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The Concept of the Boundary (*methorios*) in the Anthropology of Saint Gregory of Nyssa *Pojem meje (methorios) v antropologiji sv. Gregorja iz Nise*

Abstract. Gregory of Nyssa's understanding of anthropology is anything but one-dimensional. Characteristic of his thinking is the gradual move away from a Platonic, dualistic conception towards a holistic one, which was developed both in dialogue with contemporary philosophical currents and based on biblical revelation. It is therefore not surprising that his anthropology continues to pose a challenge to scholars studying the teachings of the Church Fathers on the human person. Within this holistic horizon, man is *methorios* – a boundary – precisely because he exists at the interface between the spiritual and the material order, as a creature that is both an embodied and a psychic being. Ontologically, this liminality is expressed in the soul, while morally it manifests itself in desire, which leads man either to a virtuous life or to servitude under sin. Finally, man, created in the image of God, is also, through divine providence, the threshold between created existence and the uncreated God. The ontological gulf that separates them cannot be bridged or dissolved by a human person and her endeavours. It is overcome in Jesus Christ, who unites the uncreated divine and created human nature in his person. In communion with him – and thus through grace – a human being is enabled to transcend his own limitations and participate in divine life.

Keywords: Gregory of Nyssa, anthropology, *methorios*, soul, desire, freedom of choice, grace

Povzetek: Pogled Gregorja iz Nise na človeka je vse prej kot enoplasten, še bolj pa je zanj značilno, da se postopoma oddaljuje od platonično obarvane dualistične antropologije in se približuje holistični koncepciji, ki jo razvija v dialogu s sočasnimi filozofskimi tokovi in ma podlagi svetopisemskega razodetja, zato ne preseneča, da je njegova antropologija vedno znova izziv za preučevalce nauka o človeku pri cerkvenih očetih. V holistični perspektivi je človek *methorios* (meja, presečišče), ker biva med duhovnim in materialnim stvarstvom, ker je duševno in telesno bitje. Mejo na ontološki ravni predstavlja duša, na moralni pa želja, ki človeka usmerja bodisi h krepostnemu življenju, bodisi k suženjstvu grehu. Nenazadnje je človek, ustvarjen po Božji podobi, po Božji previdnosti tudi meja med ustvar-

jeno resničnostjo in neustvarjenim Bogom. Ontološke razdalje med njima ni mogoče preseči ali izničiti, lahko pa je na nek način presežena v Jezusu Kristusu, ki je deležen tako neustvarjene Božje kot ustvarjene človeške narave in v odnosu z njim, torej po milosti.

Ključne besede: Gregor iz Nise, antropologija, *methorios*, duša, želja, svoboda izbire, milost

1. The Boundary as a Key Anthropological Category

Gregory of Nyssa is one of the ancient authors who dealt intensively with the question of human nature.¹ He is also considered to be the first Christian writer to dedicate an entire treatise to anthropology, *De hominis opificio*. In addition, he wrote an independent work on the soul, *De anima et resurrectione*, which is often referred to as the “Christian Phaedo”. These two writings are generally counted among his early works. However, it is clear that Gregory dealt with the topics of man and soul throughout his life: be it in his dogmatic treatises (particularly in *Antirrheticus adversus Apollinarium*) or in works of a spiritual nature, among which his *In Canticum canticorum* stands out, where the bride is identified with the soul in the first part of the commentary.

Since the beginnings of Gregory scholarship, interpreters have tried to prove the influence of ancient philosophy—especially Platonism and Stoicism on his anthropology and thus also on his conception of the soul. Moutsoulas (1997, 380–401) identifies among the sources of Gregory’s anthropology Plato, Aristotle, Posidonius, Galen, Philo of Alexandria, and Origen. At the same time, it is evident that Gregory’s thinking cannot be reduced to a simple “transfer” of philosophical categories and their Christianization. Rather, under the decisive influence of biblical revelation, he gradually distanced himself from Stoic monism and materialism as well as from Platonic dualism between material and the spiritual world, the sensible and the intelligible—that still strongly characterised the anthropology of Origen, for example, as well as that of other Church Fathers inspired by the Alexandrian teacher, including Gregory’s elder brother, Basil the Great².

Gregory’s mature conception of reality and of the human person within it is eloquently conveyed in a passage from the 6th homily of his commentary on the *Song of Songs*, considered one of his latest works:³

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² Among the most important studies on Gregory’s reception and the influence of Platonism are certainly: Balthasar 1942; Daniélou 1944; Ivanka 1964; Balás 1966; Peroli 1993; Desalvo 1996. Several scholars, however, also emphasize that Gregory thoroughly “reworked” the Platonic conception. Among them, one should mention Vogel (1986), Meissner (1991), Pochoshajew (2004), Ludlow (2013²), and Zachhuber (2000, 2012).

