ABSTRACT

This chapter identifies an apophatic theology common to the three Cappadocian Fathers—Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa. The central theme of their apophatic theology is the incomprehensibility of God. God, they argue, is known under multiple concepts and names. The distinction, common in Stoic and post-Hellenistic philosophy, between conceptualization and comprehension underlies their theological epistemology. It is shown, moreover, that they endorsed a threefold scheme of concept formation for God common in Platonism: (1) the way of negation; (2) the way of analogy; (3) the way of ascent. They argue that the resulting notion of God is ‘dim’ and ‘trifling’. Even biblical saints who were granted direct revelation did not achieve full comprehension. This apophatic theology was developed to counter the theological epistemology of Eunomius of Cyzicus.

KEYWORDS

Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Eunomius of Cyzicus, Platonism, Stoic epistemology, divine names, conceptualism, κατάληψις.
The trio of bishop-theologians known today as ‘the Cappadocians’—Basil of Caesarea (ca. 330-378), Gregory of Nazianzus (329-ca. 390), and Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 335-ca. 394)—played a major part in the development of Christian apophatic theology. This chapter will attempt to uncover the significance of their work in this area. The label ‘apophatic theology’ is an anachronism for the Cappadocians. It is, moreover, potentially misleading: since an apophasis is a negation, one might think that this will be a chapter on negations in the Cappadocians. For these authors, however, negation is merely one part of the procedure of conceiving of God, and even at its best, this procedure can yield only a likeness of the truth. It is this overarching sense of the incomprehensibility of God, and not a narrow account of negations (e.g. ‘God is infinite’) that is intended herein by ‘apophatic theology.’

To appreciate the contribution of the Cappadocians, we must identify what knowing meant for them. Much of their epistemological grammar comes from the Stoics, for whom the basic building block of conceptual thinking is the impression (φαντασία). According to the Stoics, all animals receive impressions through the senses, but rational animals receive these impressions in propositional form (Frede 1999). As we learn from Diogenes Laertius, the Stoics considered rational impressions themselves to be thoughts (νόησεις) (VII.51). Among rational impressions some, probably most, are ‘apprehensive’ (καταληπτικαί). Apprehensive impressions constitute the criterion of truth and enable the formation of general concepts (Cicero, Acad. II.22, 31). An apprehensive impression is defined as an impression that ‘comes from what exists, and is stamped and impressed in conformity with the existent item itself, and is such as could not arise from what does not exist’ (Sextus Empiricus, PH II.4). Every apprehensive impression, therefore, is a thought, but not every thought is an apprehensive impression. The state of possessing apprehensive impressions is called κατάληψις, a term whose root metaphor is that of
grasping and which is translated ‘apprehension’ or ‘cognition’ or ‘comprehension.’ The difference between mere thought and apprehensive thought is expressed in Greek by using νοέω and its derivatives for thought and λαμβάνω and its derivatives for grasping; again, the latter is a subset of the former. The distinction appears not only in the Stoics but also in their skeptical critics, who maintain that a skeptic can engage in conceptual thought (νόησις) without apprehensive impressions (Sextus Empiricus, PH II.10). Plotinus too draws this distinction (Enn. 4.3.30). It underlies the apophaticism of the Cappadocians, according to whom one can form a concept of God by thinking about God’s created effects, some of which are themselves graspable, without ever grasping the divine nature. It has long been noted that the denial of ‘apprehension’ is crucial for the Cappadocians, though this attitude towards apprehension has often been conflated with a hostility to concepts generally (e.g. Balthasar 1995 [1942, 1988], 107). According to Vladimir Lossky, Cappadocian apophaticism ‘is, above all, an attitude of mind which refuses to form concepts about God’ (Lossky 1957 [1944], 38-39). To the contrary, the Cappadocians’ viewpoint that concepts do not grant comprehension should not be taken as an anti-conceptualism. In fact, we will see repeatedly their view that human concepts present a dim likeness of God. For the Cappadocians, to the extent that we can grasp God’s effects, we can inferentially and indirectly think of their Creator, though we cannot perceive God.

One advantage of drawing this distinction is that conceptual thought is amenable to improvement and to the employment of methodical procedures, which can refine one’s capacities for judgment. Given God’s inaccessibility to apprehension, humanity stands in need of such procedures—what Gregory of Nyssa calls ‘modes of consideration (οἱ τῆς τοιαύτης κατανοήσεως τρόποι)’ (Beat. 6, 141.1-2 Callahan). The second-century Platonist Alcinous
identified three such modes, each of which he calls a ‘way of conceiving’ (νόησις) of God, and each of which appears in the Cappadocians.

(1) The way of abstraction or negation, whereby we conceive of God ‘by abstraction of these attributes [e.g. whole and part], just as we form the conception of a point by abstraction from sensible phenomena . . .’

(2) The way ‘of analogy,’ for instance, ‘the sun is to vision and to visible objects . . as the primal intellect is to the power of intellection in the soul and to its objects.’

(3) The way of pre-eminence or, as we can call it, of ascent. Here, ‘one contemplates first beauty in bodies, then after that turns to the beauty in the soul, then to that in customs and laws, and then to the ‘great sea of Beauty,’ after which one gains an intuition of the Good itself . .’ (Didaskalikos 10.5).

