Lord in his creation. It appears that he had an ally in Constantine, who, as Eusebius confesses, informed the Council of Nicaea that the Son is *homoousios* (consubstantial) with the Father because he existed potentially within the latter before coming forth (Theodoret, *Church History* 1.12.8).

4. Arius, for all his tergiversations, never conceded that the Son is *homoousios* with the Father or recanted his opinion that the Father had produced him out of nothing. Although he does not make use of the same nomenclature, he would surely have agreed with those who held that the Son owes his being to the *dunamis* which resides eternally within the father but is exercised contingently and according to his will.

The first great disputation after Nicaea – subtler, more protracted and more vigorous than any that preceded it – was between the second and third of these positions, and can be studied in the writings of Eusebius against Marcellus. The next, between the first position and all the others, is represented now in the Orations of *Athanasius against the Arians*. In the 350s, Marius Victorinus³ developed a form of the third position against the fourth; finally the fourth and the first are set against one another in the polemics of the Cappadocian Fathers against Eunomius. All four are germane to the present subject, but the first three, in which power was often discussed in other terms, will therefore be treated more summarily than the fourth. Once the clash of arms had at last become a battle in open daylight, the relation between the essence and the power of God was perceived as the capital question, both by Gregory of Nyssa and by the adversary whom he stigmatized as an Arian and a besotted follower of Aristotle.

The first two phases: Marcellus, Eusebius and Athanasius

In what I have called the first phase of the Nicene controversy, the distinction between existence in potential and existence in actuality was applied to the Second Person of the Trinity by Marcellus of Ancyra. No texts survive under his name, and his opinions must be deduced from the pedantically, and therefore usefully, hostile ebullitions of Eusebius of Caesarea *Against Marcellus* and *On the Theology of the Church*. For Marcellus the Pauline eulogy of Christ as the wisdom and power of God was a cardinal text, to be quoted against Asterius, who maintained that the Son was one power and the Father another, the former being the icon, or subaltern image, of the latter (*Frs* 82 and 96

³ Marius Victorinus, *Opera Theologica*, ed. A. Locher (Leipzig, 1976).

Klostermann). Marcellus protests that the Godhead is one indivisible *dunamis* (Fr. 77), and that another of his adversaries, Narcissus of Neronias, is falling into blasphemy when he imagines that this power can be divided into two (Fr. 81). As *dunamis* – the inscrutable power through which God executes all his works (Frs 60 and 65) – the Logos or divine Word is coeternal with the Father; but this is not to say that he possessed his own hypostasis, and Marcellus shifts from the active to the passive sense of the term when he declares that before the incarnation the Son was present *en dunamei* – that is, potentially – in the Father, until he took on actuality in the flesh, just as the latent potentialities of a man remain unknown until they are actualised in his deeds (Frs 52 and 61).

Prov. 8:22, where Wisdom proclaims, ‘the Lord created me in the beginning of his way’, was understood by Origen and those who followed him to mean that Christ, the Wisdom of God, had been the coadjutor of the Father, and hence a distinct hypostasis, from the very first.⁴ Marcellus pronounced this text too enigmatic to be of service in doctrinal controversy. To Eusebius, on the other hand, it is plain that Wisdom in *Prov.* 8:22 is a distinct hypostasis, hence that the Son was already a distinct hypostasis before the ages, if not eternally. He insinuates that Marcellus posits a change from a monadic to a triadic God at the time of Christ’s nativity, in violation of The Nicene doctrine that the Son undergoes no change (Theodoret, *Church History* 1.12.12). Conscious (perhaps more conscious than his rival) that the term *dunamis* needs to be carefully parsed, he admits that God may be said to contemplate all things in his divine and ineffable power before they come into existence (*Ecclesiastical Theology* 2.6.4); he can even grant that our knowledge of the Father was merely potential (*en dunamei*) before it was actualised in the Son (1.11.6). He insists for all that, that we cannot think of the Logos as having been dormant in the Father before the latter chose to exert his ‘drastic power’ (2.2.23); we are not to imagine a time when the logos remained inchoate in the Father as the plant is at first inchoate in the seed (2.13.2). Eusebius displays a marked partiality for the active sense of *dunamis*, as when he declares that the grace of the saviour dispenses the power of the Spirit to the saints, or that it is Christ, the one light of men, whose intellectual and rational power fills us with reason and intellection (*Against Marcellus* 1.3.11 and 1.20.8). The plural *dunameis*, which is as common as the singular in his writings against Marcellus, always denotes the angelic host (*Ecclesiastical Theology* 1.11.6, 1.20.11, 1.20.27, 3.2.25, 3.6.1).

