

Common elements within the writings of Gregory of Nyssa and Dionysius the Areopagite

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The common elements to be found in the works of Gregory of Nyssa and Dionysius the Areopagite are as follows: 1) the existence of three main stages of spiritual life; 2) the affirmation that, from an ontological point of view, evil does not exist; 3) the belief in the actuality of free will; 4) intimations that the progress of the soul – *epektasis* – continues in the afterlife, and 5) analogous conceptions regarding the creation of the world.

In this text I will only refer to the first two of those similarities. I need to underline that the perspectives of the two authors on the above issues are not identical in every regard; they agree on those in principle, but on some aspects of them each has a specific view.

The main stages of spiritual development:

1) Concerning the first commonality to be found in the texts of Nyssen and the Syrian this consists in the belief that the evolution of the human soul undergoes three stages. These are as follows: purification, illumination, and union with the Divine (*ἐνωσις/henosis*). The most elaborated explanations in the works of the two authors focus on purification and union hence I will also concentrate on those. The same three stages were suggested earlier in Origen's texts.¹ (As we know Adamantius also have a complex position on the notion of evil and

¹ For instance, Origen, *The Commentary of Origen on S. John's Gospel*, edited by Alan England Brooke, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, vol. 1, Book II. 1-3, pp. 56-58; Origen, *On first principles* [henceforth *De Princ.* in the body of the text]. See "Peri archon"/De Principiis, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus Series Graeca*, J.-P. Migne (ed.), Paris: Imprimerie Catholique, 1857, vol. 11, cols. 115A-414A. Of course, this is abbreviated 'PG'; what we shall use henceforth. The translation I shall use *On first principles*, translation and notes, George William Butterworth, Introduction to the TORCH edition by Henri de Lubac, London, New York: Harper and Row, 1973; Gloucester, Massachusetts: Peter Smith Publishers, 1973. The Alexandrian has intimations about the three stages in the development of the soul, for instance in Book I, ch. 5, pp. 50-51; Book

suffering, which for him needs to be experienced in order for the soul to ascend to God; *De Principiis/On First Principles*²). With regard to the development of the soul, the Alexandrian believed that it undergoes purification in paradise (which for Origen was a physical location) before going up to the higher heaven (*First principles*, 2. 11.6; *Against Celsius* 7. 39). For instance, this is what he says in *First principles*, 2. 11.6: “I think the souls as they depart from this life will remain in the same place situated on the earth, which the divine scripture calls ‘paradise’”;³ (*First principles*, 2. 11.6).

There have been various interpretations concerning the manner in which Adamantius conceived of Eden; Peter Martens summarizes those. He chiefly and rightly argues that since, for Origen, the **soul’s purification** in the paradise precedes her ascent through the heavenly spheres, it does not have an incorporeal reality, but **a physical one**.⁴ Epiphanius of Salamis (c. 310/320-403), who, as is known, was the first to contradict Origen’s ideas – in the

IV, ch. 1, p. 257, and Book II, ch.9, pp. 130-131. See also Origen, *On First Principles*, trans. John Behr, Oxford (from Rufinus’s translation): Oxford University Press, 2019; and Phillip Schaff (ed.), *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 4: Fathers of the Third Century: Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First and Second (ANF04), Edinburg: T&T Clark, originally published in 1885; there is a new edition (on line) of it thus: “Complete Ante-Nicene & Nicene and Post-Nicene Church Fathers”, London: Catholic Way Publishing, 2016. See comments in G. Christopher Stead, “Individual Personality in Origen and the Cappadocian Fathers”, within the book Bianchi Von Ugo and Henri Crouzel (eds.), *Arché e Telos: L’ antropologia di Origene e di Grigorio di Nissa. Analisi storico-religiosa* (Atti del Colloquio Milano 17-19 maggio 1979), *Studia Patristica Mediolanensia* 12, Mailand: Vita e Pensiero, 1981: 170-191; Mark S. M. Scott: *Journey Back to God: Origen on the Problem of Evil*, Academy Series, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

² Origen, *De Principiis (De Princ.)*, and *Against Celsius* within *Contra Celsum*, edited by Henri Chadwick, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953; the digital edition 2003. Origen, *De Principiis*, edited by P. Koetschau, Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1913, *On First Principles*, translation and notes, G. W. Butterworth, Introduction to the TORCH edition Henri de Lubac, Gloucester, Massachusetts: Peter Smith Publishers, 1973, 2011; and Origen, *On First Principles*, translator John Behr (from Rufinus’s trans.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. For comments on Adamantius’s position see M. S. M. Scott, *Journey Back to God: Origen on the Problem of Evil*.