³ The work is generally thought to have been written between 391 and 394 (May 1971, 64; Maraval 2010, 101–116; Dünzl 1992, 26).

“The nature of things that exist is divided, at the highest level of generality, into two kinds. On the one hand, there is that which is perceptible and material; on the other, that which is intelligible and nonmaterial. Hence, we reckon something to fall into the category of the perceptible to the extent that it is grasped by sense perception, but we reckon as intelligible that which falls beyond the observation of the senses.

Of these two, the intelligible has neither limit nor bound, while the other is entirely contained by particular limits. For since matter in its totality is grasped in terms of quantity and quality, which determine its bulk and form and surface and shape, what one sees of it constitutes, in its case, a limit to what is known about it, so that the person who is investigating materiality has nothing apart from some one of these characteristics to lay hold of in the imagination. Contrariwise, that which is intelligible and immaterial, being released from such confines, escapes limit and is bounded by nothing.

But again, the intelligible nature is also divided into two kinds. The first is uncreated and is that which brings intelligible realities into being. It is what it is eternally and is in every respect self-identical. Further, it is beyond any addition to, and incapable of any diminution of, the goods it possesses. The second, however, has been brought into existence by an act of creation. It looks eternally upon the First Cause of the things that are and is preserved in every respect in the good by its participation in what transcends it. It is also, in a certain fashion, always being created as it is changed for the better by being enhanced in goodness. For this reason, no endpoint can be conceived for it either, and its growth toward the better is not confined by any limit, but the good that is given at any particular time is always a starting point for something more and better, even though it already appears to be as great and as complete as possible. In its case, too, then, the apostle’s word is confirmed, because it stretches forward in forgetfulness of things that have already been accomplished (cf. Phil 3:13). For that good which is now and again discovered to be a better thing, not to say something surpassing, focuses the attention of those who have a share in it upon itself and does not permit [them] to look toward what is past, since it voids the recollection of inferior things by the enjoyment of those that are to be honored more highly.” (*Cant.* 6: GNO VI, 173,7–174,11; trans. Norris 2012, 185–187).

1.1 The Intelligible and the Sensible

Reality is thus “divided” in two ways: firstly, into the intelligible (*noēton*) and the sensible (*aisthēton*, also *sōmatikon*), which is characteristic of Platonism (*Phaedo* 79A–B; *Timaeus* 27D–28A). The former corresponds to hypercosmic reality (*hyperkosmios*, *kosmos noētos*), while the latter refers to the material world. To the former belong the intelligible or incorporeal created beings (angels), to the latter the corporeal creatures consisting of the four elements, which cyclically transform into one another (Daniélou 1970, 75–95). A profound difference separates the two dimensions. The cyclical nature of the material cosmos is enclosed in a certain immobility, since its movement is essentially a perpetual return to its

beginning—one that also conditions the bodily life of the human being (*Op. hom.* 13: PG 44, 165 A-C; *Vit. Moys.* GNO VII/1, 50,3f)—while the intelligible sphere is open to a growth that is unceasing and without limits. In this sphere, immobility and movement co-exist; that is, the more one persists in the good, is stable in it, the more one runs towards the heights of perfection (*Vit. Moys.* II, 243: GNO VII/1, 118, 6–13).

Within such a vision of reality, the human being occupies a special place and role, since he belongs to both orders. As Gregory states, man is “on the boundary” (*meson esti to anthrōpinon*) between the two extremes (*Op. hom.* 16: PG 44, 181B), or, as he puts it previously, “akin” (*syngenōs*) to both (*Op. hom.* 2: PG 44, 133B). Gregory is convinced that such a position of the human person is the result of divine providence, for God wants the sensible, too, may share in the intelligible, and enter into relationship with God (*Or. Dom.* 4: GNO VII/2, 48,14–49,20; *Infant.* GNO III/2, 78,13–23), can be deified (*theopoiēmenos*). Divine providence has inscribed into creation a precise order and sequence (*taxis kai akolouthia*), according to which animate reality succeeds inanimate reality, while human nature—as the unity of body and soul—constitutes the pinnacle of ontological perfection of created order (Daniélou 1970, 116–132).

