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Mirrors of Death, Images of God: Likeness and Difference in Gregory of Nyssa's Social Ethics

Thomas Breedlove  and Alex Fogleman

Institute for Studies of Religion, Baylor University, Waco, TX, USA

Corresponding author: Thomas Breedlove; Email: Thomas_Breedlove@baylor.edu

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Abstract

Gregory of Nyssa's critiques of various forms of social injustice hinge on his rigorous theological anthropology. For Gregory, slavery, the accumulation of wealth, and the mistreatment of the poor are evil because they deny the freedom proper to human creatures created according to the divine Image. However, Gregory's anthropology also contains, we will argue, a distinct account of the ways in which humanity's difference from God – particularly its poverty and limitation – reveals important aspects of the particular and ultimately Christological mode in which finite humans imitate the infinitude God. The aim of this present essay is to articulate how both likeness and unlikeness to God – mirrors of God and mirrors of death – are integral to Gregory's theological anthropology as it pertains to various forms of social critique.

Keywords: divine image; finitude; Gregory of Nyssa; slavery; social ethics

1. Introduction

'I will show you, as in a mirror, who you are and what you are'.¹ This promise, coming in Gregory of Nyssa's first homily on the Beatitudes, prefaces a critique of pride. The mirror reveals the burial ground, the bodies of the dying and the dead, who guarantee the inexorable dissolution of material life. In mirroring to one another this end, human beings reveal the folly of pride. But humans, as Gregory discusses in the sixth homily on the Beatitudes, are also mirrors of the infinite. How is it possible to see the invisible God? The one who is 'pure in heart', Gregory assures, 'becomes blessed, because by

¹Beat 1.5 (GNO VII/2:86; Hall, 28, trans. alt.): δεῖξω σοι ὡς περ ἐν κατόπτρῳ τίς εἶ καὶ οἶος εἶ. *Gregory of Nyssa: On the Beatitudes*, ed. by Stuart George Hall (Leiden: Brill, 2000); hereafter Hall. The critical edition can be found in *Gregorii Nysseni Opera VII/2*, ed. by John Callahan (Leiden: Brill, 1991); hereafter GNO VII/2.

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looking at his own purity he perceives the archetype in the image'.² The reflection in the mirror shows both death and the divine.³

The purpose of this essay is to explore the ways in which these apparently paradoxical themes – in short, likeness to and difference from God – together play a determinative role in Gregory's social ethics. Scholarship on Gregory's social ethics has commonly perceived its inseparability from his theological anthropology, focusing, in particular, on the importance of freedom, autonomy, and independence in both areas of his thought.⁴ Because humanity is made in the image of God, human beings are endowed with similar godlike qualities that make it difficult to sustain unjust social arrangements. In other words, Gregory emphasizes in both anthropological writings and in injunctions concerning slavery, wealth, poverty, famine, and illness the mirrors that reflect the infinite. But to appreciate the full tenor of Gregory's social ethics, we cannot ignore the mirrors of death. We are, to be clear, not arguing that Gregory emphasizes the humility and poverty of human nature *rather than* these transcendent qualities. Rather, we argue that understanding his social ethics well requires appreciating how Gregory also defines the human creature by the limitations and poverty that offer an occasion for humility and serve as a paradigmatic site for mirroring the divine. The finitude of human nature – and by this Gregory often means its temporal being unto death, its dependence on sustenance, and its material dimension – marks the distance between creature and Creator. But it also, paradoxically, makes possible likeness, for likeness, unlike identity, can exist only alongside difference.⁵

²Beat 6.4 (GNO VII/2:143; Hall, 70, trans. alt): οὕτω γίνεταί μακάριος ὁ καθαρὸς τῆ καρδίᾳ, ὅτι πρὸς τὴν ἰδίαν καθαρότητα βλέπων ἐν τῇ εἰκόνι καθορᾷ τὸ ἀρχέτυπον.

³Most often, Gregory's use of mirroring concerns the soul's purification as it comes to reflect the divine image. This is a prominent theme in his mature work *On the Song of Songs*. However, the mirror concept could also be used more broadly; Gregory uses it to describe the interpretation of Scripture, the role of the church, and human nature more generally – as he does in both *On the Soul and the Resurrection* and *On the Making of Humankind*. For discussion of the image of the mirror in Gregory, see Verna Harrison, *Grace and Human Freedom According to Saint Gregory of Nyssa* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellon Press, 1992), pp. 111–23; Lenka Karfíková, 'The Metaphor of the Mirror in Platonic Tradition and Gregory's *Homilies on the Song of Songs*', in *Gregory of Nyssa: In Canticum Cantorum. Analytical and Supporting Studies*, ed. by Giulio Maspero, Miguel Brugarolas, and Ilaria Vigorelli (Leiden: Brill, 2018), pp. 265–28.

⁴For the importance of these concepts in Gregory's thought, see, e.g., *Hom Op* 4.1, where Gregory describes the soul as 'without master' (ἀδέσποτον), 'self-governing' (αὐτεξεύσιον), and 'ruled autocratically by its own will' (ἰδίους θελήμασι αὐτοκρατορικῶς διοικουμένην). *Gregory of Nyssa: On the Human Image of God*, ed. and trans. by John Behr (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), p. 162. See also *Hom Op* 16.11 (Behr, 226–8); *Or. Cat.* 5 (GNO III/4:19–20); *An et Res* (GNO III/3:75–76); *Mort.* (GNO IX:54). For two examples that link these anthropological concepts to Gregory's social ethics, see Hans Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa: An Anagogical Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), chap. 5 ('Oppressed Body'), pp. 146–77) and Ilaria Ramelli, 'The Legacy of Origen in Gregory of Nyssa's Theology of Freedom', *Modern Theology*, 38 (2022), 363–88.