These three modes appear, with differences of terminology, in various authors, including Celsus (in Origen, c. Cels. 7.42). Each mode can be traced to Plato: the first to Timaeus 28c and Parmenides 137c4-142a8, the second to Republic 507aff., and the third to Symposium 209e5-212a7. These Platonic proof texts will be important to bear in mind when we analyze the Cappadocians. The first mode gives rise to negative theology strictly speaking. While the Cappadocians practice this mode, they devote relatively less space to it in comparison with its greater role in mainstream Platonism (see Gerson in this volume). Moreover, we do not find our trio making the denial of both parts of an opposed pair (e.g. part and whole) as we see in Platonist negative theology (Reynard 2010). The other two modes draw the greatest attention from the Cappadocians, who closely align and even combine the ways of analogy and of ascent and make constant allusions to the Platonic source-texts underlying these modes.
In late antiquity, the mode of analogy was often expressed by saying that humanity cannot know God in God’s essence, but only from God’s works (see, e.g., Dodds 1963: 312). The widely read pseudo-Aristotelian work *On the Cosmos*, from perhaps the first century BCE, distinguished between God’s transcendent essence or substance (οὐσία) and God’s power (δύναμις) (*Mund.* 6, 397a19-20). Although God cannot be seen directly by mortals, God ‘can be seen from the works themselves’ (*Mund.* 6, 399b21-22). Similar language appears in Philo of Alexandria (e.g. *Post. Cain.* 20; *Spec. leg.* I.41-49; see Louth in this volume). From God’s works, Philo argues, we come to know that God is, but not what God is (*Spec. leg.* I.32-35)—a distinction endorsed by all three Cappadocians. According to Clement of Alexandria, God is unknowable ‘according to essence’ (κατ’ οὐσίαν), though knowable ‘in power’ (δυνάμει) (Hägg 2006: 239-51; cf. Runia 2004). From these authors the Cappadocians inherited a rich set of reflections on the way of analogy. One difference between Pseudo-Aristotle and Alcinous on one hand and Philo, Clement, and the Cappadocians on the other is that, for the latter, the divine works in question include both those knowable from the created order generally and those known only through scriptural revelation.

We have now uncovered sources of Cappadocian apophaticism. However, the impetus for their development of this apophatic theology came in the course of their argument against the anti-Nicene writer Eunomius of Cyzicus, who identified God as ‘unbegotten essence.’ We will examine Eunomius’ argument for this claim and Basil’s response below. The apophatic theology Basil developed to counter Eunomius extended to numerous topics across his and the two Gregories’ varied corpora. This chapter can offer only a sketch of the three, beginning with Basil. The intention is not to suggest a total uniformity among the Cappadocians; some unique features of style and substance will be noted below. In the area of apophatic theology, however,
the similarities are so great that it would be misleading to follow the fashionable emphasis on the
differences among them. The following will present evidence for the use of the Platonists’
threefold conception of God—by negation, analogy, and ascent—by the three Cappadocians.
This procedure, I will argue, underlies the distinction at the heart of their apophatic theology
between conceiving of and comprehending God.

BASIL

Much of the distinctive hue of Cappadocian apophaticism appears already in Basil of Caesarea’s
_Against Eunomius_ (364/5). This work quotes and responds to Eunomius’ _Apology_, which had
originally been delivered as a defense speech to a synod in Constantinople in 360/61 and later
revised for publication. The salient part of Eunomius’ text is its account of the adjective
‘unbegotten’ (_agennētos_). Christian writers had long used this venerable term to characterize the
unique Creator of all in contrast with the pagan gods. For Eunomius, this term, contrary to
appearances, is not said ‘as a privation’ (_Apol._ 8). Privative terms identify ontological
deprivations: ‘privations are privations of things that belong by nature and are secondary to
possessions. Now there was no generation in God by nature, nor is it true that God first
possessed this and then was deprived of it to become unbegotten’ (_Apol._ 8). For Eunomius,
calling God ‘unbegotten’ is the same as calling God ‘the one who is’ (Ex 3:14): it is semantically
equivalent to the affirmation of God’s being (Radde-Gallwitz 2009, 104-5).

There appears to be no role in Eunomius’ theology for a negative _term_ as such. Yet, at the
level of the proposition, he does employ negation. In _Apology_ 8, Eunomius writes a disjunctive
syllogism to demonstrate that ‘unbegotten’ must modify ‘substance’ (_oūσία_). He does so by
negating each of the following alternatives: ‘unbegotten’ (1) is not based on human
conceptualization (κατ’ ἐπίνοιαν); (2) is not said as a privation (κατὰ στέρησιν); (3) does not name a part of God; and (4) does not name another entity within God or alongside God. Having eliminated the false options, he concludes that the term names God as God is: it is ‘unbegotten substance.’

Eunomius’ syllogism prompted some of the Cappadocians’ most creative epistemological ventures. In his Against Eunomius, Basil rebuts the first two parts of Eunomius’ disjunction: when we say God is unbegotten, this is based on human conceptualization and it is a privative term. While Basil concedes that there is no prior state of which God is deprived when we say ‘unbegotten,’ so that it does not denote an ontological privation, he maintains that the term is truly a negation. According to Basil, negative or privative terms play two roles: to indicate absences and to regulate concept formation. For instance, ‘unbegotten’ serves to indicate that no begetting is present to God. It also, like other terms, provides mental rules: ‘For example, whenever we call [God] “incorruptible,” we are implicitly saying to ourselves or to those who hear us: “Do not think that God is subject to corruption.” Whenever we call him “invisible”: “Do not suppose that he can be comprehended by the perception that comes through the eyes.” Whenever we call him “immortal”: “Do not think that death happens to God.” It is the same whenever we call him “unbegotten”: “Do not believe that the being of God depends on any cause or principle” (Eun. I.10). Negations are how one guards oneself from ‘inappropriate notions’ of God (Eun. I.10). Negations qua negations are therefore necessary. This argument amounts to a strong defense of the way of negation without elevating negations above affirmations.