More precisely, the boundary is the soul: “The human soul stands on the borderline (*methorios*) between two kinds of reality. One of them is incorporeal and intelligent and pure, while the other is corporeal and material⁴ and nonrational.” (*Cant.* 11: GNO VI, 333,13–15; trans. Norris, 353)

Thus, the human being is not merely a boundary, but also a mediator between the two realms, because of his structure and position in the universe (Peroli 1993, 32–34; Gillet 1962, 62–83), a mediator between God and the world (*Op. hom.*, 10: PG 44, 148B–C; *An et res.* GNO III/3, 781f). Gregory expresses this conviction in the following words:

“By divine wisdom there takes place a mingling and a union (*mixis te kai anakrasis*), so that all things may equally partake (*metechoi*) of the Good and that none of the beings may be deprived of the higher nature (*kreitonos physeōs*).” (*Or. Cat.* 6: GNO III/4, 22,1–3)⁵

1.2 The Uncreated and the Created

A second distinction concerns intelligible reality itself, namely the distinction between the uncreated (*aktiston*)—i.e. God—and the created (*ktiston*), to which angels, humans, and the rest of creation belong. The first is infinite in the act; the second is characterised by the infinite growth of the good (*Cant.* 6: GNO VI,

⁴ It seems that Gregory is not referring to a crude secondary matter, but to prime matter in the Aristotelian sense—understood as pure potentiality (*dynamis monon*)—and associates it with the intelligible dimension of the soul. This becomes even clearer in *Contra Eunomium* III (GNO II, 168,17). Prime matter is reinterpreted as the soul’s receptive capacity, a substrate of potentiality awaiting fulfilment through form, namely assimilation to God. For Gregory, the prime matter thus stands for the soul’s intelligible openness to divine transformation.

⁵ Translation is our own.

173,14f; *Eun. GNO I/1*, 133,28–29; *GNO I/2*, 107,20–108,1). While the first distinction – between intelligible and sensible reality – was classical and philosophical, this distinction between the uncreated and the created is clearly Christian and of great significance.

Gregory insists that intelligible created reality is not closer to God than sensible reality. In this he differs decisively from many Christian authors who ascribe a privileged, superior position to the soul or the spiritual dimension. There is the same infinite distance between uncreated reality and every created being. Gregory thus overcomes a dualistic view of the world that is particularly characteristic of Neoplatonism, with its series of mediating entities between the One and the “many” (Balthasar 1942, XVII–XVIII). He affirms:

“For every created being is distant, by an equal degree of inferiority, from that which is the Highest, Who is unapproachable by reason of the sublimity of His Being: the whole universe is in value the same distance beneath Him.” (*Or. Cat.* 27: *GNO III/4*, 69,19–23; trans. NPNF² 5:952)⁶

The difference between uncreated and created realms lies in this: the former is immutable (*atreptē*), the latter mutable (*treptē*), a condition determined by the fact that creation itself is change (*alloiōsis*), a transition from non-being to being by the will of God (*Op. hom.* 16: PG 44, 184C–D; *Or. cat.* 21: *GNO III/4*, 55,4–18). Put differently: only God is self-sufficient, while created beings depend at every moment upon God, receiving life from him and through their relation to him (*Vit. Moy.* II,25: *GNO VII/1*, 40,20–25).

The multifaceted character of Gregory’s cosmology and anthropology becomes clear here. Earlier, we emphasised that the sensible differs from the intelligible precisely because it is subject to mutation, while the intelligible remains immutable, whereby change means imperfection. However, when Gregory deals with the relationship between the uncreated and the created, perfection is associated with immutability, while change functions as the very dynamic of growth in perfection⁷. The difference between these two perspectives lies in the orientation of the movement. The negative movement of the material is cyclical; everything endlessly repeats itself (*Vit. Moys.* *GNO VII/1*, 50,6–16), while the positive movement of the created spiritual reality is linear and infinite. Gregory underscores that the human person must be in constant spiritual progress, since even a rest (*stasis*) represents a step backwards (*Vit. Moys.* I,6: *GNO VII/1*, 3,22–23). Positive stability of the created spiritual reality can only be spoken of in relation to Christ, who is called by Paul the “Rock” (1 Cor 10,4; *Vit. Moys.* II,244: *GNO VII/1*, 118,20). However, since the relationship is always a dynamic reality, it can be constantly deepened, thus forever

⁶ Gregory conveys the same idea in *Maced.* (*GNO III/1*, 101,7–9), where he explicitly rejects the notion that the Holy Spirit could be understood as a kind of mediator, thereby safeguarding the Spirit’s full divinity and consubstantiality with Father and Son.

