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Imagine That: Reading Eternal Progress Non-Metaphysically

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Intuitively, progress is something we make toward a goal such as winning a race, earning a degree, or completing a work of art. In light of Christ's command to his disciples that they should "be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48), it would then seem that the goal of spiritual progress in a Christian context is perfection. Toward the close of the fourth century, a young monk named Caesarius wrote a letter to St. Gregory of Nyssa asking for advice on how to attain perfection. Gregory's response is his classic treatise *The Life of Moses*. Gregory maintains that although we cannot attain absolute perfection, nevertheless we should endeavor to "make progress within the realm of what we seek. For the perfection of human nature consists perhaps in its very growth in goodness."[1] This is Gregory's famous doctrine of *epektasis*, or eternal progress: the spiritual perfection of a human being is not maximal participation in divine goodness, which is impossible, but greater and greater participation in divine goodness for all eternity.

The Life of Moses is a work of philosophical theology in which Gregory creatively draws upon both Platonic and Aristotelian metaphysical resources. For example, like Plato's Form of the Good, divine goodness is construed as something in which particulars, especially human beings, participate in varying degrees; yet unlike a Platonic Form, divine goodness is not a free-floating universal but ultimately the very nature of the divine being.[2] *The Life of Moses* is also a work of scriptural exegesis in which Gregory often looks beyond the literal historical meaning (*historia*) of a biblical passage in order to discern its spiritual meaning (*theoria*). Our theme in this article is the interplay between metaphysics and spiritual exegesis, between what is literal in some historical or metaphysical sense and what is not. We seek an understanding of eternal progress that avoids philosophical incoherence and satisfies Gregory's intention to provide practical advice concerning how to pursue a life of spiritual perfection.

[1] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*. Translated and edited by Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), p. 31.

[2] "The Divine One is himself the Good (in the primary and proper sense of the word), whose very nature is goodness" (*The Life of Moses*, p. 31).

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I

Gregory takes divine goodness to be infinite in the sense of unlimited. For something is only limited by its opposite, "as life is limited by death or light by darkness."[3] Hence goodness is only limited by evil, or at least by non-goodness. If divine goodness were limited by an opposite, then since God is not limited by anything external, this limiting opposite would be intrinsic to the divine nature. God would thus admit of an opposite, which is impossible "since the Divine does not admit of an opposite."[4] Indeed, God's nature would include both divine goodness and what is not divine goodness, which is a contradiction.

Based on the premise that divine nature is unlimited, Gregory argues that a finite intelligent creature's participation in divine goodness must also be unlimited. Suppose that such a creature desires to participate in divine goodness. The creature cannot fulfill its desire by maximally participating in divine goodness, since then the creature itself would have to be unlimited and hence infinite, which it is not. However, a finite intelligent creature can fulfill its desire by participating more and more in divine goodness so that "the participant's desire itself necessarily has no stopping place but stretches out with the limitless."[5] The creature itself is limited since it is finite. But according to Gregory, the creature's capacity to participate in divine goodness, like divine goodness itself, is limitless. Consequently, the creature's spiritual perfection consists not in the creature fulfilling its desire to participate maximally in divine goodness, but rather in fulfilling its desire to participate more and more in divine goodness without end.

Another premise of Gregory's initial argument is that in order to participate maximally in infinite divine goodness a finite intelligent creature would have to be infinite. However, the truth of this premise is hardly obvious. An analogy helps to explain why. Imagine an empty glass submerged into a limitless ocean. Though it is limited to a finite volume, the submerged glass maximally "participates" in the limitless ocean when its volume is completely filled. Similarly, though its intellectual and volitional capacities are limited, a human soul maximally participates in limitless divine goodness when these capacities are fully activated in direct beatific knowledge and love of the divine nature.[6] Of course, Gregory follows John of Chrysostom

[3] Ibid., p. 30.
[4] Ibid., p. 31.
[5] Ibid.
[6] St. Bonaventure makes the same point in *In 1 Sent.*, dist. 1, a.3, q.2, ad.2: 'it must be said that it [the soul] captures the infinite Good in a finite manner, since it is itself finite. But since that Good is infinite, for that reason it is totally absorbed by It, so that its