Already one can see the role of notions in Basil’s reply (DelCogliano 2010). The topic of conceptualization (ἐπίνοια) is a major theme of Against Eunomius I (Radde-Gallwitz 2009, 143-54). Basil maintains that some, perhaps all, true descriptions of God have been devised by
conceptualization. In contrast with Eunomius, Basil does not think it inconsistent to affirm that some theological terms are both revealed and conceptual. Moreover, he has no problem accepting terms not directly revealed in scripture—for instance, ‘unbegotten’. The various divine names represent God ‘according to various applications’ of the mind (Eun. I.7).

Perhaps Basil’s trickiest task is to state how, given God’s metaphysical partlessness and simplicity, human knowledge of God can be thought of as partial without implying that distinct terms identify distinct parts of God. Basil’s handling of this delicate question leads him to introduce the notion of the incomprehensibility of the divine essence or substance. Basil takes Eunomius’ conclusion, ‘it must be unbegotten substance,’ to imply a claim to comprehend the divine substance, a claim that fails on more than one score. For one thing, Basil notes that the conclusion does not follow from its premises. In Basil’s assessment, not only has Eunomius misunderstood the content of his disjuncts, such as when Eunomius interprets a negation as an assertion, he has also failed to show that the disjuncts exhaust the range of possibilities. Even if one concedes that ‘unbegotten’ is not said by way of conceptualization or as a negation or as referring to a part, it does not follow that ‘unbegottenness is the substance (τὸ ἀγέννητον τὴν οὐσίαν)’ (Eun. I.11; cf. I.5, I.8), which is how Basil, perhaps unfairly, rephrases Eunomius’ ‘it must be unbegotten substance (αὐτὸ ἂν εἴη οὐσία ἀγέννητος)’ (Apol. 8). Basil’s way of putting the point raises the stakes considerably: no longer are we dealing with an adjective that describes the divine substance, but with a strict identity between what it is to be unbegotten and what it is to be God. For Basil, the phrase implies that we can know what it is to be God and that no term besides ‘unbegotten’ contributes anything to that knowledge.

Basil offers a series of arguments against the possibility of knowing the divine essence. One is that there is no source whereby it could be ‘comprehended (ἐν περινοίᾳ γεγενήσθαι)’
(Eun. I.12). Using Stoic language to which Eunomius himself had appealed, Basil asserts that there is a ‘common notion’ of God—an idea of God directly and naturally available to rational beings. But, following Philo’s distinction, Basil argues that this notion tells us only that God is, not what God is. Neither does Scripture reveal God’s essence. In a move that would influence the two Gregories and subsequent tradition, Basil makes an appeal to biblical saints who received direct revelations—he mentions David, Isaiah, and Paul—and yet never claimed to comprehend the essence of God. Basil then turns to an argument from the lesser to the greater, asking whether Eunomius has ‘apprehension’ (κατάληψις) of the essence of the element earth (Eun. I.12-13). Basil’s insistence on the incomprehensibility of even created natures will be picked up by both Gregories. If even perceptible substances are inapprehensible, God’s essence must all the more exceed our grasp (Eun. I.14).

Basil’s point is not that no truths can be affirmed of God, but rather that created intellects necessarily think about God under a multiplicity of ideas that collectively form a true, but inadequate idea of God. He encapsulates this theory in a passage that would be echoed by both Gregories:

There is not one name which encompasses the entire nature of God and suffices to express it adequately. Rather, there are many diverse names, and each one contributes, in accordance with its own meaning, to a notion (τὴν ἔννοιαν συναθροίζει) that is altogether dim and trifling as regards the whole (ἀμυδρὰν μὲν παντελῶς καὶ μικροτάτην, ὡς πρὸς τὸ ὅλον) but that is at least sufficient for us’ (Eun. 1.10).

The unstated assumption is that humans have no cognitive access to God apart from names and notions—the domain of thought rather than direct observation. Yet, our concept of the divine
nature is ‘dim’ and ‘trifling’ or ‘very small.’ These adjectives, and others synonymous with them, reappear in both Gregories, so we might take this as the official line. Basil echoes Plato: dimness appears in Republic (508c-d, 516e, 517d-518a, 597a) and smallness in Symposium (210b7, b9, c5, d2)—the Platonic texts underlying the ways of analogy and ascent—and the two come together at Theaetetus 174e7-175a1.

Basil’s phrase ‘dim and trifling’ appears again in his sixth homily On the Hexaemeron. Having devoted a lengthy passage to proving that the sun and moon are, despite appearances, extremely large, Basil turns to compare them with their Creator: ‘May the one who granted us a mind to learn the mighty wisdom of the Creator from the tiniest parts of creation also enable us to grasp mighty notions of the Creator from the mighty parts. However, in comparison with the Creator, the sun and moon are proportionate to a mosquito and an ant. For it is impossible to catch a worthy glimpse of the God of the universe from these; rather, by them we are carried forward with rather small and dim reflections (μικραῖς τισι καὶ ἀμυδραῖς ἐμφάσεσι), just as we are by each of the tiniest animals and plants’ (Hex. 6.11). Again Basil’s language suggests a quantitative relation between our concepts and God: they are small in relation to the entire nature of God or the whole. In the first homily On the Hexaemeron, Basil connects this point with the way of analogy: ‘from the beauty of visible things we conceive of the one beyond beauty, and from the magnitude of these perceptible and circumscribed bodies [namely, heaven and earth], we infer (ἀναλογίζωμεθα) the one who is infinite, beyond magnitude, and exceeding all reasoning in the greatness of his power’ (Hex. 1.11). Basil writes similarly in a set of letters on theological epistemology to his protégé Amphilochius of Iconium (epp. 233-235). In ep. 233, he says: ‘So the mind’s principal task is to recognize our God, but to recognize in such a way as the infinitely great can be known by the very small’ (ep. 233). Thus God is knowable to an extent.
We do not say that the heavens are invisible because we cannot see all of them at once; that we
can see the heavens partially instead leads us to call them visible. Likewise with God’s
knowability. Basil cites Paul (1 Corinthians 13:9-10), who says that we know God ‘in part (ἐκ
μέρους)’ *(ep. 233).*