When we pass from the first to the second phase of the controversy, we find this preference for the active sense of *dunamis* to be equally characteristic of Athanasius. In his apologetic works, *Against the Nations* and *On the Incarnation*, the insuperable power of God is set against the counterfeit power of demons, whom the pagans wrongly imagine to be present by *dunamis* in wood

⁴ Eusebius, *Against Marcellus* 1.4; *Contra Marcellum* and *De Ecclesiastica Theologia*, ed. E. Klostermann (Berlin, 1972).

and stone.⁵ In Paul's phrase he acclaims Christ as the wisdom and power of God, who in the strength of this power has brought all things into being, though for our sake he concealed it in the weakness of his flesh (*Against the Nations* 46; *On the Incarnation* 19 and 21). In his treatise *On the Decrees of Nicaea* (24 and 26) he quotes with approval the dictum of Dionysius of Rome that *logos, sophia* and *dunamis* (word, wisdom and power) are the three *dunameis* of God, and that the one in whom these powers are united cannot be temporal in origin. In his letters to Serapion he asserts that the Son is *dunamis* in nature and truth, not only the power of God but the Lord of glory (*To Serapion* 3.25 and 1.25). In his three orations *Against the Arians*, he invokes the term *dunamis* in refutation of every attempt to construe other terms as proofs of the Son's inferiority. The latter is not merely the Father's image but his image and power;⁶ being not a creature of the Father's will but the will itself, he is more properly described as the living will and power of the Father, while at other times the noun *dunamis* is coupled with 'truth' and 'light'.⁷ Salvation is possible for all because he who has been made sin for us is the universal *dunamis* of God (2.58); the divine power that is in gives life to all, and the knowledge of him whom the Father possesses as word, his wisdom and his *dunamis* is sown in every soul from the beginning (2.34). Asterius is thus fighting against his conscience when he pretends that there would be no second person but for an arbitrary bestowal of the Father's *dunamis* (3.2). He may, however, seem to have raised an objection of some cogency when he argues that if the Son is to be eternal then the Father's power of creation must be eternal, and there would never be a time when the world was not (1.29). Athanasius is content to reply that the sophist (as he calls him) has failed to distinguish the eternal generation of the Son, which is an act of nature rather than of *dunamis*, from the contingent origin of all other things. This is a point to which I shall return in the epilogue; Athanasius himself need not detain us in this article, as his reasoning is always more dogmatic than philosophical. Before we pass on to the third phase of the Nicene controversy, in which philosophy becomes more salient, we may quit the second phase with the observation that it had now become the norm in Trinitarian theology for *dunamis* to signify active power, not the mere potentiality either to act or to be.

Third phase: the Trinity of Marius Victorinus

Although the Nicene Creed declared the Son to be *homoousios* (consubstantial) with the Father, subsequent councils failed to include this term in their formularies even when they did not disown the theology of Nicaea. For that matter, it was not until the 350s that Athanasius, who had wielded his pen

⁵ Athanasius, *Against the Nations* 19; *Contra Gentes* and *De Incarnatione*, ed. and trans. R.W. Thomson (Oxford, 1971).

⁶ Athanasius, *Against the Arians* 1.9; *Contra Arianos* I-III, ed. K. Metzler, D. Hansen and K. Savvidis, 2 vols. (Berlin, 1998-2000).

⁷ *Ibid.* 2.2, 3.63, 3.65.

at home and abroad against every deviation from the Nicene faith as he understood it, began to insist upon the term *homoousios* as a test of orthodoxy. The quarrel between the *homoousian* party and their allies of a day, the homoiousians, proved so wearisome to the Emperor and his peace-loving acolytes that in 357 the Council of Sirmium proscribed the very use of the term *ousia* in relation to the Trinity. The most defiant rejoinder came not from the Greek world but from Marius Victorinus, a rhetorician converted late in life, to whom philosophy was a more familiar discipline than biblical exegesis.⁸ In his four tracts against the Arians, he repeats the word *homoousios* with a frequency to which no other writer of his period, Greek or Latin, affords a parallel. Conscious at the same time that Latin theology had inherited from Tertullian a distinction between the one substance and the three persons of the Godhead, he retains the noun *substantia* to designate that which gives each person his ontological status, but replaces *persona* by *subsistentia*, or mode of being. More clearly than many Nicene theologians of his era, he perceives that his task is to show that each *subsistentia*, though distinct from the other two, is coextensive with the *substantia*, that is to say that, while the persons are not identical with each other, each is identical with the one being whom we call God.

Although this is an irreducibly Christian tenet, the tools for its elucidation are borrowed by Victorinus from Aristotle. The latter, we recall, distinguished being in potential from being in act, with a further distinction between the actuality of a thing, its first *energeia* or entelechy, and its characteristic activity, the second *energeia*. In a material object, there is never a full conversion of the potential into the actual, and consequently never a pure and uninterrupted exercise of the characteristic activity. In an immaterial being on the other hand, there is no potentiality to be converted, and the God of Aristotle is thus a perfect actuality whose activity is to contemplate eternally that one thing which is fully actual, namely himself. Christians had already begun to identify their God with this more personal and dynamic counterpart to the Platonic form of the Good; only Victorinus, however, was bold enough to conceive the Godhead as a timeless symphony of all three modes, potential, actual and active. The Father in this scheme is the initial potentiality, which, being the source of the other two persons, has a peculiar claim upon the term being. Since God is spirit according to *John* 4:24, we give this name to the actuality which the Father assumes when he becomes the object of his own reflection. Had the Stagirite been his only guide, Victorinus would have gone no further; since, however, he also embraced the Neoplatonic principle that the Good must superabound (Plato, *Timaeus* 29e), he adds that the self-intellection of God entails a collateral activity which is directed towards the lower plane of being. This he calls life, remembering that the Evangelist says of the word who is also the son that 'in him was life, and the life was the light of men' (*John* 1:4). For this notion of God's activity in the world as an efficient cause he could find no warrant, of course, in Aristotle, any more than for his doctrine of the priority of the potential to the actual.