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and other Greek Fathers in denying that an intelligent creature can directly know the divine nature: "knowledge of the divine essence is unattainable not only by men but also by every intelligent creature."[7] Let us step back from what threatens to become a theological impasse. Instead, we shall devote the rest of this section to filling in some relevant aspects of Gregory's psychology and epistemology that form the background of his initial argument and help to explain what eternal progress is *not*. In the next section, we shall attempt to understand what eternal progress *is* if it is to be interpreted as a literal metaphysical fact.

Gregory discusses fleshly desires to enjoy "the pleasures of the stomach and the table or the pleasures of wealth."[8] Eternally desiring to participate more and more in divine goodness is not like an insatiable fleshly desire. The reason is that the desirer never makes any progress in satisfying an insatiable desire. If I am hungry and remain so no matter how much I eat, then I make no progress in satisfying my hunger. Or think of trying to quench your thirst in a dream, where no matter much you drink you're still thirsty. As Gregory says, "[I]f he should fill himself on this, he becomes empty and a vacant container once more for something else."[9] A desire to acquire more and more wealth is somewhat different, since someone can make progress in acquiring wealth yet still desire to acquire more. The following considerations will enable Gregory to distinguish the desire to participate more and more in divine goodness from this sort of fleshly desire as well.

Beginning with this discussion of Moses and the Burning Bush, continuing with his discussion of Moses encountering God in the Darkness on Mt. Sinai, and culminating with his discussion of Moses' vision of the Heavenly Tabernacle, Gregory lays out key features of his rationalist religious epistemology.[10] The cardinal tenet of this epistemology, as we have seen, is that no intelligent creature can directly know the divine nature. We can only know God indirectly by forming adequate concepts of the power and glory God manifests. To be adequate, these concepts must avoid any risk of misapprehension. And to avoid any risk of misapprehension, Gregory thinks that the concepts must not be based on sensory experience but on reason. The spiritual meaning that Gregory discerns in the Burning Bush episode is a philosophical lesson about how to avoid the

capacity is already terminated on all sides' (p. 41). An English translation (2007) by Br. Alexis Bugnolo can be found in the online Franciscan Archive at http://www.franciscan-archive.org/bonaventura/opera/bon01039.html.

[7] *The Life of Moses*, p. 95. By "knowledge" here, Gregory means "direct knowledge."

[8] *The Life of Moses*, p. 67.

[9] Ibid., p. 68.

[10] See, respectively, ibid., pp. 59–63; pp. 94–97; and pp. 97–101.

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risk of misapprehension, or falsehood defined as understanding what does not exist as if it does exist.[11] An example will help to clarify Gregory's point. On the basis of sensory experience alone, I might form the misapprehension that the moon is a self-illuminating body. There it shines all by itself in the night sky! A true cognition based on theoretical principles grasped by the intellect reveals the moon to be illuminated by the sun whose light is entirely self-sufficient. Similarly, on the basis of his philosophical meditations alone in the desert, Moses learned that our sensory experiences might lead us to think that ordinary things subsist—i.e., exist without depending on anything else. Yet reason teaches that the existence of ordinary things is not independent, and that only a being whose very essence is to exist would really subsist.[12] Gregory need not be read as presenting a skeletal version of an argument for the existence of God as a necessary being, but only as articulating the preliminary intellectual reflections that might motivate one to try constructing some such argument in the first place.