⁵As Gregory writes on at least two occasions, humanity's difference from God (specifically, human mutability) makes likeness possible: 'As the image bears in all points the semblance of the archetypal excellence, if it had not a difference in some respect, being absolutely without divergence it would no longer be a likeness' (*Hom Op* 16.12 [Behr, 222]); see too *Or. Cat.* 21.1 (GNO III/4:55.13–16; PPS 60:108). As has often been observed, the categories of finitude and infinitude are major themes in Gregory's writing on human nature and spiritual progress. It has been well observed that Gregory's high valuation of mutability functions as a cornerstone in his famous doctrine of epectasy. As he argues at the end of *De perfectione*, change is nothing to be feared, since change is not only directed towards evil but can also be directed towards good: 'Let no one be grieved if he sees in his nature a penchant for change. Changing in

To make these arguments, we examine three homilies in which Gregory offers key ethical injunctions that stress human finitude. The first of these is his celebrated rejection of slavery in the fourth homily on Ecclesiastes, a homily in which, we argue, finitude and humility play an underexplored and important role. Ultimately, Gregory's exhortations to humility are based on a Christological logic, an argument we make by turning to two other passages in Gregory's writing that expand our understanding of the nature of human finitude as an aspect of social critique – namely, his defense of the poor and diseased in the sermon *In illud: Quatenus uni ex his fecistis mihi fecistis* (hereafter *Quat uni*) and the critique of wealth in the first homily on the Beatitudes.⁶ In these passages, a guiding theme is the fallacy of seeking permanence in finite goods, an error that expresses two intertwined denials – the denial of one's own human nature and the denial of the humanity of others.⁷ Having slaves, disregarding the sick, and seeking luxury are all, in Gregory's understanding, attempts to transcend human finitude, and they fail because the true path to transcending finitude is found in inhabiting life in accordance with the life of Christ.

This last claim, on its surface, is a fairly ubiquitous one in the history of Christian ethics. Yet it is commonly received and perceived to be distinct from strictly dogmatic questions about divinity and humanity in Christ. One upshot of perceiving the connection between Christology and social ethics in Gregory's thought is its profound disruption of divisions between (what we might call) metaphysics and ethics. For Gregory, at least, because ethics are densely anthropological, they are densely Christological. His defense of the consubstantiality of Christ's nature within the Godhead (against Eunomius), and his defense of the fullness of Christ's human life, particularly in his writings against Apollinarius, forms the bedrock of his understanding of how a virtue imitative of God can be found in the mutability and dissolution of humanity's current postlapsarian experience.⁸ This imitation is possible, in Gregory's understanding, because it is demonstrated in Christ's life. Thus, Christian virtue, for Gregory – which

everything for the better, let him exchange “glory for glory”. *Perf* (GNO VII/2: 213–14; *St. Gregory: Ascetical Works*, trans. by Virginia Woods Callahan, Fathers of the Church 58 [Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1967], p. 122). For a good discussion of mutability, see Jean Daniélou, *L'être et le temps chez Grégoire de Nysse* (Leiden: Brill, 1970), pp. 95–115.

⁶Another useful passage to correlate Gregory's critiques of social injustice is Gregory's fascinating interpretation of 'daily bread' in *Homilies on the Lord's Prayer* 4. For discussion, see *Grégoire de Nysse: Homélie sur le notre père*, ed. by Christian Boudgion and Matthieu Cassin, Source Chrétienne 596 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2018), pp. 129–46.

⁷The judgment that for Gregory acquisitiveness and excess are attempts to transcend (or escape) finitude owes in part to Mark Hart's notable and contested readings in two articles on Gregory's *On Virginity* – even while Hart's full 'ironic reading' is less convincing. See Mark Hart, 'Reconciliation of Body and Soul: Gregory of Nyssa's Deeper Theology of Marriage', *Theological Studies*, 51 (1990), 450–78 and 'Gregory of Nyssa's ironic praise of the celibate life', *Heythrop Journal*, 33 (1992), 1–19; 'The skill of virginity', Hart writes in a tidy summary, 'is to shift our quest for immortality from possession of material things to participation in the immaterial and intellectual' ('Reconciliation', 465).

⁸See esp. *Against Eunomius* 3.3, *Against Apollinarius* and *To Theophilus*. In several articles, Brian Daley has articulated Gregory's 'Christology of transformation', arguing that soteriology forms the crux of Gregory's contention with Apollinarius. We could extend that thesis by applying a similar approach to Gregory's social ethics. See Brian Daley, 'Divine Transcendence and Human Transformation: Gregory of Nyssa's Anti-Apollinarian Christology', *Studia Patristica*, 32 (1997), 87–95; Brian Daley, "'Heavenly Man" and "Eternal Christ": Apollinarius and Gregory of Nyssa on the Personal Identity of the Savior', *J ECS*, 10 (2002), 469–88.

is nothing other than growth in likeness to God, the refining of the mirror – always concerns the interplay of likeness and difference, of the finite and the infinite that constitutes human creatureliness itself.⁹ Gregory's ethical arguments, we argue, emerge directly from the dynamic of this interplay at the heart of his anthropology.¹⁰

2. Gregory's critique of slavery in the fourth homily on Ecclesiastes

The dynamic of likeness and difference in Gregory's social ethics is especially important in Gregory's celebrated condemnation of slavery, espoused in his fourth homily on Ecclesiastes, even if more attention has focused here on pole of divine likeness. As the locus classicus of his Christian social ethics, this text has been the subject of many readings that see it as a powerful expression of central tenets in Gregory's theological anthropology.¹¹ Scholars have observed the importance of Gregory's stress on

⁹In this way, Gregory writes in a crucial passage in *Cant.* 3 (GNO VI:90; Norris, 101), that 'divine Virtue' shines in the purified life and God (the sun in this metaphor) is inscribed in 'the mirror that we are (τῷ ἡμετέρῳ κατόπτρῳ ἐν ζωῶν ἡμετέροις τὸν ἥλιον)'. Richard A. Norris, Jr. and Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, trans by Richard A. Norris, Jr. (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012). The Greek text and critical edition can be found in *Gregorii Nysseni Opera* VI, ed. by Hermann Langerback and Werner Jaeger (Leiden: Brill, 1960). See note 2 above for Karfíková's treatment both of the centrality of the image in this text and how the text functions ascetically to refine the image.

¹⁰A common preoccupation in scholarship on Gregory is the precise sequence of his works and the corresponding question of developments of his thought. Insofar as the general argument in this paper traces a certain continuity in the connection between Gregory's understanding of human finitude and his social ethics, our reading might mitigate claims of a strong shift in Gregory's thought after the Council of Constantinople. This is not, in any case, a primary aim of this argument, however, and in general we follow the judgment that the first two of these works (*Eccl* 4 and *Beat* 1) were written shortly before the Council and the last sermon (*Quat Uni*) in the two to four years after. For a longer exposition, see Pierre Maraval, 'Chronology of Works', *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, ed. by Mateo-Seco (Leiden: Brill, 2010), pp. 153–69.