⁸ See M.J. Edwards, 'Marius Victorinus and the *Homoousion*', *SP* 46 (2010), 105-18, and M. Barnes, *Power of God: Dunamis in Gregory of Nyssa's Trinitarian Theology* (Catholic University of America, 2001), 151-6.

Aristotle indeed would have accused him of falling back into the error of Speusippus,⁹ to which (no doubt) the Christian theologian would have retorted that his aim was not to reproduce the teaching of any school but to frame a philosophy consistent with his faith.

The triad of being, mind and life is not his own invention. Before him it is attested in Iamblichus and Theodore of Asine, while more than a century later it plays a structural role in the metaphysics of Proclus. Its origins lie in Plato's *Sophist* where the order of terms is clearly not prescriptive;¹⁰ whether any significance should be attached to the variation of order in Neoplatonic writings is a matter of debate, into which we need not enter here. For Proclus in his *Elements of Theology* (101),¹¹ the order is immutable, since the class of things that exist comprehends the class of those that have life, and this in turn comprehends the class of those that are capable of thought. But whether we adopt this or Theodore's triad in which mind holds the middle place between being and life,¹² it is clear that life and mind are distinct and active functions. There is, however, an earlier form of the triad, attested in Porphyry and the *Chaldaean Oracles*, in which *dunamis* is the intermediate term between being and mind.¹³ In this case mind is the actualisation of the *dunamis*, though it is harder to determine whether the *dunamis* is an active power of being or a latent potentiality to be actualised as mind. The triad of Victorinus, a hybrid of both, is faithful to neither, as it is only in him, and only because he is struggling to interpret an ecclesiastical dogma, that potentiality can usurp the first place.

Victorinus, as we have noted, was a neophyte. In the course of his unusual career he had digested books which the authorised teachers of Christendom opened only to refute them. Striking coincidences have been discovered between his writings and a number of the texts which we now call Sethian, though the ancients called them Gnostic. The oldest perhaps, and certainly the most read, was the *Apocryphon of John*, in which the Father of all is extolled as a fathomless monad, beyond conceit or knowledge and superior alike to affirmation and negation. He reveals his Fatherhood, if not his nature, by engendering another monad, the triple-powered aeon or thrice-male virgin Barbelo, whose name appears to signify 'in the beginning, God'.¹⁴ In another Sethian text, the *Zostrianus*, a version of which was certainly known to Porphyry, we read of three unborn images, Existence, Form and Blessedness (*NHC VIII* 1.3.9),¹⁵ and later of three origins – Existence, Life and Blessedness – which have a single origin in Barbelo and are present in every other origin (*NHC VIII* 1.1.14). In a cognate text, the *Allogenes*, the First One exists hypostatically in Vitality, Mentality and That-Which-Is, each

⁹ See R.M. Dancy, *Two Studies in the Early Academy* (New York, 1991), 85-8.

¹⁰ Plato, *Sophist* 248e-249a; cf. Plotinus, *Enneads* 6.6.8.

¹¹ Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, ed. and trans. E.R. Dodd's (Oxford, 1963).

¹² Proclus, *In Timaeum* iii.64; Proclus, *Commentarium in Platonis Timaeum*. Ed. E. Diehl, 3 vols. (Leipzig, 1903).

¹³ *Chaldaean Oracles* 3.2-4, 5.5., 56.2, 96.1, 136.2, 137 Des Places.

¹⁴ *Nag Hammadi Codices* II 1.2.33-II 1.4.31.

¹⁵ *Nag Hammadi Codices*. See *The Coptic Gnostic Library*, ed. J.M. Robinson, 5 vols. (Leiden, 2000).

of the three being coinherent in the other two (*NHC XI* 3.48.30ff and 49.25ff). In his search for the highest principle, the adept must pass from Mentality, the third silence (*NHC XI* 3.53.24), into Vitality, and thence into Existence where the likeness of the One will be disclosed in rest and motion (*NHC XI* 3.59.14-23); at the same time, he is admonished that the One who is truly at rest transcends Mentality, Vitality and Existence (*NHC XI* 3.61.32-62.31). Hymns to the triple power appear also in *The Three Steles of Seth*, while in *The Concept of our Great Power* the creation is the appearance of a Power in the midst of powers, and Christ is the redeemer of the psychic realm, because he knows the Great Power.

None of these writings, even if they were available to him, furnished a perfect template for Victorinus. None of them apportions a different power to each of the persons in the Trinity; the triads that they adumbrate are inferior to the Father, who never loses his simplicity as a monad, and is never said to stand to another subject in the relation of the potential to the actual. The Gnostic contribution to the evolution of Trinitarian dogma, though undeniable, is oblique, and it is difficult in some cases to determine the order of precedence, as the Nag Hammadi Documents are fragmentary, corrupt and overwritten. For the same reasons, we cannot hope to ascertain whether the Gnostic triads were calqued on those of the Platonists or the Platonic triads on those of the Gnostics. I have quoted in the last paragraph an allusion to rest and motion as inferior manifestations of the One, which should convince us that the Sethians were acquainted with the great genera of the *Sophist*. It was no new thing for Christians of this era to seek the assistance of philosophy in dispelling obscurities or resolving doubts; it was, however, illicit in the eyes of many churchmen, to let philosophy hold the reins, invoking the creeds, tradition and scripture only as ancillary sources of knowledge. By this canon the gnostic were plainly culpable and Victorinus suspect: a more acceptable balance between speculation and exegesis was observed by the protagonists in what I have called the fourth stage of the controversy, to which the remainder of the present paper is devoted.