Once a contemplative like Moses enters the divine Darkness atop the mountain and realizes the impossibility of directly knowing the divine nature, he cannot rationally desire to have more and more direct knowledge of the divine nature in the way that a financier can desire to acquire more and more wealth or a space traveler can desire to see more and more of an infinitely expanding universe. The financier desiring to acquire more wealth *has already acquired some wealth*, and the space traveler desiring to see more of the universe *has already seen some of it*. Yet Gregory's view is that the contemplative cannot directly know the divine nature *at all*, and hence he cannot directly know more and more of the divine nature while already directly knowing some of it.[13] On the other hand, Gregory claims that upon entering the Darkness "Moses grew in knowledge."[14] If Moses did not grow in direct knowledge of the divine nature, in what kind of knowledge pertaining to God did he grow? For an answer, we turn to what Gregory says about the vision of the Heavenly Tabernacle "not made with hands which was shown to Moses on the mountain."[15]

We noted that for Gregory, adequate concepts of God cannot be based on sensory experience. Thus whatever the vision of the Heavenly Tabernacle is, it cannot be anything like a picture or sensory

[11] For Gregory's definition of falsehood see ibid., p. 60.

[12] See ibid.

[13] There is another discrepancy between the space traveler case and eternal progress, in that there is no increase in the space traveler's basic capacity to see; whereas, according to Gregory, there is an increase in the contemplative's capacity to participate in divine goodness. We shall return to this issue below.

[14] Ibid., p. 95.

[15] Ibid., p. 97.

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image. Gregory's comment that "the wonderful harmony of the heavens proclaims the wisdom which shines forth in the creation and sets forth the great glory of God through the things which are seen"[16] might tempt us to attribute to Gregory a version of the argument from design. I believe this reading misrepresents Gregory's view. An argument from design is premised on intelligible order in the universe that can be discerned by natural reason alone, unaided by supernatural revelation. However, Gregory presents Moses' vision of the Heavenly Tabernacle not as an achievement of natural reason but as a mystical insight that is shown or revealed to Moses by God. Let us try to come closer to Gregory's view by proposing a different reading.

One might say that for Gregory, intelligent creatures have a permanent blind spot regarding the divine nature, much as someone suffering from red-green colorblindness has a permanent blind spot when it comes to seeing and distinguishing these colors the way normal perceivers do. Imagine a native who has spent her entire life in the rainforest and who also suffers from this visual deficiency. When she arrives in a modern city we may teach her a number of cues for detecting the difference between red and green even though she cannot see these colors the way we do. For example, we may teach her what traffic lights are, as well as the principle or rule that when the top light shines it is red and when the bottom light shines it is green. Though she cannot directly know red or green as we do, by learning a rational principle or rule not naturally discoverable by her she can detect the operations of red and green in her environment. Similarly, in the Darkness God may teach the divine nature-blind contemplative certain rational principles or rules not naturally discoverable by him which enable the contemplative to detect the divine nature's operations in the universe. Gregory suggests that these supernaturally revealed rational principles describe divine power as it operates in the angelic hierarchy,[17] comparable to how the rules we teach the native describe the operation of color in traffic lights.

The emphasis upon grasping rational principles or rules as the epitome of human intellection is consistent with Gregory's rationalism. Gregory identifies the tabernacle as the totality of these principles with "*Christ who is the power and wisdom of God* [I Cor. 1:24]"[18] through whom all things were made.[19] Accordingly, the activity of

[16] Ibid., p. 96.

[17] See ibid., pp. 99–100.

[18] Ibid., p. 98.

[19] Gregory thinks that supernaturally learned rational principles provide us with divine names and predicates "in accord with a significance fitting to God" (ibid., p. 99) which describe not God's essence but God's power. In our example, the rule we teach the native about traffic lights provides her with names and predicates describing not the phenomenal character of red and green but their operations: "(is a) signal requiring vehicles to stop,"

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each and every creature, both intelligent and non-intelligent ones, is governed by rational principles within the totality. This point is also crucial for trying to understand what eternal progress is, since it must be an activity of human agents not intelligible in terms of sensory images but of rational principles or rules.

II

We have been considering what eternal progress is *not*. It is not fulfillment of one's desire to have more and more direct knowledge of the infinitely knowable divine nature of which one already has some direct knowledge. Then what *is* eternal progress? Gregory's Platonically inspired language of participating in divine goodness suggests the following answer: eternal progress is fulfillment of one's desire to participate more and more in infinitely good divine goodness.