¹¹Among an extensive bibliography, see T. J. Dennis, 'The Relationship between Gregory of Nyssa's Attack on Slavery in his Fourth Homily on Ecclesiastes and his Treatise *De Hominis Opificio*', *Studia Patristica*, 17 (1982), 1065–72; Rachel Moriarty, 'Human Owners, Human Slaves: Gregory of Nyssa, *Hom. Eccl.* 4', *Studia Patristica*, 27 (1993), 62–69; Lionel Wickham, 'Homily IV', in *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on Ecclesiastes. An English Version with Supporting Studies*, ed. by Stuart George Hall (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1993), pp. 177–84; Maria Bergadá, 'La condamnation de l'esclavage dans l'Homélie IV', in Hall, *Homilies on Ecclesiastes*, pp. 185–96; Daniel F. Stramara, 'Gregory of Nyssa: An Ardent Abolitionist?' *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, 41 (1997), 37–60; Richard Klein, 'Gibt es eine Sklavenethik bei Gregor von Nyssa? Anmerkungen zu David R. Stains, "Gregory of Nyssa's Ethic of Slavery and Emancipation"', in *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Beatitudes. An English Version with Commentary and Supporting Studies*, ed. by Hubertus Drobner and Albert Viciano (Leiden: Brill, 2000), pp. 593–604; David Bentley Hart, 'The "Whole Humanity": Gregory of Nyssa's Critique of Slavery in Light of His Eschatology', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 54 (2001), 51–69; J. Kameron Carter, 'Theology, Exegesis, and the Just Society: Gregory of Nyssa as Abolitionist Intellectual', *Ex Auditu*, 22 (2006), 181–212; Giulio Maspero, 'Slavery', in *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, ed. by Mateo-Seco (Leiden: Brill, 2010), pp. 683–85; Sharon Weisser, 'Philo's Therapeutae and Essenes: A Precedent for the Exceptional Condemnation of Slavery in Gregory of Nyssa?' in *The Quest for a Common Humanity: Human Dignity and Otherness in the Religious Traditions of the Mediterranean*, ed. by Katell Berthelot and Matthias Morgenstern (Leiden: Brill, 2011), pp. 289–310; Ilaria Ramelli, 'Gregory of Nyssa's Position in Late Antique Debates on Slavery and Poverty, and the Role of Asceticism', *Journal of Late Antiquity*, 5 (2012), 87–118; Hans Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue*, pp. 146–77; Ilaria Ramelli, *Social Justice and the Legitimacy of Slavery: The Role of Philosophical Asceticism from Ancient Judaism to Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Ramelli, 'The Legacy of Origen', 363–88.

the common unity of human nature, the way in which anti-Eunomian commitments exclude ontological subordination among members of the same species, the analogous relationship between divine and human equality, the role of Gregory's eschatological reasoning, and, perhaps most emphasized, the conceptions of freedom, autonomy, and independence that characterize humanity's creation in the image of God.¹² The core of Gregory's argument, according to these readings, arises from his high estimation of the dignity and worth of the human creature. Human creatures cannot be treated as material possessions because they transcend material creation.

Some readers have found significant the absence in the homily of any direct appeal for the legal abolition of slavery and so have stressed its private rather than public perspective on ethics.¹³ Other interpreters have drawn attention to the connections between Gregory's theological critique of slavery and the apparent manumission practiced in the ascetic careers of his own family.¹⁴ More recently, scholars have turned to focus on the theological nature of Gregory's unique arguments against slavery.¹⁵ Ilaria Ramelli puts this well when she writes: 'Gregory of Nyssa's radical condemnation of slavery, albeit owing much to Origen's reflections, stands out against the rest of patristic theories of slavery as unique, both for its outright rejection of slavery not only *de facto*, but also *de jure*, and for the eminently theological foundation of this rejection'.¹⁶

While Gregory's critique of slavery in the fourth homily on Ecclesiastes has been analyzed in different ways, the premises central to its argumentation appear relatively clear. Human beings, Gregory preaches, cannot be used as property because (a) they share one nature, (b) that nature is free, and (c) they are by divine decree the owners and rulers of all nonrational creation.¹⁷ Gregory begins his interpretation of Solomon's declaration of the slaves he acquired – 'I got me slaves and slave-girls'¹⁸

¹²Bergadá, 'La condemnation', 185–96; Ramelli, 'Gregory of Nyssa's Position', 87–118; Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue*, pp. 158–60; Hart, 'The Whole Humanity', 51–69; Carter, 'Theology, Exegesis, and the Just Society', 181–212; Maspero, 'Slavery', 683–85; Dennis, 'Gregory of Nyssa's Attack on Slavery', 1065–72.

¹³Moriarty, 'Human Owners, Human Slaves', 177–184; Wickham, 'Homily IV', 179; Susanna Elm, 'Virgins of God: The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 103.

¹⁴For evidence of such practices, see Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Saint Macrina*, in *Macrina the Younger, Philosopher of God*, ed. and trans. by Anna M. Silvas (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008), p. 118. For discussion, see Ramelli, 'Gregory's Position', 107–10; Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue*, p. 148. For a rebuttal of Moriarty and Elm, see Stramara, 'Ardent Abolitionist', 37–60.

¹⁵On patristic and early Christian views of slavery more generally, see Franz Laub, *Die Begegnung des frühen Christentums mit der antiken Sklaverei* (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1982); Peter Garnsey, *Ideas of Slavery from Aristotle to Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Ramelli, *Social Justice*; Chris De Wet, *Preaching Bondage: John Chrysostom and the Discourse of Slavery in Early Christianity* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015); Chris De Wet, *The Unbound God: Slavery and the Formation of Early Christian Thought* (London: Routledge, 2017); *Slavery in the Late Antique World, 150–700 CE*, ed. by Chris De Wet, Majastina Kahlos, and Ville Vuolanto (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

¹⁶Ramelli, 'Gregory of Nyssa's Position', 116.

¹⁷Bergadá provides three points: humans cannot enslave other humans; all humans are made in the image of God; one cannot enslave one who is by nature free. Bergadá 'La condemnation', 185–96. Weisser also divides the argument into three steps: All people are equal and free; slavery transgresses the order of nature; slavery transgresses the divine order. Weisser, 'Philo's Therapeutae', 292. Dennis draws these into nine essential points. Dennis, 'Gregory of Nyssa's Attack on Slavery', 1065–72.