³ Origen, *De Princ.* and *Against Celsius* in *Contra Celsum*, edited by Henri Chadwick, p. 403. On other places in Origen’s work where he mentions the paradise see C. H. Bammel, “Adam in Origen”, in *The Making of Orthodoxy. Essays in Honour of Henry Chadwick*, ed. R. D. Williams, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, pp. 62-93.

⁴ Peter Martens, “Origen’s doctrine of Pre-Existence and the Opening Chapters of Genesis”, *Zeitschrift für Antike Christentums* 16 (2013), pp. 536-538. Origen speaks about the reality of paradise in *First principles*, 2. 11.6; *Against Celsius* 7. 39. On the subtleties and apparent consistencies of his position, in addition to Martens, see also C. H. Bammel, “Adam in Origen”, in *The Making of Orthodoxy. Essays in Honour of Henry Chadwick*, ed. R. D. Williams, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, pp. 62-93.

*Panarion (Refutatio Omnium Haeresium/Refutation of all the Heresies*⁵) – does not refer specifically to the above-mentioned aspect of Adamantius’ thought (if he did, perhaps he might have agreed with the three stages).

Gregory of Nyssa elaborates further on the position the Alexandrian held on lustration, illumination, and unification, and according to Jean Danielou the following: “is the familiar pattern in Gregory of Nyssa’s work: purification (‘light’); contemplation (‘cloud’); [and union (‘darkness’)].”⁶ According to Paul Rorem, the history of this classification “may involve Origen’s adaptation of some Stoic or Middle Platonic”⁷ ideas.

This is, for instance, what Nyssen says with regard to the first stage of the development of the soul in “Homily 3”. 24 from the series *Homilies on the Song of Songs*:

προφανέντων ἐστέρων καὶ τοῦ ὑπαυγάζσαντος ὀρθρου τὴν λαμπηδόνα.
κάκεινα μὲν πάντα καθαρσίων τινῶν καὶ περιφραντηρίων δύναμιν ἔχει, δι’ ὧν
ἀφαγνισθεῖσαι αἱ ψυχαὶ πρὸς τὴν ὑποδοχὴν τῶν θείων παρασκευάζονται, ἐστὶ
μετουσία αὐτοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ
λόγου διὰ τῆς ἰδίας φωνῆς μεταδιδόντος τῷ ἀκούοντι τῆς ἀκηράτου δυνάμεως τὴν
κοινωνίαν.
καὶ ὥσπερ ἐπὶ τοῦ ὄρους εἰνᾶ προπαρασκευασθεῖς τοῖς καθαρσίοις ὁ’ Ἰσραὴλ ἐν
ἡμέραις δύο τῇ τρίτῃ κατὰ τὸν ὀρθρον ἀειοῦται τῆς θεοφανείας οὐκέτι περὶ τὴν
πλύσιν τῶν ἱματιῶν ἀσχολοῦν, ἀλλ’ αὐτὸν δεχόμενος ἐμφανῶς τὸν θεόν, οὗ χάριν
τὸν τῆς ψυχῆς ῥύπον διὰ τῶν
προλαβόντων καθαρσίων ἀπεπλύνετο, οὕτω καὶ νῦν ἢ ἐν τοῖς φθάσαι λόροις
γεγεννημένων προοιμίῶν τοῦ Ἰσμοῦ τῶν Ἰσμάτων θεωρία κατὰ.