This answer assumes that a particular human being (or other finite intelligent creature) can participate more and more in divine goodness with no upper bound on degrees of such participation. Against the assumption, it might be objected that a creature who participates in divine goodness to degree m cannot be the same creature who participates in divine goodness to degree n where $m \neq n$. To use an analogy, let a sentence be *good* if and only if it is not only true but also contains at least three words. Let one good sentence be *better* (*participates more in goodness*) than another good sentence to the degree that the first contains more words than the second. Then all of the following sentences are not only good, but each additional sentence in the series is better and better than the first: "Snow is white," "'Snow is white' is good," "'"Snow is white' is good" is good,' and so on, ad infinitum. No good sentence in this series is the same as a better sentence, so no particular sentence eternally progresses in becoming better and better. Similarly, no human being participating in divine goodness is the same as a human participating to a greater (or lesser) degree in divine goodness, so no particular human being eternally progresses by participating more and more in divine goodness.

Gregory has a reply to the foregoing objection. Unlike a sentence "participating" in the artificial property *good*, a human soul participating in divine goodness or virtue possesses an intrinsic capacity to do so in ever greater degrees: "Activity directed towards virtue causes its capacity to grow through exertion; this kind of activity

"(is a) signal permitting vehicles to proceed," respectively. For Gregory, the tabernacle as the totality of rational principles structuring and upholding the universe provides us with divine names and predicates applicable to Christ as the eternal Word: "(is the) eternal tabernacle," "(is the) pillar of strength," "(is the) throne of judgment," and so forth (see ibid, p. 118).

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alone does not slacken its intensity by the effort, but increases it."[20] Once a soul participates in divine goodness to degree *m* the soul's capacity expands, allowing the soul to participate in divine goodness to a greater degree *n*, and so on, ad infinitum. In terms of our earlier example, submerging the glass into the limitless ocean causes the glass to expand so that more water fills it, causing the glass to expand yet again so that even more water fills it, and so on, ad infinitum. At times Gregory himself uses this very image.[21]

The problem with the image of the ever expanding glass is precisely that it is an *image* based on sensory experiences of glasses, water filling a volume, and expansion. Literally understanding the human soul in such terms leads to misapprehension. Because it has parts, a receptacle is decomposable and hence destructible. Yet like God, who lacks parts and so is indecomposable, indestructible, and immortal, the human soul is also immortal because it lacks parts.[22] What is needed is a purely intellectual understanding of the soul's limitless capacity to participate more and more in divine goodness.

Keeping in mind the central role of rational principles or rules in Gregory's epistemology, it might be suggested that intrinsic to the soul is a principle of infinite expansion. Such a principle is comparable to one defining an infinite series, in the way that the principle *set of even positive natural numbers well-ordered by* $\leq$ defines the series 2,4,6,8, etc. Each member of this literally infinite series is distinct from the other members. Someone may develop the series by writing down part of it ("2,4"); someone may then develop the series further by writing down more of it ("2,4,6"); and so on, indefinitely. But these are all finite subseries, not the entire series itself which is literally infinite. We might say that the series participates in cardinality to an infinite degree. The problem with the rationalist suggestion should now be clear. The principle of a mathematical series like 2,4,6,8, etc. defines what is already literally infinite. Nothing in the series becomes greater and greater, since each member of the series and each subseries in it are distinct. Since what the principle of the series defines is already infinite, neither the series nor anything in it progresses toward infinity. Therefore, if intrinsic to the soul there is a rational principle of infinite participation in divine goodness that is analogous to the rational principle defining an infinite mathematical series, then the soul is already literally infinite

[20] Ibid., p. 113.

[21] For example, see *De anima et resurrectione* in *Patrologia graeca*. Edited by J.P. Migne (Paris: Migne, 1857—1866), 46.105 A–C.

[22] Gregory affirms the immortality of the soul in *The Life of Moses*, p. 63: "For example, pagan philosophy says that the soul is immortal. This is pious offspring." See also *De anima et resurrection* 46.45C–48C and 52A. We do not evaluate but merely note the argument that the soul is immortal because it is indecomposable.