¹⁸Ecclesiastes 2:7. Unless otherwise noted, the translation is from Stuart Hall in *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on Ecclesiastes. An English Version with Supporting Studies*, ed. by Stuart George Hall (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1993); hereafter Hall. The Greek text and critical edition can be found in *Gregorii Nysseni Opera* V, ed. by Paul

– by identifying the ‘pride’ (ὕπερηφασία)¹⁹ of one human being who thinks ‘himself the master (δεσπότην) of his own kind’.²⁰ Such boasting directly challenges God, Gregory notes, for it is to God alone that humans are enslaved (alluding to Psalm 118:91 LXX).²¹ Slavery arrogates God’s authority, and, as Gregory goes on to argue, violates the inherent freedom proper to human nature. ‘You condemn man to slavery, when his nature is free and possesses free will (ἐλευθέρα ἢ φύσις καὶ αὐτεξούσιος), and you legislate in competition with God, overturning his law for the human species’.²² Slavery assumes God’s role and violates human freedom.

The homily proceeds to argue that this overstepping comes through the forgetfulness of the limits of the authority proper to human nature. Drawing from Genesis 1:26, Gregory details the authority proper to the human creature, who is ‘the owner of the earth, and appointed to government by the Creator’.²³ This authority extends over non-rational creation but does not and cannot include dominion over fellow humans. To claim and exercise such dominion is to bestialize fellow humans and, by so doing, to divide humanity into two – those who are enslaved and those who own, the result being that humanity is both ‘enslaved to itself’ and ‘the owner of itself’.²⁴ Gregory adds more rhetorical questions to highlight slavery’s absurdity: What value is a creature who is the divine image? If each human has dominion over all the earth, must one not buy all the earth – each human’s property – when one buys a human slave? To God alone, Gregory argues, does such power belong, but God gives freedom not slavery, and God gives freedom again after humans have lost it through sin.²⁵ The titles of owner and slave owe neither, he concludes, to any superiority in the former nor legitimacy in the relationship itself; master and slave share the same ‘origin’ and their ‘life is of the same kind’.²⁶ The arrangement of slavery is thus not one of nature but of flawed convention, based only on a perishable contract.²⁷

Central to the entire critique is Gregory’s distinctive theological anthropology, informed here primarily by his understanding of the creation of the whole of humanity in the image of God, the faculties proper to human nature in the image, and the bequeathal to humanity of dominion over the rest of creation in Genesis 1:26.²⁸ Slavery thus both divides into two groups those who are by nature one and violates the inherent freedom and infinite worth of human creatures. Connections between these critiques and Gregory’s wider theological and anthropological perspectives in other

Alexander and Werner Jaeger (Leiden: Brill, 1986); hereafter GNO V. This citation of Ecclesiastes is Hall’s translation (GNO V:334; Hall, 72).

¹⁹ *Eccl* 4 (GNO V:334; Hall, 73).

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Eccl* 4 (GNO V:335; Hall, 73).

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Eccl* 4 (GNO V:336; Hall, 74).

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Eccl* 4 (GNO V:338; Hall, 75). For Moriarty, Stoic rather than Christian origins account for this argument. Moriarty, ‘Human Owners, Human Slave’, 64–69. Dennis agrees on the Stoic influence but maintains that it only elucidates or confirms Biblical teaching. See Dennis, ‘Gregory of Nyssa’s Attack on Slavery’, 1068.

²⁷ *Eccl* 4 (GNO V:337; Hall, 75).

²⁸ Dennis points to Genesis 1:26 as ‘the text that dominates and actually determines much of his argument’. Dennis, ‘Gregory of Nyssa’s Attack on Slavery’, 1068.

texts have been well detailed. Against Rachel Moriarty's contention that Gregory's theme of common humanity is Stoic rather than Christian, Hans Boersma argues that Gregory's position arises from his anagogical understanding of the unity of the fullness of humanity in its originary first creation and ultimate destination in the apokatastasis.²⁹ In Boersma's reading of Gregory, divisions of humanity such as slave and master do not belong to human nature in its essence.³⁰

For Boersma, the unity of humanity in its protological origin and eschatological destination is also the key to understanding the divine image, which, in his reading, is primarily found in freedom of the will.³¹ Thus, slavery violates distinctively theological understandings of both unity and the freedom from necessity to which belongs humanity's likeness to God. Ramelli, likewise, draws out the connections between the critique of slavery and Gregory's wider theological affirmation of the centrality of freedom to human nature, focusing on Gregory's frequent recourse to Plato's argument that virtue is unruled (ἀδέσποτον) and his reinterpretation of this concept within the Christian logic of the divine image.³² Ramelli finds abundant support throughout Gregory's corpus.³³ For Gregory, human nature is, by virtue of its creation according to the image of God, free, and slavery a violation of that freedom.³⁴ That humanity is made in the image of God is tantamount to saying that humanity is created with freedom and independence. To enslave another, then, is to deny the image of God in that person. This much of Gregory's argument is clear from a straightforward reading of the homily.

Gregory's critique of slavery, however, does not rest solely on arguments about human freedom as constituting the image of God. Read in light of the broader scope of the homily, one finds that it is the interplay of both likeness and unlikeness – freedom and finitude – that provide the overarching rationale for the rejection of slavery. Moriarty, as well as Lionel Wickham, has called attention to the rhetorical nature of Gregory's homily, which entails contextualizing the slavery critique within the homily's judgments on wealth, pleasure, and usury – all of which, they argue, suggest that the overarching problem the homily addresses is the vice of pride and arrogance. For Moriarty, Gregory's writing against slave-owning 'falls squarely into the familiar

²⁹See too Ramelli's similar rebuttal in 'Gregory of Nyssa's Position', 107.

³⁰Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue*, 155–56. For the contrary view, that the image of God is in the body as well as the soul, see John Behr, 'The Rational Animal: A Rereading of Gregory of Nyssa's *De hominis opificio*', *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 7 (1999), 219–47.

³¹As Boersma writes: 'the notion of freedom from necessity—which Gregory describes as free will (ἀυτεξούσιον)—constitutes for him the very core of what it means to be a human being' (*Embodiment and Virtue*, 153). See, too, Weisser, 'Philo's Therapeutae', 297.

³²See Ramelli, 'Gregory of Nyssa's Position', 100–5. For Plato, see *Republic* 617e: Ἀρετῇ δὲ ἀδέσποτον, ἦν τιμῶν κατ' ἀτιμάζων πλέον κατ' ἔλαττον αὐτῆς ἕκαστος ἕξει. Αἰτία ἐλομένου: θεὸς ἀναίτιος.