Fourth Phase: Eunomius v. Gregory of Nyssa

The *Apology* of Eunomius, Bishop of Cyzicus and gadfly of the Nicenes in the latter half of the fourth century, is his only surviving work of any magnitude, though a sequel to this text can be reconstructed from the writings of his adversaries, the Cappadocian fathers. The argument of the *Apology* begins from the Nicene platitude that the Father is the one being who has no cause.¹⁶ The homoousian party, which denied that the Son is temporally posterior to the Father, proclaimed with equal warmth that he was none the less begotten, not by a birth or creation of the common order but by what came to be called (after Plotinus, *Enneads* 5.1.3.)¹⁷ an eternal generation. It was generally regarded as a heresy to

¹⁶ *Apology* 7, p. 40 Vaggione.

¹⁷ Plotinus, *Enneads*, ed. and trans. A.H. Armstrong, 7 vols. (New York, 1966-1988).

speak of *duo agennêta*, two unbegotten subjects, in the Godhead.¹⁸ Eunomius, however, is no longer on common ground when he maintains that *agennêsia* is a peculiar quality, not so much of the Father, as of the *ousia* or essence of the Godhead (*Apology* 9, p. 42). It is obvious, he reasons, that no being posterior to the *agennêtos* can itself be *agennêtos*, and equally obvious that that which is first in the order of being is God (*Apology* 10, p. 46). We are told in the scriptures that it is the property of God to be ‘he who is’, that is to be the one logical subject whose existence is identical with his essence (*Apology* 9; cf. *Ex.* 3:14). Hence whatever we predicate of him is predicated essentially, and therefore it is of his essence to be *agennêtos*. To imagine another being who shares his essence is to fall into the error of positing two *agennêta*, which not only flouts the teaching of the church but compromises the simplicity of the Godhead (which appears to follow from the identity of existence and essence) and entails the logical fallacy of attributing *agennêsia* to that which has a cause. Nothing could be more obvious than that the Son, who depends for his origin on the Father, is not that being whose existence is identical with his essence. On the contrary, he has come into being, and just as that which truly is never undergoes any process of becoming, so that which does undergo this process must have come to be from what is not. The *Categories* (12a26-34) are cited to prove that *agennêsia* can be a property rather than a privation,¹⁹ while echoes of the *Sophist*, the *Metaphysics* and Alexander of Aphrodisias can be detected in the argument that if that which is were to change it would become that which it is not and therefore pass from existence into non-existence.²⁰ Thus, Eunomius reasons, it is as perverse to suppose that God imparts his essence to another as that another could come into being and be God.

To put the matter shortly: that which is God must be unbegotten, and therefore that which is begotten cannot be God. According to the Nicene doctrine, represented by Basil of Caesarea and his brother Gregory of Nyssa, *agennêsia* was a property of the Father in relation to the Son, but not an essential attribute. Those attributes that pertain to his essence – eternity, omnipotence and sovereignty, for example – are equally predicable of the Son, who because he originates from the Father, inherits his essence according to the rule that applies to parents and their offspring in this world. Eunomius replies that, while every word that is said of God in the scriptures is true, and thus indicative of his essence (*Apology* 12, p. 48), it is not always true in the sense that it would convey when used of his creatures (*Apology* 16, p. 50). Paternity in God does not imply the same alienation of his own substance that takes place in the generation of one creature by another (*Apology* 17, p. 54); conversely, the divine predicates and even the divine name may be accorded to the Son without implying that he and the Father share one essence. The Nicenes, who rejected this dichotomy between talk of the Son and talk of the Father, drew their own distinction between the use of a term to express

¹⁸ Pamphilus, *Apologia pro Origene* 87, ed. Georg Röwekamp (Turnhout, 2006), 312; cf. E.J. Jonkers, *Acta et Synoda quae Quarto Saeculo habita sunt* (Leiden, 1954), 101 and 105.

¹⁹ *Apology* 8, p. 42 Vaggione with note.

²⁰ *Apology* 13-4, pp. 48-50 Vaggione. Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1074b; Plato, *Sophist* 251-259; Alexander of Aphrodisias, *Mantissa* 22, in R.C. Sharples, *Alexander of Aphrodisias: On Fate* (London, 1983), 213-4.

the proper notion, the *ennoia*, of a thing and the use of it to express the *epinoia*, or knowledge of a thing by its effects. Only the latter usage, they asseverate, is possible in the case of God, and hence it is a fallacy to assume that in knowing him to be *agennêtos* we know anything of his essence.

Eunomius demurs: the essence, he argues, manifests itself through its effects, and thus the *epinoia* must be congruent with the *ennoia* (*Apology* 20-3, pp. 58-64). Both sides, we observe, admit the ambivalence of theological language, though they do not give the same account of this ambivalence and do not employ the same definition of truth.