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by fully participating in divine goodness to an infinite degree. But then the soul cannot progress by participating more and more in divine goodness.[23]

We have failed to reach a coherent metaphysical interpretation of Gregory's doctrine of eternal progress. It would be injudicious to conclude that the doctrine is metaphysically incoherent. Perhaps a viable metaphysical interpretation can be devised that we have not hit upon yet. For now, however, let us place ourselves in the shoes of a philosopher-theologian like St. Bonaventure, who has tremendous respect for St. Gregory and the Cappadocian Fathers but after his best efforts still cannot makes sense of eternal progress in strictly metaphysical terms. We shall devote the remainder of this article to the question of whether there is a plausible *non-metaphysical* interpretation of eternal progress that preserves its significance in Gregory's thought.

III

We begin by considering some remarks Wittgenstein makes:

> The work of the philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose.[24]
>
> Religion teaches that the soul can survive when the body has disintegrated. Now do I understand this teaching?—Of course I understand it—I can imagine plenty of things in connection with it. And haven't pictures of these things been painted? And why should such a picture be only an imperfect rendering of the spoken doctrine? Why should it not do the *same* service as the words? And it is the service which is the point.[25]

These remarks occur in contexts where Wittgenstein is working to pull certain words away from what he regards as the ultimately unintelligible metaphysical constructions philosophers place upon them, and to remind us of the human practices in which these same words have a non-metaphysical point. The first remark concerns the non-metaphysical uses that words like "language," "proposition," "thought," and "rules" have in our everyday linguistic practices. More

[23] One might propose an understanding of numerical infinity along the lines of mathematical intuitionism: the series 2,4,6,8, etc. is not *literally* infinite but only *potentially* so in that we human beings possess the capacity to keep adding 2. Accordingly, the soul is not literally infinite but only potentially so in that it possesses a capacity to participate more and more in divine goodness. But this characterization is patently question-begging, for the soul's alleged *capacity to participate more and more in divine goodness* is the very "capacity" we are trying to understand.

[24] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*. Translated by G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1968), section 127, p. 50.

[25] Ibid., p. 178.

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interesting for our particular purpose is the second remark, in which Wittgenstein calls our attention to the various things we can imagine in connection with the doctrine of the soul's immortality. He suggests that even if the doctrine does not express a coherent metaphysical thesis, the words "The soul is immortal" and what we can imagine in connection with them perform a non-metaphysical service, in the way that a religious painting might inspire us in our devotional practices.

We need not agree with Wittgenstein that the *only* legitimate philosophizing consists in assembling reminders for the purpose of deconstructing philosophical pseudo-problems, or that the doctrine of the soul is metaphysically incoherent. Nonetheless, it might be fruitful to explore whether *some* theological doctrines can have a non-metaphysical point without expressing a coherent metaphysical thesis. Specifically, we may wonder whether this kind of analysis applies to Gregory's doctrine of eternal progress.

Despite the centuries separating them, there is a point of contact between Wittgenstein's methodology in *Philosophical Investigations* and Gregory's exegetical approach in *The Life of Moses*. When he deems a literal interpretation of some biblical passage to be problematic, instead Gregory seeks a spiritual meaning (*theoria*). Several examples give the flavor of Gregory's approach. The darkness blinding the Egyptians without affecting the Israelites (Exod. 10: 21–23) is not a metaphysical miracle but signifies how rejecting or embracing virtue leads to darkness or enlightenment in one's life.[26] God's slaying of the Egyptian firstborn (Exod. 12: 29–30) does not sanction the murder of innocents but means that we should destroy lust and anger as the first beginnings of evil in us so that they do not spawn additional evils like adultery and murder.[27] Moses' command that the departing Israelites despoil the Egyptians (Exod. 12: 31–36) does not enjoin stealing but indicates that those who pursue virtue should appropriate natural philosophy, geometry, astronomy, and other fruits of pagan learning.[28] In each case, a literal, historical interpretation of the text is rejected in favor of a spiritual interpretation. Let us try to take this approach a step further by rejecting a literal, metaphysical interpretation of Gregory's remarks about eternal progress in favor of a non-metaphysical, spiritual interpretation.

