

5. The Development of Negative Theology in the Latter Half of the 4th Century

The reaction to Eunomius' claims on comprehensibility of the substance of God goes much deeper than the responses of Basil and Gregory. Moreover, in the latter half of the 4th century, we can observe not only the reaction to Eunomius,⁶⁸³ but also a deeper penetration of the field of negative theology that would influence Christian theology for good, even when the risk of the Neo-Arian heresy disappeared. The main authors, apart from Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa, who are the most obvious participants in the polemic with Eunomius, are Gregory of Nazianzus and John Chrysostom. Their writings were to a large extent provoked by the Eunomians' teaching and are analysed here in this context. But before we turn to those two important figures, we must first discuss certain aspects of the negative theology of Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa which have not been mentioned in the preceding chapters but seem important in order to fully expose the extent of negative theology in their writings.

5.1 Basil of Caesarea's incomprehensibility of οὐσία

The first remark that should be made at the beginning, which is absolutely clear in the context of the anti-Eunomian polemic, is the fact that for all the participants in the discussion, God is without doubt the οὐσία, and they never seriously considered that God could exceed the categories of existence.⁶⁸⁴ We should always keep it in mind as the multiplicity of Neoplatonic similarities,⁶⁸⁵ especially pointed out in various studies may obscure this obvious truth. It is perfectly obvious for Basil that the substance of God is incomprehensible for creatures. We can find many places where Basil

683 Cf. V. Losski, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, Cambridge 1973, p. 21.

684 It is still not very clear how does Basil understand οὐσία in *Contra Eunomium*, and in my opinion, further studies should be conducted. Cf. David G. Robertson, *Stoic and Aristotelian Notions of Substance in Basil of Caesarea*, VCh, vol. 52, no. 4 (Nov. 1998), pp. 393–417.

685 Cf. B. Sesbüé, *Introduction*, in: *Contre Eunome*, SC 299, p. 9.

admits the same idea in quite similar words both in *Contra Eunomium* and *Homilies in Hexaemeron*, so he is consistent at the very beginning as well as the end of his writing activity. The two following passages are a very good example of this claim:

“I think that comprehension of God’s substance transcends not only human beings, but also every rational nature. Now by ‘rational nature’ here, I mean one which belongs to creation.”⁶⁸⁶

“It is to be expected that the very substance of God is incomprehensible to everyone except the Only-Begotten and the Holy Spirit.”⁶⁸⁷

But, as a matter of fact, in his argumentation, Basil goes even further and claims that we have no knowledge not only about the substance of God but about the substance of the created world as well.⁶⁸⁸ Although we recognize creatures and we are encouraged by Basil to contemplate them and even admire them and their Creator, the accidents cannot provide us any knowledge about the essence:

“In the same way we shall counsel ourselves with regard to the essence of earth [the context is an exegesis of Gen 1,1]. We will not meddle about its essence proper (ἥτις ποτέ ἐστί), nor waste our thoughts searching for the substrate itself (αὐτὸ τὸ ὑποκείμενον), nor try to find some nature devoid of qualities, existing in such a way on its own account. For we are well aware that whatever is seen around it (περὶ αὐτήν) has been rendered fully by the account of being as completive of the essence (συμπληρωτικά τῆς οὐσίας). You arrive at nothing [therefore] if you try to take away by reason each of the qualities it possesses. If you take away black,

686 *Con. Eun.* I, 14, 1–3. Οἶμαι δὲ οὐκ ἀνθρώπους μόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ πᾶσαν λογικὴν φύσιν ὑπερβαίνειν αὐτῆς τὴν κατάληψιν. Λογικὴν δὲ νῦν τὴν ἐν τῇ κτίσει λέγω (SC 299, p. 220; tr. DelCogliano/Radde-Gallwitz, p. 112).

687 *Con. Eun.* I, 14, 14–17. Πᾶν γάρ που τὸ ἐναντίον, εἰκὸς αὐτὴν μὲν τὴν οὐσίαν ἀπερίοπτον εἶναι παντὶ, πλην εἰ τῷ Μονογενεῖ καὶ τῷ ἁγίῳ Πνεύματι· ἐκ δὲ τῶν ἐνεργειῶν τοῦ Θεοῦ ἀναγομένους ἡμᾶς (SC 299, p. 220; tr. DelCogliano/Radde-Gallwitz, p. 113).

688 *Con. Eun.* III, 6, 5–10. Νῦν δὲ μυρία οὐ τῶν ἐν τῷ μέλλοντι αἰῶνι ἀποκειμένων ἡμῖν μόνον, οὔτε τῶν νῦν ὄντων ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς ἀποκεκρυπται, ἀλλ’ οὔτε τῶν ὑπαρχόντων ἡμῖν ἐν τῷ σώματι τρανῆ καὶ ἀναντιρρήτως ἐστὶν ἡ κατάληψις (SC 305, p. 166). “But the truth of the matter is that there are countless things of which we do not have clear and incontrovertible knowledge – not only those things reserved for us in the age to come and those now hidden in the heavens, but also those things that belong to our bodily existence” (tr. DelCogliano/Radde-Gallwitz, pp. 192–193).

cold, depth, density, the qualities associated with taste a substance possesses, or any other that may be seen around it, the substrate will be nothing.”⁶⁸⁹

The impossibility of knowing any substance at all, not only God’s substance, is Aristotle’s thesis formulated in book VII of *Metaphysics*.⁶⁹⁰ Aristotle presents the process of abstractions which in the end gives us no knowledge about the *ousia* and states that “it is beyond us to say what else [it] is.”⁶⁹¹

The attention that Basil pays to utter incomprehensibility of the essence is of course a reaction to Eunomius’ concept of rationality which was expressed as cognoscibility of God’s essence.⁶⁹² In order to explain that the lack of knowledge about the very substance is not equivalent to complete ignorance, in his later writings, Basil says that although we know ourselves, even our own substance is out of our reach. We also do not have any knowledge of our own essence, but we still know ourselves:

689 *In Hex.* I, 8 (SC 26, p. 120; tr. Schaff, p. 230).

690 *Cf. Met.* VII, 3, 1029 a, 9–26. “The statement itself is obscure, and further, on this view, *matter* becomes substance. For if this is not substance, it is beyond us to say what else is. When all else is taken away evidently nothing but matter remains. For of the other elements some are affections, products, and capacities of bodies, while length, breadth, and depth are quantities and not substances. For a quantity is not a substance; but the substance is rather that to which these belong primarily. But when length and breadth and depth are taken away we see nothing left except that which is bounded by these, whatever it be; so that to those who consider the question thus matter alone must seem to be substance. By matter I mean that which in itself is neither a particular thing nor of a certain quantity nor assigned to any other of the categories by which being is determined. For there is something of which each of these is predicated, so that its being is different from that of each of the predicates; for the predicates other than substance are predicated of substance, while substance is predicated of matter. Therefore the ultimate substratum is of itself neither a particular thing nor of a particular quantity nor otherwise positively characterized; nor yet negatively, for negations also will belong to it only by accident” (tr. Barnes).

691 *Met.* 1029 a, 10–11. εἰ γὰρ μὴ αὐτὴ οὐσία, τίς ἐστὶν ἄλλη διαφεύγει· (tr. Barnes).

692 *Cf. Con. Eun.* II, 22, 39–43. ἀλλ’ ἀπὸ μὲν τῶν ταπεινῶν καὶ σαρκικῶν νοημάτων ἐν τοῖς περὶ Θεοῦ δόγμασι καθαρεῦειν, γέννησιν δὲ τῆ ἀγιοσύνη καὶ τῆ ἀποθεία τοῦ Θεοῦ πρέπουσαν ἐνοεῖν· (SC 305, pp. 90–92). “He knows that when it is a question of doctrines about God he should purify words of lowly and fleshly concepts and think of the begetting that is suitable for the holiness and impassibility of God” (tr. DelCogliano/Radde-Gallwitz, p. 164).

“For thus and in this sense I both know and am ignorant even of myself. For I know myself, who I am, but I do not know myself, insofar as I am ignorant of my substance.”⁶⁹³

Basil introduces here a paradox that will be in fact crucial for the theological knowledge. One may know and not know at the same time: *καὶ οἶδα καὶ ἄγνοῶ*.⁶⁹⁴ In order to correct the Eunomian mistakes, Basil uses negative theology, but he avoids the error of agnosticism, sees the risks of this method, and distances himself from this method when limited only to the *alpha privativum* technique. Basil employed alpha privatives to say what God is not, i.e., ἄρητος - unspoken, ἀδής - unseen, ἀθάνατος - immortal, ἀπαθής - not suffering and so on, but he remarks that even privative forms used in the descriptions give us knowledge about what God is not⁶⁹⁵ and what kind of attributes cannot be connected with Him.

Simultaneously, Basil uses natural theology based on contemplation of nature⁶⁹⁶ and positive theology based on the Bible.

“Again, we say that God is ‘good’, ‘Just’, ‘Creator’, ‘Judge’, and all such things. So, then, as in the case of the terms we just spoke about which signified a denial and rejection of what is foreign to God, so here they indicate the affirmation and

693 *Ep.* 235, 2. Ἐπει καὶ ἑμαυτὸν οὕτω τούτῳ τῷ λόγῳ καὶ οἶδα καὶ ἄγνοῶ. Οἶδα μὲν γὰρ ἑμαυτὸν ὅστις εἰμί, οὐκ οἶδα δὲ καθὼς τὴν οὐσίαν μου ἄγνοῶ (Courtonne, vol. 3, pp. 45–46; tr. LCL 243, p. 381).

694 *Cf. Ep.* 235, 2 (Courtonne, vol. 3, pp. 45–46).

695 *Cf. Con. Eun.* I, 9, 34–41. Ὡς τοίνυν τὸ ἄφθαρτον τὸ μὴ προσεῖναι τῷ Θεῷ φθορὰν σημαίνει· καὶ τὸ ἀόρατον τὸ ὑπερβαίνειν αὐτὸν πᾶσαν τὴν διὰ τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν κατάληψιν· καὶ τὸ ἀσώματον τὸ μὴ ὑπάρχειν αὐτοῦ τριχῆ διαστατὴν τὴν οὐσίαν· καὶ τὸ ἀθάνατον τὸ μηδέποτε διάλυσιν αὐτῷ προσγενήσεσθαι· οὕτω φασὲν καὶ τὸ, ἀγέννητον, δηλοῦν τὸ γέννησιν αὐτῷ μὴ προσεῖναι. Εἰ μὲν οὖν μηδὲν τούτων στερητικὸν τῶν ὀνομάτων, οὐδὲ ἐκεῖνο (SC 299, pp. 90–92). “Just as ‘incorruptible’ signifies that no corruption is present to God, and ‘invisible’ that he is beyond every comprehension through the eyes, and ‘incorporeal’ that his substance is not three-dimensional, and ‘immortal’ that dissolution will never happen to him, so too do we also say that ‘unbegotten’ indicates that no begetting is present to him. So, then, if none of the former terms is privative, then neither is the latter” (tr. DelCogliano/Radde-Gallwitz, pp. 103–104).