³³See esp. Catechetical Oration 5; Contra Eunomium 2.1.224.10–15; On the Beatitudes 3.

³⁴It is worth noting that Gregory interweaves in *Eccl* 4 two senses of freedom – ἐλευθερία as opposed to slavery (whether spiritual or physical) and ἀυτεξούσιος (self-determination) – that are normally kept more distinct. On this point, see Bergadá, 'La condemnation', 187–89; Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue*, 153. The upshot of this knitting together is, at least, to suggest that legal freedom (or its absence) has some effect on the natural human faculty of freedom of will, even if the two freedoms are not identical.

territory of patristic denunciation of the improper use of worldly possessions'.³⁵ For both Moriarty and Wickham, this judgment cautions celebration of Gregory's abolitionism: Gregory, they suggest, sees slavery's primary problem as worldly vanity rather than the injustice and violence done to those enslaved.³⁶ While such a reading, it seems, underplays Gregory's own emphasis on the abrogation of freedom entailed in slavery, it helpfully poses the question of what to make of the relationship between the critique of slavery alongside the critiques of wealth and pleasure. These critiques, it seems, together express a fuller picture of Gregory's theological anthropology and display the role of finitude, as well as freedom, in his social ethics. Enslavement denies the divine image of those enslaved. But for the slave-owner, it also rejects the humility and finitude proper to all human creatures. To deny one's finitude, Gregory suggests – whether through pleasure, wealth, or luxury – entails social injustice, and slavery is in many ways the paradigmatic expression not only of this denial but also of its consequences.

Several passages in the homily make clear that Gregory's concern is not only to inculcate a respect for the divinely ordained freedom of all humans but also to make clear that a life of virtue entails an acceptance of the limitations, dependence, and finitude that characterize human nature. Slavery, he stresses, depends upon and expresses the fallacious belief that humans are superior to one another; it is fallacious because slavery brings no such advantage. It brings 'not longevity, nor beauty, nor good health, nor superiority in virtue'.³⁷ The plight of human finitude, Gregory continues, is common to all:

Your origin is from the same ancestors, your life is of the same kind, sufferings of soul and body prevail alike over you who own him and over the one who is subject to your ownership—pains and pleasures, merriment and distress, sorrows and delights, rages and terrors, sickness and death. Is there any difference in these things between the slave and his owner? Do they not draw in the same air as they breathe? Do they not see the sun in the same way? Do they not alike sustain their being by consuming food? Is not the arrangement of their guts the same? Are not the two one dust after death (ὁὐ μίᾱ κόνις οἱ δύο μετὰ τοῦ θάνατου)?³⁸

To enslave, as Gregory has reasoned, is to divide humanity, but human experience attests to the universality of finitude. All persons live lives of passibility and mutability; all depend on the air for breath, on their senses to know the world, on food to live. Where is equality more obvious than in the viscera and in the decomposition of the body after death?

³⁵Moriarty, 'Human Owners, Human Slaves', 63. Wickham similarly writes: 'On the passage as a whole [sc. *Ecc* 4] I would observe that in context it is not so much a condemnation of slavery or about the evils of owning slaves, as a condemnation of pride in the sense of overweening arrogance. Slavery is, of course, an issue for public conscience and morality, and Gregory's arguments are, in the end, arguments for the abolition of slavery. But Gregory treats the matter in the domain of private conscience'. Wickham, 'Homily IV', 179. Weisser argues that the homily is united by Gregory's critique of 'the vanity of possession'. Weisser, 'Philo's Therapeutae', 291.

³⁶As Dennis ('Relationship', 1065) notes, Gregory does not address enslaved persons in the homily.

³⁷*Ecc* 4 (GNO V:338; Hall, 75).

³⁸*Ibid.*

Striking here is Gregory's subtle turn: having critiqued slavery by reminding enslavers what sort of creatures the enslaved are (images of God, rulers of the world, inherently free), now he critiques slavery by reminding enslavers what sort of creatures they are (mutable, passible, dependent, and mortal). The social injustice of slavery is inseparable from the desire for some humans to step beyond these limitations – a desire that is impossible to realize and yet devastating in its attempts.

This reminder of the limitations of finitude serves to unite the two critiques of the homily. When Gregory turns to the problems of luxury and wealth, he addresses them primarily through a critique of pride (Solomon's pride identified at the homily's beginning) and the misbegotten hope that pleasure and possessions might bring permanence to the instability of finitude. Having argued that each human, in some sense, owns all the earth, Gregory critiques the desire for wealth by arguing that it oversteps the limited confines of human authority over creation. God, he writes, has given to human creatures what they may grow and eat underground; to go beneath the ground, to what humans have not sown, transgresses the limitations of the gift.³⁹ Human authority is limited, and so too is human nature – realities that accumulation can never change.

What hope is there, that someone who lives amidst so much gold will thereby become ... physically strong, pleasant to look at, extending life for many centuries, free from aging, disease and pain, and all the things sought for in the life of the flesh? But nobody is so absurd or so unobservant of our common humanity (τῆς φύσεως τῆς κοινῆς) as to think that these things would come to human beings, if only money were poured out before everyone in vast quantities on demand.⁴⁰

One cannot transcend the limitations of our common humanity through gold; but this, in Gregory's reading, is the allure of wealth and all created things. Sorrow and suffering are found when the permanence that can only be found in that which transcends creation is sought instead of that which is mutable and created. Those who own slaves and who seek riches, Gregory reminds, remain human.

These passages illuminate the attention to human finitude that unites the homily's critique of slavery and wealth. Slavery is not akin to greed in that Gregory considers the slave simply another possession – this much is clear in his insistence on the infinite worth of the human creature. Rather, slavery and greed share for Gregory in being denials of finitude and attempts to find permanence in material, mutable goods. Slavery itself makes clear the destructive social cost of this denial and the suffering of others it entails. The therapy Gregory prescribes involves recognizing both the humanity of others and the humility of one's own finitude.

3. Seeing finitude: Famines and Graves in *Quat Uni*

The interplay of humanity's likeness and difference from God also plays a key role in Gregory's critique of the mistreatment of the poor and sick in the sermon,

³⁹*Ecc*l 4 (GNO V:338; Hall, 76).

⁴⁰*Ecc*l 4 (GNO V:340–1; Hall, 77).

