Chapter X. Gregory of Nyssa and Eunomius: theology versus philosophy

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Gregory of Nyssa was probably the most gifted intellectually of the three Cappadocian writers. Basil was his elder brother and mentor, and some of Basil's themes are developed and enhanced by Gregory. He lived from approximately 335 until 394, and was raised to the see of Nyssa in 371, and deposed by Arian opponents in 376. Some of his philosophy has already been drawn out of the works attacking Eunomius, but we will turn now to a broader picture of his negative theology and philosophy of transcendence.

We will begin with Gregory's general views on the limits of human thought, and the divine incomprehensibility. The latter is a continually present theme, and it underlies all Gregory's theology. The first passage to be examined comes from his first book against Eunomius (354 ff. Jaeger). Here it is proposed that God is out of time, whereas by contrast human history moves on to its proper end through the sequence provided by time, with a beginning, middle and end. The absence of time-span implies, for Gregory, the absence of any measure for the deity. Nothing can measure the divine and blessed life (Contra Eun. I, 365 J.). Living in time would imply such a measure, and it is interesting that timelessness provides the proof of incomensurability for this author.

But this power which creates beings circumscribes within itself the nature of that which comes into being, but it has itself no circumscribing boundaries. It encloses every thought striving to reach the source of the divine life within itself, and it exceeds every meddling inquiry and restless questioning which contentiously seeks to declare the limits of the limitless. (Contra Eun. I, 367 J.)

The circumscriber cannot himself be circumscribed, and so any thought seeking to grasp it is “enclosed”. This last is an interesting term (κατακλειόσω), for it suggests that thought is an effort to enclose: when, however, the subject is boundless, the thought itself is enclosed and enveloped, in the manner it had intended for the deity. Gregory goes on to say that no place, no form, no size, no measure of time is in the divine nature, but only the incomprehensible. This attempt to exclude the deity from time is fairly familiar; the first hypothesis of Plato’s Parmenides (141A) does this in relation to the One, and as is well known, the Parmenides acquired the status of a text book for Middle and Later Platonists. In a sense, then, this emphasis on the atemporal character of God is not novel. The Gnostic work, the Secrets of John, excludes God from both time and eternity. Tardieu explains that both terms suggested the idea of measure (Écrits Gnostiques: Codex de Berlin, 88 and 251).
But what we do find with Gregory is a striking antecedent of the philosophy of time developed in Augustine, and associated more with his name. With Gregory, the timelessness of God is central, but it is accompanied by the desire to validate time in other respects. He goes on to emphasize that space and time are the conditions of the created world, and that God includes them rather than vice versa. He is prior to them. But again he reverts to the importance of timelessness: God is “unmeasured by the ages”, “unaccompanied by time”. The following passage could almost be drawn from Augustine’s Confessions, in the latter chapters:

Such characteristics are part of the creation, with life divided between the emotions of hope and memory according to the divisions of time. But in that transcendent and blessed power, in which all things at once have been and are, the future is contemplated encircled within its all-encompassing power. (Contra Eun. I, 372 J.)

As with Augustine we have the timeless present, which brings together both future and past, and this timelessness is a most important part of the deity. The emphasis on time and timelessness is not necessarily a result of the sense of human history, and the consequent absence from history of the deity, which we find with Augustine’s Confessions. The issue of time became crucial in the Trinitarian debate since the Son could possibly have been said to come after the Father. The orthodox were aware of the pitfalls involved in the priority of the Father, as would normally be required by such imagery. To have the Father out of time, and the Son in it would have introduced a disastrous imbalance in their respective states. Gregory proceeds to deal with this in the next pages, asserting timelessness of both the Father and the Son.

It is here that the specifically Christian problem of the Trinity gives the discussion of time a specifically Christian twist, since two beings are now said to be out of time. It will be found that the response to Eunomius is what draws out Gregory’s views.

Earlier in book I Gregory cites Eunomius as declaring that that which is mentioned second or third, must be inferior and dependent (Contra Eun. I, 200 J.). Eunomius is said to believe that such a numerical ranking implies a difference in nature, and Gregory complains that he has never heard of this “wisdom”: “For numerical rank does not bring about a difference in nature” (Contra Eun. I, 201 J.). Gregory argues that number deals with quantity only, and that it does not signify qualitative relationships. Thus that the Father is first, above the Son, does not imply any ranking or gradation between them. Gregory takes an example the list “Paul, Silvanus and Timothy”: the fact that one is first, another second, and the other third is immaterial. They are three in quantity, but the list does not imply a ranking in quality.

Gregory’s point is a skilful one, since number can be used to denote quantity only. However it is also true that it can be used for ranking purposes: a
Sequence and the Trinity

class of pupils can be numbered from one to thirty in order to determine an order of scholastic merit. That depends on the intention of the numbering agent, and this is the kind of point that Gregory is getting at. Now the imagery of the Trinity, which has a Father/Son relationship for two of the members, and rather curiously an non-family relationship for the third, may indeed suggest a ranking purpose in the numeralisation involved: that is, if one considers the Father necessarily superior to the Son. This is not in fact necessarily to be assumed: the two could be equally potent. Or alternatively, the Son could be the stronger partner. So Eunomius appears to have made an assumption about the meaning of the numbers one and two in the case of the Trinity, and Gregory’s argument points this out. Why does Eunomius move this way? Because he is governed by the Neoplatonist framework of emanationism, Lovejoy’s great chain of being, which proceeds in ever-decreasing gradations from the purest form of being itself. The first leads to the second, which is related to the first, but also a diminution of it. Furthermore, the Neoplatonist interest in the One and the many governs Eunomius’ thinking, according to which the movement away from unity is a descent. It is for this reason that the Second person in the Trinity is said by Eunomius to be in subjection to the First. These are assumptions on Eunomius’ part, or to put it differently, he is using a set of metaphysical axioms drawn from Greek philosophy.