⁷ The mutability of created reality explains both the possibility of turning away from the good—that is, the possibility of evil—and the character of the incessant growth in virtuous life. The first possibility—conceived not ontologically but morally—will be examined later.

retains the character of growth, i.e. movement. So, what appears to be a form of positive stability is, at the same time, inherently dynamic. "The limit (*oron*) of perfection (*teleiōtēs*) is the fact that it has no limit." (*Vit. Moys.* I,5: GNO VII/1, 3,13–14)

The identity of the created being lies precisely in the tension between being and becoming, stability (*stasis*) and movement (*kinēsis*). This tension is the consequence of the ontological status of created being. "Created nature finds no stability of its being except in this becoming, in this continual conversion (*epistrefein*), in this ongoing participation in the infinite being of God." (Peroli 1993, 42) Balthasar (1984, 12) therefore concludes that for Gregory the essence of created being is precisely "becoming." Were it to cease moving, it would cease to exist. In his created nature, a human being can never finally and irrevocably attain the good, not only on earth, but also during eternal life; he can attain an ever-greater participation in the uncreated good (Daniélou 1970, 103). The difference between earthly and eternal life consists in the impossibility of declining from the good, i.e., God, in the latter.

Although Gregory, in his conception of reality, collocates every dimension (intelligible and sensible, uncreated and created) and being in its proper place and in the relationships predetermined and decided in God's plan, his concept of the boundary leaves room for the possibility of crossing it, which makes Gregory's anthropology particularly fascinating. The boldness with which he attempts to transcend ontological limits is dogmatically safe; it is Christological: in the one who is both God and man, who belongs to both the uncreated and the created natures, the ontological gulf is overcome (*Perf.* GNO VIII/1, 204). In all other human beings, who are exclusively created, this gulf may be surpassed not by nature but by grace, insofar as they are conformed to Christ and partake of his life (*Inst.* GNO VIII/1, 178). Thus, Gregory can say that the saints stand on the boundary between the human (created) and the divine (uncreated). Concerning his sister Macrina and her fellows, he reflects:

"Who, then, could bring under human consideration the manner of such a life? For their existence was placed upon the boundary (*methorios*) between the human and the incorporeal nature. For to be freed from human passions, they were in a nature superior to man; yet to appear in the body and to be encompassed with form, and to live in association with the organs of sense, in this they remained less than the angelic and incorporeal nature." (*Macr.* 11: GNO VIII/1, 382,19–26)⁸

Gregory does not, of course, suggest that the virtuous human being becomes a pure spirit. In his early work *Apologia in Hexaemeron* he affirms that the angelic world constitutes a kind of boundary between the sensible and the intelligible, as the Apostle Paul also testifies (1 Cor 12:2). The angelic realm is "the highest point of stability for the mutable world" (*Hex.* PG 44, 121), that is, for the created order. Above it there exists only the immutable and uncreated reality of God (Daniélou 1944, 151–160). In this sense, angelic nature may be regarded as "more than human." Nevertheless, in God's plan, the human being stands "above" the angels, for man alone was

⁸ Translation is our own.

created in the image of God and thus constitutes the central element of the universe; all other creatures were brought into being for his sake. The decisive foundation of such an understanding is Christological: the central event of salvation history is the Incarnation of the Son of God, who did not assume an angelic nature but a human one—that is, he truly became flesh (*Or. Cat.* GNO III/4, 61; *Cant.* 5: GNO VI, 163,11–164,15). For this reason, any negative evaluation of the body or its depreciation as something of lesser value than the spirit cannot be justified within Christianity.

The comparison of the virginal life with the angelic Gregory makes use of a classical *topos*, which should not be understood ontologically, but exclusively morally (Frank 1964). The angels serve as a model of perfection, since they are neither subject to the passions nor to sin (*Or. Dom.* 4: GNO VII/2, 49–50) and already participate in the *visio beatifica* (*Virg.* 4; GNO VIII/1, 276), to which human beings only gradually advance (Völker 1993, 183). Here, too, Gregory's thinking follows that of the apostle when he reflects on the contrast between flesh and spirit (Gal 5:16–17; Rom 8:5–9). The flesh symbolises the inclination, the submission to passions and sin, while the spirit denotes the orientation of the embodied person towards virtue and God (*Beat.* 8: GNO VII/2, 164,16–20).⁹