Eunomius seems to throw doubt upon his own maxim that an essence is manifest in its effects when he ascribes the origin of the Son to the *dunamis* or *energeia* of the Father, using the two nouns indiscriminately in his creed, and declaring with emphasis in the *Apology* that the *energeia* does not pertain to the essence of the Father (*Apology* 23, pp. 62-4). The Son is known from scripture to be *monogenês*, one of a kind, an epithet that distinguishes him in essence both from the Father and from the Spirit, who is the product of his own *dunamis* and *energeia*.²¹ For all that, it is not to be expected that the active power of the Son (as we must understand *dunamis* here) will be of a piece with that of the Father. Both the propagation of the Son and the procession of the Spirit are works of paternal *exousia*, a term that implies both sovereignty and an increment to the *ousia* (*Apology* 28, p. 76). To illustrate the freedom of God's action in bringing forth the Son, Eunomius also describes it as an ordinance²² and an exercise of will or deliberation,²³ whereas the Son (we are reminded) can do nothing of his own will.

Like every Christian author outside the New Testament who subordinates the Son and the Holy Spirit to the Father, Eunomius has been styled a Platonist, a Neoplatonist and even a Plotinian.²⁴ Michel Barnes has argued that a precedent for his understanding of *dunamis* can be found in the metaphysics of Iamblichus for whom *dunamis* mediates between the *ousia* and the *energeia* by which the *ousia* is known.²⁵ His usage is anticipated in the *Chaldaean Oracles*, perhaps also in Numenius of Apamea (whose star was at its highest in the first half of the fourth century), and wider currency was given to it in the epoch of Eunomius himself by Julian the Apostate. For all that, as Barnes acknowledges, Iamblichus never intimates that the exercise of the *dunamis* by the essence might be arbitrary or subject to intermission; his assertion that composite entities have a multitude of powers would rather suggest that a simple essence has only one, which we must assume (since there is no mention of the will) to be exercised without cessation. Moreover, he plainly means by *dunamis* a

²¹ *Apology* 22, p. 62; see M. Barnes, 'The Background and Use of Eunomius' Causal Language', in *id.* and D.H. Williams (eds), *Arianism after Arius* (Edinburgh, 1993), 217-36 on Clement, *Stromateis* 8.9.33.

²² *prostagma: Apology* 17, p. 54; Eunomius of Cyzicus, *Extant Works*, ed. and trans. R. Vaggione (Oxford, 1987).

²³ *Apology* 15, p. 52.

²⁴ See P. Papageorgiou, 'Plotinus and Eunomios: A Parallel Theology of the Three Hypostases', *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 37 (1992), 215-31.

²⁵ M. Barnes, *Power of God* (2001), 99, citing Iamblichus *Fr.* 75 Dillon.

potentiality to actualised, whereas *dunamis* and *energeia*, as we have seen, are synonyms for Eunomius. When we compare Eunomius with Plotinus, the disparity is palpable, for the latter asserts repeatedly that an *ousia* cannot be separated from its productive activity (cf. *Enneads* 3.8.2-3). In answer to those who say that soul is in body only by its *dunamis*, he insists that where the *dunamis* is present the soul is present, though distinct (*Enneads* 6.4.3). The soul envelops the body, not somatically but dynamically, and therefore invisibly and indivisibly, as an object in the hand would be enveloped invisibly and indivisibly by the *dunamis* if the corporeal mass could be eliminated (*Enneads* 6.4.7).

One Platonist whom Eunomius might have claimed as an intellectual friend is Porphyry, whose treatise *On Statues*, well known to the Christians of this period, contends that the gods are present in their images by *dunamis*, in a manner that seems to exclude their being present in *ousia*.²⁶ In his *Sententiae*, Porphyry again contrasts these terms when he asserts that soul is present in body only by *dunamis*.²⁷ Eunomius holds a similar position with regard to the coexistence of divinity and humanity in the incarnate Christ;²⁸ in modern parlance he would be an Antiochene, a denier of the true unity of natures, but the leitmotif of Nemesius of Emesa's work *On the Nature of Man*, to which we owe this testimony, is that every false Christology implies a false understanding of human nature.²⁹ If he is right, it is likely enough that Porphyry's anthropology was the model for the Christology of Eunomius; we should not conclude, however, that he was merely a philosopher shaping dogma according to his own preconceptions, Christian theology is set apart not so much by its metaphysics, its psychology or its view of the natural world as by its appeal to revelation, and the credal formulae based on revelation, as first principles. The consequence is that its problems are its own, yet it does not possess its own tools for their solution. The typical error of modern theologians is to assume that they have these tools already by virtue of their profession; the typical error of classicists in their study of antiquity is to assume that where common tools are being deployed they are being deployed for a common purpose. Whatever Eunomius takes from the pagan schools he applies to the vindication and elucidation of beliefs derived from scripture, or from reflection on the logical consequences of the monotheism which for him is both a credal and a scriptural axiom. Moreover, we shall see when we turn to Gregory of Nyssa that, whatever Porphyry taught regarding the separability of power and essence, he would never have countenanced the Eunomian teaching that an essence may choose not to exercise its characteristic power.