696 *Cf. In Hex.* I, 8 (SC 26, p. 118).

existence of what has affinity with God and is appropriately considered in connection with him.”⁶⁹⁷

But what exactly can we know about God? This problem is developed by Basil later on, and most probably, it was related to the discussion and attacks of the Eunomians who accused Basil of ignorance.⁶⁹⁸ We can know God’s attributes⁶⁹⁹ that are common to the divine essence. Because we can recognize God from His activities in the created world, we know Him as the Creator of the world and the source of all beings. It is God’s will to let us gain the knowledge about Him.⁷⁰⁰ In this process, Christians refer to a

697 *Con. Eun.* I, 10, 28–33, Πάλιν, ἀγαθὸν λέγομεν τὸν Θεὸν, καὶ δίκαιον, καὶ δημιουργὸν, καὶ κριτὴν, καὶ ἄλλα ὅσα τοιαῦτα. Ὡς οὖν ἐπ’ ἐκείνων ἀθέτησιν τινα καὶ ἀπαγόρευσιν τῶν ἄλλοτριῶν τοῦ Θεοῦ ἐσήμαινον αἱ φωναί, οὕτως ἐνταῦθα θέσιν καὶ ὑπαρξίν τῶν οικειῶν τῷ Θεῷ καὶ πρεπόντως περὶ αὐτὸν θεωρουμένον ἀποσημαίνουσιν (SC 299, p. 206; tr. DelCogliano/Radde-Gallwitz, pp. 105–106).

698 *Cf. Ep.* 234, 2: Therefore, we know that the saying is of mockers: “If you are ignorant of the substance of God, you worship what you do not know” (Courtonne, vol. 3, p. 43; tr. LCL 243, p. 375).

699 *Cf. Ep.* 234, 1. Καὶ γὰρ τὴν μεγαλειότητα τοῦ Θεοῦ εἰδέναι λέγομεν καὶ τὴν δύναμιν καὶ τὴν σοφίαν καὶ τὴν ἀγαθότητα καὶ τὴν πρόνοιαν ἢ ἐπιμελεῖται ἡμῶν καὶ τὸ δίκαιον αὐτοῦ τῆς κρίσεως, οὐκ αὐτὴν τὴν οὐσίαν. Ὡστε ἐπιφραστικὴ ἢ ἐρώτησις. Οὐ γὰρ ὁ τὴν οὐσίαν μὴ φάσκων εἰδέναι ὠμολόγησε τὸν Θεὸν μὴ ἐπίστασθαι, ἐκ πολλῶν ὧν ἀπρηθμισάμεθα συναγομένης ἡμῖν τῆς περὶ Θεοῦ ἐννοίας (Courtonne, vol. 3, p. 42). “For instance, we say that we know the greatness of God, and His power, and His wisdom, and His goodness, and His providence, whereby He cares for us, and the justice of His judgment, not His very substance. Therefore the question is captious. For he who says that he does not know the substance has not confessed that he does not know God, since the concept of God is gathered by us from the many attributes which we enumerated” (tr. LCL 243, pp. 371–273).

700 *Cf. Con. Eun.* I, 14, 14–20. Πᾶν γὰρ πού τὸ ἐναντίον, εἰκὸς αὐτὴν μὲν τὴν οὐσίαν ἀπερίοπτον εἶναι παντὶ, πλην εἰ τῷ Μονογενεῖ καὶ τῷ ἁγίῳ Πνεύματι· ἐκ δὲ τῶν ἐνεργειῶν τοῦ Θεοῦ ἀναγομένους ἡμᾶς, καὶ διὰ τῶν ποιημάτων τὸν ποιητὴν ἐννοοῦντας, τῆς ἀγαθότητος αὐτοῦ καὶ τῆς σοφίας λαμβάνειν τὴν σύνεσιν. Τοῦτο γὰρ ἐστὶ τὸ γνωστὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ, ὃ πᾶσιν ἀνθρώποις ὁ Θεὸς ἐφανερώσεν (SC 299, pp. 220–222). “It is to be expected that the very substance of God is incomprehensible to everyone except the Only-Begotten and the Holy Spirit. But we are led up from the activities of God and gain knowledge of the Maker through what he has made, and so come in this way to an understanding of his goodness and wisdom. For what can be known about God is that which

very unique starting point on the way of cognition of the image of God in man.⁷⁰¹ We do not search God as an abstract idea; we search God who reveals Himself in created beings. The divine names reveal His energies which descend towards the created world, yet they do not lead man closer to His inaccessible essence.

Negative theology in Basil's thought is inseparably connected with the positive and eminent way. His theology is not so mystical as Gregory's, but it is radically opposite to the rationalism of Eunomius.⁷⁰² Basil reminds his readers that the aim of Christian life is not knowledge but salvation. The very first step along this way is epistemological humility.

“But I do know that He exists, but what His substance is I consider beyond understanding. How then am I saved? Through faith. And it is faith enough to know that God is, not what He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him. Knowledge of His divine substance, then, is the perception of His incomprehensibility; and that is to be worshipped which is comprehended, not as to what its substance is, but as to that its substance exists.”⁷⁰³

If we give up the illusory desire to possess the knowledge of God's essence and concentrate on natural theology, which will lead us to the knowledge of God's existence, the next obvious step provoked by our admiration of the divine activities in the world will be faith and worship.⁷⁰⁴ Knowledge,

God has manifested [Rom 1.19] to all human beings” (tr. DelCogliano/Radde-Gallwitz, p. 113).

701 Cf. Aghiorgoussis, *Image as Sign (Sêmeion) of God*, GOTHr, 21 (1976), p. 21.

702 Cf. B. Sesbouë, *Introduction* in Basil de Césarée, *Contre Eunome*, SC 299, p. 92.

703 *Ep.* 234, 2: Ἐγὼ δὴ οἶδα ὅτι μὲν ἔστιν οἶδα, τί δὲ ἡ οὐσία ὑπὲρ διάνοιαν τίθεμαι. Πῶς οὖν σώζομαι; Διὰ τῆς πίστεως. Πίστις δὲ αὐτάρκης εἶδέναι ὅτι ἐστὶν ὁ Θεός, οὐχὶ τί ἐστὶ, καὶ τοῖς ἐκζητοῦσιν αὐτόν μισθαποδοτῆς γίνεται. Εἰδῆσις ἄρα τῆς θείας οὐσίας ἢ αἰσθησις αὐτοῦ τῆς ἀκαταληψίας, καὶ σεπτὸν οὐ τὸ καταληφθὲν τίς ἢ οὐσία, ἀλλ' ὅτι ἐστὶν ἡ οὐσία (Courtonne, vol. 3, p. 43; tr. LCL 243, p. 375).

704 Cf. *Ep.* 235, 1. “Ἐν δὲ τῇ περὶ Θεοῦ πίστει ἡγεῖται μὲν ἡ ἔννοια ἢ περὶ τοῦ ὅτι ἐστὶ Θεός, ταύτην δὲ ἐκ τῶν δημιουργημάτων συναγομεν. Σοφὸν γὰρ καὶ δυνατὸν καὶ ἀγαθὸν καὶ πάντα αὐτοῦ τὰ ἀόρατα ἀπὸ τῆς τοῦ κόσμου κτίσεως νοοῦντες ἐπιγινώσκωμεν. Οὕτω δὴ καὶ Δεσπότην ἑαυτῶν αὐτὸν καταδεχόμεθα. Ἐπειδὴ γὰρ παντὸς μὲν τοῦ κόσμου δημιουργὸς ὁ Θεός, μέρος δὲ κόσμου ἡμεῖς, καὶ ἡμῶν ἄρα δημιουργὸς ὁ Θεός. Ταύτην τῇ γνώσει ἢ πίστις ἀκολουθεῖ καὶ τοιαύτη πίστις ἢ προσκύνησις” (Courtonne, vol. 3, p. 44). “But in faith in God, the notion of

faith, and worship constitute for Basil three stages of the relationship with God. In this perspective, the discovery of existence of God the Maker is the very first step⁷⁰⁵ to recognize His goodness and wisdom, to discover God who reveals His actions in the Holy Bible and the created world. The culmination and final aim of this path is to worship God.

But the relationship between faith and knowledge seems to be more complex in Basil's case. In Letter 234, those terms seem to be mixed:

“So worship follows faith, and faith is confirmed by power. But if you say that the believer also knows, he knows from what he believes; and vice versa he believes from what he knows. We know God from His power. We, therefore, believe in Him who is known, and we worship Him who is believed in.”⁷⁰⁶

In this and other texts, Basil seems to treat knowledge and faith interchangeably as two terms referring to cognition. Georgios Martzelos recalls one more text and another type of the relationship between εἰδησις and πίστις. In *Homilia in illud Attende tibi ipsi*, faith precedes the knowledge of God. As the knowledge of God cannot be achieved by means of sensual organs,

the existence of God precedes, and this notion we gather from His works. For it is by perceiving His wisdom and power and goodness and all His invisible qualities as shown in the creation of the universe, that we come to a recognition of Him. Thus we also accept Him as our Lord. For since God is maker of the whole universe, and we are a part of the universe, God is therefore our maker also. And faith follows this knowledge, and worship follows such faith” (tr. LCL 243, p. 379).

705 Cf. *Con. Eun.* I, 14, 42–46. Πιστεῦσαι γὰρ δεῖ πρῶτον, ὅτι ἔστι Θεός, καὶ τοῖς ἐκζητοῦσιν αὐτὸν μισθαποδότης γίνεται. Οὐ γὰρ ἢ τοῦ τί ἐστὶν ἐξερεύνησις, ἀλλ’ ἢ τοῦ ὅτι ἔστιν ὁμολογία τὴν σωτηρίαν ἡμῖν παρασκευάζει (SC 299, pp. 222–224). “One must first believe that God exists and that he rewards those who seek him [Heb 11.6]. For it is not the investigation of what he is, but rather the confession that he is, which prepares salvation for us.” (tr. DelCogliano/Radde-Gallwitz, p. 113).