...The souls that have been purified are ready for the reception of the divine. They constitute a participation in the Godhead itself, since the divine Word is his own voice that confers on the hearer a fellowship with the undefiled Power. And just as Israel was prepared for two days in advance via rituals of purification and then, at the beginning of the third day, was considered worthy of the theophany, being no longer

⁵ Epiphanius of Salamis, *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis*, 64.2 edited and translated by Frank Williams, Books II and III. *De Fide*, second, revised edition, Leiden, Boston: Brill, 1994, new edition 2013, series Nag Hammadi texts and the Bible. A synopsis and index, vol. 79, Book II, pp. 134-214; and *Ancoratus* 62 See also Epiphanius of Salamis, *Panarion (De Haeresium)* and *Ancoratus/Ἀγκυρωτός*, edited by K. Holl, in GCS (*Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte*, Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1915-1933, vols. 1-3. (Epiphanius of Salamis, *Ancoratus*, translated by Young Richard Kim, Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America, 2014).

⁶ Paul Rorem mentions this in *Pseudo-Dionysius. A Commentary*, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 59. So far, I could not find this quotation in the works of Jean Danielou.

⁷ P. Rorem, *A Commentary*, p. 59.

engaged with the cleansing of garments but openly receiving God himself, for whose sake the soul's dirt had been cleansed by the earliest purifications.⁸

Also, in his *Life of Moses*, using the biblical account as a parable of the Christian spiritual ascent, he describes how the meeting with God occurs “in the cloud”, i.e., without the help of created vision. Such an encounter is possible because God is totally invisible and incomprehensible to the created eye, and inaccessible to the created mind. He is, nevertheless, seen and perceived by man, when man, by baptismal and ascetic purification, by effort and virtues, is enabled to acquire “spiritual senses,” which allow him to perceive, through communion in Christ and the Holy Spirit, the One who is beyond creation.⁹

Gregory describes how Moses instructed people concerning the process of undergoing purification, which the Cappadocian calls “a most secret initiation”. This is what he affirms: “The divine power itself by marvels beyond description initiated all the people and their leader himself in the following manner. The people were ordered beforehand to keep themselves from defilements of all kinds which pertain to both soul and body and to purify themselves by certain lustrations; (Book I, 42; p. 42).¹⁰

Gregory of Nyssa, as we shall see, also Pseudo-Dionysius, calls the highest stage of the human development, the union with the divine, ‘**darkness**’. Gregory does it in *The Life of*

⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, “Homily 3”, Ekkehard Mülenberg and Giulio Maspero (eds.), *In canticum canticorum*, in *Gregorii Nysseni Opera Online*, vol. 24; general editor Werner Jaeger, consulted online on 22 June 2020, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2214-8728_gnoo_aGNO_24_t, translation mine adapted from *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, trans. with an Introduction and Notes by Richard A. Norris Jr., Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012; Homily 3, in Greek on p. 78, commentary in English, pp. 79, 81.

⁹ Gregory of Nyssa/Gregorii Nysseni, “De Vita Moysis pentecosten”, in Ekkehard Mülenberg and Giulio Maspero (eds.), *Gregorii Nysseni Opera Online*, vol. 25, general editor for the hardback version Werner Jaeger, consulted online on 22 June 2020 http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2214-8728_gnoo_aGNO_25_t; see also GNO. 7. 1, Leiden: Brill, first printed in 1964, reprinted 1991. In English: Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, trans. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1978, p. 36; reprint Harper Collins Publishers in 2006. Also Gregory of Nyssa/Grégoire de Nyse, *La vie de Moïse*, edited by Jean Daniélou, Paris: Éditions du Cerf, the third edition revised and corrected, 1968, pp. 44-326; and Ann Conway-Jones, *Gregory of Nyssa's Tabernacle Imagery in its Jewish and Christian Contexts*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

¹⁰ Gregorii Nysseni, “De Vita Moysis pentecosten”, Book I, 42, in E. Mülenberg and G. Maspero (eds.), GNO 25; general editor for the hardback version Werner Jaeger, consulted online on 22 June 2020 http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2214-8728_gnoo_aGNO_25_t. 6.