In illud: Quatenus uni ex his fecistis mihi fecistis (= *Quat Uni*).⁴¹ As Susan Holman has argued, this sermon offers a rare window into Gregory's understanding of poverty and illness and how he perceived the role of almsgiving as opportunities for Christian transformation. For Gregory, as Holman puts it, 'Physical lepers become the essential means by which spiritual lepers may find a mediator to wipe away their own polluting spots of greed and passion'.⁴² Holman helpfully draws attention to the medical background in view, especially the notions of contagion and remedy that Gregory would have absorbed. She also suggests, intriguingly, that without the anti-Eunomian and anti-Apollinarian affirmations of Christ's coequal status within the Godhead and full participation in mutable flesh, Gregory likely would not have so drastically pointed to the leper's diseased bodies as sites of spiritual transformation.⁴³ Here, we want to consider the way Gregory's 'mirroring' of diseased bodies allows him to draw attention to the aspects of finitude constituent to human nature even as he affirms the dignity of the poor. In showing his hearers the bodies of the dying, he shows them a mirror of their common frailty and, precisely therein, the way in which they may mirror the divine.

Quat Uni is replete with visual, spectral imagery, especially using the term *θέαμα*. Gregory begins by describing 'the dreadful vision' (*θεάματα τῆς φοβεράς*) he himself sees of the return of Christ.⁴⁴ The vision impresses his soul with such fear 'that it seems to be coming to life'.⁴⁵ This fearful image is meant to inculcate watchfulness and diligence in keeping the commands presented in Matthew's portrayal of the *parousia* in Matthew 25 to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and care for the sick. The church, however, Gregory insists, has failed and continues to fail in these injunctions.

The proof of this failing is the primary spectacle of the sermon. Gregory dwells extensively and often in grotesque and spectacularizing fashion on the bodily horrors of those who suffer from famine and disease. 'You see these people', he writes, 'whose frightful malady has changed them into beasts. In place of fingernails, the disease has caused them to bear pieces of wood on hands and feet'.⁴⁶ The disfigured are variously described in terms of the bodily features: 'this one brandishes a mutilated hand, another exposes a bloated abdomen, a third uncovers a now useless face and another a leg eaten away with gangrene'.⁴⁷ Disease and deformity, Gregory suggests, have drawn out the irrational and bestial nature of these human sufferers. Those who yesterday walked and 'looked at the sky' are today 'walking on four feet, practically changed into animals'.⁴⁸ Their lot, moreover, is worse than that of animals. In losing the form of the human creature, they have been transformed into something less

⁴¹For a good translation and contextualization of this sermon, see Susan R. Holman, *The Hungry are Dying: Beggars and Bishops in Roman Cappadocia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). The Greek text and critical edition can be found in Gregorii Nysseni Opera IX/1, ed. by Günter Heil et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1967); hereafter GNO IX/1.

⁴²Holman, *The Hungry are Dying*, 161.

⁴³Holman, *The Hungry are Dying*, 166.

⁴⁴*Quat Uni* (GNO IX/1:111; Holman, 199).

⁴⁵*Quat Uni* (GNO IX/1:111; Holman, 200).

⁴⁶*Quat Uni* (GNO IX/1:114; Holman, 201).

⁴⁷*Quat Uni* (GNO IX/1:119; Holman, 203).

⁴⁸*Quat Uni* (GNO IX/1:114; Holman, 201). One thinks here of Gregory's reflections linking human posture and intellect in *On the Human Image of God* 8.

than men, even less than animals; they have been ‘transformed into monsters’.⁴⁹ In a deliberate appeal to Genesis 1:27, Gregory contrasts the governing vocation of humans created in the image of God with the ‘monstrous’ figures that appear to his hearers:

Man born in the image of God (ὅτι ἄνθρωπος, ὁ κατ’ εἰκόνα θεοῦ γεγινώς), entrusted with governance of the earth (ὁ κυριεύει τῆς γῆς τεταγμένος) and rule over all creatures, [is] here so alienated by sickness that one hesitates to recognize him. He has not of the appearance of man, nor those of a beast. Do you think about the man? But the human body disowns this hideous form. Do you try to see here an animal? But there is no species that takes the form of this monster (οὐδὲ ἕκεῖνα τῆν ὁμοιότητα τοῦ φαινομένου προσίεται).⁵⁰

Gregory insists that the physical characteristics of sickness and diseases have led his hearers to misapprehend the human nature of their fellows. Suffering confounds the capacity to recognize and act.

This atrocious spectacle (θέαματι) has often filled me with alarm; often I have felt deeply upset by it, and now it utterly confounds my thoughts. I see again this pitiable suffering, these scenes that force one to tears, the dead are displayed among the living along the road (εἶδον πάθος ἐλεεινόν, εἶδον θέαμα δακρύων πλήρες· πρόκεινται κατὰ τὰς ὁδοὺς τῶν παριόντων ἀνθρώπων ἄνθρωποι νεκροί). Rather than men, theirs is a lamentable wreckage. Their malady has robbed them of the traits that would permit them to be identified. One is not able to recognize humans in them: they have lost the form (οὐ γὰρ ἔχουσιν ἀπὸ τῶν τῆς φύσεως χαρακτῆρων ἐπιγινώσκεισθαι ἄνθρωποι).⁵¹

Gregory intertwines reflection on human nature – its essence and its characteristic traits – with the process of looking at disease-ridden bodies. The effect of disease is such that it causes the physical healthy to misapprehend the traits (χαρακτῆρων) that would identify the sick as human. By holding up the spectacle of suffering bodies, the sermon opens a pathway to restored vision.

This path, however, is occluded by a different sort of blindness – that born of the refusal to act with charity. The sufferers whose grotesque physicality is a constant refrain in the sermon are in fact a double mirror for the healthy. First, they mirror the healthy in so far as their physical maladies are produced by the spiritual sickness of those who refuse to help them. Gregory writes that it is because of the refusal of their common humanity that those who suffer must ‘make a parade of their infirmities [giving] the crowds the spectacle of their crippled bodies’.⁵² But those who are diseased and afflicted also mirror their fellow humans because they reveal the fate, character, or aspect of mortality, of death and disease, that are shared among all. Thus, the broken bodies of those who suffer are images of two failures of acknowledgment. The healthy have both failed to acknowledge the sufferers’ humanity and failed to

⁴⁹ *Quat Uni* (GNO IX/1:115; Holman, 201).