706 *Ep.* 234, 3. Οὕτως ἢ μὲν προσκύνησις τῇ πίστει ἀκολουθεῖ, ἢ δὲ πίστις ἀπὸ δυνάμεως βεβαιοῦται. Εἰ δὲ λέγεις τὸν πιστεύοντα καὶ γινώσκειν, ἀφ’ ὧν πιστεύει ἀπὸ τούτων καὶ γινώσκει· ἢ καὶ ἀνάπαλιν ἀφ’ ὧν γινώσκει ἀπὸ τούτων καὶ πιστεύει. Γινώσκομεν δὲ ἐκ τῆς δυνάμεως τὸν Θεόν. Ὡστε πιστεύομεν μὲν τῷ γνωσθέντι, προσκυνοῦμεν δὲ τῷ πιστευθέντι (Courtonne, vol. 3, pp. 43–44; tr. LCL 234, p. 377).

but by means of intellect, which is equipped through faith.⁷⁰⁷ We can see that despite the complex relationship⁷⁰⁸ of those two realities (εἰδησις and πίστις), both should be treated as mutually complementary tools on the way to knowing God. Basil's theology leads us to other than rational cognition of God. Only in worship do faith and knowledge find their aim and their deeper meaning and significance.⁷⁰⁹ At the very end of *Contra Eunomium* when speaking about the nature of the Holy Spirit, Basil gives us the perspective of cognition that is reserved for Christians whom he encourages:

“to be convinced that experience and exact comprehension of him is reserved for us in the subsequent age, when, passing beyond the vision of the truth that comes *dimly in a mirror*, we will be deemed worthy of contemplating *face to face* [1 Cor 13:12].”⁷¹⁰

707 Cf. G. Martzelos, *The Significance of the Distinction between the Essence and Energies of God according to St. Basil the Great*, p. 155; Basil, *Homilia in illud Attende tibi ipsi*. Ἀσώματον ἐννόει τὸν θεὸν ἐκ τῆς ἐνυπαρχούσης σοι ψυχῆς ἀσώματου, μὴ περιγραφόμενον τόπω· ἐπειδὴ οὐδὲ ὁ σὸς νοῦς προηγουμένην ἔχει τὴν ἐν τόπῳ διατριβήν, ἀλλὰ διὰ τῆς πρὸς τὸ σῶμα συναφείας ἐν τόπῳ γίνεται. Ἄορατον τὸν θεὸν εἶναι πίστευε, τὴν σεαυτοῦ ψυχὴν ἐνοήσας, ἐπεὶ καὶ αὐτὴ σωματικοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς ἀληπτός ἐστιν. Οὕτε γὰρ κέχρωσται, οὕτε ἐσημάτισται, οὕτε τινὶ χαρακτηριστῶ περιεῖληπται, ἀλλ’ ἐκ τῶν ἐνεργειῶν γνωρίζεται μόνον. Ὡστε μῆτε ἐπὶ θεοῦ ζητήσης τὴν δι’ ὀφθαλμῶν κατανόησιν, ἀλλὰ τῇ διανοίᾳ ἐπιτρέψας τὴν πίστιν, νοητὴν ἔχε περὶ αὐτοῦ τὴν κατάληψιν (PG 31, 216 A).

708 Cf. also *Con. Eun.* I, 7, 19–23. καὶ ὡς τῇ λαμπρότητι τῆς γνώσεως τοῦς κεκαθαρμένους τὸ ὄμμα τῆς ψυχῆς καταναγάζων· ἄμπελον δὲ, ὡς τοῦς ἐν αὐτῷ κατὰ τὴν πίστιν ἐρρίζωμένους ἐπ’ ἔργων ἀγαθῶν καρποφορίας ἐκτρέφων· (SC 299, pp. 222–224). “He also calls himself this because he illuminates those who have purified the eye of their soul with the splendor of his knowledge. He calls himself ‘vine’ because he nurtures those who have been planted in him by faith so that they may bear the fruits of good works” (tr. DelCogliano/Radde-Gallwitz, p. 99).

709 Cf. G. Martzelos, *op. cit.*, p. 156; Cf. Basil *Ep.* 234 and 235 (Courtonne, vol. 3, pp. 41–47).

710 *Con. Eun.* 3,7, 38–40. Εὐσεβοῦς γὰρ ἐστὶ διανοίας τὰ ἀποσιωπηθέντα ἐν ταῖς ἁγίαις Γραφαῖς εὐλαβεῖσθαι ἐπιφημίζειν τῷ ἁγίῳ Πνεύματι, πεπεισθαι δὲ τὴν ἐμπειρίαν αὐτοῦ καὶ ἀκριβῆ κατάληψιν εἰς τὸν ὑστερον ἡμῖν ἀποκεισθαι αἰῶνα, ὅταν, διαβάντες τὸ δι’ ἐσόπτρου καὶ αἰνίγματος ὄραντὴν ἀλήθειαν, τῆς πρὸς πρόσωπον θεωρίας ἀξιοθῶμεν (SC 305, p. 174; tr. DelCogliano/Radde-Gallwitz, p. 196).

5.2 Negative theology and mystical experience in Gregory of Nyssa

In *Contra Eunomium*, Gregory of Nyssa refers to Basil as his teacher on the incomprehensibility of God.⁷¹¹ So, if it is not only a rhetorical figure, he thinks of himself as the continuator of his brother's theology also in the field of negative theology, and, therefore, Basil's thought seems to be one of the factors which pushed Gregory to develop further negative speaking of God. But before we look more closely at the negative theology of Gregory of Nyssa, especially in its mystical dimension, it is worth making some remarks on negative language in general.

It must be pointed out that although Gregory constantly underlines the ineffability of God's essence, he never denies the possibility of speaking about God.⁷¹² We have observed in the preceding chapter that he makes an effort to secure the position that names which we multiply indeed say something about God, and our naming Him is not pointless. A good example of this is his discussion of the descriptive character of the lack of properties. Although Gregory of Nyssa strongly criticizes Eunomius as regards the positive meaning of the name "Unbegotten," he very often uses negation (στέρησις) to define some properties or even entities. Among those, we find darkness, ignorance, and evil. C. Stead argues that Gregory is not systematic, and, therefore, many problems arise with respect to his use of negation. Most of all, he does not express how negation is related to other categorical terms.⁷¹³ It can be seen when Gregory considers the problem of what knowledge and ignorance are (ἡ γνῶσις καὶ ἡ ἄγνοια). This is important for him since he constantly repeats that living in God is the life of the soul, and this life is to know God. On the contrary, the lack of knowing God is the alienation from Him and evil. A very significant example of this is a fragment of *On Infants' Early Deaths*.⁷¹⁴ Knowledge and ignorance can

711 Cf. CE II, 138, 1–11 (GNO I, 265, 24–266, 2).

712 Cf. G. Maspero, *Trinity and Man*, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

713 Cf. C. Stead, *Ontologie und Terimniologie bei Gregor von Nyssa*, in: *Gregor von Nyssa und die Philosophie*, ed. H. Dörrie, M. Altenburger, U. Schramm, Leiden 1976, p. 114.

714 *Inf.* (GNO III/2, 80, 25–81, 22).

be both counted as relations (τὸ πρὸς τί), and, therefore, they cannot be understood as substances, but they also cannot be seen as equal:

“If, then, knowledge is not a substance, but a perfected operation of the soul, it must be conceded that ignorance must be much farther removed still from anything in the way of substance; but that which is not in that way does not exist at all; and so it would be useless to trouble ourselves about where it comes from.”⁷¹⁵

Although ignorance must somehow exist in the subject because it is a relation, Gregory is not sure how to describe its ontological status. It must exist, but it has no existence (ὑπαρξις) of its own, since it is the “negation of the operation of knowing.” (γνώσιν ἐνεργείας ἀναίρεσις).⁷¹⁶ Therefore, in the case of the soul, a negative attribute refers to some kind of reality, whereas in the case of God, it merely states the absence or inconvenience of something which is denied of Him in a negative statement.⁷¹⁷

This fragment is significant because, although Gregory does not use the term στερησις, it shows the same problems which we have seen in Aetius and Eunomius who wanted to convince their opponents that “unbegotten” is not a negative predicate. But we can certainly see here an attempt to define the ontological status of a feature which can be characterized in a negative way, and this discussion very much resembles Aristotle’s statements on blindness as the negation of the operation of seeing.⁷¹⁸ The case of ignorance is then a good example of how Gregory treats philosophical sources. Although he often expresses his disapproval of philosophy, especially in the

715 *Inf.* (GNO III/2, 80, 16–20). εἰ οὖν ἡ γνώσις οὐσία οὐκ ἔστιν, ἀλλὰ περὶ τι τῆς διανοίας ἐνεργεία, πολὺ μᾶλλον ἢ ἀγνοία πόρρω τοῦ κατ’ οὐσίαν εἶναι ὠμολόγηται. τὸ δὲ μὴ κατ’ οὐσίαν ὄν οὐδὲ ἔστιν ὄλωσ. μάταιον τοίνυν ἂν εἴη περὶ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος τὸ ὄθεν ἐστὶ περιεργάζεσθαι (tr. NPNF II, vol. 5, p. 36).

716 *Inf.* (GNO III/2, 80, 23–24).

717 *Cf.* CE II, 143, 3–5. οὐ μὴν τι περὶ οὗ λέγεται διὰ τῶν ὀνομάτων ὁ λόγος παρίστησιν. τί μὲν γὰρ οὐκ ἔστι, δι’ ὧν ἠκούσαμεν ἐδιδάχθημεν, τί δὲ ἔστιν, ἡ τῶν εἰρημένων οὐκ ἐνεδείξατο δύναμις (GNO I, 267, 6–9).

718 *Top.* I, 106b, 13–20. Aristotle discusses in this passage the contradictory opposites saying that the lack of seeing could have two meanings. If somebody does not possess the power of seeing, it is the privation of the power, but in case of having this power, it is simply the privation of the activity (ἐνεργεία) of seeing.

context of the discussion with Eunomius, he does not refrain from using philosophy when it serves his theological purposes.⁷¹⁹

The passage presented above contains yet another characteristic feature of Gregory's negative theology. It is almost always presented in the context of having a life in God or even more often as part of a mystical doctrine. Although the discussion with Eunomius would seem to direct the issue to purely doctrinal and theoretical considerations, incomprehensibility of God is the fundament for understanding the path to man's unity with God. As we saw above, even considering the name "God," Gregory talks about it as describing the activities which He performs in the human soul. This is significant because in the majority of his works, the passages on the ineffability of God constitute a starting point to the discussion of His activities.⁷²⁰ So the problem of the incomprehensible substance of God and the personal dimension of the work of His activities are intrinsically linked.

When characterizing the mystical doctrine of Gregory of Nyssa, A. Louth points out that the most important feature of his teaching is a radical division between the Creator and creations. This gap is so deep that it leads Gregory to the denial of the possibility of ecstasy.⁷²¹ I would argue that not only the radical doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* was the cause of such claims, but also the teaching of the role of the Divine activities devised during the discussion with Eunomius led Gregory to such conviction.

Usually the path to God is divided into three stages,⁷²² and at each of these stages, we can find elements of negative theology, because the most important aspect of each is to remove false conceptions of God. Gregory describes it his commentary on the *Song of Songs*, when he talks about the

719 Cf. C. Stead, *Ontologie und Terimniologie bei Gregor von Nyssa, op. cit.*, p. 107. He also notes that on one hand Gregory's philosophical conceptions are original and forceful, but on the other, they "are confused by his habit of citing received philosophical opinions at second hand, without criticizing the term in which they are framed" (p. 117).