²⁶ Eusebius, *Preparation for the Gospel* 3.7.1; *Preparation for the Gospel and Demonstration of the Gospel*, ed. and trans. E.H. Gifford, 5 vols. (Oxford, 1903).

²⁷ Porphyry, *Sententiae* 2, ed. E. Lamberz (Leipzig, 1975), 2.

²⁸ Nemesius of Emesa, *On the Nature of Man*, p. 1.11 Morani.

²⁹ Nemesius of Emesa, *De Natura Hominis*, ed. M. Morani (Leipzig, 1987), 43.17.

Dunamis in Gregory of Nyssa

So far *dunamis* and *energeia* would appear to be synonymous in Eunomius. If Gregory of Nyssa can be trusted, however, the words were differentiated in his subsequent writing, *energeia* standing as always for activity, while *dunamis* denotes the power that is exercised in activity. In an excerpt censured by his Cappadocian adversary, Eunomius urges that even that sublime *ousia* which wields authority over all others is subordinate to the *ousia* of the Father both because it has a cause and because it is brought into existence by a certain *energeia*. Granting that each of the three divine *ousiai* is simple and one, he adds that this is true of each only according to its dignity, and in each the *energeiai* are ‘circumscribed along with the works’, while the works in turn are a measure of the *energeiai*.³⁰ Hence these *energeiai* must admit of more or less, for it would not be lawful to say that the same *energeia* was responsible for the creation of the angels, of the stars and of humankind. As one work surpasses another, so must be the *energeia* from which one work proceeds surpass the *energeia* from which another proceeds.³¹ Gregory’s subsequent commentary implies that the Son himself was numbered among these products of the divine *energeia kai dunamis* – or rather, of the *energeia dunameos*, since Eunomius now distinguishes the activity from the latent potentiality to act.³² Gregory in his response does not deny that every creature of the visible world, and even those denizens of the invisible world who are not begotten but created, are the fruits of a limited exercise of divine power. The very fact, however, that the highest of these are acclaimed in the plural as *dunameis* or powers of God is evidence that they do not share the monadic nature of the three divine persons.³³ The Son we know, by contrast, to be the *dunamis* and wisdom of the Father;³⁴ if instead we postulate an intermediate *dunamis*, distinct from the Father’s essence, as the instrument of his creation, then that *dunamis*, not the Father, is his author.³⁵ Absurdity is compounded if we introduce *energeia* as a third term, distinct from any of the hypostases; for, having no hypostasis of its own, it could produce only a work commensurate with its own nature, that is, a work without substance (1.253-260; *GNO* I, 100-102). Unless we confess that the Son is the offspring rather than the creature of the Father, issuing directly from his essence rather than any ‘partial *dunamis*’, we shall fall into the blasphemy of reckoning the fount of being among the things that are not.

Dunamis in God cannot be distinguished from *energeia*; neither, if we grant to Eunomius that the simplicity of divine beings precludes the separation of properties from the essence, is it any more possible to distinguish the Father’s *dunamis* from that which he is in himself. In short it is he, by the mere fact of being the Father, who brings the Son into being, not an *energeia* distinct from himself, a

³⁰ *Against Eunomius* 1.152; *GNO* I 72.

³¹ 1.153; *GNO* I 72.

³² 1.244; *GNO* I 98.

³³ 1.310-3; *GNO* I 118-9.

³⁴ 1.335; *GNO* I 126.

³⁵ 1.247; *GNO* I 99.

decantation (as it were) of his power or essence. Gregory has been credited with a new understanding of *dunamis*, and certainly he would seem to have been the first to bring this notion into his teaching in the Trinity. Similar notions, however, can be found in his Greek precursors, none of whom is likely to have been better known than Porphyry in the second half of the fourth century. As Eirini Viltanioti has pointed out to me, two passages in the commentary of Proclus on the *Timaeus* reveal that Porphyry defined a real power as one that acts not intermittently or through instruments, but by its mere proximity to the substrate (Proclus, *In Timaeum* I, 393.1-8 Diehl). Rejecting the opinion of ‘those around Atticus’, who maintain that God could exist without creating, Porphyry urged that, since the *dunamis* of God is inseparable from his essence, he will exercise this *dunamis* unceasingly by virtue of his essence: a Demiurge who failed to create would no longer be the demiurge, just as the soul, if it failed to sustain the vital operations of the body, would no longer be a soul. In the second passage he contrasts the Demiurge of the world with the artisan who, for want of mastery over his substrate, is obliged to make use of tools; if his mere existence furnished the necessary power, the form would immediately supervene upon the matter without the assistance of any tool.³⁶ If it is true, however, that Gregory had been reading Porphyry, he had found a dangerous bedfellow, for Porphyry thought it a logically ineluctable conclusion that the world must be eternal. Christians, of course, denied this inference, and were therefore bound to admit that even a God who was not circumscribed by any other entity might set limits to his activity when the *ergon* was the product of his will. On the other hand, Porphyry was a safer guide to the logic of the Trinity if one held, with Athanasius, that the Son was a product of the Father’s nature. When a timeless and immaterial being works by nature, there is nothing to prevent the full conversion of the potential into the actual; on this view, which was warmly embraced by the Cappadocian Fathers, the exercise of paternal *dunamis* was not only uninhibited and unmediated but, as Porphyry would contend, inevitable.