⁵⁰ *Quat Uni* (GNO IX/1:116; Holman, 201).

⁵¹ *Quat Uni* (GNO IX/1:117–18; Holman, 202). Translation modified.

⁵² *Quat Uni* (GNO IX/1:116; Holman, 202).

acknowledge their own human nature. ‘You see a man’, Gregory writes, ‘and in him you have no respect for a brother? No, you do not pity a being of your own race; his affliction only instills horror in you, his begging repels you, and you flee his approach like the assault of a wild beast You who share the nature of this brokenness, you flee your own race’.⁵³ Those who suffer ought to be pitied and given succor because their suffering expresses the universal tragedy of human nature in its current mortality. Gregory twice encourages his hearers to reflect on the common mortality they share with their neighbors as a way to reflect on the commonality of human nature.

Remember who you are and on whom you contemplate: a human person like yourself, whose basic nature is no different from your own (ὅτι περὶ ἀνθρώπων ἄνθρωπος, οὐδὲν ἰδιάζου ἐν σεαυτῷ παρὰ τὴν κοινὴν κεκτημένος φύσιν). Don’t count too heavily on the future. In condemning the sickness that preys upon the body of this man, you fail to consider whether you might be, in the process, condemning yourself and all nature. For you yourself belong to the common nature of all (μετέχεις δὲ καὶ σὺ τῆς φύσεως παραπλησίως τοῖς πᾶσι).⁵⁴

Slightly later, Gregory repeats this sentiment:

Remember who they are on whom we meditate: on human beings, in no way distinct from common nature (ὅτι περὶ ἀνθρώπων ἄνθρωποι, οὐδὲν ἰδιάζου παρὰ τὴν κοινὴν φύσιν ἕφ’ ἑαυτῶν ἔχοντες). ‘There is for all only one entrance into life’ [Wis. 7:6]: one way to live, to drink, to eat, only one physical make-up, a common biological law, only one physical death, only one return to the dust. All are similarly bound for decomposition (οὐδὲν τῶν συνεστῶτων παγίαι ἔχει τὴν σύστασιν). The body lives bound to the soul; like a transitory bubble, the spirit clothes itself in the body.⁵⁵

Both passages emphasize a key theme: Death is common, and suffering and sickness are intertwined with life. To deny our common mortality and finitude, Gregory insists, is not just to delude ourselves but to participate actively with death itself, doubling and redoubling such suffering.

In this homily, the spectacularizing nature of Gregory’s anthropological critique of injustice is brought into sharp relief. While Gregory appeals to the recognition of the image of God in all humanity as a motive to treating the poor with dignity and respect, he also pictures the grotesque bodies of the suffering as a mirror of the diseased souls who refuse mercy. In attending to these mirrors of suffering, Gregory points to the profoundly misshapen form of humanity that turns a blind eye to suffering. In so doing, Gregory reflects to his listeners their own mortality and finitude. In looking upon the diseased, they are summoned to remember who they really are.

⁵³ *Quat Uni* (GNO IX/1:115; Holman, 201).

⁵⁴ *Quat Uni* (GNO IX/2:115; Holman, 201).

⁵⁵ *Quat Uni* (GNO IX/1:120; Holman, 203).

4. 'The mysteries of our existence': Humility in the first homily on the beatitudes

As alluded to at the beginning of this essay, the dual forms of mirroring – imaging God and imaging death – figure at key moments in Gregory's *Homilies on the Beatitudes*. In the sixth homily, we find Gregory's celebrated articulation of how the virtuous soul functions as a mirror reflecting the divine image.⁵⁶ While God cannot be seen in his essence, Gregory argues, the divine image appears reflected in the cleansed mirror of the pure heart.⁵⁷ But to arrive here, one must traverse the lower rungs of the ladder, and that begins with reckoning with the first beatitude, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit'. This beatitude, in Gregory's interpretation, is especially linked with the injunction to humility and a repudiation of wealth, both of which are undergirded by a deep reflection on the poverty and finitude of human nature.

In the first homily, Gregory first introduces the larger function of the beatitudes before treating the first beatitude, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God'. The beatitudes as whole, for Gregory, serve as sequential steps for redrawing the defaced image of God in humanity – and here Gregory appeals specifically to Genesis 1:27, commenting that 'human nature, being an image of the transcendent blessedness (ἡ ἀνθρωπίνη φύσις, εἰκὼν οὕσα τῆς ὑπερκεμένης μακαριότητος), is itself also marked out as possessing the same excellent beauty, when it displays in itself the features proper to the characteristics of blessedness'.⁵⁸ In this paradigm, Gregory argues that the phrase 'poor in spirit' most properly refers to 'voluntary humility' (ἐκούσιον ταπεινοφροσύνην), which Gregory interprets in a distinctly Christological fashion – though, to be sure, material poverty remains instrumental.⁵⁹ Given the post-lapsarian proclivity to pride, humility is the antidote that enables the recovery of virtue and the ascent to God. Gregory's rationale for why humility is the first step is especially illuminating for its stress on human nature's inherent fragility:

Every other aspect of the divine nature exceeds the limit of human littleness (ἐπεὶ οὖν τὰ ἄλλα πάντα ὅσα περὶ τὴν θεϊὰν καθορᾶται φύσιν ὑπερπίπτει τὸ μέτρον τῆς ἀνθρωπίνης βραχύτητος), whereas humility has a natural affinity with us, and grows up with those who arrive on the ground, who consist of earth and into earth dissolve [cf. Gen 3:19]; consequently, in what is natural and possible even you have imitated God and put on the blessed shape.⁶⁰

Of all the virtues of the divine nature, humility is the one most natural, as it were, to human nature. Nonetheless, humility is anything but easy to acquire. Sin causes pride to dominate the human heart, and for this reason, Gregory argues, God became

⁵⁶On the importance of the sixth homily for Gregory's understanding of the spiritual life, see Harrison, *Grace and Human Freedom*, 111–16.

⁵⁷Beat 6.4 (GNO VII/2:142; Hall, 69).

⁵⁸Beat 1.2 (GNO VII/2:80–81; Hall, 25).

⁵⁹Beat 1.4 (GNO VII/2:83; Hall, 27). Meredith draws attention to Gregory's originality in the Greek philosophical tradition in identifying humility with the imitation of Christ. This emphasis is rare in Gregory's other writings and shares many similarities to Augustine's emphasis on Christ's humility as the cure for the principal human sin of pride. Anthony Meredith, 'Gregory of Nyssa, *De Beatitudinibus*, Oratio I', in *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Beatitudes*, ed. by Stuart George Hall (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 105–106.