On its surface, the language of knowing in part implies that God is divisible, which Basil
rejects. Basil raises this issue in *ep.* 235 by forcing his imagined Eunomian interlocutor into a
dilemma. If, as they claim, they know the essence of God *as a whole*, they break with Paul; if,
however, they say they know a *part* of the essence, they violate their own commitment to the
simplicity of the essence. Basil’s own solution to the same problem is subtle, but the root of it
lies in what we have called the way of analogy. Basil understands Paul to refer to the fact that
our knowledge of God is mediated; for us, direct apprehension extends only as far as God’s
activities: ‘we say it is from the activities that we know our God, but the substance itself we do
not dare approach. For his activities descend to us, but his substance remains unapproachable’
(*ep. 234*). In *ep.* 235, Basil says that ‘we gather’ (συνάγομεν) a concept of God from God’s
works in creation. Presumably this concept includes what Basil in various places calls the
‘formula of substance’ (λόγος τῆς οὐσίας) that is shared by the three persons; this is not an
apprehensive formula, but merely a conceptual one (e.g. *Eun.* 1.19; *ep.* 125.1; *ep.* 214.4). There
is more to know—one could directly apprehend the essence of God—and in this sense our
knowledge is partial. Basil recalls the distinction between knowing what God is and believing
that God is; the activities, he says, provide us only with the latter. Later developments in Greek
theology might prompt one to ask in what precise way the essence and activities are different,
but Basil gives us little to go on. All we see is a consistent commitment to the ungraspability of
the divine essence, despite our possession of numerous true concepts. As Basil says: ‘therefore, knowledge of the divine essence is the perception of its incomprehensibility’ (ep. 234).

GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS

Many of Basil’s themes appear in orations proclaimed by his friend Gregory in the years following Basil’s death. We can begin with the five Theological Orations, which Gregory delivered in the summer of 380 in Constantinople. The first two orations in particular aim to burst the balloon of Eunomian hubris. Gregory argues that human knowledge of God is necessarily limited in this life (Oration 27.10) and that purity of life matters as much as logical acumen. Like Basil, Gregory invokes the theophanies of biblical figures like Moses, as in this famous paragraph:

I was running to apprehend (καταληψόμενος) God and so I ascended the mountain. I reached the cloud, entered within apart from matter and material things and steel myself as much as possible. But when I looked I barely saw the back parts of God, and this as I took cover in the rock, God the Word incarnate for us. Peering a bit more closely, I saw not the first (πρώτην) and inviolate nature, known to itself, by which I mean to the Trinity, and insofar as (ὁση) it remains within the first veil and is covered by the Cherubim, but insofar as (ὁση) it at last reaches us. This is, as far as I understand, the grandeur, or as divine David calls it the ‘majesty’ inherent in things created and brought forth and governed by him. For these items called God’s ‘back parts’ are all the identifying markers of him that come after him. They are like shadows and images (ὡσπερ ἁἱ σκιαι καὶ εἰκόνες) of the sun in water, reflections which show the sun to weak
eyes, because they are unable to gaze at it, as it overpowers perception by the purity of its light (Or. 28.3).

The passage artfully combines the ways of ascent and analogy. Gregory, it appears, takes his *a posteriori* epistemology rather literally. Following Philo’s reading of the passage (*De posteritate Caini* 169-70), Gregory likens the limited knowledge of God through creation to Moses’ vision of God’s posterior from the rock. The story becomes an allegory for Gregory’s own encounter with God—a characteristically autobiographical touch (see Hofer 2016). Yet, the passage describes the Christian as such, or more precisely the spiritually advanced Christian who has left the crowd behind (see Or. 28.2), rather than an experience unique to Gregory. The initial desire to grasp God is frustrated. That one can see only God’s back suggests that there is more there than what human beings can grasp. The remainder is the divine nature insofar as it ‘remains’ (μένει), whereas what we glimpse is the same nature insofar as it finally reaches us (ὅση τελευταία καὶ ἐις ἡμᾶς φθάνουσα). That the transcendent cause both remains in itself and proceeds in an order of first and last is a Neoplatonist theme (e.g. Plotinus, *Ennead* 3.8.10; 4.8.6; 5.1.3). Likewise Gregory’s terms for the items brought forth (προβεβλημένοις) and governed (διοικουμένοις) by God are common in Neoplatonism (e.g., respectively, Iamblichus, *De mysteriis* 1.6; Plotinus, *Enn.* 4.8.2, following Plato, *Phaedrus* 246e). In God’s creations, which are like reflections of the sun in water, the grandeur of God’s nature can be seen (cf. Rep. 508-510). The series of which Gregory speaks comes with a fundamental break between the first and last, which the unaided human intellect cannot overcome. There is a distinction, then, between what is and is not knowable of God. The repeated quantifier ‘insofar as’ (ὅση) suggests that Gregory is thinking of this distinction quantitatively. According to Christopher Beeley, ‘It is primarily this creaturely inability to know the full magnitude, or the entirety of God that Gregory
means by God’s incomprehensibility . . . This fundamentally quantitative sense of the incomprehensibility of God remains programmatic for Gregory’ (Beeley 2008, 96-97).