Moses. This is how he introduces it by the example of the prophet's forty day experience on Mount Sinai:

Then the clear light of the atmosphere was darkened so that the mountain became invisible, wrapped in a dark cloud. A fire shining out of the darkness presented a fearful sight to those who saw it. It hovered all around the sides of the mountain so that everything which one could see smouldered with the smoke from the surrounding fire. Moses led the people to the slope, not without fear himself at the sight. [...] The manifestation was of such a nature that it not only caused consternation in their souls through what they saw but it also struck fear in them through what they heard. A terrible sound ripped down from above upon everything below. [...]. This sound was sharp and clear, the air articulating the word by divine power without using organs of speech. The word was not articulated without purpose but was laying down divine ordinances. As the sound drew nearer, it became louder, and the trumpet surpassed itself, the successive sounds exceeding in volume the preceding ones.¹¹

At the end of this encounter, 'grown in knowledge', Moses declared that he had seen God in the darkness. What is most interesting in this Scriptural story is that within a darkness as that which enveloped Moses "The eye is not dimmed nor does the person age [...] And the person who by every means achieves incorruption in his whole life admits no corruption in himself. For he who has truly come to be in the image of God and who has in no way turned aside from the divine character bears in himself its distinguishing marks and shows in all things his conformity to the archetype; he beautifies his own soul with what is incorruptible, unchangeable, and shares in no evil at all"; Book II, 318).¹²

On the basis on this description *inter alia* Hans Boersma rightly assesses Gregory's ecclesiology to be "thoroughly anagogical", i. e. 'negative'/of the ascent. Paraphrasing Ps 23 (24) he considers that the "the aim of the sacraments [in the Church] is ascension, along with Christ, onto the mountain of the presence of God."¹³ John McGuckin also evaluates that the

¹¹ Gregorii Nysseni, "De Vita Moysis pentecosten", Book I, 42, in Mülenberg and Maspero (eds.), GNO 25, consulted online on 22 June 2020 http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2214-8728_gnoo_aGNO_25_t.

¹² Gregorii Nysseni, "De Vita Moysis pentecosten", Book II, 318, in Mülenberg and Maspero (eds.), GNO 25; consulted online on 22 June 2020 http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2214-8728_gnoo_aGNO_25_t.

¹³ Hans Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa. An Anagogical Approach*, Oxford Early Christian Studies, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 209 and p. 210.

way “the mystical ascent of the *Nous*” in presented by Gregory in the *Life of Moses* “is exactly what the ancient Church from earliest times took as a symbol of its own worship.”¹⁴

Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite on the stages of soul’s development

Dionysius, like Gregory, also refers to the purification as being the first stage in the development of the human soul. But he thinks that for people this process is performed through intermediaries, i. e. through the bodily beings, who are already perfected and so, have the uninterrupted vision of God. He elaborates on this especially in “The Celestial Hierarchy”, for example at CH 240C/240D, and 273C. This is what the Syrian avers in the first instance mentioned above: “Similarly, it seems to me, the **immediate** participation in God of those angels that first raised up to him is **more direct** than that of those **perfected through a mediator**. Hence – to use the terminology handed down to us – the **first** intelligences **perfect, illuminate, and purify** those of inferior status in such a fashion than the latter, **having been lifted up through** them to the **universal and transcendent source**, thereby acquire their due share of **the purification, illumination, and perfection** of the One

¹⁴ John McGuckin, “Gregory of Nyssa. Bishop, Philosopher, Exegete, Theologian”, in Anna Marmodoro and Neil B. McLynn (eds.), *Exploring Gregory of Nyssa. Philosophical, Theological, and Historical Studies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, chapter 1, pp. 7-28. McGuckin is referring to Ann Conway-Jones’s book *Gregory of Nyssa’s Tabernacle Imagery in its Jewish and Christian Contexts*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014 in ft. 97 on page 24 of his chapter.

who is the source of all perfection”; (CH 240C/240D).¹⁵At CH 273C he says that purification helps “Moving ‘upwards’ towards’ God”.¹⁶

Pseudo-Dionysius calls the highest stage of the human development ‘darkness’ (DN 592CD8; 708D9)¹⁷ because the knowledge achieved at that level is so profound that it escapes description by words; this is also the most intimate human state. Such a level of development is reached through the above-mentioned union with the divine.¹⁸

He describes this process very clearly in the *Mystical Theology*, where he instructs a young friend how to undergo it:

“Thou then, my friend, if thou desirest (ἠὺχθῶ) mystic visions, with strengthened feet abandon thy senses and intellectual operations, and both sensible and invisible things, and both all nonbeing and being; and unknowingly restore thyself to unity as far as possible, unity of Him Who is above all essence and knowledge. And when thou hast transcended thyself and all things in immeasurable and absolute purity of mind, thou shalt ascend to the superessential rays of divine shadows, leaving all behind and freed from ties of all.” [MT 997B- 1000A].¹⁹

¹⁵ Dionysius, “The Celestial Hierarchy”, CH 273C, in *CD II*, edited by Günter Heil and Adolf Martin Ritter, *Patristische Texte und Studien*, vol. 36, Berlin and New York, 1991; the fragment is on pp. 40-41 in Greek; *Corpus Dionysiacum II*; the same fragment in English, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, edited by Paul Rorem, trans. by P. Rorem and C. Luibheid, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987, p. 168; bold letter added. I use here the following abbreviations for the titles of Dionysius’ treatises: EH (for the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*), CH (for the *Celestial Hierarchy*), MT (for the *Mystical Theology*, and DN (for the *Divine Names*). The quotations will be given as in the critical edition: *Corpus Dionysiacum I (DN)*, Edited by Beate Regina Suchla, and *Corpus Dionysiacum II*, eds. Günter Heil and Adolf Martin Ritter, *Patristische Texte und Studien*, vols. 33 and 36, Berlin and New York, 1990-1991, reprint 2013.

¹⁶ Dionysius the Areopagite, “The Celestial Hierarchy”, CH 240C/240D, and 273C in *CD II*, edited by Günter Heil and Adolf Martin Ritter, *Patristische Texte und Studien*, vol. 36, Berlin and New York, 1991; the fragments are on p. 33, respectively 40-41 in Greek; *Corpus Dionysiacum II*; the same fragment in English, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, edited by Paul Rorem, trans. by P. Rorem and C. Luibheid, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987, pp. 168, respectively p. 174.

¹⁷ Dionysius the Areopagite, “The Divine Names”, CD I, edited by B. R. Suchla, pp. 114-115.

¹⁸Among the publications on this topic see Ysabel de Andia, “Henosis: l’union à Dieu chez Denys l’Aréopagite”, *Philosophia Antiqua* 71, Leiden, New York, and Köln: Brill, 1996; D. Turner, *The Darkness of God. Negativity in Christian Mysticism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998; Deirdre Carabine, *The unknown God: negative theology in the Platonic tradition: Plato to Eriugena*, Louvain: Peeters, W.B. Eerdmans, 1995, and *John Scottus Eriugena*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, *Great Medieval Thinkers*, 2000; Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism. Origins to the Fifth Century*, New York: Crossroads, 1994; and Douglas B. Farrow, “Unification/Henosis”, in *Religion Past and Present*, Leiden, Koninklijke Brill NV, Brill Online Reference Works/Brill Online), April 2011.

¹⁹ Dionysius the Areopagite, “Mystical Theology” 997B-1000A, in “Mystical Theology”, *Corpus Dionysiacum II (CH, EH, MT, Letters)*, eds. Günter Heil and Adolf Martin Ritter, *Patristische Texte und Studien*, vol. 36, Berlin and New York, 1991; the fragment is on p. 142.

Here it is in Greek: “Dionysius the Areopagite, *Μυστικῆς Θεολογίας/Mystical Theology*, “Ἐμοὶ μὲν οὖν ταῦτα ἠὺχθῶ σὺ δέ, ὃ φίλε Τιμόθεε, τῆ περι τὰ μυστικὰ θεάματα συντόνω διατριβῆ καὶ τὰς αἰσθησεις ἀπόλειπε, καὶ τὰς νοεράς ἐνεργείας, καὶ πάντα αἰσθητὰ καὶ νοητὰ, καὶ πάντα οὐχ ὄντα καὶ ὄντα, καὶ πρὸς τὴν ἔνωσιν, ὡς ἐφιχτόν, ἀγνώστως ἀνατάθητι τοῦ ὑπὲρ πᾶσαν οὐσίαν καὶ γνῶσιν τῆ γὰρ ἑαυτοῦ καὶ πάντων ἀσχετῶ καὶ

In my own translation, the most important part of this fragment is thus: “If you wish to contemplate God through a mystical experience, my dear Timothy, I advice you to be aware and prepare yourself.”