⁶⁰Beat 1.4 (GNO VII/2:83; Hall, 27).

a human being and took on the yoke of slavery. Gregory draws from several scriptural passages to encourage the imitation of Christ's humility, including Philippians 2:5–7 and Luke 2:1–5. The Incarnation, for Gregory, models the kind of humility that vanquishes pride and propels the ascent to God.

Gregory, however, does not only point to Christ's Incarnation as the model of voluntary humility; he also draws attention to the irrationality (ἀλογία) of pride, which should, he hopes, render the pathway of humility more scalable.⁶¹

How might one better demonstrate the vanity of swelling pride ... than by showing what our nature is? One who looks into himself and not at what is around him could not readily fall into such a condition. What then is a human being? You would like me to use words of highest honor and esteem? Yet the one who embellishes our life and equips the nobility of man to be more worth boasting of, traces our nature back to an origin from mud.⁶²

Looking at human nature itself – not the ‘things around it’ – reveals humility as the key to reflecting the divine image. As in *Quat Uni*, Gregory distinguishes the essential aspects of human nature from its visible characteristics. And here, too, Gregory describes human nature in terms of its limitations and finitude – especially its temporally finite character: ‘Do you not see at each end the limits of human life’, Gregory writes, ‘how it begins and where it ends’ (οὐχ ὁρᾷς εἰς ἀμφοτέρωθεν τῆς ζωῆς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου τὰ πέρατα, καὶ ὅπως ἄρχεται καὶ εἰς ὃ τι λήγει);⁶³ Pride comes from looking at the external markers of youthful appearance – strong hands, quick feet, curly hair, finely embroidered clothing, well-polished shoes. To those who look at such things, Gregory points elsewhere. ‘I will show you’ he writes, ‘as in a mirror, who you are and what you are’.⁶⁴ What the hearers discover in this mirror is nothing pretty – at least according to conventional human measures – but rather a grotesque reflection of human mortality:

Have you not seen in the burial ground the mysteries of our existence? Have you not seen the heap of bones piled on each other, skulls stripped of flesh, staring fearsome and horrible from empty eye-sockets? Have you seen the grinning mouths and the rest of the limbs lying casually about? If you have seen those things, then in them you have observed yourself.⁶⁵

Death, then, serves to reveal what sort of creatures human beings are. Its powers of detachment and purification reside both in each creature's actual death and in death's revelation of the finitude of human nature.⁶⁶ It is this latter sense of death's pedagogy

⁶¹Beat 1.5 (GNO VII/2:85; Hall, 28).

⁶²Beat 1.5 (GNO VII/2:85; Hall, 28, lightly modified).

⁶³Beat 1.5 (GNO VII/2:85–86; Hall, 28).

⁶⁴Beat 1.5 (GNO VII/2:86; Hall, 28): δεῖξω σοι ὡσπερ ἐν κατόπτρῳ τίς εἶ καὶ οἷός εἶ. We have altered Hall's translation here, which reads ‘I will shew [sic] you your reflection, who you are and what you are’.

⁶⁵Beat. 1.6 (GNO VII/2:86; Hall, 28–29).

⁶⁶This is also the strand of Gregory's thought that Balthasar picks up when he compares sexual procreation – both punishment and favor – to death itself: ‘Although it is the supreme punishment for man's

that animates the mirroring of death. The skulls held rhetorically before his listeners, the bones that they will become, mock all earthly vanity. They are the best picture of human nature for those suffering from the disease of pride, and they thus open the way for the imitation of the God who transcends death.

5. Conclusion

Central to Gregory's arguments against slavery, wealth, and the mistreatment of the diseased to them is reflection on what it means to be human. Human creatures may not enslave others, ignore the sick, or accumulate undue wealth because they are, as created in the image of God, granted autonomy and freedom – the denial of which is tantamount to the denial of human nature itself. In this, Gregory's critiques of these various forms of social injustice are celebrations of the heights of human dignity. Human worth, he argues, cannot be calculated in wealth. But Gregory also discerns in these denials of the humanity of others an even more basic denial – the denial of one's own finitude. The allure of slavery and luxury is their capacity to obscure – even if only for the briefest moment – the smallness and transience of human nature.

What these texts thus reveal is that the pathway to the imitation of God is not found through avenues of false permanence but through a Christological inhabitation of transience and smallness. Christ's incarnate life reveals that these dimensions of finitude are not, in the ethical life of virtue, to be transcended in a simplistic way but to be transcended by being accepted in a manner imitating Christ. The condemnation of the injustices of slavery and wealth reveals how likeness to and difference from God are for Gregory indelibly inscribed in the heart of human nature. One form of difference, that of vice, must be overcome; the other, however, that of finitude, must be accepted. Thus it is that Gregory's understanding of freedom is no libertinism that sees any form of human limitation as a shackle to be rejected. Rather, Gregory's picture of freedom, drawn in lines that trace the Incarnation, takes the form of humility and dependence. To become free – to imitate the divine nature – is to follow Christ's assumption of human finitude. Put differently, one becomes most like the transcendent and impassible God, paradoxically, by accepting the limitations and dependencies of finitude. To refuse these limitations and seek to surpass them otherwise is not only a matter of personal virtue but of the health and wellbeing of others.

Gregory is acutely aware of the ways in which false desires for permanence are destructive not only of individual virtue but also of the fabric of human society. The beauty of the flesh – just like the beauty of the human mind or the beauty of creation more broadly – is dangerous in so far as it obscures the transience proper to creaturely nature. Death, however, makes manifest the finitude of the flesh and the creature. The way of the human creature when cut out against the good of creation is the way of pride; it is a refusal of creation in its finitude as a divine gift. Mortality, meanwhile,

original fault, it is death, nonetheless, that detaches us from the world and purifies us of all concupiscent'. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought: An Essay on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa*, trans. by Mark Sebanc (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), pp. 78–79.

reveals the vanity of seeking permanence in possession and consumption and shows that to own slaves reveals a misunderstanding of human nature at a fundamental level. By holding up before his hearers the mirror of death, he holds up to them their true nature – and, precisely there, the pathway to being reformed in the image of God. In Gregory’s paradoxical and enigmatic theological anthropology, it is only in the proper embrace of the creature’s difference from God that the creature can become like God.

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