From what has been said it is evident that the noun *dunamis*, in Gregory no less than in Eunomius, is customarily used as a synonym for *energeia*, signifying active power. Gregory tells us often enough that the power of God is ineffably superior to the limited capacities that he imparts to us,³⁷ inexpressibly greater than the signs by which we know it,³⁸ surpassing every name that we apply to him,³⁹ unchanging and unalterable, as the Nicene Creed had declared the Word to be,⁴⁰ and requiring no instrument but his almighty will.⁴¹ Unlimited and immeasurable as it is, it is circumscribed only by the impossibility of his doing evil.⁴² This too is no deficiency but the

³⁶ *Ibid.* I 395.10-22 Diehl; cf. Plotinus, *Enneads* 3.8.2.

³⁷ *Against Eunomius*, GNO I 291.8.

³⁸ *On the Holy Pasch*, GNO IX 256.24.

³⁹ *Against Eunomius*, GNO I 222.10

⁴⁰ *Then the Son also*, GNO III 2,7.8.

⁴¹ *Infant Deaths*, GNO III 2, 92.4.

⁴² *Epistles*, GNO VIII 2, 25.9; *Song of Songs*, GNO VI 204-10.

consequence of the immutable goodness which defines his nature insofar as a word can define it.⁴³ In short his power is his sovereignty, and when characterized as eternal is all but synonymous with his divinity.⁴⁴ Inasmuch as his sovereignty is undivided, his nature simple and his Godhead one, his *dunamis* too can be spoken of only in the singular. Gregory, as we have seen, lays down a rule that where scripture speaks monadically of *dunamis*, it is always the power of God that is intended, whereas *dunamis* in the plural is another term for angels.⁴⁵ So far, he and Eunomius agree in their adherence to the axiom of Plotinus that if the source is simple the power too must be one (*Enneads* 5.3.15). For all that, he is in no want of qualifying adjectives which enable him to distinguish one operation of omnipotence in the lower realm from another. Thus we hear frequently of the *prognostikê*, or prescient, *dunamis*, by which God knows all things before they come into being.⁴⁶ We are warned to fear the *antapodotikê*, or retributive, *dunamis*, of his wrath.⁴⁷ His power as creator is sometimes styled his *dêmiourgikê dunamis*,⁴⁸ though Gregory seems to imply that it is only Eunomius who would favour this epithet, and certainly only Eunomius who would regard the creative faculty as a thing superadded to God's original nature.⁴⁹ *Poiêtikê* is the term by which he himself prefers to describe the power that encompasses within itself 'every object of thought that strives to reach the beginning of divine life'.⁵⁰

Does Gregory therefore contradict his own tenet that the power of God is as simple as his essence? No doubt he would answer, as any Neoplatonist would, that this fissiparation is the illusion of finite creatures who cannot grasp the operation of the divine will as a whole. He would indeed be drawn into inconsistency if he held that the Son is a product of the Father's *dunamis*, for the eternal and infinite act of generation cannot be simultaneously the finite and contingent process of shaping a temporal world. Eunomius can ascribe demiurgic activity both to the Father and to the Son without imperilling the simplicity of the Godhead because in his view only the Father is truly God, and although the same verb is predicated of both it does not denote the same operation. In Gregory's theology, the Son is not a product of *dunamis* but the very *dunamis* of the Godhead. The Father is the sole cause of his generation and of the procession of the Spirit; in the created order, on the other hand, whatever the Father initiates is effected through the Son and consummated by the Spirit, all three working together in all to reveal the indivisible unity of the Godhead. In this world we would object that even perfect coadunation of powers is something less than ontological unity; of the Godhead we cannot say this, because the words that are vouchsafed to us in scripture tell us not what he is by

⁴³ *Titles of the Psalms*, GNO V 65.25; *Against Eunomius*, GNO I 311.16; *Song of Songs*, GNO VI 255.14.

⁴⁴ *On Virginity*, GNO VIII 1, 298.11; *Christian Instruction*, GNO VIII 1, 43.22; *Against Eunomius*, GNO I 290.17.

⁴⁵ *Christian Instruction*, GNO VIII 1, 133.7.

⁴⁶ *Making of Man*, GNO IV 2, 206.14 and 22; *Catechetical Oration*, GNO III 4, 34.10.

⁴⁷ *Titles of the Psalms*, GNO V 113.9.

⁴⁸ *Antirrheticus*, GNO III 1, 223.21; *Life of Moses*, GNO VII 1, 120.7.

⁴⁹ *Against Eunomius*, GNO II 282.23-9.

⁵⁰ *Against Eunomius*, GNO I 135.18-20.

nature but how his nature is exhibited in his works. In his letter to Ablabius, Gregory proposes a new etymology of the word *theos* from *theasthai*, to behold, and takes this to indicate that God is known to us only as the one who superintends the created order.⁵¹ The essence of the Godhead is inscrutable, and since all three persons are equally divine all there are equally beyond our understanding; their being at one in every work, however, is the earnest of their being one in essence.