2. The Concept of the Soul

Gregory's conception of the soul is markedly eclectic (Smith 2004, 48–74). The early treatise *De anima et resurrectione*, where he developed his doctrine of the soul most considerably, is undoubtedly both a dialogue and a polemic with contemporary philosophical views of the soul as well as a search for a clearly Christian answer. Many scholars agree that Gregory's doctrine represents a critique of Stoic and Epicurean materialism on the one hand but also takes up elements of Platonic and Neoplatonic doctrine on the other (Peroli 1997, 117–139). Given Gregory's explicit intention to formulate a Christian understanding of the human being, the assessment of Zachhuber (2012, 211–232) is more accurate. He argues that although the author uses Platonic dualism in some places—such as when he claims that the soul is rational, or even that only the intellect (*noûs*) is the soul *stricto dictu* (*An et res.* GNO: III/3, 32,11), or when he articulates the tension between soul and body—he decisively rejects dualism in his essence. This is evident in his refusal to accept the Platonic notion of the pre-existence of the soul and in his defence of the resurrection of the dead, which for the Platonists amounts to a degradation of the soul, currently imprisoned in the body as in a dungeon and therefore longing for liberation from the body at the moment of death. Resurrection forestalls such liberation from bodily fetters, which is why it is rejected.

What is decisive for Gregory is above all the unity of the human being, i.e. the inseparability of soul and body. For this reason, he is not primarily concerned with

⁹ A similar perspective is also found in Neoplatonism (Plotinus, *Enneads* IV,4,3), where it was probably taken over from Posidonius (Vogel 1986, 213–232; Peroli 1993, 32).

the abstract question of what the soul is in itself, as he does not understand it as existing separately from the body. Rather, his enquiry focuses on the question of what the soul is in relation to the body—and this is precisely the question that concerns us in the context of a holistic anthropology. Gregory explains:

“The soul is an essence created, and living (*zōsa*), and intellectual (*noēra*), transmitting from itself to an organized and sentient body the power of living and of grasping objects of sense, as long as a natural constitution capable of this holds together.” (*An et res*. GNO III/3, 15,6–9; trans. NPNF² 5:842)

The soul is described as “living”, which means that it is responsible for the existence of the human being. It functions as a life principle—but not of its own accord, as in Platonism, but by receiving its vitalising power from God. The “living” soul is therefore not alive *per se*, but precisely and exclusively as a constitutive life principle of the human person, a composite of soul and body. Gregory is convinced that the body only becomes what it is through the presence of the soul; conversely, without reference to the body, nothing substantial or effective can be asserted in relation to the soul itself (Ludlow 2018, 160–178).

Furthermore, the soul is “intellectual.” According to Gregory’s holistic anthropology, the “functions” of the soul consist in transferring its powers to the body and its organs. In this sense, the soul is *methorios*—a mediating principle. The soul fills the body with life, is responsible for blood circulation, breathing, digestion, the operation of muscles and nerves, for growth, nutrition, and sense perception. The latter are very important, because “the senses are not purely biological and organic functions of the body /.../ What we call seeing, hearing, even feeling, is always integrated into our rational understanding of the world.” (Zachhuber 2012, 225).

In this way, other faculties—such as the will (*boulēsis*), appetite (*epithymia*), and emotions (*pathē*)—are likewise situated between the intellect (*noūs*) and the body, as was characteristic of the philosophical tradition of the time¹⁰. They are not parts (*meros*) of the soul; rather, Gregory uses terms for them that denote actions and powers—*orexis*, *hormai*, *dynamis*, and *kinēmata*, as we can see in his later writings (Smith 2004, 72). In this context, Nyssen uses *logistikon* (reason), *thymos* (drive), and *epithymia* (desire) to make conceptual distinctions between the general powers or activities of the soul. These faculties or motions are necessary for human action and existence.

¹⁰ In *De anima et resurrectione* (GNO III/3, 32,18–34,11), he openly criticises Plato and his tripartite view of the soul, in particular the image of the winged chariot in which the charioteer—*logistikon* (reason) steers two horses: the noble, spirited or courageous part (*thymos*) and the unruly, appetitive part (*epithymia*)—desires, lusts and bodily cravings, described in Phaedrus 241C–247B. Rather, he seems to align himself more closely with Aristotle and with his three *dynamēis* (powers) of the soul—the mind (*noūs*), sense perception (*aisthēsis*), and movement (*kinēsis*). The Stagirite holds that the faculty of sense perception corresponds to the *orektikon* (appetitive faculty), which includes above all desire (*epithymia*), drive (*thymos*), and choice (*boulēsis*) (*De Anima* 2.2, 414a29). Barnes (1994, 14) argues that Gregory “has achieved a way of speaking of the soul as having essential unity in contrast with the awkward Platonic language of different parts of the soul. Hence, Nyssen and Aristotle’s view of the soul as trichotomous rather than tripartite.” On the structure of the soul see also (Arko 1999, 189–191).