Gregory’s concern is that this numbering/ranking philosophy of the Trinity implies sequence, that all three members are caught up in an ordering which is essentially a temporal concept. On the example of Paul, Silvanus and Timothy cited above, Gregory denies that this threefold characteristic ranks them in any way, or differentiates them. “Not so. Each is human both before and after this numbering” (Contra Eun. I, 203 J.). The “before” and “after” is the issue which worries Gregory, and this temporal sequence crops up frequently in his discussion of whether the Son “follows” the Father, as Eunomius had claimed. Gregory argues for a threefold characterization of the Trinity without the idea of sequence being involved. This implies a timeless multiplicity, and it is probably in virtue of this conflict with the representatives of Arianism that timelessness came to be emphasised, out of all the usual negative descriptions of God.

Gregory finds speech to be time-bound:

Speech, since it cannot indicate the three in one utterance, recalls each separately according to the appropriate order, but conjoins them through the middle term, in order, I think, to indicate the harmonious activity of the three towards one goal through the conjunction of names. (Contra Eun. I, 203 J.)

This is an exact precedent for an argument of Augustine, who in the De Trinitate (see p.203) argues that speech introduces temporal sequence where
there is none. It is inevitable, runs the argument, that speech temporalises because one word follows another, whether in writing or in speech. The fundamental timelessness of the Trinity should not be concealed by this limitation which is endemic in discourse.

We have heard from the Neoplatonists that speech numeralises (see for example my “What is negative theology?”... p.11), and that it therefore introduces quantity into whatever is the subject under discussion. Consequently, the negative manoeuvre leads the Neoplatonist to seek unity in the transcendent, by negating the multiplicity inherent in speech. Neoplatonism is characterized, as everybody knows, by this polarisation of unity and multiplicity.

Patristic Philosophy inherits this concern from the Neoplatonists, but it adds the new preoccupation with time. (In fact Hochstaffl [Negative Theologie... 110, following Mühlenberg] claims that Gregory is the first to make the negation of time in relation to God, a positive statement of his being in and for himself. This is only partly true, in my view: the following discussion indicates a willingness to let “endlessness” refer to the positive concept of eternity, but a refusal to have it designate God’s essence. But there is no doubt that from this point, time and its negation becomes a major issue in Patristic philosophy.) Now it is seen that speech also temporalizes that which may or may not be in time. We will discuss this in relation to Augustine’s Confessions, and the On the Trinity, but we find it first in Gregory of Nyssa. (Courcelle, Late Latin Writers... 202, finds that Augustine was more familiar with Basil and Gregory Nazianzenus, than with Nyssenus. Basil he knew best, and even appears to have confused Nazianzenus with Nyssenus, on Courcelle’s view. He may have read Nazianzenus in translation only. Despite this alleged lack of connection between Augustine and Gregory of Nyssa, we note the great similarity of their theologico-philosophical preoccupations with time and its relationship to the Trinity.) As with Augustine, the negative manoeuvre is carried out to produce the picture of the timeless deity. Two concerns bring this insight forward, and it is a uniquely Christian contribution to the philosophy of the period: one the Christian interest in history and the linear development of the human race, and two, the problem of the Trinity. The Trinity invests the deity with multiplicity, and orthodox theology requires that this threefold characteristic not be understood as sequential, so that members of the Trinity may not be ranked. The Trinity thus produced a legacy of philosophical problems which had to be solved, and in the course of this problem-solving, the temporalizing nature of speech became crystal-clear. Its consequences were unacceptable and so the negation of time became a major part of the via negativa. This is why Gregory devotes so much space to the word “follows” in his discussion of “energy” and “essence” (Contra Eun. I, 207ff. J.).

Gregory returns to the question of “following” later in book I, and deals
Eunomius misrepresented 175 with it in greater detail. The curious feature of it is that he actually substitutes the verb ἐπομαι ("follow") for the verb ἀκολουθέω ("follow", or "be a consequence of"). This misrepresentation has already been alluded to in our chapter on Eunomius, but can be expanded here. Anastos (Basil’s Κατὰ Εὐνομίου... 79) has commented on the misreading of Eunomius at this point by both Basil and Gregory, who assume that Eunomius means that the quality of ingeneracy sequentially follows the deity. We have translated the passage differently on p.58 in line with Anastos’ remarks. But it is striking that over and over again Gregory writes as if Eunomius had used the verb ἐπομαι, whereas he did not. (Daniélou’s article on ἀκολουθεῖα in Gregory of Nyssa makes no mention of this problem. It does require a thorough investigation, and would provide an interesting complement to the material he has adduced. Gregory uses the word in this passage, but as a play on words.)

Gregory is defending Basil’s initial statement on this question, but what is curious is that he seems not to have the text of Eunomius’ first writing before him. To compare the text of the two:

**Gregory**: Somewhere in his writings Eunomius said: “Ingeneracy follows God”.

(Εἶπεν τῶν εαυτῶν λόγων ο Εὐνόμιος: “Επομαί τῷ Θεῷ τὸ ἄγεννητον.”

(Contra Eun. I, 655 J.)

**Eunomius**: If therefore it is shown that [God] is not prior to himself, and that nothing else precedes him, he is before all things. Ingenerateness is a consequence of this.

(Οὐκόθεν εἰ μήτε αὐτὸς ἐαυτοῦ, μήθ᾽ ἔτερον τι αὐτοῦ προύπαρχειν δεῖται, πρὸ δὲ πάντων αὐτὸς: ἀκολουθεῖ τούτῳ τὸ ἄγεννητον.) (PG 30, 841C)

Clearly Gregory has misquoted Eunomius, or quoted him from memory. He does not have the text in front of him, and his memory of the passage may have been influenced by Basil’s gloss. It is Basil who makes ἀκολουθεῖ into ἐπομαι, and thus introduces a notion of temporal sequence in what is meant to be a logical sequence. As Anastos remarks, Eunomius seems to have complained that he was misunderstood: Gregory mentions his complaints about Basil’s lack of serious interest in the issue (Contra Eun. I, 653 J.). If he was annoyed by Basil’s misinterpretation, how much more would he have been annoyed by Gregory’s perpetuation of it, apparently in ignorance of the genuine text?