The reference to ‘shadows and images’ carries another implication: namely, that what we apprehend is a mere likeness. Thus, the back parts would be not part of God, namely, the currently knowable part, but images of God in creation. Through creating things taken as images, Gregory proceeds to argue, we can form conceptual and linguistic representations, a point Gregory makes by rephrasing a foundational apophatic dictum from Plato’s *Timaeus*:

‘To conceive (νοῆσαι) of God is difficult, to tell of him impossible,’ as one of the Greeks’ theologians philosophized (*Tim. 28c*)—and quite cleverly, I think—so that by mentioning difficulty he might appear to have attained comprehension (κατείληφέναι) while still escaping exposure because, after all, it’s inexpressible. But, in my opinion, to tell is impossible and to conceive even more impossible.

For what is conceived, speech can perhaps indicate, if not adequately (μετρίως), at least dimly (ἀμυδρῶς), to anyone not entirely dull of hearing and corrupt in mind. However, to grasp so great a matter in the mind is utterly impossible . . . (*Or. 28.4*).

Plato implies that there are incommunicable concepts. One might recall Alcinous’ dictum that God is ‘graspable by the mind alone’ but ‘ineffable’ (*Didask. 10.4*). In addition to alleging that Plato is dodging, Gregory offers a substantive reply, according to which (1) anything conceived can be communicated and (2) God is harder to conceive than to communicate. To make his point, he uses Basil’s descriptions ‘dimly’ and ‘not adequately,’ though not for the relation of concepts to God, but for the relation of language to concepts (likewise Nyssen, *Eun.* II.61, 243.21-27 Jaeger). Nazianzen’s principal aim, however, is not to offer a philosophy of language, but to
portray God as transcending what humans and even the angels can comprehend and *a fortiori* can express. For the sake of this argument, Nazianzen equates ‘conceiving’ and ‘comprehending.’ Accordingly, Plato’s implication that God is conceivable is taken as equivalent to saying that God is comprehensible and in fact has been comprehended by the speaker.

To equate conception and comprehension in this way might suggest a real break from Basil. Pushed to its extreme, the passage could be seen as ruling out the possibility of representing God conceptually or linguistically at all: if comprehension is impossible, and conception is comprehension, conception must be impossible. This was the conclusion drawn by Lossky, as noted above. However, the remainder of the oration suggests otherwise. Gregory first draws the familiar distinction between believing *that* God is and knowing *what* God is, and he argues that ‘vision’ and ‘natural law’ are sufficient to teach us *that* God is (*Or*. 28.6). If we see a cithara, we ‘conceive’ (ἐννοήσει) of a craftsman and a cithara-player, even though we might not see them; likewise, when we observe created things, we conceive of their maker, even if we do not ‘mentally grasp’ the maker (κἂν μὴ περιλαμβάνῃ τῇ διανοίᾳ) (28.6). Gregory then turns to the formation of negative concepts, such as incorporeality. He argues that the way of negation alone is inadequate: just as one does not answer ‘what is ten?’ by saying ‘not one, not two’ and so forth, neither will a concept of God be formed by simply negating properties of the created order such as embodiment and extension. Negations, then, guide us to truth, but form just one part of our concept of God. No concept is adequate, since even our highest intuitions, such as that God is wise or good, are rooted in our ordinary experience of those concepts (*Or*. 28.13). We cannot see God directly, but must ‘gather a partial impression from images (μερικήν τινα φαντασίαν ἐκ τῶν εἰκασμάτων’) (*Or*. 28.13). Because of our cognitive limitations, we must acknowledge that comprehension is impossible. Yet, because of our longing for God, we must
seek ‘to know God from the beauty and arrangement of visible things,’ a clear endorsement of the ways of analogy and ascent (Or. 28.13). These paths reveal our cognitive limitations. We hope one day to know God more fully through a direct and unencumbered illumination, but ‘for now, everything that descends to us is a tiny ray, like a small efflux of a great light’ (Or. 28.17). The general thrust of Oration 28, therefore, is to endorse the ways of negation, analogy, and ascent in such a way that emphasizes not the utter inappropriateness of conceiving of God, but the limitations of the enterprise.

The Theological Orations might be expected to raise such apophatic themes, since Gregory directly targets Eunomius’s theology therein. We see similar ideas in other works that are not explicitly anti-Eunomian, including orations Gregory delivered on feast days. There is one notable passage Gregory of which must been particularly fond, since he placed it verbatim in both his Oration on the Theophany (Or. 38) and his Oration on Pascha (Or. 45), and it echoes a paragraph in the Fourth Theological Oration (Or. 30.17). Here is the version from Oration 38:

God always was and is and will be, or rather always is. For was and will be are divisions of time as we see it and belong to a nature in flux. But ‘he who is’ is always so, and he gave himself this name in his oracle to Moses on the mountain (Exod 3:14). He possesses being in that he encompasses in himself as a whole and without beginning or end the infinite and unlimited sea of essence, so to speak, which exceeds every notion of time or nature. Only in the mind is he sketched, and this in a very dim and modest way (νῦν μόνον σκιαγραφώμενος, καὶ τοῦτο λίαν ἁμερός καὶ μετρίως), not from things intrinsic to him (ἐκ τῶν κατ’ αὐτόν) but from things around him (ἐκ τῶν περὶ αὐτόν). One impression (φαντασίας) from here is combined (συλλεγομένης) with another from there into a single
semblance (ἰνδάλμα) of the truth, which flees before it can be grasped and escapes before it can be thought (Or. 38.7).