On the ontological level the irrational faculties are neutral and serve to mediate between the material and the intelligible; they are located at the boundary (*mesōs*) between the two realms of reality (*An et res*. GNO III/3, 31,16–32,17).¹¹ It is evident, however, that Gregory works with two different schemes: an ontological and a moral, which he coordinates more or less harmoniously. For the irrational faculties of the soul are also morally qualified¹². Their orientation, however, depends on the extent to which they are connected to reason, called also *hēgemonikon*, the “ruling principle” or the guiding faculty of the soul¹³. When they are in harmony with this rational guide, the impulses of the human person are elevated and directed towards the pursuit of virtue. If, on the other hand, they are detached from reason and come under the dominion of disordered desires, they incline the person to a way of existence enslaved by the negative passions (Peroli 1993, 251–259).

2.1 Role of Irrational Motions

The cause of any movement in the soul, whether rational or irrational, is spiritedness or irascible faculty (*thymos*) and desire or appetitive faculty (*epithymia*). They represent the fundamental modalities of human reaction: in the case of pleasant stimuli, desire, or with unpleasant stimuli, dislike. This is the principle of attraction. In other words, they are the drive to act to attain a desirable object or to resist an unpleasant one (Smith 2004, 68):

“Under the control of reason and directed to God, *epithymia* is love and *thymos* is courage, which drive the soul toward God and enable it to overcome the temptations of other lesser goods or impediments, such as fear of death, that would divert it from its proper goal. Thus, these non-rational impulses can become the allies of reason.” (Smith 2010, 20)

However, if they are not subordinate to reason, they have the opposite effect and reduce human behaviour to the irrational. Gregory calls it bestial (*Prof.* GNO VIII/1, 137,15–25).

“The human being has in fact the terrible power to renounce his own being and his own humanity, breaking the communion with God and others and literally becoming a beast, as can be understood from the reference to the dogs in Nyssen’s commentary on Ps 58,15.” (Maspero 2010, 41)

¹¹ It is also the case, however, that we find passages in which Gregory explains that the irrational faculties are secondary in the human being, or rather the consequence of sin and the degradation of the soul (*An et res*. GNO III/3, 36,7–37,4; *Virg.* GNO VIII/1, 305,2–306,1; *Mort.* GNO IX, 52.5f). The principal motivation for such reasoning is the fact that the soul is created in the image of God, and in the divine nature, there is nothing of the desiderative or the irascible (*An et res*. GNO III/3, 33–34). Nevertheless, Gregory is convinced that by means of free choice the human being can “rise above” the irrational and, through reason, overcome this degradation (*Mort.* GNO IX, 55,24f).

¹² Such an approach is Stoic in character: the same *dynamis* of the soul can be rational, covetous, or irascible, depending on circumstances and disposition (Plutarch, *De virtute morali* 441C; SVF II, 459).

¹³ A Stoic conception believed to reside in the heart (Galen, *PHP*: V 6,25: SVF II, 826), integrating and directing all other faculties of the soul.

In this way, even the most essential characteristic of the divine image in man—free will (*proairesis*)—is weakened and obscured: the slavery (*douleia*) of the passions makes him a slave (*doulos*) of sin (*Beat.* 3: GNO VII/2, 105,24–106,18).

As previously emphasised, here, the ontological aspect is inseparably intertwined with the spiritual and moral aspects. The orientation imparted by *thymos* and *epithymia* assumes either a virtuous or a vicious character. Gregory also applies the concept of boundary here. In explaining the symbol of the “narrow gate”, he says: “virtue is discerned in the mean (*en mesotēti*), all evil naturally operates in a deficiency of or an excess of virtue.” (*Vit. Moys.* II,228: GNO VII/1, 132,11–13; trans. Malherbe, Ferguson, 128; cfr. *Cant.* 9: GNO VI, 284,5–6) The middle (*meson*) between excess and deficiency is thou the measure (*metron*) defined by the right mean (*tē mesotēti*) between opposing qualities (*Eccl.* 6: GNO V, 375,4–7)¹⁴. Thus, courage (*andreia*) is found as a mean (*en mesotēti*) between excessive rashness and the lack of cowardness; wisdom (*sophia*) lies between shrewdness and simplicity; moderation (*sōphrosynē*) is an intermediate disposition between libertinism and scrupulosity (*Vit. Moys.* II,288–289: GNO VII/1, 132,13–133,4). Gregory illustrates this insight in *De virginitate* with the example of the woman who discovers the lost Drachma (Lk 15:8–10):