It is a curious situation: Basil was only half interested in Eunomius’ argument, and so caricatured it without too much concern; but Gregory, who investigated it very thoroughly and very philosophically, dealt only with the caricature he had from Basil. Eunomius means that ingeneracy is a logical consequence of nothing preceding God, and the Cappadocians take it as a temporal consequence.

Thus the question of time and the deity weighs heavily in Gregory’s thinking. It is relatively easy for him to defeat the caricature of Eunomius’ view...
which he has in mind, since any following of the deity by his essential quality would create two stages, and also destroy the attempt to say what the “real” essential quality is. But the theme of temporal sequence and the deity looms larger in Gregory than this easy refutation of a caricatured view, seems to warrant. Thus he proceeds to outline a picture of the timelessness of God in what follows.

The eternity of God is like a circle, Gregory says, with no visible beginning or end (he recognizes that God is not circumscribed like a circle). God’s life is an unbroken continuity. He exceeds any end, and precedes any beginning. Both these things are the consequences of timelessness in Gregory’s view, and he now inquires why Eunomius offered only a negation of the idea that God had a beginning, without a corresponding negation of the idea of a divine end. He asks why it is somehow necessary that only ingeneracy can be held to denote being: why cannot endlessness be equally ontologically significant?

It is an interesting question, and one wonders what Eunomius’ response would be. It probably arises out of the desire to avoid ascribing eternity to God, found in both Gnostics and Neoplatonists by Tardieu (Écrits Gnosti ques ... 251). Eunomius may have felt that “endlessness” might lead to eternity. But Gregory has touched on a crucial characteristic of Neoplatonism, and he has made it look like an oddity, or at least something to be explained: namely, that Neoplatonism is origin-centred. It is all about the beginning of things, the procession away from this beginning and the gradual loss of the purity of this beginning. Why is this so? The answer is probably as old as Greek philosophy, and the cosmogonic myths of Hesiod and the Presocratic philosophers. Gregory has identified an important element of the Greek tradition as a contingent one, which is capable of criticism, namely that Greek philosophy always asks from whence we come, and never whither we are going.

He has done so by bringing to bear a theological perspective on the canons of Greek philosophy:

I would advise them to reverse their teaching, and to consider endlessness in essence, and to overlook the absence of beginning of the endless, giving priority to that which is Future and which is full of hope, rather than to that which is past and stale. (Contra Eun. I, 672 J.)

Gregory focusses the Christian eschatological perspective on Eunomius’ concern with origins, and finds it stale and backward-looking. He contrasts hope with the retrospective piety of Eunomius’ theological system, and finds hope to be the appropriate response to the Christian sense of the future.

Pressing forward to future goals, and the motivation of hope, are two of the things which most emphatically differentiate ancient Christianity and an-
cient Platonism. Paul articulates the idea in Philippians 3.13–14, and Augustine develops it to its most complete form in the Confessions: the Christian believer moves quickly through time to goals which stretch out ahead of him. “Every particle of sand in the hour glass in precious to me”, says Augustine (Conf. XI. 2).

Gregory concludes with a logical refutation of Eunomius’ position: having challenged him from the standpoint of his own theology, he now moves to offer a critique of Eunomius from Eunomius’ own standpoint. His argument is important from the point of view of the history of negation. If, he argues (Contra Eun. I, 676 J.), the Eunomians argue that both the negations “endless” and “beginningless” are simultaneously true, they fall into a contradiction. For beginning and end are opposites (ἐναντίως ἔχει): they are like “the other diametric opposites” (τῶν λοιπῶν τῶν κατὰ διάμετρον ἀλλήλως ἀντικειμένων). (Throughout this passage the words used for opposite are either ἐναντιοῦς or ἀντικειμενος.) Gregory’s argument is simply that, if “end” and “beginning” are opposites, so are “endlessness” and “beginninglessness”, since the negations of opposites are also opposite to each other. If the Eunomians accept only one of these negations, then they will be indicating only one half of God’s being. If, on the other hand, they accept both of these, then they contradict themselves.

I am at a loss to see why Gregory does not apply this argument to himself as well, since he advocates both negations at various points. In fact he argues that the discussion should be expanded to include both, and so would seem to be hoist on his own petard.

However he concludes with a statement of the negative way, apparently intended to dismiss all preceding linguistic manoeuvres as trivial.

The simplicity of the true faith assumes God to be that which he is: incapable of being grasped by any name, any thought, or any other conception, remaining beyond the grasp of not only human, but also angelic and every supramundane being, unthinkable, unutterable, and above every expression in language. He has one knowable name for his own nature, the single name that he is above every name. This is also granted to the Only-begotten, through the principle that “all that the Father has is the Son’s”. Orthodoxy allows certain terms as being indicative of his eternity, but not his essence, such as “ingenerate” and “endless”. Thus “ingenerate” means that no beginning can be postulated prior to him, nor any cause held forth. “Endless” means that his kingdom will be brought to no end. (Contra Eun. I, 683 J.)

In this way Gregory asserts an absolute namelessness for God. The ousia (essence) of God cannot be put into words: the only name that can be used is “namelessness”. Gregory advocates a generic negation of epithets, just as Proclus offers a generic negation; but in the case of negation itself, Gregory offers a blanket negation of all names. There is however, no exploration of the significance of this particular negation. There is no discussion of the rela-
tation of this negative name to his essence: there is no discussion of the logic of negation, in the manner that is to be found in Proclus. In short there is no *via negativa*, in the sense of a way or a technique to be systematically pursued. Gregory offers a negation, but there are no claims that this is in any sense revelatory of the essence.

Further, this is the culmination of his philosophizing about time in relation to the divinity. The negations of time are intended to represent God's "eternity", rather than his "essence". This is a difficulty, since God is said now to have at least two characteristics: an "essence", and "eternity". If eternity is not part of God's essence, then what is it? Surely not an accident, in the Aristotelian sense? And eternity could hardly be said to be one of the divine *energeiai*, which are cosmic activities capable of being designated in human terms. Gregory has let a dualism slip into the transcendent being of the Godhead, without attempting to resolve the problem for us, at least at this point. However it is at least true that a negation has been transformed into an affirmation, as Hochstaffl claims (see below, 174).