While Gregory does not think it a heresy to call the creative power of God his *logos* or *sophia*, his word or wisdom,⁵² the name Logos when applied to the second person of the Trinity denotes not a mere operation of the Father, but a co-possessor of *dunamis*, or rather the *autodunamis*, the power-itself, of the Godhead.⁵³ He is the unique or only-begotten *dunamis*, who executes in himself all things that the Father executes through him.⁵⁴ At the same time, it can be said that he performs through the Spirit all that the Spirit himself is said to perform:⁵⁵ the Father, we may say, is the fount of *dunamis*, the Son the very *dunamis*, the Spirit the spirit of that *dunamis*.⁵⁶ The life-giving power comes forth as activity from the Father and the Son in unison;⁵⁷ it is by the same power that the Son unites the Spirit to himself and to the Father.⁵⁸ The demiurgic activity that is metaphorically signified by the hand of God⁵⁹ can also be described as *apergastike* or productive, and *tekhniké* or craftlike, as *katakeuastike* or constructive and as *exergastike* or efficacious.⁶⁰ Under all these names the will of God – the triune deity – brings into being every product or effect of his power, but even when this is also called his *boulesis* or *boulema*, no temporal process of deliberation is implied.⁶¹ Since his will and his workmanship can never be separated from his benignity, we can also attribute to God an epoptic or tutelary *dunamis*, which with equal propriety might be termed *energeia* or activity.⁶² The union of benevolence with omnipotence entails that the power of Christ will also be *zoopoios*, or productive of life, manifesting its supremacy in the banishment of diseases by a mere word of command.⁶³

Concluding observations

⁵¹ *To Ablabius*, GNO V 44.17.

⁵² GNO XVI 16.11-23.

⁵³ *Catechetical Oration*, GNO III 4, 35.12.

⁵⁴ *Against Eunomius*, GNO I 177.22.

⁵⁵ *To Ablabius*, GNO V 51.13.

⁵⁶ *On the Holy Spirit*, GNO III 1, 99.32-100.1.

⁵⁷ *Against Eunomius*, GNO II 302.14.

⁵⁸ *Against Eunomius*, GNO I 120.16.

⁵⁹ *Song of Songs*, GNO VI 337.14.

⁶⁰ *Defence of the Hexaemeron*, GNO IV 1, 20.23 and 78.29; *Against Eunomius*, GNO II 198.7; *Refutation of Eunomius*, GNO II 340.25.

⁶¹ *Catechetical Oration*, GNO III 4, 61.2; *Against Eunomius*, GNO I 296.28 and 396.29.

⁶² *Titles of the Psalms*, GNO VIII 40.21.

⁶³ *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, GNO III 3, 2.137.

More scrutiny would be required to discover whether this equation of the power of God with the Son or Second Person of the Trinity is consistently observed in Gregory's writings. Even if it proves to be so, consistency is not the same thing as cogency, and the faithful application of this thesis may allay certain difficulties at the cost of raising others. If every exertion of *dunamis* by any of the three persons must be concretely realised in the Second Person, it will follow, since each person is identical with the one being named God, that God is identical with his own *dunamis*. This would be an intelligible theory if *dunamis* signified *energeia* in the sense of actuality. In Greek thought, however, *dunamis* is always a complementary term, not a synonym, for *energeia* in this sense; the present paper has shown that in Christian thought of the late fourth century it often functioned as a synonym for *energeia* in the sense of activity. Gregory himself teaches that all three persons are known to us only through their synergetic activity in the creation, preservation and redemption of the cosmos; he also holds, however, that the creation was itself a contingent act and that the world which it brought into being has only a finite history. The charge against Eunomius was that he makes the Son the product of a fickle exertion of *dunamis* which remains extrinsic to the Father's essence; Gregory, in asserting that the *dunamis* is intrinsic to the essence of the Godhead, and hence eternal, has given metaphysical force to the dictum of Athanasius that the Son is not a creature of the divine will but the will itself, and he anticipates the teaching of Augustine that, because God is eternal love, the Son must exist eternally as an object of that love. But what he gains in metaphysics he loses in cosmology, for the pagan question, 'what was God doing before he created the world?' is now transferred from the Godhead as a whole to the Second Person in particular. To judge by the *Hexaemeron*, Gregory was content with Origen's answer that there was nothing before the world because time itself came into being with the creation.⁶⁴ The fact that the question is still in dispute suggests that this solution, though it satisfied Augustine,⁶⁵ has not always been found compelling. It also shows that the difficulty is not peculiar to those who entertain a particular theory of the Trinity, and it is not my purpose here to disparage Gregory's capacity as a philosopher. He could not have embraced the eternity of creation as a logical corollary of his teaching on the Trinity, because this appeared to him to be negated by the opening words of Genesis. The paradox into which he is thrown is therefore an illustration of a point made more than once in the present paper, that Christian speculation in antiquity was never entirely free to take its own course, and was bound to shun every path that was not illumined by the light of revelation.

⁶⁴ See M. DelCogliano, 'Basil of Caesarea versus Eunomius of Cyzicus on the Nature of Time', *Vigiliae Christianae* 68 (2014), 498-532; P. Tzamalikos, *Origen: Cosmology and Ontology of Time* (Leiden, 2006), 142-4.

⁶⁵ *Confessions* 11.13; *City of God* 11.4-5.