“The neighbours, that is, the soul’s familiar powers, both the reasoning (*logistikē*) and the appetitive (*epithymētikē*), the affections (*diathesis*) of grief (*lypē*) and of anger (*orgē*), and all the rest that are discerned in her, at that joyful feast which celebrates the finding of the heavenly Drachma are well called her friends also; and it is meet that they should all rejoice in the Lord when they all look towards the Beautiful and the Good, and do everything for the glory of God, no longer instruments of sin.” (*Virg.* GNO VIII/1, 301,23–302,4; trans. NPNF² 5:698–699)

3. The Freedom of Choice

The responsibility for maintaining balance rests with freedom of choice (*proairesis*), by virtue of whose presence Gregory ascribes a royal dignity to the human being. “We are free from necessity,” argues, “and not in bondage to any natural power, but have decision in our own power as we please” (*Op. hom.* 16,11: PG 44, 184B; trans. NPNF² 5:785). *Proairesis* is thus the ability with which man can shape himself and his identity. In other words, it enables self-control and self-realisation, the aim of which is to be free from sin, to shine as the image of God, and to live in piety (*Perf.* GNO VIII/1, 195–196). Gregory even says that man can become to some extent father of himself because of the freedom of choice (*Vit. Moys.* II,3: GNO VII/1, 34,10–14). So, it is clear that by means of *proairesis*, the

¹⁴ Such a doctrine is found already in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* (II.7, 1107a21–1107b4–14). Peroli (1993, 260) maintains that Gregory did not take over the teaching directly from the Stagirite, but that the conception of the “mean” was widely diffused among Christian authors of his time, mediated through Middle Platonism. Thus, for example, Plutarch holds that the soul, to attain harmony—just as in music one must avoid the extreme notes—must likewise avoid both excess and defect (*De virtute morali* 444F–445A).

human being is called first to exercise governance over himself before assuming dominion over creation.

Sometimes he seems to conceive growth in perfection linearly, without the danger of regression, as Moses or the bride in the Song of Songs. But the bishop of Nyssa is by no means naïve and fully aware that such growth cannot be the result primarily of human strength or moral effort but is always a gift of grace. *Proairesis* is “the gift which permits the Christian to appreciate the divine grace in the struggle to preserve it” (*Cant. GNO VI, 55; Maspero 2010, 40*).¹⁵ Nevertheless, Gregory is convinced that the person who has decided in favour of Christ and has been cleansed of sin in the sacrament of Baptism is called to set out resolutely on the path to perfection by means of *proairesis*.

Even when the human being chooses evil, such a decision is never absolutely definitive. Since *proairesis* belongs to the very essence of the divine image in man – a reality that can neither be cancelled nor erased – the possibility of repentance always remains open. The ontological mutability of the human condition ensures that a person can, until the end of life, interrupt the trajectory of sin, turn away from it, and reorient himself toward God. Even more, Gregory was one of the ancient thinkers who advocated the doctrine of *apokatastasis* in accordance with which even in death, man retains the ability and possibility to repent and thus the freedom to determine his relationship both to God and to all other creatures (Ramelli 2013).

In this dynamic, the human being is capable of further progress, regression, or conversion (*Inscr. 7: GNO V, 46–47*). Gregory argues that the decisions of *proairesis* depend on consuetude, i.e. are based on previous actions and choices. Therefore, even if a change of direction in life is always possible, it is by no means indifferent how one orients one’s existence and how one cooperates with divine grace:

“All those elements of the soul which lie on the border-land (*en methoriō*) and are capable from their peculiar nature of inclining to either of two opposites whose eventual determination to the good or to the bad depends on the kind of use they are put to.” (*An et resurr: GNO III/3, 39,17– 41,1; trans. NPNF² 5:855*)

Yet, since Gregory was a pastor of the Christian community and responsible for its spiritual growth – among other things, also for certain monastic communities, especially after Basil’s premature death – he places decisive emphasis on the positive construction of the identity and of the spiritual growth.

4. Longing for God as a Boundary

This dynamic appears with particular force in the commentary on the Song of Songs, which is addressed to the perfect—to those who have been cleansed from the stain of sin in Baptism and whose desire is directed towards the contemplation of God, union with him, and a longing that is never finally satisfied. Each fulfilment becomes a new

¹⁵ On grace in the works of Gregory of Nyssa (Arko 2008, 5–25).

provocation of desire, or rather a deepening of it. Daniélou (1944, 298) described this reality as *epektasis* (from verb *epekteinomai*, Ph 3:13). *Epektasis* denotes “the definitive and paradigmatic form of the relationship between God and man,” “eternal immersion in intimacy with him” (Maspero 2018, 3). It is essentially the constant forgetting of what lies behind us and the striving forward to what lies ahead—an eschatological ascent that never finds its completion. Whenever the human person attains the good, an even deeper longing for God is awakened within him; yet God can never be grasped or possessed.

