

# Knowledge and its Limits in Clement of Alexandria and Gregory of Nyssa

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Early Christian epistemology is not an area that has been extensively studied. While it is evident that questions of knowledge were fundamental to some Patristic debates, there is little understanding of what development, if any, we can find regarding this topic throughout the early Christian period. In my chapter, I will therefore make few overarching claims of such a kind and refrain from inscribing my two authors into any kind of grand narrative or locate them on a trajectory leading to some specific outcome as it is unclear to me that there was any one epistemology that ever became generally shared by Christian authors in the East.

Instead, I shall focus, in line with the theme of the volume, on the thought of only two writers, Clement of Alexandria and Gregory of Nyssa. These two authors were rather different individuals. They lived in different centuries (Gregory was probably born around 180 years after Clement) and inhabited different places.<sup>1</sup> Whereas Clement belongs to the world of Hellenistic Alexandria,<sup>2</sup> Gregory seems to have spent practically his entire life over 2,000km away in his native Cappadocia. Clement apparently grew up in a pagan family and converted to Christianity,<sup>3</sup> whereas Gregory was part of a wealthy Christian dynasty reaching back a century and spawning several bishops and saints.<sup>4</sup> The purposes of their literary and intellectual activities were also divergent: Clement was a teacher of Christian philosophy in an overall pagan environment while Gregory writes as a bishop of the imperial Church.

My argument, however, will not hinge on any of these observations however significant they may be. Instead, I will present Clement and Gregory as representatives of two radically different approaches to epistemology within a Christian intellectual framework. This is not to deny that their views show similarities on certain points. It would be surprising if they did not, given that they share the fundamental outlook of the ancient Christian faith. Yet epistemology was never part of Christian doctrine in the strict sense. Through the centuries, theologians or indeed the Church never felt there was need to come to a complete agreement on this kind of issue. Thus far, the divergence between Clement and Gregory is neither shocking nor scandalous. It is not even a theological problem, as far as I can see, but

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of Clement's life and thought see Judith Kovacs, 'Clement of Alexandria: An Introduction', *The Expository Times* 120 (2009): 261–71; Matyaš Havrda, 'Clement of Alexandria', in *The Routledge Handbook of Early Christian Philosophy*, edited by Mark Edwards, 357–71 (London: Routledge, 2021). On Gregory's life see the introduction in Anna M. Silvas (ed.), *Gregory of Nyssa: The Letters. Introduction, Translation and Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 1–57.

<sup>2</sup> For the Alexandrian background see Henny Fiskå Hägg, *Clement of Alexandria and the Beginnings of Christian Apophaticism* (Oxford: OUP, 2006), 15–70.

<sup>3</sup> Kovacs, 'Clement', 261–2.

<sup>4</sup> For general background on see Raymond van Dam's trilogy: *Kingdom of Snow: Roman Rule and Greek Culture in Cappadocia* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2002); *Families and Friends in Late Roman Cappadocia* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2003); *Becoming Christian: The Conversion of Roman Cappadocia* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2003).

rather indicative of a range of options that were open to Christian thinkers through the ages.

My chapter is divided into two parts of which the former deals with Clement while the latter discusses Gregory's contribution. The two parts are of unequal length and originality. Counterintuitively perhaps, there was more to say on Gregory than on Clement. Although the Bishop of Nyssa has been more popular as an object of academic study in recent decades than the philosopher from Alexandria, this particular area of his thought has not found much attention among researchers. By contrast, there are a number of excellent accounts of Clement's theory of knowledge, including those by Salvatore Lilla, Eric Osborn, Boniface Okafor, Andrew Radde-Gallwitz, and George Karamanolis.<sup>5</sup> Much of what follows simply reiterates the broad outlines of what these scholars have securely established.

## 1. Clement of Alexandria

It seems generally accepted that the problem of knowledge is central to Clement's thought.<sup>6</sup> For this there are two reasons. One is outward-facing or apologetic. Clement was arguably conscious of the criticism, well attested for the second century, according to which Christianity was dogmatic and authoritarian, the exact opposite of a philosophy.<sup>7</sup> We have for this the testimony of Galen, the great physician and polymath. He writes, to cite but one example:

Were I thinking of those who teach pupils in the manner of the followers of Moses and Christ, ordering them to accept everything on faith (*pistis*), I should not have given you a definition.<sup>8</sup>

What is remarkable here and in similar passages is the cursory character of the reference.<sup>9</sup> Galen is not polemicising against Christians (or Jews) but rather seems to take for granted that they are known to be dogmatists. He must have been sure that his readers would have understood the reference which to us indicates that this perception of Christians was widespread among educated Greeks and Romans at the time.<sup>10</sup>

For Galen and those minded like him, Christianity was a faith and as such unphilosophical.<sup>11</sup> Clement was clearly intent on proving them wrong. In fact, he was more motivated to

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<sup>5</sup> Salvatore R.C. Lilla, *Clement of Alexandria: A Study in Christian Platonism and Gnosticism* (Oxford: OUP, 1971), esp. ch. 3; Boniface N. Okafor, *The Theory of Knowledge in Clement of Alexandria*. PhD University of Navarra (Pamplona: Universidad de Navarra, 1993); Eric Osborn, 'Arguments for Faith in Clement of Alexandria', *Vigiliae Christianae* 48 (1994), 1–24; Andrew Radde-Gallwitz, *Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and the Transformation of Divine Simplicity* (Oxford: OUP, 2009), ch. 2; George Karamanolis, *The Philosophy of Early Christianity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 2021), 103–13.