The same problem occurs a little earlier in the first book against Eunomius, and here Gregory says more about the types of names which are applied to the divine. He leans heavily on Basil here (see p.166): we may give the one entity a variety of names, depending on the context. Thus at harvest time we call grain "produce"; at meal-time we call it "food". The same entity takes a different name, as its function changes. Gregory uses the idea of bread, as already used by Eunomius (Contra Eun. I, 561 J.): a loaf of bread is flour if we are thinking about its composition, but also bread if we are thinking about food. Eunomius appears to imply that it cannot be both simultaneously: if it is conceded that it is flour, the loaf of bread cannot also be called food. It has been seen earlier that Eunomius believes that names are necessary rather than conventional; he believes there is more to a name than just the focus of the human mind. Gregory controverts this view by arguing for the conventional application of language, following on the focus of the conception. Gregory continues by repeating Basil's distinction (see p.168) between names which are absolute, and names which are relations (Contra Eun. I, 568-9 J.). He refines it in certain ways however: firstly he introduces the category of epithets which are both relations and absolutes, such as "God". One may appropriate God, by speaking of "our God", and in this case the term becomes relational. It can be used in isolation, however, and then it is absolute.

Gregory chooses a series of negative terms for his examples of absolutes: "imperishable", "everlasting" and "immortal". And he reverts to his idea of God's eternity at the end of this passage:

... in every epithet, eternity is implied. (Contra Eun. I, 574 J.)

Here again is the problematic status of eternity: it is always alongside other things as an aspect. Originally we saw it alongside essence in an unexplained
way, and now it is involved in all the other characteristics in an equally unexplained way. A comparison with Plotinus may help to show how eternity can occupy this shadowy status. Plotinus struggles throughout his discussion of time and eternity to make them qualities which are not accidents, but integral parts of that to which they belong. Gregory here treats eternity as if it is something like the “life of God”: Plotinus toys with this idea for time, and the attraction of life is that it is a characteristic which is indistinguishable from the being itself. Whatever holds for time tends to hold for eternity in these discussions, and perhaps it is this kind of model which dominates Gregory’s thought.

It is the idea that the term Father can have a “double meaning” which bothers Eunomius. The view of the Cappadocians is that the term Father signifies two things: (I) that God is the creator of all things and (II) that God himself has no higher cause. Eunomius’ response is a syllogistic style argument aimed at showing the incompatibility of the two meanings for “Father”. Gregory’s point appears to be that “Father” is one of those words which can be both absolute and relative at the same time. On the one hand the term refers to the relationship with the Son and all begotten creatures, and on the other it refers to the Father’s absolute quality of ingeneracy. Like Basil, Gregory offers a philosophy of language which admits of a variety of descriptions of the transcendent, all of which are qualified in various ways. Eunomius finds an intolerable looseness in this, accepting only those terms which are demonstrated to be appropriate, and which are unambiguous. The idea of a multiple concept of the Father is a contradiction in terms.

Much later in the work Gregory returns to the question. Eunomius had asserted that the term “Lord” for Jesus is one term which signifies essence, and not the “dignity” of the Son. The position of Eunomius referred to here (Contra Eun. III, V, 33 ff. J.) appears to be something like this: Christ is referred to as Lord in the New Testament. Either this epithet is the true, given term, denoting essence, or it is one of the many which are merely the produce of human thought. Since the Scriptures say “The Lord is Spirit” (II Cor. 3.17), they must be suggesting that this is the essential nature of Christ: in other words Eunomius is taking spirit as a sort of equivalent of ousia (essence). Such would appear to be Eunomius’ thinking. The same response comes forth as that which was offered on the subject of the Father: for Gregory many names are possible, depending on the approach being taken. Eunomius’ position is the same as before: different names mean different things, and to change names is to change the nature of the object being referred to: why, Eunomius asks, would one call man both “man” and “horse” in order to compare them? There is something impossible about this variety of names, if name means essence.

For Eunomius the variety of names means that they fall into the category of names like Peter, and Paul (Contra Eun. III, V, 50 J). These names can be
changed. But Gregory replies that this is true of all names: they are all applied by us. Gregory insists on the difference between the essence of the objects and their names:

For when we gather into the form of a name the concept of a thing which arises within us, we declare our concept by different terms at different times. We do not make the thing, but we make the utterances by which we name it. For the things remain in themselves as they are by nature... And just as the essence of Peter was not changed by the change of names, neither is any of the other things we contemplate changed by the change of names. (Contra Eun. II, V, 52 J.)

The link between name and essence is denied, and language is relegated to the position of being an instrument of the human intellectual process. For Eunomius some names fall into this category, but for Gregory all do. For Eunomius, some names indicate essence, but for Gregory none do.

Gregory concludes on the unknowability of the copula. We may say "God is good", "God is incorruptible" and so on. These terms apply to manifestations of his nature, but between them and God lies the word "is". This "isness" of God remains undescribed. The "is" of the copula refers to the being of God, and this is actually undefinable (Contra Eun. III, V, 60 J.). We may say how it is deployed, but no remark is ever made, or can be made on the "isness" itself of God, for this is his very being. We shall return to the copula later.

Returning to the question of naming, a passage in book II of the Against Eunomius raises the issue of the "name", as used in the New Testament, as when Jesus speaks of "baptizing into the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost" (Matt. 28.19). Given that Gregory has declared the only real name of God the Father to be namelessness, there is some difficulty as to what is being recommended. We have alluded elsewhere to the revival of interest in naming in this period, and Daniélou (Théologie du Judéo-Christianisme) has done much to clarify the early development of the name theology. However here in the fourth century we are in a different context: there is evidence of a very broadly based interest in names and their applicability, which cuts across the pagan/Christian division. A revival of interest in the Cratylus, and a revival of the Stoic belief in the natural truth of names, is part of this (see vol. I, p.101).

Gregory's discussion here must be placed in this context, rather than the earlier and much more limited theology of the name so ably outlined by Daniélou in the abovementioned book. A new difficulty has surfaced, provoked jointly by the contradictions involved in the notion of the Trinity, and by the linguistic realism espoused by Neoplatonist thinkers. Gregory has said that God is nameless: accordingly he asks the question:
Names as conventional

What then does that unnameable name mean, about which the Lord said “Baptizing them into the name” without adding the significant word which “the name” indicates? (Contra Eun. II, 14 J.)