720 Cf. G. Maspero, *Trinity and Man, op. cit.*, p. 31.

721 Cf. A. Louth, *The Origins...*, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

722 Gregory follows Origen in describing the spiritual growth by the corresponding books of the Holy Scripture: infancy with Proverbs, youth with Ecclesiastes, and maturity with the Song of Songs. But those three stages can be also characterized as light, cloud, and darkness, cf. A. Louth, *op. cit.* pp. 80–81.

ascent of Moses. The first transition which must take place is from darkness to light: "...the first withdrawal from false and erroneous notions about God takes the form of a transition from darkness to light."⁷²³ But in this context, what is called darkness means the false notions which we can obtain from the sensual world. From this point, the vision of the soul and its knowledge only becomes more and more accustomed to darkness:

"More attentive apprehension of hidden realities, which leads the soul to the invisible realm by way of what appears, is like a cloud that casts a shadow on everything that appears but yet induces and accustoms the soul to look upon what is hidden. But the soul that has made its way through these stages to higher things, having left behind whatever is accessible to human nature, enters within the innermost shrine of the knowledge of God and is entirely seized about by the divine darkness; and in this darkness, since everything that appears and is comprehended has been left outside, only the invisible and the incomprehensible remain for the soul's contemplation – and in them God is, just as the Word says concerning the Lawgiver: 'Moses entered into the darkness where God was' (Exod 20:21)."⁷²⁴

Getting closer to the mystery of God means leaving behind everything that is "accessible to human nature." Therefore, we can say that the knowledge which man has of God from His activities must be abandoned at this stage. In a similar passage from *The life of Moses*, Gregory explains that the ascent of Moses teaches us that the soul must leave behind not only what the senses observe, but also the notions of intellect:

723 *In Cant.* XI ἡ πρώτη ἀπὸ τῶν ψευδῶν καὶ πεπλανημένων περὶ θεοῦ ὑπολήψεων ἀναχώρησις ἢ ἀπὸ τοῦ σκότους εἰς φῶς ἐστὶ μετάστασις (text and tr. Norris, pp. 340, 1–2).

724 *In Cant.* XI, ἡ δὲ προσεχέστερα τῶν κρυπτῶν κατανόησις ἢ διὰ τῶν φαινομένων χειραγωγούσα τὴν ψυχὴν πρὸς τὴν ἀόρατον φύσιν οἷόν τις νεφέλη γίνεται τὸ φαινόμενον μὲν ἅπαν ἐπισκιάζουσα πρὸς δὲ τὸ κρύφιον ἢ βλέπειν τὴν ψυχὴν χειραγωγούσα καὶ συνεθίζουσα, ἢ δὲ διὰ τούτων ὀδεύουσα πρὸς τὰ ἄνω ψυχῆ, ὅσον ἐφικτόν ἐστὶ τῇ ἀνθρωπίνῃ φύσει καταλιπούσα, ἐντὸς τῶν ἀδύτων τῆς θεογνωσίας γίνεται τῷ θεῷ γνόφῳ πανταχόθεν διαληφθεῖσα, ἐν ᾧ τοῦ φαινομένου τε καὶ καταλαμβανομένου παντὸς ἔξω καταλειφθέντος μόνον ὑπολείπεται τῇ θεωρίᾳ τῆς ψυχῆς τὸ ἀόρατόν τε καὶ ἀκατάληπτον, ἐν ᾧ ἐστὶν ὁ θεός, καθὼς φησι περὶ τοῦ νομοθέτου ὁ λόγος ὅτι Εἰσηλθε δὲ Μωϋσῆς εἰς τὸν γνόφον οὗ ἦν ὁ θεός (Norris, pp. 340, 2–12).

“For leaving behind everything that is observed, not only what sense comprehends but also what the intelligence thinks it sees, it keeps on penetrating deeper until by the intelligence’s yearning for understanding it gains access to the invisible and the incomprehensible, and there it sees God. This is the true knowledge of what is sought; this is the seeing that consists in not seeing, because that which is sought transcends all knowledge, being separated on all sides by incomprehensibility as by a kind of darkness.”⁷²⁵

Since even an intellectual notion must be rejected then, there is no concept which can truly refer to God. Also contemplation is for Gregory only a necessary stage of knowledge, which corresponds to the way of the cloud, whereas the ultimate knowledge is the “non-seeing.”⁷²⁶ Therefore, this doctrine differs not only from Plato, but also from Origen and Evagrius.⁷²⁷ But it is worth asking whether one can find any answer in Gregory on how to understand this kind of knowledge above knowledge or seeing without seeing. We can find a very interesting attempt to explain this kind of seeing God in the *Homilies on Beatitudes*. At the beginning, Gregory notices the profound problem of the ambiguity which can be found in the Holy Scripture. The sixth beatitude promises seeing God to those of the pure heart (Mt 5:8), but simultaneously, there are passages which deny such a possibility. Gregory quotes the Gospel of John (1:18), the first letter to Timothy (6:16) and once again returns to the figure of Moses.⁷²⁸ This contradiction goes even further because when Moses says that no one can see God and stay alive (Ex 22:20): “Nevertheless life eternal is to see God, and this is ruled impossible by the pillars of the faith, John and Paul and Moses.”⁷²⁹ Gregory then once again points out the intrinsic relationship of having the

725 *De Vita Moysis* II, 163, 1–8. Καταλιπὼν γὰρ πᾶν τὸ φαινόμενον, οὐ μόνον ὅσα καταλαμβάνει ἡ αἴσθησις, ἀλλὰ καὶ ὅσα ἡ διάνοια δοκεῖ βλέπειν, αἰεὶ πρὸς τὸ ἐνδότερον ἵεται, ἕως ἂν διαδύῃ τῇ πολυπραγμοσύνῃ τῆς διανοίας πρὸς τὸ ἀθέατόν τε καὶ ἀκατάληπτον κάκει τὸν Θεὸν ἴδῃ. Ἐν τούτῳ γὰρ ἡ ἀληθὴς ἐστὶν εἶδησις τοῦ ζητουμένου καὶ ἐν τούτῳ τὸ ἰδεῖν ἐν τῷ μὴ ἰδεῖν, ὅτι ὑπέρκειται πάσης εἰδήσεως τὸ ζητούμενον, οἷόν τι γνόφῳ τῇ ἀκαταληψίᾳ πανταχόθεν διειλημμένον (SC 1, pp. 210–212; tr. Malherbe/Ferguson, p. 94).

726 Cf. N. Russell, *The doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, Oxford 2004, p. 231.

727 Cf. A. Louth, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

728 *De Beat.* VI, 1 (GNO, VII/2, 137, 13–20).

729 *De Beat.* VI, 1 (GNO, VII/2, 137, 23–24; tr. Hall, p. 66).

knowledge of God and participating in His life. Therefore, seeing God is necessary not only because man is constantly longing to see Him, but also because otherwise there is no possibility for the soul to have the unending life and to possess God since in the biblical meaning “to see” means “to possess.”⁷³⁰ Since Moses and Paul deny the possibility to see God:

“then it would appear that what is proposed by the Word in the present Beatitude is an impossibility. What good is it to us to know how God is seen, if the possibility of it is not also given to our understanding.”⁷³¹

Therefore, the Lord demands something which is beyond our nature, and to answer this dilemma, Gregory first turns to his doctrine of divine activities. While: “what the divine nature might be in and of itself transcends all conceptual comprehension, being inaccessible and unapproachable to speculative thoughts,”⁷³² there are other means to see and comprehend this nature.⁷³³ We can somehow see the artificer through the beauty of his works, but this is rather the apprehension of the skill and craftsmanship of the Maker, not his very nature. Therefore: “He who is by nature invisible becomes visible in his operations (ἐνεργείαις), being seen in certain cases by the properties he possesses.”⁷³⁴

Although the problem seems to be resolved, Gregory does not stop here because he realizes that the beatitude promises the real seeing of God, not only His activities, so there must be something more that was promised in the beatitude, because “the Lord does not say that knowing something about God is blessed, but to possess God in oneself.”⁷³⁵ But what does it mean to possess God? For Gregory, this means that if the heart of a man

730 *De Beat.* VI, 2 (GNO, VII/2, 137, 10–14).

731 *De Beat.* VI, 2. ἀδύνατον εἰσὶν τι εἶναι τὸ τῷ μακαρισμῷ νῦν ὑπὸ τοῦ λόγου προκειμένον. τί οὖν ἡμῖν τὸ κέρδος ἐκ τοῦ γινῶναι πῶς ὁ θεὸς ὁράται, εἰ τὸ δυνατὸν τῇ ἐπινοίᾳ μὴ πρόσεστιν (GNO, VII/2, 139, 3–6; tr. Hall, p. 67).

732 *De Beat.* VI, 3 Ἡ θεία φύσις αὐτὴ καθ' αὐτὴν ὅτι ποτὲ κατ' οὐσίαν ἐστὶ, πάσης ὑπέρεκειται καταληπτικῆς ἐπινοίας, ἀπρόσιτος καὶ ἀπροσπέλαστος οὐσα ταῖς στοχαστικαῖς ἐπινοίαις (GNO, VII/2, 140, 15–17; tr. Hall, p. 68).

733 *De Beat.* VI, 3 (GNO, VII/2, 141, 1–3).

734 *De Beat.* VI, 3 Ὁ γὰρ τῇ φύσει ἀόρατος, ὁρατὸς ταῖς ἐνεργείαις γίνεται, ἐν τισὶ τοῖς περὶ αὐτὸν καθορώμενος (GNO, VII/2, 141, 25–27; tr. Hall, p. 69).

735 *De Beat.* VI, 4. ὅτι οὐ τὸ γινῶναι τι περὶ θεοῦ μακάριον ὁ κύριος εἶναι φησιν· ἀλλὰ τὸ ἐν ἑαυτῷ σχεῖν τὸν θεόν (GNO, VII/2, 137, 13–15; tr. Hall, pp. 69–70).

is pure, the soul can hold the image of God and can see God in this image. Thus, the Word in his blessing seems to comfort the soul longing for God by saying:

“You men who have some longing for the vision of what is really good, when you hear that the divine majesty is exalted above the heavens, its glory inexplicable, its beauty ineffable, its nature inaccessible, do not fall into despair of being able to see what you desire. The measure of what is accessible to you is in you, for thus your Maker from the start invested your essential nature with such good. God has imprinted upon your constitution replicas of the good things in his own nature, as though stamping wax with the shape of a design.”⁷³⁶

Despite all negative statements of the impossibility of any comprehension of the substance of God, Gregory seems to find a positive aspect of our knowledge. Although man is constantly longing for God, always desiring to know God, whom he could not know,⁷³⁷ Gregory seems to admit that seeing God in the image is real, but this is only the participation in God, while His substance in itself remains incomprehensible. As A. Louth points out, this is not an alternate way of seeing God different to seeing in a cloud, but it is rather the positive side of the same experience.⁷³⁸

Therefore, we can say that what Gregory’s claims about seeing God shows best the unity of his doctrine. We can constantly see his struggle to preserve absolute incomprehensibility of God, whose nature can be known only in His activities, but at the same time, he always wants to convince his readers that such statements do not make God inaccessible to man. Therefore, in his mystical doctrine, he speaks about the real vision of invisible and incomprehensible God present in the soul of man, thanks to his image.

736 *De Beat.* VI, 4. ὦ ἄνθρωποι, ὅσοις ἐστί τις ἐπιθυμία τῆς τοῦ ὄντως ἀγαθοῦ θεωρίας, ἐπειδὴν ἀκούσητε ὑπὲρ τοὺς οὐρανοὺς ἐπῆρθαι τὴν θείαν μεγαλοπρέπειαν, καὶ τὴν δόξαν αὐτῆς ἀνερμηνεύτον εἶναι, καὶ τὸ κάλλος ἄφραστον, καὶ τὴν φύσιν ἀχώρητον· μὴ ἐκπίπτετε εἰς ἀνελπιστίαν τοῦ μὴ δύνασθαι καταδεῖν τὸ ποθοῦμενον. τὸ γὰρ σοι χωρητὸν, τῆς τοῦ θεοῦ κατανοήσεως μέτρον ἐν σοὶ ἐστί, οὕτω τοῦ πλάσαντός σε τὸ τοιοῦτον ἀγαθὸν εὐθὺς τῆ φύσει κατουσιώσαντος. τῶν γὰρ τῆς ἰδίας φύσεως ἀγαθῶν ὁ θεὸς ἐνετύπωσε τῆ σῆ κατασκευῇ τὰ μιμήματα, οἷόν τινα κηρὸν σχήματι γλυφῆς προτυπώσας (GNO, VII/2, 142, 24–143, 9; tr. Hall, p. 70).