The sentence ‘God is’ succeeds where ‘God was’ or ‘God will be’ fail. Thus ‘he who is’ is the most appropriate divine name. However, Gregory appeals to two intuitions, eternity and infinity, to emphasize that God is ungraspable even with this title. The two ideas work in different, but complementary ways. Eternity, because it involves a non-successive present-tense, is subjectively impossible to grasp for those bound to time—a point Augustine will later underscore in Confessions XI. Infinity objectively exceeds every definite concept. God is said not merely to have being but to embrace ‘the infinite and unlimited sea of essence,’ an echo of the ‘great sea of beauty’ in Plato’s Symposium (210d4). Here, though, the sea is eternal and infinite, which calls to mind Plotinus’ definition of eternity as ‘infinite life’ possessed as a whole without past or future (Enn. 3.7.5.26).

For Gregory, the implication of our inability to grasp an eternal and infinite God is not anti-conceptualism. Rather, he continues to speak of the formation of a mental ‘semblance’ of the truth (likewise Gregory of Nyssa, Cant. 3, 87 Langerbeck). The parallel passage in Nazianzen’s Fourth Theological Oration spells the point out more fully. Gregory first says, in similar terms as above: ‘sketching the things intrinsic to him from the things around him, we gather an impression that is dim, weak, and drawn from here and there (ἐκ τῶν περὶ αὐτὸν σκιαγραφοῦντες τὰ κατ’ αὑτὸν, ἀμυδράν τινα καὶ ἁσθενῆ καὶ ἄλλην απ’ ἄλλου φαντασίαν συλλέγομεν)’ (Or. 30.17). He then generalizes: ‘And for us the best theologian is not one who has discovered the whole, for our bonds cannot contain the whole, but the one who receives a greater impression than another and gathers in himself a fuller semblance (ἰνδάλμα) or sketch (ἀποσκίασμα) or whatever we might call it of the truth’ (Or. 30.17). Here we see quantitative
language used to describe concepts. One person’s impression can be greater than another’s and accordingly their semblance will be fuller. For Gregory, it is Moses who has received the most adequate name—‘he who is’—which presumably qualifies him as ‘our best theologian.’ Even he, though, did not ‘discover the whole’.

GREGORY OF NYSSA

Of the three Cappadocians, Gregory of Nyssa’s apophatic theology has received by far the most attention in the past century (Mühlenberg 1966; Brightman 1973; Laird 2004). What has not been made clear is the link tying Gregory to the other Cappadocians, and by extension, to the threefold way of apophaticism we have traced back to Alcinous. The way of analogy appears in numerous places in Gregory’s work, perhaps most succinctly in his short treatise To Eustathius—

On the Holy Trinity, likely from the time shortly after Basil’s death:

For if it were possible to behold the divine nature itself on its own and to discover what is proper and what foreign to it through appearances, surely there would be no need for arguments or other signs for the comprehension (κατάληψιν) of the sought-after item. But because it is loftier than the observation of those seeking it, and because when it comes to matters that escape our knowledge, we draw inferences conjecturally (στοχαστικῶς ἀναλογιζόμεθα) from various signs (ἐκ δὲ τεκμηρίων τινῶν), it is entirely necessary that we be guided to the investigation of the divine nature through the activities (Eust., 10.18–11.3 Mueller).

Here Gregory presents the way of analogy as a case of inferential reasoning from signs or tokens (see Sorabji 2005, 265-68). In the case of God, what plays the role analogous to the indicative sign (e.g., smoke for fire) are the activities, which inform us of God’s existence and, partially,
God’s nature. Fuller versions of the point elsewhere in Gregory’s corpus show that he has in mind, for instance, the inference that there is an all-powerful wisdom behind and beyond all perceptible things because of the harmonious revolutions of the heavens or the mutual bonding of the elements (Anim et res, 12.1-14.6 Spira and Mühlenberg; Or catech prol., 6 Mühlenberg; Beat. 6, 140.13-141.27 Callahan; Cant 11, 335 Langerbeck). In To Eustathius Gregory implies that the knowledge of God, in the here and now, is always of this sort. Elsewhere, he adds that one can also turn inward and see reflections of God in the ‘mirror’ that is the human soul, provided that it is sufficiently purified (e.g. Beat 6, 141.28-142.144.3; De anim et res, 26.10-27.13; Cant 3, 90-91 Langerbeck).

In the area of apophaticism, Gregory is best remembered for passages in which he presents imagined narratives of spiritual journeys taken by various biblical figures: Abraham, Moses, and the Bride from the Song of Songs. These narratives have justly drawn the attention of modern scholars writing on Gregory’s apophaticism (e.g. Laird 2004; Smith 2004). In Against Eunomius II, Life of Moses, and Homilies on the Song of Songs, Gregory outlines a certain order of discovery inherent in apophaticism.