Gregory finds something important in the failure to say what the specific name actually is, and his answer is that the use of the uninformative term “name” is deliberate. The impossibility of communicating anything about the Father, who surpasses all names, causes this oblique form of reference: in the baptismal formula meaning is deliberately withheld. Now of course the baptismal formula does not say “baptize in the name of the nameless”, as it should strictly have done if Gregory’s theory is to work. But Gregory’s negative theology does not prohibit language entirely, since he makes a place for a variety of terms as helpful in some degree, and it is this point which he chooses to emphasise here. His suggestion is that the oblique character of the baptismal formula is intended to convey a variety of names:

For this reason the Word, when speaking of the Name in handing down the faith, did not add what it was. For how could a name be found for that which is above every name? But he gave the power that whatever name our intelligence by holy endeavour should discover, indicative of the transcendent nature, that that name should be equally applicable to the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, whether the “good” or the “in-corruptible”, whatever name each may think worthy to be employed to indicate the undefiled nature. (Contra Eun. II, 15 J.)

This is quite a loose position for a member of the orthodox to adopt. It has of course to be read in conjunction with the other material on Gregory in our chapter on Eunomius. Gregory always advocates a multiplicity of names to aid the understanding whereas Eunomius advocates one only, and prohibits all others. Still, it is a remarkably agnostic position for Gregory to advocate, since he appears to be suggesting that there can be any number of names to fill out the unspecific reference of the baptismal formula.

The natural interpretation of baptism in the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Ghost, is that these three names are the actually specified names. What Gregory has done is open up a gap, as if “name” refers to something else, other than “Father”, “Son” and “Holy Ghost”. Helpfully for the unity of the Trinity, Gregory envisages a single name, applied to all members of the Trinity. But he has opened up here the possibility for speculative interpretations of the baptismal formula, though of course the various candidates for the unspecified name are all scripturally inspired.

The Gnostic Gospel of Truth is again called to mind, with its proposition that “the Name of the Father is the Son”. Gregory’s interpretation of the baptismal formula shows us that speculation about the “real” names for the Father was in the air. In a passage which is closer to the Gospel of Truth statement than any other, with the exception of that of Philo discussed in my “In the Name of the Father…”, Gregory says:
For without the Son the Father neither is, nor is spoken of, any more than the powerful is without power, or the wise without wisdom.

... Χώρις γὰρ Υἱὸν Πατήρ οὔτε ἔστιν οὔτε λέγεται · οὔτε μὴν χωρίς δυνάμεως ὁ δύνατὸς · οὔτε χωρίς σοφίας ὁ σοφός. (Refutatio 26 J.)

The exact words of the first sentence are repeated at Refutatio 38 J. The word δόμα is not present, but this is unimportant, since λέγεται does just as well. Clearly Gregory is asserting that Son provides both the existence and the name for the Father, and it is precisely this link between name and being which is so unusual in the Gospel of Truth, according to which Christ is actually the name of the Father, a name-entity. Gregory’s concern is of course the maintenance of the unity of the Trinity: hence the integral relation of the Son with the being of the Father. But the Gospel of Truth has the same motive: the assertion of the closeness of the Father and the Son.

All this emerges from Gregory’s belief that the name in the baptismal formula is simply a generic term for whatever name or series of names we may find helpful in trying to conceive of the divine, who is in the end nameless. It would seem from another work (That They are not Three Gods), that those names which are applied to the nameless are held to signify operations (energeiai). The term “Godhead”, for example, refers to the joint work of all three persons of the Trinity at once, so that the multiple is treated as a unity. Here (p.53, 4 ff., ed. Jaeger/Mueller) Gregory conducts an argument against those who complain that the term Godhead is intended to signify nature (physis), rather than operation (energeia).

One verse is particularly difficult to Gregory in developing his theme of the namelessness of God: “You worship you know not what” (Jn. 4.22), quoted in Against Eunomius III, 105 (Jaeger). Gregory refers to this as a text quoted by his opponents, apparently to ridicule the Cappadocian negative theology. Gregory says that one should honour in silence that which is incomprehensible, but refers to opponents who regard this as overly cautious. These opponents point up the agnosticism of Gregory’s position with the satirical use of the verse from John, and Gregory bolsters his position by scriptural assertions of incomprehensibility, such as Paul’s assertion that God’s ways are “unsearchable”, and “past finding out” (Rom. 11.33). For Gregory, the rebuke “you worship you know not what” was directed against Samaritans who imagined the deity to be circumscribable in some location: Eunomius’ party are the “new Samaritans”, offering a similarly fraudulent attempt to circumscribe the deity with the word “ingenerate”.

As with Basil, we are faced with the oddity that one type of negative theology is being pitted against another. Gregory’s ultimately nameless divinity is contrasted with Eunomius’ ingenerate divinity: Eunomius offers a negative adjective, and Gregory the negation of all adjectives, even negative ones.

Closely related to Gregory’s apophatic theology is his kataphatic theology.
For Gregory believes that both man’s reasoning faculty and his language is the work of God, and this is asserted in many ways. The value of language emerges, for example, in his endorsement of analogy as a means of constructing concepts of the divine. This was one of the classic Middle Platonist “three ways”, and we have seen that Eunomius rejected analogy as a theological instrument, considering it to be an indulgence of over-eager intelligences. But in the Great Catechism (10), Gregory explicitly endorses arguments by analogy though he does not use the word ἀνάλογα, the argumentation is quite clear. A comparison is drawn with the flame of a lamp: the flame appears to embrace the material which is burning. Though we cannot perceive the actual distinctness of the material and the flame, we can rationally posit it. Gregory continues:

What is there then to prevent our thinking (just as we see flame adhering to the material, and not swallowed up in it) of a certain union and approximation of the Divine nature with humanity, and in this approximation preserving the proper notion of deity, believing that though the divine is in man, it is beyond all circumscription. (PG 45, 41D ff.)