737 This is the famous doctrine of Gregory which J. Daniélou calls *epektasis*, cf. *Platonisme et Théologie Mystique*, Paris 1944, pp. 309–326.

738 Cf. A. Louth, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

5.3 Unknown God of Gregory of Nazianzus

The complex teaching about God's cognoscibility can be found in Gregory's orations, among which the most famous are the so-called *Theological Orations*.⁷³⁹ They are also important for us since they were a response to the Neo-Arian teaching. As we are informed, Eunomians were present in Constantinople and they were a real problem for the community and their bishop.⁷⁴⁰ The *Theological Orations* constitute an attempt to deal with theological controversies, including God's cognoscibility. But in order to present complete Gregory's teaching on the human knowledge about God, we should also take in consideration other orations, in particular *Oration 20 (On Theology, and the Appointment of Bishops)*, *Oration 38 (On the nativity of Christ)*, and *Oration 40 (On Baptism)*, as well as *Oration 45 (On Holy Pascha)*.

Gregory confronts Eunomius on several levels, and some of his arguments are directly while others – indirectly addressed to them. We find in Gregory's teaching the same elements as in his predecessors, the statements in common with Basil and Gregory of Nyssa that we know that God exists but we do not know anything about His οὐσία.

“No man has yet breathed all the air, no mind has yet contained or language embraced God's essence in its fullness”⁷⁴¹

It is obvious that we cannot comprehend what is the very nature of God if we cannot understand even our own nature and the nature of the created world. Gregory calls for some moderation in the striving at full comprehension. Not to acknowledge the limits of our reason is, he says, “to be

739 Cf. *Or. 27–31* (PG 36, 12–172).

740 Cf. *Or. 27, 1* (PG 36, 12 A). “There are people, believe me, who not only have ‘itching ears;’ their tongues, also and now, I see, even their hands itch and attack my arguments” (Wickham/Williams, p. 218) *Or. 20, 10* (PG 35, 1077 A). “All of this is what our abusers argue; all of this belongs to those who rashly attack everything we say.” and “I am constantly repeating the same argument, since I fear for the crude and material style of your thought” (tr. B.E. Daley, *Gregory of Nazianzus*, New York 2006, p. 103).

741 *Or. 30, 17* (PG 36, 126 C; tr. Wickham/Williams, p. 274).

fetched in an abyss of nonsense with no halting place.”⁷⁴² Natural theology is limited to a discovery of God’s existence from the beauty and order of visible things.⁷⁴³

After a long description of various problems that we are not able to resolve, Gregory ascertains that “if you do not fully grasp these things, of which your own sense faculties are witnesses, how do you suppose you can know with accuracy what and how great God is? This is really a lot of foolishness!”⁷⁴⁴ Neither our mind nor language can grasp God’s οὐσία.⁷⁴⁵ For Gregory of Nazianzus, God’s essence is unknowable not only to an ordinary man but also to biblical heroes such as Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Elijah, and Peter.⁷⁴⁶ According to F. Norris, the assertion that the divine nature is incomprehensible is the most often repeated one in *Theological Orations*.⁷⁴⁷

Gregory points out that if we do not know visible things, the invisible ones are even more above our range. In Gregory’s teaching, we observe the antinomy between what is sensual and spiritual even more clearly than in Basil.⁷⁴⁸ It is our bodily existence that makes a contact with God difficult.

742 Or. 28, 8 (PG, 36, 36 B; tr. Wickham/Williams, p. 228). Cf. also C.A. Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God. In Your Light We Shall See Light*, Oxford 2008, p. 111.

743 Cf. Or. 28, 13 (PG 36, 41 C-43 A).

744 Or. 20, 11 (PG 35, 1080 A; tr. Daley, p. 104).

745 Cf. Or. 30, 17 (PG, 36, 125 B). “Our starting-point must be the fact that the God cannot be named. Not only will deductive arguments prove it, but the wisest Hebrews of antiquity, so far as can be gathered, will too. The ancient Hebrews used special symbols to venerate the divine and did not allow anything inferior to God to be written with the same letters as the word ‘God’ on the ground that the divine should not be put on even this much of a level with things human” (tr. Wickham/Williams, p. 274). Or. 30, 17 (PG, 36, 125 B-C). “No man has yet breathed all the air; no mind has yet contained or language embraced God’s essence in its fullness. No, we use facts connected with him to outline qualities which correspond with him, collecting a faint and feeble mental image from various quarters” (tr. Wickham/Williams, p. 274).

746 Cf. Or. 28, 17–20 (PG 36, 48 C-53 A).

747 Cf. F. Norris, *Introduction* [in:] *Faith Gives Fullness to Reasoning. The Five Theological Orations of Gregory of Nazianz*. intr. and com. F.W. Norris, tr. L. Wickham, F. Williams, Leiden 1991, p. 40.

748 Or. 37, 11 (PG 36, 296 B). Ἡ σὰρξ τῷ κόσμῳ προσέδησεν, ἀλλ’ ὁ λογισμὸς πρὸς Θεὸν ἀνήγαγεν· ἡ σὰρξ ἐβάρησεν, ἀλλ’ ὁ λογισμὸς ἐπτέρωσεν· ἡ σὰρξ ἔδησεν, ἀλλ’ ὁ πόθος ἔλυσεν.

“That may be the reason this corporeal gloom stands barrier between us and God like the cloud of the time between Hebrews and Egyptians, being, it may be, too, the ‘darkness which he made his hiding place, meaning our grossness, through which few but briefly peer.”⁷⁴⁹

According to J. Pelikan, accepting those limitations of human reason, functioning within them, and not allowing the reach of reason to exceed its grasp is not a sacrifice of the intellect, nor an abdication of the rational philosophical activity.⁷⁵⁰ Gregory in various places mentions the reasons of God’s incomprehensibility. According to Beeley, for Gregory, the incomprehensibility of God is the necessary result of the infinitude of God’s being and the finitude of creaturely existence, including human thought.⁷⁵¹

“God is the most beautiful and exalted of the things that exist (τῶν ὄντων) – unless one prefers to think of him as transcending being (ὑπὲρ τὴν οὐσίαν), or to place the sum total of existence (τὸ εἶνα) in him, from whom it also flows to others.”⁷⁵²

In his discourse of divine incomprehensibility, he compares the greatness and magnitude of God the Creator to a theologian’s ability to know him.⁷⁵³ *Via eminentiae* seems to be a necessary complement of negative and positive ways of speaking about God. Therefore, He not only surpasses all things in magnitude and greatness, but He is the “supreme nature” (φύσις ἀνωτάτω).⁷⁵⁴ So God is not only supremely great and beautiful but He is even more supreme to the category of greatness and other categories, as well as time and space.⁷⁵⁵ In *Oratio* 28, Gregory preaches that God’s nature is not simply “greater” than our ability to understand, or even “above

749 *Or.* 28, 12 (PG 36, 41 B). διὰ τοῦτο μέσος ἡμῶν τε καὶ θεοῦ ὁ σωματικὸς οὗτος ἴσταται γνόφος, ὡσπερ ἡ νεφέλη τὸ πάλαι τῶν Αἰγυπτίων καὶ τῶν Ἑβραίων. καὶ τοῦτό ἐστιν ἴσως, ὃ ἔθετο σκότος ἀποκρυφῆν αὐτοῦ, τὴν ἡμετέραν παχύτητα, δι’ ἣν ὀλίγοι καὶ μικρὸν διακύπτουσιν (tr. Wickham/Williams, pp. 230–231).

750 Cf. J. Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture: The Metamorphosis of Natural Theology in the Christian Encounter with Hellenism*, London 1993, p. 50.

751 Cf. C.A. Beeley, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

752 *Or.* 6, 12 (PG 35, 737 B). ὅτι κάλλιστον μὲν τῶν ὄντων καὶ ὑψηλότατον Θεός, εἰ μὴ τῷ φίλον καὶ ὑπὲρ τὴν οὐσίαν ἄγειν αὐτὸν, ἢ ὅλον ἐν αὐτῷ τιθέσθαι τὸ εἶνα, παρ’ οὗ καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοις (tr. Beeley, *op. cit.* p. 95).

753 Cf. C.A. Beeley, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

754 Cf. *Or.* 31, 10 (PG 36, 144 B).

755 Cf. C.A. Beeley, *op. cit.* p. 95.

all things” (ὕπερ ἅπαντα), in the sense of being superior to them on their own terms, but He is “first and unique” (πρώτης καὶ μόνης) in an absolute sense,⁷⁵⁶ and in *Oratio 25*, God’s existence is presented as a kind radically different from our own.⁷⁵⁷

In his polemic with Eunomians, Gregory first of all put points that not everybody can be called a theologian and dispute about divine matters.⁷⁵⁸ He begins *Theological Orations* with a presentation of his theological method. As an answer to the theories produced by Eunomians,⁷⁵⁹ Gregory points to the Orthodox theology and reminds its fundamental conditions.

“Discussion of theology is not for everyone, I tell you, not for everyone – it is no such inexpensive or effortless pursuit. (...) It is not for all men, but only for those who have been tested and have found a sound footing in study, and more importantly, have undergone, or at the very least are undergoing, purification of body and soul.”⁷⁶⁰

The idea that the knowledge of God is closely related to morality was rather absent in the Eunomian doctrine but was constantly present from the beginnings of a philosophical inquiry.⁷⁶¹ Here, not only unknowability of God, which is clearly the essence of the dispute, distinguishes the Orthodox from heretics, but also an inseparable connection between the practice and the possibility of practising theology. Gregory bases the necessity of transformation and detachment from mundane matters directly on Platonic assumptions that the similar clings to the similar. In *Oration 20*, Gregory encourages the faithful:

756 Cf. *Or.* 28, 31 (PG 36, 72; tr. Wickham/Williams, p. 244).

757 Cf. *Or.* 25, 17 (PG 35, 1224 A).

758 Cf. *Or.* 27, 3 (PG 35, 1224 A).

759 Cf. *Or.* 20, 1. “When I see the endless talkativeness that haunts us today, the instant sages and designated theologians, for whom simply willing to be wise is enough to make them so, I long for the philosophy that comes from above; I yearn for that ‘final lodging,’ to use Jeremiah’s phrase, and I want only to be off by myself” (PG 35, 1065 A-B; tr. Daley, p. 98).