The notion of darkness is also very important because it has implications for the manner in which Gregory of Nyssa and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite conceived Trinity. While both thinkers believe that there are three stages in the development of human soul, their position on Trinity varies because they use the term *ἐνωσις* differently: for Nyssen it means unity of persons (a unity within which each of the members of the Triune God keep their individuality) while for Ps-Dionysius it means “unity of nature” (the Syrian does not comment on the distinction **of persons**). Ysabel de Andya²⁰ and Endre von Ivánka²¹ emphasize the differentiation between the types of ‘union’ in Gregory and Pseudo-Areopagite’s work.

2. The **second aspect** that is common to Gregory of Nyssa and Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite’s theological systems is their attitude towards evil. Gregory thinks that “vice has

ἀπολύτῳ καθαρῶς ἐχστάσει πρὸς τὴν ὑπερουσίον τοῦ θεοῦ σχότους ἀχτῖνα, πάντα ἀφελῶν καὶ ἐχ πάντων ἀπολυθείς, ἀναχθήσῃ.” (MT 997B -1000A), my translation.

In the translation realized by C. Luibheid the fragment in its entirety says: “For this I pray; and Timothy, my friend, my advice to you as you look for a sight of the mysterious things, is to leave behind you everything perceived and understood, all that is not and all that is, and with your understanding aside, to strive upwards as much as you can toward a union with him who is beyond all being and knowledge. By an undivided and absolute abandonment of yourself and everything, shedding all and freed from all, you will be uplifted to the rays of divine shadows, which is above everything that is”; eds. Heil and Ritter, *Corpus Dionysiacum II*, pp. 68-69; ed. Luibheid, *The Complete Works*, p. 135.

The same fragment was translated (and edited) by Rolt thus: “Such be my prayer; and thee, dear Timothy, I counsel that, in the earnest exercise of mystical contemplation, thou leave the senses and the activities of the intellect and all things in this word of nothingness, or in that world of being, and that, thine understanding being laid to rest, thou strain (so far as thou mayest) towards an union with Him whom neither being nor understanding can contain. For, by the unceasing and absolute renunciation of thyself and all things, thou shalt in pureness cast all things aside, and be released from all, and so shalt be led upwards to the Ray of the Divine Darkness which exceedeth all existence”; ed. Clarence E. Rolt, *The Divine Names & Mystical Theology*, pp. 191-192.

²⁰ Ysabel de Andia, “Henosis: l’union à Dieu chez Denys l’Aréopagite”, *Philosophia Antiqua* 71, Leiden, New York, and Köln: Brill, 1996.

²¹ Endre von Ivánka, *Plato christianus. Übernahme und Umgestaltung des Platonismus durch die Väter* [How the Fathers adopted and transformed Platonism], Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1964.

no inherent existence;”²² i.e. it and the evil behind it do not exist from an ontological point of view; it is just the lack of good. He speaks about it not only within “Oratio Catechetica”, but also in the “De Anima et Resurrectione”²³ and “De Virginitate”,²⁴ where he paraphrases Plato’s *Phaedrus* and *Phaedo*, especially the latter.²⁵ The Cappadocian believed that people “could decide in favour of evil, which cannot have its origin in the Divine will, but only in our inner selves where it arises in the form of a deviation from good, and so it is **a privation of it;**”²⁶ *Or. Cath.*: 24C. It is so because of the freedom with which human beings were endowed when created.

Dionysius articulates the same thought. He states that evil “comes into being not on its own account” but, paradoxically, “for the sake of the Good”; it exists “as an accident [...]

²² Gregory of Nyssa, for example in “Oratio Catechetica”, PG 45 (1863): 24C; “The Great Catechism”, in *Dogmatic Treatises, Select Writings and Letters* translated and edited by Henry Wace and Philip Schaff, A Selected Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers (NPNF), second series, 14 vols., Oxford and New York, 1893, V, p. 474; see also 25A, NPNF p. 480.