On the basis of this approach, certain valuable concepts may be formed, though their limits may be recognized. One notes that Gregory believes in an ontological continuity between God and man, preceding the conceptual analogies which may be used. An actual analogy of being is presupposed in analogies of discourse, and this combination of the ontological and the conceptual in analogy goes back to the very roots of Christian philosophy (see my 'Ἀναλογία chez Clément d'Alexandrie...').

But in general, language is a God-given gift. Gregory’s fully developed views on language and its application are given in his second reply to Eunomius’ own second book. It is here that he gives a more detailed response to the philosophy of language that was emerging, and appropriated by Eunomius in particular. In other words Gregory returned to this issue, just as he returned to the issue of privation, in greater detail, probably because both problems were proving to be more stubborn than he had originally thought. A good deal has already been said on the background of this dispute over language in the discussion of Eunomius, but the whole of Gregory’s view will be summed up here.

A neo-Stoic view had grown up, according to which a necessary relationship between words and their objects was postulated. The view was that certain words were every bit as “given” as any object belonging to the realm of physis. In response to this Gregory argues that language is human construction:

So that our view remains firm: we define human utterances as the inventions of our understanding. (Contra Eun. II, 254 J.)
Language as posterior to man

The tower of Babel story, according to which different languages arose from God's punishment, was clearly a prime subject of debate. Gregory alludes here to interpretations of the tower of Babel which were being used against him, but it is difficult to perceive exactly what view of it was being offered by Eunomius. Gregory's own view is simple enough. When God willed that the human race should expand and go off in various directions, it followed that men adopted different tongues in different regions. Their knowledge of things was in no way different, but their terms varied. God desired that men should have full freedom to develop their own languages. Gregory adds the hypothesis that the Hebrew language was a relatively recent development (Contra Eun. II, 257 J.), in order to point out the absurdity of the idea that God spoke in Hebrew:

For to suppose that God used the Hebrew tongue, with no-one present to understand such a tongue, no reasonable person will agree. We read in Acts that because of this the divine power was divided into many different tongues, so that no one of alien tongue might be deprived of benefit. But if God spoke in a human manner before creation, who would have benefited from such an utterance? (Contra Eun. II, 258 J.)

Gregory's purpose is to show that language does not pre-exist man. Hebrew has no particular status as the chosen language of God – indeed it may be a relatively recent acquisition. So that the idea that God might choose to speak in any language at all, prior to the existence of man, is absurd.

This point is a specific response to Eunomius, who believes in the pre-existence of language (Contra Eun. II, 262 J.), and claims to have the testimony of Moses on this issue. The view is that God created things, and the names for them, and then gave them to men. Eunomius' circle apparently took their cue from the verse: "God called the light Day, and the darkness Night", this activity being prior to the existence of man according to the Genesis account (Contra Eun. II, 269 J.). Gregory has to develop a complicated exegesis to extract himself from this problem, and the details of it need not detain us here. His exegesis of this particular verse is really nothing more than an ad hoc arrangement to meet the needs of his argument on language, which he reiterates. Names are human inventions: God has no need of speech. And what of those who invented different names for man, such as anthropos, brotos or phos? Are these, he asks, to be elevated to the same status as God himself, as inventors of names?

Clearly, for Eunomius, to admit a variety of names is to admit variety of nature. The numerous epithets applied to Christ in the Scriptures cannot therefore, on his view, be taken seriously. Gregory replies that the many names reflect the many operations (ἐνεργεῖον), that he undertakes, and that these names are all derived from abstract conception (ἐπίνοια). It is at this point that Eunomius launches his attack on the use of analogy as a means of
forming ideas of the transcendent. We have seen that Gregory advocates this elsewhere, and also that Eunomius seems to share in a hostile view of analogy, current in some Neoplatonist circles. However at this point Gregory chooses not to advocate analogy, but to belabour his opponent with the charge that such words as "analogy" and "homonym" are not Biblical (Contra Eun. II, 309 J.). Though this is to evade the philosophical arguments entailed in the use of these expressions, it is a justifiable response since Eunomius claims to be using the language of Scripture.

Again we see Gregory as either unwilling to tackle, or ignorant of, the technical philosophical issue being addressed by Eunomius. Since the Middle Platonists, analogy had been recognized as one of the three ways of developing concepts of the transcendent. Clement of Alexandria recognizes it, as does Plotinus. Eunomius stands in this tradition, except that he rejects the use of analogy: in other words he shares in a revisionist school of Neoplatonist thought. That analogy was contested seems to result from a difficult text of Proclus (see p.108), and it seems likely that in this circle, there was a group of "contestataires", and their tradition ultimately led to the philosophy of Damascius. Eunomius seems to be aware of this kind of discussion, as we saw with privation. Gregory, on the other hand, seems to be light years away from it.

Curiously enough, Gregory accuses Eunomius (Contra Eun. II, 343 J.) of wanting to promulgate the idea that God speaks in the manner of men, and though this is something of a distortion, it is not unreasonable. Eunomius does in effect try to vindicate human language, certain parts of it at least, by claiming that it is also God's language. His view does suppose a great deal of truth-bearing capacity in human language, and expresses a kind of confidence in it. Gregory's own view is more sceptical than this.

Further, Gregory accuses Eunomius, again with some justification, of arbitrariness in the selection of language. Certain epithets are held to be immutably valid, but most are discarded as inventions. Yet these appear to have been sanctioned by Jesus himself, and Gregory goes on to report a response of Eunomius to Basil on this very point. Basil had said, and it is an argument which Gregory followed virtually word for word (see p.166), that just as grain admits of different descriptions, depending on whether it is used as seed, or as nourishment, so God can be called different things depending on the energeia, or operation, involved. Eunomius complains that Basil (Contra Eun. II, 362 J.) compares God to corn, and finds this absurd or blasphemous. But more importantly he attacks Basil for arguing that God is conceived, "through certain analogies and relations" (ἀναλογίας τινὰς καὶ σχέσεις). Again Eunomius' language is the technical language of logic, and again Gregory does not deal with the question of analogy on this level. Eunomius objects to Basil's mode of argument, whereby a point is made about God on the basis of a model drawn from the material world, and he calls this mode of ar-
argument “analogy”. Whether Basil would have done so is another matter; he may not have seen it as a matter of logic. Eunomius’ substantial point is simply that God and corn are incomparable.