760 *Or.* 27, 3 Οὐ παντός, ὃ οὔτοι, τὸ περι θεοῦ φιλοσοφεῖν, οὐ παντός· οὐχ οὔτω τὸ πρᾶγμα εὖωνον καὶ τῶν χαμαὶ ἐρχομένων. προσθήσω δέ, οὐδὲ πάντοτε, οὐδὲ πᾶσιν, οὐδὲ πάντα, ἀλλ’ ἔστιν ὅτε, καὶ οἷς, καὶ ἐφ’ ὅσον. οὐ πάντων μὲν, ὅτι τῶν ἐξητασμένων καὶ διαβεβηκότων ἐν θεωρίᾳ, καὶ πρὸ τούτων καὶ ψυχὴν καὶ σῶμα κεκαθαρμένων (PG 36, 14 D-16 A; tr. Wickham/Williams, p. 218).

761 We can see it already in *Letter VII* of Plato (*Ep.* VII 326 B-C).

“Approach it by the way you live: what is pure can only be acquired through purification. Do you want to become a theologian someday, to be worthy of the divinity? Keep the commandments, make your way forward through observing the precepts (τὰς ἐντολὰς φύλασσε): for the practical life (πρᾶξις) is the launching-pad for contemplation (θεωρία).”⁷⁶²

As Jean Plagnieux observes, it is impossible to separate Gregory’s doctrine of God from his doctrine of the means by which God is known.⁷⁶³ The concept that what is unclean cannot be unified with what is pure is constantly repeated in Gregory’s orations:⁷⁶⁴

“For one who is not pure to lay hold of pure things is dangerous, just as it is for weak eyes to look at the sun’s brightness.”⁷⁶⁵

“Therefore, the first requirement is to purify oneself, then to associate oneself with the One who is pure.”⁷⁶⁶

As in many other cases, it is a good example how biblical and philosophical influences intermingle in an author’s work without the possibility to identify the exact source of direct inspiration. Both in pagan as well as Christian philosophy, there is a common idea of purification which leads to *theosis*.⁷⁶⁷ Just to point one though crucial passage of the sixth blessing which was so

762 Or. 20, 12. Διὰ πολιτείας, ἀνελθε· διὰ καθάρσεως, κτῆσαι τὸ καθαρὸν. Βούλει θεολόγος γενέσθαι ποτὲ, καὶ τῆς θεότητος ἄξιος; τὰς ἐντολὰς φύλασσε· διὰ τῶν προσταγμάτων ὀδευσον· πρᾶξις γὰρ ἐπίβασις θεωρίας· ἐκ τοῦ σώματος τῆ ψυχῆ φιλοπόνησον (PG 35, 1080 B; tr. Daley, p. 104).

763 Cf. J. Plagnieux, *Saint Grégoire de Nazianze théologien*, Paris 1952, p. 109.

764 Cf. Ch. A. Beeley, p. 66. The most important studies of Gregory’s doctrine of purification are: H. Pinault, *Le platonisme de Saint Grégoire de Nazianze: Essai sur les relations du christianisme et de l’hellénisme dans son oeuvre théologique*, Paris 1925; J. Plagnieux, *Saint Grégoire de Nazianze théologien*, Paris 1952 and C. Moreschini, *Luce e purificazione nella dottrina di Gregorio Nazianzeno*, Augustinianum, vol. 13, no. 3 (Dec. 1973), pp. 535–549; T. Spidlik, *Gregoire de Nazianze. Introduction a l’etude de sa doctrine spirituelle*, Rome 1971.

765 Or. 27, 3 (PG 36, 16 A). μὴ καθαρῷ γὰρ ἄπτεσθαι καθαρῷ τυχὸν οὐδὲ ἀσφαλές, ὡσπερ οὐδὲ ὄψει σαθρᾶ ἠλιακῆς ἀκτίνος (tr. Wickham/Williams, p. 218).

766 Or. 20, 4 (PG 35, 1069). Καὶ διὰ τοῦτο καθαρτέον ἑαυτὸν πρῶτον, εἶτα τῷ καθαρῷ προσομιλητέον (tr. Daley, p. 100). And nearly exactly in the same words in Or. 39, 9 (PG 36, 344 B; tr. Daley, p. 131) and similar Or. 2. 39, 71; 17. 12; 18. 3; 30. 20).

767 Cf. H. Pinault, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

important for Gregory of Nyssa: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” (Mt 5.8).⁷⁶⁸ We can find similar assumptions in Plato’s *Phaedo*: “it cannot be that the impure attain the pure.”⁷⁶⁹ As Beeley notes, Plato’s doctrine of purification became widely influential in later Hellenistic traditions, and Plotinus,⁷⁷⁰ whom Gregory with much probability read, strove to popularize the modified Platonic doctrine of purification.⁷⁷¹

Gregory also describes the means of purification which are first of all mindfulness of God (μεμνησθαι θεοῦ), meditation, and worship.⁷⁷² After purification comes illumination which precedes a mystical union. Gregory continues the scheme introduced by Origen, who applied this distinction to the three protocanonical books of Wisdom ascribed to Solomon: *Proverbs*, *Ecclesiastes*, and the *Song of Songs*, where ethics is assigned to *Proverbs*, physics assigned to *Ecclesiastes*, and enoptics assigned to the *Song of Songs*.⁷⁷³ There are three stages that the soul must pass through progressively: first – learning virtue; next – adopting a right attitude to natural things; and then – ascending to the contemplation of God. Illumination is conditioned by purification and proportionate to it.

“Where there is fear, there is observation of the commandments; where the commandments are observed, there is a cleansing of the flesh, that cloud that blocks the soul’s vision and keeps it from seeing clearly the rays of divine illumination; but where there is cleansing, there is also illumination, and illumination is the fulfilment of desire for those eager to share in the greatest things—or in the greatest Thing, or in That which is beyond the great!”⁷⁷⁴

Gregory’s primary concept for God’s nature is light, and he frequently refers to the knowledge of God as illumination or coming to share in the divine light.⁷⁷⁵ The ultimate aim of human existence is participation in God.⁷⁷⁶

768 μακάριοι οἱ καθαροὶ τῆ καρδία, ὅτι αὐτοὶ τὸν Θεὸν ὄψονται.

769 *Phaedo* 67 B: μὴ καθαρῶ γὰρ καθαρὸν ἐφάπτεσθαι.

770 E.g. Plotinus, *Enn.* 1.2.7: Καὶ γὰρ ἡ νόησις ἐκεῖ ἐπιστήμη καὶ σοφία, τὸ δὲ πρὸς αὐτὸν ἡ σωφροσύνη, τὸ δὲ οἰκεῖον ἔργον ἡ οἰκειοπραγία, τὸ δὲ οἶον ἀνδρία ἡ ἀυλότης καὶ τὸ ἐφ’ αὐτοῦ μένειν καθαρὸν.

771 Cf. C.A. Beeley, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

772 Cf. *Or.* 27, 4 (PG 36, 16CD; tr. Wickham/Williams, p. 219).

773 Cf. A. Louth, *The Origins...*, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

774 *Or.* 39, 8 (PG 36, 343 A; tr. Deeley, p. 131).

775 More about illumination, see B.E. Deeley, *op. cit.*, pp. 104–108.

776 Cf. *Or.* 30, 4 (PG 36, 108 B).

Those who are purified, he says, will come to know that the Trinity as well as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are known by one another.⁷⁷⁷

In *Oration 21*, Gregory gives a very suggestive account of *theosis*. It may be even interpreted as the possible ascent of the soul to God, even in the present life, a type of the soul's ascent to deification, but in other *Orations*, Gregory remarks that this union and knowledge is possible only in future life.⁷⁷⁸ We must remember that just like for Gregory of Nyssa, each stage of ascent relies on some kind of negation: negation of impurity, negation of our concepts of the Divine, etc.

Gregory gives his clearest statement on the positive knowledge of God in the Epiphany orations, and in the anti-Eunomian context of *Oration 28*, he naturally emphasizes the incomprehensibility of God showing that in the Orthodox faith, there is place for both knowing and absolute mystery – that there is no space for easy answers and that an apologetic attitude often leads us to certain simplifications. We can observe that Gregory himself tries to avoid such traps of common patterns of thinking. When commenting on the use of negation in theology, he omits its long philosophical tradition with respect to privation⁷⁷⁹ and very clearly explains that although it is not a mistake to define God in the categories of negation when we attribute to Him, such terms as incorporeal, ingenerated, and immutable,⁷⁸⁰ it would not help us in any way to define who He is and what His essence is. Negative theology should be accompanied by positive assertions.⁷⁸¹ “A person

777 Cf. *Or. 25*, 17 (PG 35, 1221 C-D). Γενοῦ τι τῶν εἰρημένων πρότερον, ἢ τοιοῦτος, καὶ τότε γνώσῃ τοσοῦτον, ὅσον ὑπ’ ἀλλήλων γινώσκεισθαι. Νῦν δὲ δίδασκε τοσοῦτον εἰδέναι μόνον, μονάδα ἐν Τριάδι, καὶ Τριάδα ἐν μονάδι προσκυνουμένην, παράδοξον ἔχουσαν καὶ τὴν διαίρεσιν καὶ τὴν ἔνωσιν (tr. Beeley, p. 102).

778 *Or. 20*, 12 (PG, 35, 1080 C). “Yet I consider this to be nothing else than to share in what is purest and most perfect; and the most perfect of all things that exist is the knowledge of God. Let us, then, hold on to what we have and acquire what we can, as long as we live on earth; and let us store our treasure there in heaven, so that we may possess this reward of our labor: the full illumination of the holy Trinity – what it is, its qualities and its greatness, if I may put it this way – shining in Christ himself, our Lord, to whom be glory and power for the ages of ages. Amen” (tr. Daley, s. 105).

779 Cf. R. Mortley, *From Word to Silence*, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

780 Cf. *Or. 28*, 9 (PG 36 C-37 A; tr. Wickham/Williams, p. 228).

781 Cf. *Or. 28*, 9 (PG 36, 37 A-B; tr. Wickham/Williams, p. 229).

who tells you what God is not but fails to tell you what He is, is rather like someone, who asked what twice five are, answers “not two, not three, not four, not five...”⁷⁸² In his apology of God’s incomprehensibility, Gregory shows the need to use also positive theology against the Eunomian doctrine.

A similar paradox is found when the figure of Moses is being recalled. He is the one who ascends the Mountain to meet God and who has left all of the impurity below. According to Ch. A. Beeley, Gregory is largely responsible for creating the image of Moses as a primary model of Christian growth and the vision of God. This archetype was first used by Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, and Pseudo-Dionysius followed Gregory Nazianzen’s work. The motif itself became standard in Eastern and Western spirituality.⁷⁸³ The figure of Moses is used here to underline the absurdity of Eunomius’ claim, since even Moses who prayed to comprehend God could only see His averted figure and not His face.⁷⁸⁴

But still according to Gregory, the main aim of human existence is participation in God who is the greatest reward for all efforts. In the life to come, He can draw those who are purified and lightened to Himself and let them know God without any of the limitations of the present state of

782 *Or.* 28, 9 (tr. Wickham/Williams, p. 229).