²³ Gregory of Nyssa, “De Anima et Resurrectione”, in GNO 15, Werner Jaeger; consulted online on 21 August 2019 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2214-8728_gnoo_aGNO_15_t> Leiden: Brill, c. 2019; Gregory of Nyssa, “De anima et Resurrectione inscribitur Macrinia dialogus”, in J.-P. Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completus (series Graeca)*, Paris: Imprimerie Catholique vol. 46, 1863, cols. 11-161; translated as *On the Soul and the Resurrection* by William Moore and Henry Austin Wilson, in Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (eds.), Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, vol. 5, pp. 596-597 (p. 436 in the first series??). Nyssen has another text about Resurrection (of Christ): “In Christi Resurrectionem Oratio Quinque”, J-P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* 44, Paris: Imprimerie Catholique, 1863, cols. 599-690.

²⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, “De Virginitate”, *Gregorii Nysseni Opera Online* 8; Werner Jaeger; consulted online on 21 August 2019 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2214-8728_gnoo_aGNO_15_t> Leiden: Brill, c. 2019. In a particular quotation in this dialogue, at GNO 8.1. 332, there are clear allusions to Plato’s *Phaedrus* (246-247)], and *Phaedo*. In *Phaedo* 107d it is written: “Since the soul is seen to be immortal, it cannot escape from evil or be saved in any other way than by becoming as good and wise as possible. For the soul takes to the other world nothing but its *paideia* and nurture, and these are said to benefit or injure the departed greatly.”

²⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, “De Anima et Resurrectione”, in GNO 15, Werner Jaeger; consulted online on 21 August 2019 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2214-8728_gnoo_aGNO_15_t> Leiden: Brill, c. 2019; Gregory of Nyssa, “De anima et Resurrectione inscribitur Macrinia dialogus”, in J.-P. Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completus (series Graeca)*, Paris: Imprimerie Catholique vol. 46, 1863, cols. 11-161; translated as *On the Soul and the Resurrection* by William Moore and Henry Austin Wilson, in Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (eds.), Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, vol. 5, pp. 596-597 (p. 436 in the first series??). Nyssen has another text about Resurrection (of Christ): “In Christi Resurrectionem Oratio Quinque”, J-P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* 44, Paris: Imprimerie Catholique, 1863, cols. 599-690.

²⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, for example in “Oratio Catechetica”, PG 45: 24C; “The Great Catechism”, in *Dogmatic Treatises, Select Writings and Letters* translated and edited by Henry Wace and Philip Schaff, A Selected Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers (NPNF), second series, 14 vols. (Oxford and New York), 1893, V; p. 479; emphasis added.

by means of something else”.²⁷ Therefore, for the Syrian it means that evil is initially a ‘good’ that weakens.

For the Syrian evil has neither “inherence in things that have being”¹ (DN 733D) nor “substance” or “place” because “its origin is due to a defect rather than to a capacity”(DN 733C).¹ In some places the Syriac thinker surprisingly avers that the evil still aspires to the Good, and exemplifies his statement by specifying that demons desire “existence”, “life” and “understanding”; they “are evil in so far as they have fallen away from the virtues proper to them.” But he also explains that: “desire for what has no being [in those who sin] is proportionate to [its] lack of desire for the Good. Indeed this latter is not so much a desire as a sin against real desire” (DN 733D).¹

Moreover, Dionysius indicates that there are people who in spite of knowing the content of biblical precepts do not act in accordance with them due to their weak will. In some cases, the “will is so perverse” that people “do not want to know how to do good” (736A). Because of this, among other definitions of evil, one could be that it is “a deficiency of knowledge [...], of desire” or “an error of real desire”;¹ the Areopagite seems to believe that these two possible ways for evil to arise from the will are synonymous. Since for Dionysius ignorance is, as we have observed, one of the causes of evil, it is logical to assume that, by understanding things clearly, one can turn to the Good.

Ysabel de Andia comments on the above-mentioned passage in the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* (EH 392A) which concerns the candidate for a deep spiritual life by noticing that for the Syrian it is precisely up to the human will to accept or not the gift of deification that comes from the “Divine Goodness”. The extent to which this process takes place depends on the individual capacity to receive the “gift”.

²⁷ Dionysius the Areopagite, DN 732C, *Corpus Dionysiacum I* (1990), p. 177; *The Complete Works* (1987), p. 94.

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