It is a pity that Gregory does not quote more at this point, because it would be interesting to see how well developed Eunomius’ critique is. One would like to know whether he shared the view of Damascius, that analogy is simply a failure as an epistemological manoeuvre, since it endeavours to compare a known thing with an unknown thing. However we have no more information, and Gregory’s reply does not deal at all with this alleged incomparability of the two things.

Gregory claims that Eunomius derived his ideas from Plato’s Cratylus, or from someone who has read the Cratylus, and this has been discussed in our chapter on Eunomius. Gregory does not seem to display any familiarity with that dialogue of Plato, and it is not clear how seriously we should take what he says. Nor is it at all clear what Plato himself is advocating in the Cratylus, since much of it is intellectual play. But it is quite likely that a revival of interest in the dialogue was taking place, alongside a broadly-based speculation on the natural origins of language.

Two more quotations of Eunomius by Gregory will suffice to show the difference between them on the subject of names:

“True expressions”, he says, “take their precision from the realities which are subject to discussion, different expressions being applied to different realities, just as the same expressions are applied to the same things. Therefore one must hold one or other of these positions: either the thing under discussion is completely different, or the word designating it is not different”. (Contra Eun. II, 481 J.)

Whilst it is not exactly clear what this means—and no doubt the answer lies somewhere, in some Neoplatonic commentator’s use of Greek—it is clear that Eunomius wants to establish a direct relationship between words and things. The position is a curious one: the exactness, or truth, of a word is derived from the reality itself. The word carries with it all the strength of being, or of the object it designates. I take the last few words to mean: either a word is exactly applicable or it is not. If we have two different words, either they refer to different things, or else the words are not really different, that is, they are identical in meaning. This seems to be what Eunomius is getting at, since he wants to develop the idea that ingeneracy and indestructibility are exactly the same thing. In terms of the principle enunciated in the above quotation, either ingeneracy and indestructibility are completely different things, or the words themselves are identical. I take it that Eunomius opts for the lat-
ter part of this disjunction. It is difficult however, and it is interesting to note that Gregory quotes this passage no less than three times in a few pages, twice at fair length.

It is a view which wishes to impart great rigour to language, a rigour which is born of the natural rigour of ontology. Either things are things, or they are not. They are not several. This desire to clarify language reminds us of the principle of Epicurus (vol. I, p.101) who also desired to cleanse language of confusion, nature itself being free of confusion.

Gregory’s complaint in response appears reasonable: Eunomius seems to exclude “various relations (σχέσεις) and juxtapositions (παραθέσεις), as well as form, measure, part, time and manner”. I think this means that for Gregory, Eunomius sees language as a simple set of one-to-one relations between nouns and things, as if it proceeded by a series of one word statements. But, Gregory asks, what of “relations and juxtapositions”, such as occur when we introduce a verb into a sentence? Where does the truth come from then, when we describe a state of affairs involving several entities? And what of abstractions like time, or relational concepts. These seem to be legitimate questions, if we have understood Eunomius correctly. One suspects, however, that there must be more to Eunomius’ view, and that his answer might be that only very few words fall into the category he describes and that the type of construction Gregory refers to would be part of that which he would regard as the artificial creation of the human mind.

But the cash value of the difference between the protagonists is simply expressed in the following quotations of Eunomius:

“A law of our nature”, he says, “teaches us that in the naming of things, the dignity of the name lies not within the authority of those who name”. (Contra Eun. II, 545 J.)

And a little further:

He says that it is a holy thing, and appropriate to the law of providence, that words are imposed on objects from above. (Contra Eun. II, 546 J.)

The second passage contains the key difference between Eunomius and the Cappadocians: for him language is of transcendent origin, moving from above to below in a Neoplatonist-style descent. For Gregory, of course, they are the result of the human reasoning process. The first passage shows another aspect of Eunomius’ thought which is more problematic, since it implies that human agencies give names, which nevertheless derive their validity from elsewhere. That this should be a “law of nature” (φύσεως θεμιτός) is interesting, since it reminds one of the view that names are κατὰ φύσιν. Eunomius’ view is a curious one, and one would like to know more of what he means by this first passage. Gregory’s response is as follows: this “law of na-
ture" is not clearly demonstrable; clearly it is not equally in force everywhere, since there is variety in language; if it were really a law of nature, the common human nature would produce a common tongue. These apologetic arguments do not allow us to see further into Eunomius' meaning, but what is interesting is the apparent juxtaposition of two ideas:

(i) that human beings give names;
(ii) that these names do not derive their validity from this, but from some other agency.

Is the "other agency" nature itself, so that the names would be κατὰ φύσιν? Probably not, given the second quotation, which says that they come "from above". They are part of a providential ordering. On this view, then, it seems that human beings use names which are endowed from above, and that they somehow get to know them. How? Speculating again on Eunomius' position, one might say that he believes certain names to be given in Scripture: of the profusion of names available there, he selects only those which are logically demonstrable. This is probably Eunomius' equivalent of Proclus' revelation of preexisting names through the daimones.

Gregory's position that language springs from God-given mental capacity places more value on the inventive and rational abilities of human intelligence. Rist (Basil's "Neoplatonism" 185) makes the observation that the view of Basil and Gregory is more "scientific" and "more authentically Greek", in that they consider the human rational faculty to be effective, and to be capable of constructing more than just fictitious abstractions. This is probably true in a general sense, though there is plenty to suggest that Eunomius was equally "Greek" in that he was in touch with a developing philosophy of names in Neoplatonist circles, itself perhaps somewhat out of character with the Platonist/Aristotelian stream of Greek philosophy.