783 *Cf.* C.A. Beeley, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

784 *Or.* 28, 3. ἐπεὶ δὲ προσέβλεψα, μόλις εἶδον θεοῦ τὰ ὀπίσθια· καὶ τοῦτο τῇ πέτρα σκεπασθεῖς, τῷ σαρκωθέντι δι’ ἡμᾶς θεῷ Λόγῳ· καὶ μικρὸν διακύψας, οὐ τὴν πρώτην τε καὶ ἀκήρατον φύσιν, καὶ ἑαυτῆ, λέγω δὴ τῇ τριάδι, γινωσκομένην, καὶ ὅση τοῦ πρώτου καταπετάσματος εἶσω μένει καὶ ὑπὸ τῶν χερουβὶμ συγκαλύπτεται, ἀλλ’ ὅση τελευταία καὶ εἰς ἡμᾶς φθάνουσα. ἡ δὲ ἐστίν, ὅσα ἐμὲ γινώσκειν, ἡ ἐν τοῖς κτίσμασι καὶ τοῖς ὑπ’ αὐτοῦ προβεβλημένοις καὶ διοικουμένοις μεγαλειότης, ἥ, ὡς ὁ θεῖος Δαβὶδ ὀνομάζει, μεγαλοπρέπεια. ταῦτα γὰρ θεοῦ τὰ ὀπίσθια, ὅσα μετ’ ἐκείνου ἐκείνου γνωρίσματα, ὡσπερ αἱ καθ’ ὑδάτων ἡλίου σκιαὶ καὶ εἰκόνες ταῖς σαθραῖς ὄψεσι παραδεικνύουσι τὸν ἥλιον, ἐπεὶ μὴ αὐτὸν προσβλέπειν οἶόν τε, τῷ ἀκραϊφνεῖ τοῦ φωτὸς νικῶντα τὴν αἴσθησιν (PG 36, 36 B-C). “Peering in I saw not the nature as it abides within the first veil and is hidden by the Cherubim, but as it reaches us at its furthest remove from God, being, so far as I can understand, the grandeur, or as divine David calls it the ‘majesty’ inherent in the created things he has brought forth and governs. All these indications of himself which he has left behind him are God’s ‘averted figure’. They are, as it were, shadowy reflections of the Sun in water, reflections which display to eyes too weak” (tr. Wickham/Williams, pp. 225–226).

human existence.⁷⁸⁵ But Gregory claims that even in the present state, we may be conducted to the knowledge of God but it is God's not human act. He is sceptic about the possibility of knowing God by our own means,⁷⁸⁶ but limitations of human intellect do not separate Christians from God since "faith, in fact, gives fullness to our reasoning."⁷⁸⁷

785 *Cf. Or. 38, 7* (PG 36, 317 C). "For he contains the whole of being in himself, without beginning or end, like an endless, boundless ocean of reality; he extends beyond all our notions of time and nature, and is sketchily grasped by the mind alone, but only very dimly and in a limited way; he is known not directly but indirectly, as one image is derived from another to form a single representation of the truth: fleeing before it is grasped, escaping before it is fully known, shining on our guiding reason – provided we have been purified – as a swift, fleeting flash of lightning shines in our eyes. And he does this, it seems to me, so that, insofar as it can be comprehended, the Divine might draw us to itself – for what is completely beyond our grasp is also beyond hope, beyond attainment – but that insofar as it is incomprehensible, it might stir up our wonder, and through wonder might be yearned for all the more, and through our yearning might purify us, and in purifying us might make us like God; and when we have become this, that he might then associate with us intimately as friends – my words here are rash and daring! – uniting himself with us, making himself known to us, as God to gods, perhaps to the same extent that he already knows those who are known by him" (tr. Daley, p. 120).

786 *Cf. Or. 39, 8–10* (PG, 36, 344 D-345 A). "For the same Word is both fearful to those who are unworthy on account of its nature, yet on account of its loving kindness also accessible to those who are converted in the way we have described, who have driven out the unclean, material spirit from their souls, and have swept and adorned their own souls by self-examination and who, besides fleeing from evil, practice virtue and make Christ to dwell within them entirely, or at least as much as possible. [When we have done this] and so enlightened ourselves with the light of knowledge, then let us speak of the wisdom of God that is hidden in a mystery and enlighten others. Meanwhile, let us purify ourselves and be initiated into the Word, so that we may do as much good to ourselves as possible, forming ourselves in God's image and receiving the Word when he comes – not only receiving him, in fact, but holding onto him and revealing him to others." (tr. Daley, in: Beeley, pp. 69–70, with my own alterations).

787 *Or. 29, 21* (PG 36, 104 A; tr. Wickham/Williams, p. 260).

5.4 John Chrysostom against Eunomius

John Chrysostom wrote twelve homilies against the Anomeans, which can be divided into two series. The first five, which deal with God's incomprehensibility, were preached when he was a priest in Antioch⁷⁸⁸ and were addressed both to the Heterodox and the Orthodox. This is the reason why they are not so theologically and philosophically sophisticated as Basil's and Gregory's texts, unlike even Gregory of Nazianzus, whose *Orations* were full of theological and philosophical analyses, John Chrysostom presents a more pastoral attitude. But it does not mean that Chrysostom was not aware of all the nuances of the controversy. On the contrary, we find many proofs that he deliberately simplified his teaching.⁷⁸⁹ Additionally, John Chrysostom, as J. Daniélou mentioned in his introduction to the critical edition, quotes not only the thoughts of Gregory and Basil, but includes his own ideas as well.⁷⁹⁰ The aim of the homilies is apologetic: "The time I spend on these arguments will both increase your knowledge about the Anomoeans and will make my prize of victory over those heretics a brighter one."⁷⁹¹ We can also observe that to provide better reception, John uses mainly biblical examples.

The general content of the homilies is similar to the predecessors in the polemic: divine essence is incomprehensible⁷⁹² not only for human beings but also for angels.⁷⁹³ John declares it in many places in a beautiful style:

"Let us call upon him, then, as the ineffable God who is beyond our intelligence, invisible, incomprehensible, who transcends the power of mortal words. Let us call on him as the God who is inscrutable to the angels, unseen by the Seraphim,

788 Cf. St. John Chrysostom, *On the Incomprehensible Nature of God*, tr. P.W. Harkins, Washington 1984, p. 22.

789 Cf. Von Ivanka who sees some analogy with the scepticism of the New Academy in the conviction that man can only know the sensible world (*Hom. II*, 209 nn). E. von Ivanka, *Vom Platonismus zur Theorie der Mystik*, Scholastik, 11 (1936), pp. 178–185.

790 Cf. J. Daniélou, *Introduction*, in: SC 28bis, p. 25.

791 *Hom. IV*, 8–12 (SC 28bis, p. 228; tr. Harkins, p. 115).

792 Cf. *Hom. V*, 251–257 (SC 28bis, p. 292). "But why do I speak of the essence of the angels when we do not even know well the essence of our own souls? Rather, we do not have any knowledge whatsoever of that essence" (tr. Harkins p. 149).

793 Cf. *Hom. IV*, 302–309 (SC 28bis, p. 252).

inconceivable to the Cherubim, invisible to the principalities, to the powers, and to the virtues, in fact, to all creatures without qualification, because he is known only by the Son and the Spirit.”⁷⁹⁴

Not only divine essence but also divine economy is inaccessible for the people.⁷⁹⁵ Man is unable to know even the created word⁷⁹⁶ and his own soul, so how can he comprehend angels⁷⁹⁷ or the reality that is above him.⁷⁹⁸ In his attitude, we can observe the lack of the trust in human cognition typical of the authors of the latter half the 4th century, which is according to J. Daniélou a commonplace between pagan and Christian philosophy in the late Antiquity.⁷⁹⁹ What Chrysostom underlines is the fact that even pretending that we can know the essence of God is true ignorance, madness, and even blasphemy⁸⁰⁰ – the blasphemy which does not harm God but its author.⁸⁰¹ In order to visualize the absurdity of heretical views⁸⁰² to ordinary listeners, he uses simple examples:

794 *Hom. III*, 53–59 (SC 28bis, p. 190; tr. Harkins, p. 97).

795 *Cf. Hom. I*, 280–281 (SC 28bis, p. 124).

796 *Cf. Hom. II*, 473–480 (SC 28bis, p. 180). “But we do not know what the essence of the sky is.” (tr. Harkins, p. 91).

797 *Cf. Hom. III*, 194–196 (SC 28bis, p. 202). “And why do I speak of that blessed essence of God? A man cannot even look upon the essence of an angel without fear and trembling” (tr. Harkins, p. 105); *Hom. V*, 257 (SC 28bis, p. 292). “But why do I speak of the essence of the angels when we do not even know well the essence of our own souls? Rather, we do not have any knowledge whatsoever of that essence” (tr. Harkins, p. 149).

798 *Cf. Hom. V*, 249–266 (SC 28bis, p. 292).

799 *Cf. J. Daniélou, Platonism et théologie mystique*, Paris 1953, p. 131.

800 *Cf. Hom. V*, 371–373 (SC 28bis, p. 302); *Hom. I*, 188–190 (SC 28, p. 116). “I urge you, then, to flee from the madness of these men. They are obstinately striving to know what God is in his essence. And I tell you that this is the ultimate madness” (tr. Harkins, p. 59); *Hom. II*, 163–165, (SC 28, pp. 154–156; tr. Harkins, p. 79).

801 *Cf. Hom. III*, 32–41 (SC 28bis, pp. 188–190). “In the same way, the man who hurls blasphemies at that blessed essence of God would never do any harm to it. God’s essence is much too great and far too high to receive any hurt. The blasphemer is sharpening his sword against his own soul because he has become so arrogant toward his benefactor” (tr. Harkins, p. 96).

802 *Cf. Hom. I*, 190–195 (SC 28bis, p. 116). “Not only is it clear that the prophets do not know what his essence is but they do not even know how vast his wisdom is. Yet his essence does not come from his wisdom, but his wisdom

“How great is the distance between the knowledge which is going to be given to us and the knowledge which we now have? How great is the distance between a complete and perfect man and an infant at the breast? For that is the degree of superiority of the knowledge to come in comparison to our present knowledge.”⁸⁰³

John compares an attempt to pretend of having full knowledge of divine essence with Adam’s pride in paradise. The first man lost everything that he had received from God because he exceeded the set limits. Similarly, the Anomeans who claimed to have obtained perfect knowledge, which is impossible here on earth, would lose any possibility to know God in eternity.⁸⁰⁴

John explains that the impassable barrier in our cognition is based on the difference in nature:

“...for the distance between God and man is as great as the distance between the potter and the clay. Rather the distance is not merely as great but much greater. The potter and the clay are of one and the same substance. It is just as Job said: ‘I admit it as for those who dwell in houses of clay because we are ourselves formed from the same clay.’”⁸⁰⁵

The distance between the essence of God and the essence of man is so great that according to John neither words can express it, nor the mind can measure it.⁸⁰⁶ It means that the exact knowledge of God is possible only for those who share the same nature with Him. When Chrysostom comments on the text that nobody knows the Father, he explains that the term “nobody” is always used to express the exclusion of creatures alone.⁸⁰⁷ The

comes from his essence. When the prophets cannot perfectly comprehend his wisdom, how mad and foolish would the Anomoeans be to think that they could” (tr. Harkins, p. 59); *Hom.* II, 159–165 (SC 28bis, pp. 154–156). “Does this require refutation? Must I prove it not the mere utterance of the words enough to prove, godlessness of the Anomoeans? In these words we the obvious folly, an unpardonable madness, a new kind of piety and godlessness. (..)You miserable Anomoeans! Think of who you are and in things you are meddling” (tr. Harkins, p. 79).