“The divine nature’s greatness knows no limit, and no measure of knowledge sets bounds to a seeker’s looking—bounds beyond which no one who is reaching to the heights must cease to move ahead. On the contrary, the intelligence that makes its course upwards by searching into what lies beyond it is so constituted that every fulfilment of knowledge that human nature can attain becomes the starting point of desire for things yet more exalted.” (*Cant.* 6: GNO VI, 179,20–180,7; trans. Norris, 191–193)

Precisely in, and because of, the awareness of God’s unattainability, the human person undergoes not only moments of ascent but also of descent. These descents do not always carry a moral valence but are rather the result of human mutability—an instability that arises from the tension between past, present and future, between memory, hope and the constant experience of transience and death. The awareness of this tension and of God’s unattainability can drive a person into despair, simply because true life consists in the vision of the infinite and immutable God, whom the human being cannot attain by his own efforts—a fact of which Gregory is acutely aware (*Beat.* 6: GNO VII/2, 136,25–138,24; *Eccl.* GNO V, 414,14–415,10; *Cant.* 12: GNO VI, 357,15–358,3). But it is precisely here that the full power of longing is revealed – a longing that proves to be stronger than the experience of the human inability to reach God. For the God who has implanted in the heart of man, created in the divine image, the longing for union with himself, also grants the power to reach that which lies beyond human capacity (*Cant.* 6: GNO VI, 183,1–10). Thus, the longing is also the boundary. What lies beyond the ontological capacity of the soul is made possible by grace, if one freely decides to open himself to God, who wants man to share (*methexis*) fully in divine life. In relation to him, the finiteness of the creature is constantly overcome. Although man remains a finite being by nature, through grace, he enters into an infinite growth that progresses without limit and deepens the relationship with God.

At this point, a crucial question arises: how is the paradox to be understood that the longing for God never comes to rest, not even in the eschatological order? For even after death, when man is united with God and nothing poses a threat to their relationship, the longing remains infinite. Gregory responds: after death, man realises that the true satisfaction of his longing is always a new desire (*heteron epithymian*, *Cant.* 13: GNO VI, 370,2). The infinite and incomprehensible nature of God is therefore not a cause for despair or disappointment, even if every experience of God causes pain, which Gregory calls an “admirable wound” (*kalon trauma*), but it is the beginning of a new experience, an ever-greater immersion in God (*Cant.* 12: GNO VII/1, 366,5–6).

5. Conclusion

These considerations have shown that the concept of the boundary is constantly present in the work of Gregory of Nyssa and that it serves as a means of finding a balance- both between man and the cosmos, between him and God, and between the different dimensions of the human being. The concept of the boundary helps him above all to interpret God's plan, which on superficial observation can appear unclear or even contradictory and paradoxical due to the drama of salvation history. The life of the individual himself often seems to have the same characteristics. We cannot claim that Gregory's interpretation of anthropology is linear or always coherent. However, it is clear that it is multi-layered and often interwoven with a moral component that can never be completely separated from the ontological level. Nevertheless, it is based on the conviction that human existence is ordered and internally harmonised by God, even if it cannot be perceived directly, and is oriented towards fulfilment in Christ, who definitely "explains" the meaning of the boundary between the physical and the spiritual in human nature and between the created and the uncreated. Outside of Christ, the world and human life seem to be filled predominantly with negative tensions; in Him, however, they are not extinguished, but redefined, given meaning, and offered new hope to humanity and, through it, to all creation.

The most significant aspect of this complexity lies in the positive evaluation of all that has emerged from God's hands, combined with the conviction that God is always ready to "sustain" his creation and enable it to reach its goal – participation in divine life. This participation constantly pushes the boundaries but never cancels them out and deepens the relationship with God and in him with the brothers and sisters. Such a quest for a holistic view of the whole of created reality, with man as the crown, makes Gregory's anthropology not only extraordinarily convincing, but also profoundly relevant for today.

Abbreviations

GNO – Gregorii Nysseni Opera.

NPNF² – Schaff 1996–1997 [The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Second Series].

PG – *Patrologia graeca*.

PHP – *De Placitis Hippocratis et Platonis*.

SVF – *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta*.

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