Thus Gregory offers his second analysis of Eunomius' philosophy of language, and Gregory's view amounts to this: language is not "from above", but the human intelligence which produces the language, is. Gregory concludes his analysis with a more detailed attack on the "technology of privation" (τῆς στερήσεως... τεχνολογία (Contra Eun. II, 563 J.)). Eunomius' view of privation has already been spelt out in that chapter, but it is necessary to show how Gregory's treatment of it positively fits into his own philosophy of language. Though it has been argued that Gregory did not really see the point of the issue, it is nevertheless true that he offers some views of his own in the course of discussion. Eunomius had said that the term "ingenerate" was applicable to the deity, and that though negative in form, it was not a privative term. The reason for ruling out privation appeared to be that priva-
tion carries a covert affirmations of another kind (see p.138), and this is what Eunomius wished to rule out.

Gregory finds it astounding that anyone should imagine that this view should even be entertained (Contra Eun. II, 566 J.), and reveals that he was unaware of the discussion of this issue. He will admit the use of negative words, but declines to consider it important to determine whether these are actually “privative” (στερητικά), or “abstractive” (ἀφαιρετικά). This is one of the few passages in late Platonism to link ἀφαίρεσις with negative theology (Contra Eun. II, 580 J.).

Gregory takes the view that language is about the material world: it falls into four categories. Language will fall into the categories of distance, space, limit or time (Contra Eun. II, 578 J.), or combinations of these. He continues:

Considering that the transcendent nature would seem to have no relationship whatever with the things below, we use thoughts and terms about the divine nature which express separation from such things. (Contra Eun. II, 579 J.)

For separation Gregory uses the non-technical word ἀποχωριστικός for “separation”, and goes on to say that he means words like “imperishable” or “changeless”. It is such words as this that he refuses to categorize as either “privative” or “abstractive”.

Thus Gregory admits the use of negative descriptions. But he believes that these convey only the idea of what God is not: they bring no positive information about what he is (Contra Eun. II, 582 J.). In fact God is above every name, and the application of negative epithets does not infringe this principle.

That he transcends every intellectual manoeuvre, and is far beyond being discovered by any name, constitutes a proof to men of his ineffable greatness. (Contra Eun. II, 587 J.)

This endorsement of certain negative words constitutes an elementary form of negative theology. It is not however a method, but it is simply a statement of the limits of language. For Proclus the negative epithets played a part in theological discourse, as bearers of positive information about the essence of transcendent realities. We find in Gregory a static recognition of the value of negative words, but no advocacy of a part for them to play in the theological procedure. There is no recognition of the unveiling power of the negative, such as we see in the Neoplatonist Commentators, and in Proclus. Gregory’s negative theology remains at a relatively simple level.

The identification by Eunomius of the word “ingeneracy” with the actual being of God is refuted by Gregory. The reification of the semantic, a tendency which we have observed to be Gnostic as well as Neoplatonist, is explicitly rejected by Gregory.
The value of reason

... for it is clear to all that no name has real existence (ὑπόστασιν) by itself, but that every name is a sign (σημεῖον) and a means of knowing some being or thought, and that a name neither exists in itself nor is thought of in itself. (Contra Eun. II, 589 J.)

In contrasting the terms hypostasis and semeion, Gregory makes a very clear statement. A name is not an existent, but a sign of something. This statement could almost have been made in response to the Gospel of Truth, with its identification of the Son as a name.

The Godhead alone has authentic existence, and it is shared equally between the three members. Eunomius had declared:

He whose existence (τὸ ἐξῆς) arises from generation, did not exist before generation. (Contra Eun. III, VIII, 30 J.).

The intention is clearly to make Jesus' status as only-begotten imply not-being, or a diminished form of being by comparision with the Father. Eunomius argues that the type of existence which relies on generation as its source is not the highest form of existence. Gregory declares himself unable to grasp what Eunomius means, and the alternatives he offers make it clear that it is not a mere ploy. Eunomius offers a demonstration, in the Platonist manner, that existence which is part of the generated world is inferior (the confusion between γίγνομαι and γεννᾶω is of little consequence here). However Gregory goes on to assert Scriptural arguments against the view that Christ either exists in a lesser way, or exists not at all. It is clear that Eunomius means that Christ does not exist as a pure unity: that he is multiple and it is likely that he is assimilating God to the One pure, and Christ to the lesser unity of parts, as envisaged in Plato's Parmenides. Gregory's discussion turns (Contra Eun. III, VIII, 35 J.) on this question of simplicity and multiplicity, without however referring to Plato.

Gregory returns to this in his second book, in order to assert once more "that there is no difference in essence to be found between the Father and the Son" (Contra Eun. II, 610 J.). This is then the foundation for the theology of the unknowability of the Trinity: each member participates equally in being, or "is-ness", and so each is equally unknowable. It was observed earlier (p.180) that the copula "is" was thought by Gregory to be unknowable, that to attribute being was unlike any other description. To say "God is good" is an attempt to circumscribe the uncircumscribable: but to say "God is", is not a definition or a description in the same way. It is a statement of unknowable essence. The verb to be is taken as making an ontological statement, and not as a mere copula in such sentences, but the kind of statement it makes is not like an ordinary statement which attempts to draw lines around the subject.

Gregory is in an interesting position. He simultaneously asserts that God is nameless, and that human language is the efficacious product of the human
intelligence. The semantic capacities of language are given an important status, through the endorsement of such techniques as analogy, but at the same time it is also true that God is indescribable.

Eunomius' position has a similar irony about it. He attacks the Cappadocians for the "culpable caution" of their refusal to apply names to God, but at the same time attacks human language as fiction manufactured from *epinoia*. The irony is increased in that his confidently offered name for God is in fact a negative, the "ingenerate".

For Gregory the use of negatives is quite acceptable, but for him this is tantamount to saying nothing. To accumulate negative descriptions of God is to do no more than assert that God is nameless, and it is this general assertion which Gregory wants to make. How the negatives work, or even which negatives are used, is not a matter of great import to him. The only important thing is the statement of namelessness.

There is no science of negation in Gregory. Whether these examples are cases of *steresis* or *aphairesis* is a question which does not detain him. One suspects that Eunomius believed, like Proclus, that the negative unveiled positive aspects of being, such as causes: or like Dexippus, a possible source, that negation revealed "the truest essence" of things. In other words negation was an epistemological technique for Eunomius, but a mere sign of namelessness for Gregory.