Wittgenstein emphasizes the roles our words play in various human practices. For Gregory, the human practice at issue is the Christian's search for spiritual perfection so far as that is possible in this life. The subtitle of *The Life of Moses* is "Concerning Perfection in Virtue." We saw that Gregory is responding to a young monk who wants to know what the perfect life is. What exactly should someone seeking

[26] See *The Life of Moses*, pp. 72–73.
[27] See ibid., pp. 75–76.
[28] See ibid., p. 81.

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spiritual perfection do, and what should he avoid? If he succeeds in mastering his bodily desires, should he take any pride in his accomplishment? If not, why not? Is envying a fellow believer's success permissible as long as it spurs one to accomplish more and more good works? These eminently practical questions about the nature of spiritual perfection and the proper path to it are what motivated Gregory to write his treatise in the first place.

It is instructive to consider the radically different perfectionism found in Nietzsche. One way to understand Nietzsche's notion of Eternal Recurrence is not as a metaphysical thesis but as a thought experiment or imaginative conception that one can use to test whether a particular life is perfect, a life worthy of an *Übermensch*: a perfect life is a life that one should be willing to relive exactly the same way ad infinitum.[29] For example, if I would be willing to relive ad infinitum a life in which I devote twelve hours a day to writing, then such a life is perfect for me. The literal falsehood, or even metaphysical incoherence, of my reliving a particular life ad infinitum does not prevent me from imagining that I relive it ad infinitum, and thus testing whether that particular life is perfect for me. What Nietzsche asks us to conceive may be metaphysically impossible, but our conceiving it may still serve a legitimate purpose.

Gregory's notion of eternal progress can also be interpreted non-metaphysically as a thought experiment or imaginative conception performing a similar heuristic function—only in the service of a Christian perfectionism that is diametrically opposed to Nietzsche's. The point of Gregory's imaginative conception is to test whether a particular attitude with its associated behavior is really a virtue that can be included in the perfect life sought through Christian spiritual discipline. A perfect life is such that "no description of its perfection hinders its progress."[30] Furthermore, someone attaining perfection is said to be "like a good sculptor who has fashioned well the whole statue of his own life."[31] We may then say that something qualifies as a virtue compatible with spiritual perfection if and only if we can imagine someone progressing in it continuously, without limit, and solely by exercising his or her own intellectual and volitional powers. To illustrate how this test might be applied, let us work through three attitudes Gregory describes, as well as their opposites. In each case, our conceiving can serve a practical purpose even if what we conceive is metaphysically fictitious or impossible.

[29] For example, see section 10 of *Ecce Homo*: "My formula for greatness in a human being is *amor fati*: that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity." In *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 2000), p. 714.

[30] *The Life of Moses*, p. 133.

[31] Ibid., p. 134.

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In the section on the True Priesthood, Gregory considers the attitude of a monk who takes pride in mastering all his bodily desires.[32] Is such pride a virtue compatible with human perfection? Either the monk never has any additional bodily desires he has not mastered or eventually he does have such desires. In the former case, he cannot progress in his pride by mastering any more bodily desires. In the latter case, his shame in not mastering his subsequent bodily desires offsets his pride in having mastered his previous ones, so that even if he eventually succeeds in mastering his subsequent desires his pride is not continuous but interrupted. Therefore, the monk's pride is not a virtue compatible with spiritual perfection because we cannot imagine making continuous progress in it without limit. By contrast, imagine a monk who remains humble upon mastering all his bodily desires. If he has subsequent desires he has not mastered then he can progress in humility by humbly acknowledging this fact. These additional desires do not interrupt his humility. We can imagine that even if he never has additional bodily desires he still progresses in humility by not taking pride in being humble about mastering all his bodily desires, by not taking pride in not taking pride in being humble about mastering all his bodily desires, by not taking pride in not taking pride in that, and so on, ad infinitum. Such a scenario is perfectly conceivable, even if it is literally impossible, since it involves the humble monk participating more and more in divine goodness ad infinitum.