803 *Hom.* I, 120–123 (SC 28bis, p. 106; tr. Harkins, p. 56).

804 *Cf. Hom.* I, 175–179 (SC 28bis, p. 114; tr. Harkins, p. 59).

805 *Hom.* II, 336–341 (SC 28bis, p. 170; tr. Harkins, p. 85).

806 *Cf. Hom.* II, 347–350 (SC 28bis, p. 170; tr. Harkins, p. 85).

807 *Cf. Hom.* V, 64–74 (SC 28bis, p. 276; tr. Harkins, p. 139).

knowledge about God exceeds our spiritual powers,⁸⁰⁸ and he emphasizes the vanity of our human nature which is worthless compared not only with the excellence of God⁸⁰⁹ but even with angels.⁸¹⁰ For Chrysostom, God is not only unknowable (ἀκατάλητος), but also inaccessible (ἀπρόσιτος), which is in this context even stronger.

“However, he did not say: ‘Who dwells in incomprehensible light,’ but: ‘in unapproachable light,’ and this is much stronger than ‘incomprehensible.’ A thing is said to be incomprehensible when those who seek after it fail to comprehend it, even after they have searched and sought to understand it. A thing is unapproachable which, from the start, cannot be investigated nor can anyone come near to it. We call the sea incomprehensible because, even when divers lower themselves into its waters and go down to a great depth, they cannot find the bottom. We call that thing unapproachable which, from the start, cannot be searched out or investigated.”⁸¹¹

808 Cf. *Hom.* III, 35–38 (SC 28bis, p. 188; tr. Harkins, p. 98).

809 Cf. *Hom.* II, 296–300 (SC 28bis, p. 166; tr. Harkins, p. 83); Cf. *Hom.* II, 166–177, (SC 28bis, p. 156). “You are only a man, and the bare names we call a man are enough to prove how excessive your madness is. A man is dust and ashes, flesh and blood, grass and the flower of grass, a shadow and smoke and vanity, and whatever is weaker and more worthless than these. And do not think that what I am saying is an accusation against nature. I am not the one who says this, but it is the prophets who are expressing their thoughts on the lowliness of man. Nor are they seeking to heap dishonor on humankind but they are trying to check the conceits of the foolish. Their aim is not to disparage our nature but to discourage the folly of those who are mad with pride” (tr. Harkins, p. 79).

810 Cf. *Hom.* III, 182–193 (SC 28bis, p. 202). “And the fact is that we do not know God in the same way in which those powers above know him. Their nature is far more pure and wise and clear-sighted than man’s nature. The blind man does not know that the sun’s rays are unapproachable as does the man who can see. So we do not know the incomprehensibility of God in the same way as these powers do. The difference between a blind man and a man with sight is as great as the difference between us men and the powers above. So, even if you hear the prophet say: ‘I saw the Lord,’ do not suspect that he saw God’s essence. What he saw was this very condescension of God. And he saw that far less distinctly than did the powers above. He could not see it with the same clarity as the Cherubini” (tr. Harkins, pp. 104–105).

811 *Hom.* III, 124–133 (SC 28bis, pp. 196–198; tr. Harkins, p. 100). Ἀλλ’ οὐδὲ φῶς οἰκῶν ἀκατάληπτον εἶπεν, ἀλλὰ ἀπρόσιτον, ὃ τοῦ ἀκατάληπτου πολλῶ μείζον ἐστι. Τὸ μὲν γὰρ ἀκατάληπτον λέγεται, ὅταν ἐρευνηθὲν καὶ ζητηθὲν μὴ καταληφθῆ παρὰ τῶν ζητούντων αὐτό· ἀπρόσιτον δὲ στίβ, ὃ μὴδὲ ἐρεύνης ἀνέχεται τὴν ἀρχὴν, μὴδὲ ἐγγύς αὐτοῦ γενέσθαι τις δύναται. Οἷον ἀκατάληπτον λέγεται πέλαγος, εἰς ὃ

Just like Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa, John defends believers against the Eunomian accusation of not knowing God⁸¹² and reminds that “All that we are required to know is that God exists; we are not asked to be busybodies and be inquisitive about his essence.”⁸¹³ He makes a distinction between the knowledge we can receive from the revelation and human inquiries about the truth and understanding of divine mysteries.⁸¹⁴

“Paul said this because on the one hand he knows that God exists, whereas, on the other, he does not know what God is in his essence. He knows that God is wise but he does not know how great his wisdom is. He knows that God is great but he does not know how or what his greatness is. He also knows that God is everywhere present but he does not know how this is so. He knows that God provides for all things and that he preserves and governs them to perfection. But he does not know the way in which God does all these things. Therefore, he said: ‘Our knowledge is imperfect and our prophesying is imperfect’.”⁸¹⁵

καθιέντες ἑαυτοὺς οἱ κολυμβηταὶ καὶ πρὸς πολὺ καταφερόμενοι βάθος, τὸ πέρασ ἀδυνατοῦσιν εὐρεῖν· ἀπρόσιτον δὲ ἐκεῖνο λέγεται, ὃ μήτε τὴν ἀρχὴν ζητηθῆναι δυνατόν, μηδὲ ἐρευνηθῆναι.

812 Cf. *Hom.* V, 366–369 (SC 28bis, p. 302). “What is the wise objection and argument of these Anomoeans? They say: ‘Do you not know what you are adoring?’ *First and foremost*, we should not have to reply to this objection because the Scriptures afford such strong proof that it is impossible to know what God’s essence is. But since our *purpose in speaking is not* to arouse their enmity but to correct them, come, let us show that being ignorant of God’s essence but contending obstinately that one does know his essence, this is *really not to know him*” (tr. Harkins, p. 153).

813 *Hom.* V, 385–386 (SC 28bis, p. 304; tr. Harkins, p. 154).

814 Cf. *Hom.* I, 156–167 (SC 28bis, pp. 110–112). “I, too, know many things but I do not know how to explain them. I know that God is everywhere and I know that he is everywhere in his whole being. But I do not know how he is everywhere. I know that he is eternal and has no beginning. But I do not know how. My reason fails to grasp how it is possible for an essence to exist when that essence has received its existence neither from itself nor from another. I know that he begot a Son. But I do not know how. I know that the Spirit is from him. But I do not know how the Spirit is from him. [I eat food but I do not know how it is separated into phlegm, into blood, into juice, into bile. We do not even understand the foods which we see and eat every day. Will we be inquisitive, then, and meddle with the essence of God?]” (tr. Harkins, pp. 57–58).

815 *Hom.* I. 290–301 (SC 28bis, p. 126; tr. P.W. Harkins p. 65).

John does not hesitate to use privation or negation to describe God, and that fact can be clearly associated with not only Plato's, Philo's, and Clemet's inspiration, but also with the Bible.⁸¹⁶ We can see it in the use of such terms as: invisible ἀόρατος,⁸¹⁷ unspeakable ἄρητος,⁸¹⁸ unreachable ἀπρόσιτος,⁸¹⁹ impossible to contemplate ἀθέατος, and many others.⁸²⁰ The negative language is complemented by the transcendent descriptions with ὑπερ.⁸²¹ Like his predecessors, John believes that Christians will achieve the full knowledge of God in future life, but in the present state, they are not left without help as God can be seen by men or angels only by condescension (συγκατάβασις) and accommodation (ἐπιμετρέω). In his *Third Homily*, when John describes the knowledge of angels, he presents the definition of condescension:

“Yet they did not see the pure light itself nor the pure essence itself. What they saw was a condescension accommodated to their nature. What is this condescension? God condescends whenever He is not seen as He is, but in the way one incapable of beholding Him is able to look upon Him. In this way God reveals Himself by accommodating what reveals to the weakness of vision of those who behold Him.”⁸²²

According to John Chrysostom, God wants to be known by His creation but everything that was revealed to us about Him is very distant from the true knowledge about His nature.⁸²³

816 Cf. e.g. Rom 1: 20; 2 Cor 9: 15.

817 Cf. *Hom.* III, 54 (SC 28bis, p. 190).

818 Cf. *Hom.* IV, 61 (SC 28bis, p. 232).

819 Cf. *Hom.* III, 124 (SC 28bis, p. 196).

820 Cf. *Hom.* III, 45 (SC 28bis, p. 191). J. Daniélou, *Introduction*, in: SC 28bis, pp. 17–18.

821 Cf. *Hom.* II, 192 (SC 28bis, p. 158); *Hom.* II, 297 (SC 28bis, p. 166).

822 *Hom.* III, 162–166 (SC 28bis, p. 200). Τί δέ ἐστι συγκατάβασις; Ὅταν μὴ ὡς ἔστιν ὁ Θεὸς φαίνεται, ἀλλ' ὡς ὁ δυνάμενος αὐτὸν θεωρεῖν οἷός τε ἔστιν, οὕτως ἑαυτὸν δεικνύη, ἐπιμετρῶν τῇ τῶν ὁρώντων ἀσθενείᾳ τῆς ὄψεως τὴν ἐπίδειξιν” (SC 28bis, p. 200; tr. Harkins, pp. 101–102).

823 The same motif was used by Cyril of Jerusalem: “‘What?’, someone will say. ‘Doesn’t Scripture say that the angels of the little ones “always behold the face of my Father in heaven”’ (Mt 18.10)? But the angels see God not as he is, but according to their capacity. For Jesus himself said: ‘Not that anyone has seen the Father, except the one who is from God, he has seen the Father’ (Jn 6.46). The angels see according to their capacity, and the archangels according to their ability; the Thrones and Dominations more than the first, but still fail

In the thought of all authors presented in this chapter, we could observe same schemes of demonstrating the incomprehensibility of God. The basic truth of the impossibility to know the essence of God is always defended, but there are different accents as well. While Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa present a more speculative attitude, for Gregory of Nazianzus and especially for John Chrysostom, a pastoral approach is more natural. But this does not mean that such pastoral care was less important, since the Anomeans were effective not only in the field of doctrinal demonstrations, but also in their missionary activity.

Finally, it is worth adding that those four writers are the most famous ones, and, therefore, they are the best examples of a rapid development of negative theology in the late 4th century. But they certainly are not all writers who contributed to the growing interest in negative theology in the latter half of the 4th century. Among others worthy of mentioning is Cyril of Jerusalem⁸²⁴ and Didymus the Blind, who also accepted the basic outcome of the debate, namely that the essence of God is incomprehensible.

to do him justice.” Cyril of Jerusalem, *Cat. VI*, 6 (PG 33, 548 B), in. *Cyril of Jerusalem*, ed. tr. E. Yarnold, London, New York, 2000, p. 117.

- 824 It is worth quoting at least one quote from Cyril of Jerusalem’s orations which shows that negative theology was commonly present at that time: “For we do not say as much as needs to be said about God, but as much as human nature can grasp and our weakness can bear. We do not explain what God is; we admit with a good grace that we do not know the exact truth about him. For in what concerns God the height of knowledge is to admit one’s ignorance” (*Cat. VI*; 1; PG 33, 357A-340 B; tr. Yarnold, p. 115).