We can begin with Abraham’s journey, as told in Against Eunomius II. Abraham, Genesis tells us, was commanded by a God whose name he did not know to leave his homeland to journey to a land he did not know. For Gregory, this is a story of the way of ascent. He picks up Philo’s description of this scene as an emigration from the ‘Chaldean philosophy,’ which encloses God in the sense-perceptible realm (Philo, De migratione Abraham 177-79). The first step, then, is to move from the perceptible to the intelligible. Here, Philo says, the mind can grasp the nature of God (De migratione Abraham, 195). Gregory too says Abraham had to pass beyond the senses—this stage corresponds to the way of negation—but Gregory stresses that
achieving intellectual contemplation does not terminate the quest: ‘. . . all the other things that Abraham comprehended as he proceeded in his reasoning, whether power or goodness or being without beginning or being limited by no boundary or any other like concept about the divine nature that is discovered—all these he made provisions and stepping-stones for his journey upward, always leaning upon its discoveries and stretching forward to what lies ahead (Phil 3:13) and establishing these beautiful steps in his heart, as the prophet says (Ps 83:6)’ (Eun. 2.89, 253.1-9 Jaeger). Intelligible concepts serve as supports to lean upon—Gregory takes Clement’s term here (Strom. 5.12.82)—and as steps along an endless journey—here, the inspiration is Platonic (Rep. 511b6, Symp. 211c2). While ideas like power and goodness serve a purpose, one who advances considers all of them ‘smaller’ (μικρότερον) than their object and transcends them: ‘having purified his reasoning of such conjectures and adopted a faith unmixed and pure of every notion, he makes this the unwavering and evident sign of the knowledge of God: the belief that God is greater and loftier than every identifying sign’ (Eun. 2.89, 253.12-17 Jaeger). The text has multiple layers: Gregory recycles language from a section of his own earlier De Virginitate, where he draws on Diotima’s Ladder from the Symposium, perhaps as retold by Plotinus (Virg. XI, 294.4-6 Jaeger et al.; Plotinus, Enn. 1.6.8-9; Plato, Symp. 210). For Gregory, Abraham’s process of ascent culminates with faith, which, as Martin Laird has demonstrated, functions here as a technical term for an apophatic faculty of union (Laird 2004). In Gregory’s words, ‘it is not impossible to approach God in any other way unless faith mediates and attaches through itself the seeking intellect to the incomprehensible nature’ (Eun. 2.91, 253.25-28 Jaeger). Faith in this sense names an ecstatic state of a purified reason free of conceptual representation. It would seem, however, that the mind does not permanently abandon the conceptual level, since Gregory states that Abraham continually rests on concepts and progresses forward. Thus ecstasy
and conceptual thought somehow co-exist in the life of the advanced believer. Still, reaching this highest stage in the ascent must cast a new light on one’s concepts. Perhaps the advanced believer comes to view concepts like power, goodness, and being as mere place-holders: useful, even necessary for the time being, provided they are seen as temporary.

Similar narratives appear in the Life of Moses and the Homilies on the Song of Songs, two later writings. Moses, Gregory notes, experiences two theophanies. In the first, narrated in Exodus 3, Moses sees God in the light of the burning bush. In the second, which comprises a series of episodes, Moses meets God in darkness to receive the commandments (Exodus 19:9, 16; 24:18), then beholds the heavenly tabernacle (Exodus 25:9), and finally asks God to show himself and is granted the vision of the back parts (Exodus 33:17-23). In the light of the fiery bush, Moses learned of God as true being (Vita Moys II.24-25). The second theophany seems contradictory to the first. Gregory accounts for the difference with reference to stages of spiritual progress. At first, knowledge takes the form of light, as one learns to distinguish truth from error, which corresponds to the way of negation. This stage satisfies the requirement that ideas of God be truthful, since for Gregory, truth is defined as ‘not being in error in one’s conception of what is’ (Vita Moys II.23, 40.5-6 Musurillo). This task is only the beginning:

As the mind progresses, however, and, through ever greater and more complete attention, comes into comprehension of the consideration of beings, the closer its gets in its observation, and the more it sees how much of the divine nature is unobserved. For as it leaves behind everything that appears, not only all that sense-perception apprehends but also all that reason seems to see, it continually proceeds further inward until even by reason’s efforts it slips into what is unseen and inapprehensible—and there it sees God. For it is here that the true knowledge of what is sought exists, and it is here that seeing
consists in not seeing, because that which is sought transcends all knowledge, since it is grasped in its utter inapprehensibility as if in some dark cloud (Vita Moys II.162-63, 86.20-87.9 Musurillo).

For Gregory, Moses’ encounter with God in darkness is naturally connected with the prohibition of idolatry, which he understands as forbidding that ‘the divine be likened to any of the things known by human beings’ (Vita Moys II.165, 88.1-2 Musurillo). He explains: ‘since every concept that arises through an apprehensive impression (κατά τινα περιληπτικὴν φαντασίαν) and as a comprehension of and a conjecture about the divine nature, fashions an idol of God and does not proclaim God’ (Vita Moys II.65, 88.2-5). The sentence echoes a line in Against Eunomius, where Gregory accuses Eunomius of doing just this with ‘unbegottenness’ (Eun. II.100, 256.1-7 Jaeger). One must decide whether Gregory means (1) No one should form a concept of God, or (2) No one should understand a concept as an adequate representation of God. If (1) is correct, then Gregory is abandoning the project of conceiving of God by cutting out the initial steps of the way of ascent. Much more likely is (2). If a concept is something that arises from an apprehensive impression or embodies a conjecture about the divine nature, then one must adopt a certain attitude of critical distance from it. As the phrasing of the point in narrative fashion conveys, the adoption of this attitude is possible only for the spiritually advanced. A parallel text in the sixth homily On the Song of Songs says that ‘every apprehensive marker (πᾶν γνώρισμα κατάληπτικόν)’ becomes not an idol but an ‘impediment (ἐμπόδιον)’ (Cant. 6, 183 Langerbeck). Concepts are dangerous precisely because each one is a ‘likeness of the one sought,’ which tempts one to forget they are mere resemblances (Cant. 3, 86 Langerbeck).