Rashness and libertinism can be considered together.[33] Gregory accepts the Aristotelian teaching that "virtue is discerned in the mean"[34] between excess and deficiency. Imagine someone who acts rashly whenever confronted by some challenge. Eventually, though others may regard her behavior as rash, it is no longer rash *for her* because that is how she always acts.[35] For others, she does not increase in rashness because she always acts rashly; for herself, beyond a certain point she no longer even acts rashly but simply the way she always acts. Consequently, we cannot imagine someone eternally progressing in rashness. For parallel reasons, we cannot imagine someone eternally progressing in libertinism as excessive self-indulgence. Imagine instead a person who keeps to "the royal road" between the excesses of rashness and libertinism on the one hand and the deficiencies of timidity and total self-denial on the other. No matter how long she continues in this manner, her behavior is regarded as moderate not

[32] See ibid., pp. 125–126.
[33] See ibid., pp. 128–129.
[34] Ibid., p. 128.
[35] To employ a different idiom, the discrepancy between the status of his behavior for others and the status of his behavior for him can be said to be a way in which his willing is *disordered*.

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just by others but is also moderate for her since she always adheres to the mean between excess and deficiency. How then do we imagine to progress eternally in courage and temperance? We can also imagine a hypothetical human who has always existed, will always exist, and throughout its eternal existence adheres to the mean. A person who keeps to the royal road can never match the moderation of this eternal human, since the person begins to exist at some time and so does not adhere to the mean throughout a past existence of infinite duration. Yet the longer the person adheres to the mean throughout a future existence of infinite duration, the closer she approximates the total moderation of the eternal human. In this sense, we can imagine someone eternally progressing in moderation even if it is literally impossible since doing so amounts to participating more and more in divine goodness ad infinitum.

Gregory pithily observes that "For envy, it is not its own misfortune but another's good fortune that is unfortunate."[36] For someone to progress eternally in envy, his neighbors must enjoy more and more good fortune which he regards as his own misfortune. But whether others enjoy more good fortune is not something over which he has complete control. He can carve the statue of his own virtuous life, but not the statue of his neighbor's fortune or misfortune.[37] Thus we cannot imagine someone eternally progressing in envy solely by exercising his own intellectual and volitional powers, in which case envy is not a virtue compatible with spiritual perfection. However, it is within someone's own power to avoid all envy through prayer and other forms of Christian discipline. As in the case of moderation, the longer a person does so, the closer he approximates the total non-envy of an eternally existing, non-envious human. Hence we can imagine someone continuously progressing in avoiding envy without limit and solely by exercising his own intellectual and volitional powers. We can imagine such a thing, even if we cannot make literal sense of someone who forever avoids envy participating to a greater degree ad infinitum in divine goodness. Thus avoiding envy is also a virtue compatible with the spiritual perfection. Since the eternal progress we can imagine in connection with humility or moderation is also entirely under the agent's intellectual and volitional control, humility and moderation are also virtues compatible with spiritual perfection.[38]

[36] Ibid., p. 121.

[37] There is a connection between Gregory's understanding of virtue as something under one's control and Augustine's idea of evil as "the love of those things which a man can lose against his will." See *On Free Choice of the Will*. Translated by Anna S. Benjamin and L.H. Hackstaff (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1964), p. 10.

[38] Even if they make use of some concepts with experiential content—such as *bodily desires*, *neighbor*, *fortune*, and *misfortune*—the tests we have described utilize imaginative

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Gregory stresses that "The knowledge of God is a mountain steep indeed and difficult to climb—the majority of people scarcely reach its base."[39] Certainly spiritual perfection, which includes the acquisition not only of non-direct, mystical knowledge of God but also the cultivation of virtues that pass the strenuous test of eternal progress, is extremely demanding. We might even suspect that spiritual perfection is humanly impossible. To prevent the seeker of perfection from despairing, Gregory also stresses the constant availability of divine grace:

> For truly the assistance God gives to our nature is provided to those who correctly live the life of virtue. This assistance was already there at our birth, but it is manifested and made known whenever we apply ourselves to diligent training in the higher life and strip ourselves for the more vigorous contests.[40]

Hence it is more accurate to say that something qualifies as a virtue compatible with Christian spiritual perfection if and only if we can imagine someone continuously progressing in it without limit and by exercising only his or her own intellectual and volitional powers in cooperation with divine grace.