Later in Life of Moses Gregory turns to Moses’ request to see God in Exodus 33:18, which Gregory takes as an entreaty that God reveal himself ‘not as far as it is possible to
participate in him, but as he is’ (*Vita Moys* II.230, 114.3-4 Musurillo). Gregory is following Philo and Gregory of Nazianzus, who see in the story hints of the difference between knowledge of God’s existence from his works and knowledge of God’s essence. Gregory of Nyssa highlights the erotic nature of the request, and thereby evokes the way of ascent: ‘Now it seems to me that Moses experiences something like this as his soul becomes inclined with an erotic disposition towards that which is beautiful by nature, which hope attracts from visible beauty to transcendent [beauty], continually enkindling desire for what is hidden through what is always apprehended (διὰ τοῦ πάντοτε καταλαμβανομένου). Whence the heady lover of beauty, who accepts what always appears (τὸ ἀεὶ φανόμενον) as an image (εἰκόνα) of what is longed for, longs to be filled with the imprint of the archetype itself’ (*Vita Moys* II.231, 114.5-12 Musurillo; cp. *Anim et res* 69.20 Spira). Shifting to the way of analogy, Gregory says that Moses wishes no longer to see God ‘through various mirrors and images’ (*Vita Moys* II.231, 114.13-14 Musurillo). God’s refusal of Moses’ request has a didactic aim, according to Gregory, and this suggests an answer to the question of why a providential God would remain imperceptible. For Gregory, desire for God would cease if vision happened, and this would put an unwelcome end to the way of ascent. Desire presupposes cognition: one desires more of what one actually perceives. Gregory also makes clear, famously, that the necessarily unfulfilled character of desire also results from the infinite nature of its object: ‘so then, no encompassing can be thought of for the infinite nature, and what is not encompassed by its nature cannot be apprehended. But every desire for the good, which is drawn to that ascent, always expands along with (συνεπεκτείνεται) the course of the one advancing towards the good’ (*Vita Moys* II.238, 116.13-17 Musurillo).

Gregory is speaking of Moses’ earthly life, not of the eschaton. We see more on the hoped-for stated in the *Homilies on the Song of Songs*. For Gregory, growth in virtue will
continue ‘throughout all the eternity of the ages’; this is because ‘what lies beyond is infinitely
greater than what is always being apprehended (ἀπειροπλάσιον τοῦ πάντοτε καταλαμβανομένου
tὸ ύπερκείμενον)’ (Cant. 8, 246 Langerbeck). Thus the duality of Moses’ vision finds a
counterpart in the afterlife. One will see, indeed apprehend, to one’s capacity, but ‘the infinite
and unenclosed nature of the deity remains beyond all apprehension’ (τὸ μέντοι ἀόριστον τε καὶ
ἀπεριληπτὸν τῆς θεότητος ἐπέκεινα πάσης καταλήψεως διαμένει)—thus, puzzlingly, something is
always apprehended, but this is not the infinity of God. In this life, the distinction corresponds to
the divide between seeing God in God’s created works and seeing God directly; eschatologically,
presumably there is no such mediation, so ‘what is apprehended’ must be some sort of partial
vision. Gregory suggests that the ways of analogy (at least in the sense of proportionality) and
ascent extend endlessly: ‘throughout all the eternity of the endless age, the one running towards
you becomes ever greater than himself and always higher as he grows proportionally by ascent
of goodness (ἀεὶ διὰ τῆς τῶν ἀγαθῶν ἀναβάσεως ἀναλόγως αὐξόμενος)’. Gregory returns to the
theme in Homily 11. He reaffirms the basic narrative of Life of Moses: first, one separates from
error; then, what is led through phenomena to the invisible cause; then one enters the darkness
(Cant. 11, 322-23 Langerbeck). He uses the language of ‘conjectural reasoning’ (στοχαστικὴν
dιάνοιαν) that appears frequently elsewhere (Cant. 11, 324 Langerbeck). But he also offers a
different account of the eschatological vision. Here, there is no parsing of what is and is not seen;
the language of a quantitative difference—this much now, the rest later—drops out. Rather,
Gregory suggests that apprehension will occur, but in some way we cannot presently conceive:
‘no longer will we recognize the nature of the good by its works just as we now do nor will the
transcendent be conceived of (νοηθήσεται) through its activity in things apparent. Rather, the
form of inexpressible blessedness will be apprehended (καταληφθήσεται) in a completely
different way, and there will be another mode of enjoyment, which of its nature cannot now *enter into the heart of a human being* (1 Cor 2:9)’ (Cant. 11, 336 Langerbeck). That the mode of apprehension is unknown stands to reason, since Gregory makes clear elsewhere that we have no idea of what our nature will be like after death and after the resurrection (*Anim et res* 112.7-12 Spira; *Eun.* III.1.106-8, 39-40 Jaeger). If the nature of the knower is unknown, its mode of apprehension must be also: we are not only unsure of *what* we will know, but *how* we will.

**CONCLUSION**

We have now traced a thread that runs throughout the three Cappadocians. These three present the divine essence as ungraspable, but they do not give up on essentialism (the belief that there is an essence). They describe human concepts as limited representations of the truth about God derived only from God’s works, but they do not give up on conceptualism (the belief that our only access to God is through thought). They do not abandon apprehension (κατάληψις) as a general description of the human cognitive relation with reality; they merely deny we can apprehend God in this life. Instead, they recommend the ways of conceiving (νοήσεις) of God—negation, analogy, and ascent—outlined by various Platonists before them. These methods simultaneously enable us to form an idea of God and reveal how shadowy this idea is—a realization that is altogether salutary. Nothing short of the eschaton will break us permanently out of conceptual mediation, and we presently have no idea what that state will be like; the soul’s apprehension of God then might remain in some sense partial as it currently is. Not even the biblical saints who had ecstatic experiences transcended the realm of concepts entirely and permanently. Nazianzen and Nyssen present mini-narratives of such experiences, and their dark tales leave the reader with a sense of the fuzziness and littleness of our conceptual and linguistic
representation of God, which is nonetheless sufficient to awaken desire for God in us. An apprehensive impression is marked not only by its clarity and distinctness, but also by the fact that it arises from its object. Our ‘dim and trifling’ notion of God, by contrast, is necessarily based on impressions of other things, countless many things, which bear some trace of God. This insight is at the heart of what we can call Cappadocian apophaticism.

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