A worry arises at this point. What makes humility, moderation, avoidance of envy, and other virtues identified by the test of eternal progress compatible with *spiritual* perfection? Intuitively, spiritual virtues, as opposed to purely secular ones, should make the human agent who cultivates them more like God. It seems that a human agent can become more like God by cultivating humility, moderation, and avoidance of envy only if God possesses these virtues. But since God does not have bodily desires He has mastered and refrains from taking pride in mastering, God does not possess humility. Moreover, since God does not have appetites or passions the way human beings do He does not steer a middle course the extremes of excess and deficiency in His appetites and passions, so that God does not possess moderation. Finally, since God cannot suffer misfortunes He cannot be envious, and hence He cannot possess the virtue of choosing to avoid envy rather than indulge in it. Therefore, God does not possess these virtues. If not, then a human agent cannot become more like God by cultivating them. A non-metaphysical interpretation of eternal progress as an imaginative conception threatens to collapse into a purely secular or even existential account of virtue that makes no reference to God.

rational arguments rather than appeals to sensory experience: *thought* experiments, not empirical ones.

[39] *The Life of Moses*, p. 93.

[40] Ibid., p. 64. Also see ibid., pp. 118–120, where Gregory spiritually interprets Moses' seeing the back of God as the need to follow Christ as the guide who is able to lead us where we cannot lead ourselves.

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In reply, we may observe that interpreting the notion of eternal progress as a non-metaphysical heuristic rather than as a literal metaphysical thesis does not mean that we have to jettison Gregory's entire metaphysical framework. Specifically, Gregory takes God to be the archetype of perfect Goodness and indeed identical with it. A human agent who cultivates humility, moderation, avoidance of envy, and other virtues identified by the eternal progress test may very well come to resemble God as perfect Goodness in respects which do not imply that God is humble or moderate or chooses to avoid envy. According to the eternal progress test, something qualifies as a spiritual virtue if and only if we can imagine a human agent progressing in it continuously, without limit, and solely by exercising his or her own intellectual and volitional powers. To the extent that even during her lifetime a human agent cultivates a virtue continuously and without interruption, she resembles the immutability of God as perfect Goodness; to the extent that she can go on cultivating a virtue even after her death indefinitely, she resembles the limitless nature of God as perfect Goodness; and to the extent that she cultivates a virtue solely by exercising her own intellectual and volitional powers, she resembles God insofar as He is perfect Goodness totally independent of anything external to Him. Such an agent is then a spiritual image of God who resembles Him more than she resembles anything else:

> 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 with the archetype*; he beautifies his own soul with what is incorruptible, unchangeable, and shares in no evil at all.[41]

A person who cultivates the virtues identified by the eternal progress test comes to resemble God neither because God possesses these same virtues nor because the person participates more and more in divine goodness ad infinitum but because the person's uninterrupted, unlimited, and non-dependent cultivation of these virtues resembles the immutability, limitlessness, and independence of God as perfect Goodness. For Gregory of Nyssa, the latter resemblance is a literal metaphysical fact. It is what spiritual perfection comes to for him, I suggest.

The non-metaphysical interpretation of eternal progress proposed here does not demand that *every* theological doctrine be given a non-metaphysical reading. It does not require us to eschew metaphysics across the board and to embrace a Wittgenstein-style fideism or some other radically deflationary position. But whenever we encounter a theological doctrine we cannot see our way to interpreting in literal metaphysical terms without rendering it false or incoherent,

[41] Ibid., p. 136, emphasis added.

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a non-metaphysical interpretation of the doctrine as an imaginative conception serving a particular purpose in religious practices may be attractive—especially if the doctrine is propounded by a thinker we regard highly or is part of a theological tradition we wish to engage in respectful dialogue. I leave it for others to investigate whether this methodology can bear fruit elsewhere, particularly in ecumenical contexts.

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