<sup>6</sup> Lilla, *Clement of Alexandria*, 118; Okafor, *Theory of Knowledge*, 93.

<sup>7</sup> Osborn, 'Arguments for Faith', 2.

<sup>8</sup> Galen, *Against the First Unmoved Mover*. Quoted in Karamanolis, *Philosophy*, 103. See Richard Walzer, *Galen on Jews and Christians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949), 14.

<sup>9</sup> Karamanolis, *Philosophy*, 103–4.

<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Barnes, 'Galen, Christians, logic', in T. P. Wiseman (ed.), *Classics in Progress: Essays on Ancient Greece and Rome*, 399–417 (Oxford: OUP, 2006), here: 402.

<sup>11</sup> The charge also figures prominently in Celsus, *True Word: Origen, Contra Celsum* I 9. See Osborn, 'Arguments for Faith', 2.

undertake this task than others given that the ideal Christian, in his words, was not a believer but a knower, a Gnostic.<sup>12</sup> This points to the second, inward-facing, reason Clement had for taking the problem of knowledge seriously.

The language of gnosis and the Gnostic was, of course, not innocent at the time. It had been claimed by groups we today call Gnostic in their entirety.<sup>13</sup> Whether or not this is a fair designation is not something that concerns me here.<sup>14</sup> What is clear is that Clement, together with Irenaeus, Tertullian and others, was at the forefront of those opposing these Gnostic groups.

His embrace of the terms Gnosis and Gnostic must be seen in this connection. It was a characteristically bold attempt to reclaim for orthodox Christianity what in the hands of his foes had become a conceptual tool separating a subgroup off from the broader church.<sup>15</sup>

These two factors shape Clement's treatment of knowledge and give it its particular urgency and importance within his thought as a whole. Insofar as he wants to establish the Gnostic as the true Christian – who in a qualified sense stands above the mere believer<sup>16</sup> – it was vital for him to show that Christianity is the true philosophy and not merely the kind of dogmatic sect as which it appeared to Galen and others. At the same time, he needed to rehabilitate faith (*pistis*) in principle not only to vindicate this property of Christianity vis-a-vis its pagan, intellectual critics, but also in order to defend orthodox Christianity against the categorical division between faith and knowledge held by the Gnostics.

Clement's solution to these challenges lies in his reconstruction of knowledge as demonstration (*apodeixis*).<sup>17</sup> Demonstration was a key term in Aristotelian logic. Certain knowledge, or science, must be demonstrated by generally agreed logical rules. Yet not all knowledge can be deduced like that; the highest principles of our sciences cannot themselves be demonstrated. According to Aristotle, they therefore have to be worthy of being accepted in a different way, for example through induction.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Clement, *Stromateis* VII 10. See Kovacs, 'Clement', 10; Piotr Ashwin-Siejkowski, *Clement of Alexandria: A Project of Christian Perfection* (London: T & T Clark, 2008), 147–225.

<sup>13</sup> Christoph Marksches, *Gnosis: An Introduction*, trans. John Bowden (London: T & T Clark, 2003).

<sup>14</sup> For a radical critique of the traditional nomenclature see Michael Allen Williams, *Rethinking 'Gnosticism': An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

<sup>15</sup> On the anti-Gnostic background of Clement's theory see Elizabeth Clark, *Clement's Use of Aristotle* (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1977), 16; Ashwin-Siejkowski, *Clement of Alexandria*, 109–44; Dragoş Andrei Giulea, 'Apprehending "Demonstrations" from the First Principle: Clement of Alexandria's Phenomenology of Faith', *The Journal of Religion* 89/2 (2009): 187–213, here: 189.

<sup>16</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* VII 10.57.4: καί μοι δοκεῖ πρώτη τις εἶναι μεταβολή σωτήριος ἢ ἐξ ἔθνῶν εἰς πίστιν, ὡς προεῖπον, δευτέρα δὲ ἢ ἐκ πίστεως εἰς γνῶσιν· ἢ δέ, εἰς ἀγάπην περαιουμένη, ἐνθὲνδε ἤδη φίλον φίλῳ τὸ γινῶσκον τῷ γινωσκομένῳ παρίστησιν. All Greek quotations from the *Stromateis* after: L. Früchtel, O. Stählin, and U. Treu, *Clemens Alexandrinus*, vols. 2, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. and 3, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. GCS 52 (15), 17 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2: 1960; 3: 1970).

<sup>17</sup> Giulea, 'Apprehending Demonstration'; Radde-Gallwitz, *Basil of Caesarea*, 41–4; Matyaš Havrda, 'Demonstrative Method in *Stromateis* VII: Context, Principles, and Purpose', in *The Seventh Book of the Stromateis: Proceedings of the Colloquium on Clement of Alexandria (Olomouc, October 21–23, 2010)*, edited by Matyaš Havrda, Vit Hušek, and Jana Plátová, 261–75 (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

<sup>18</sup> Aristotle, *Analytica Posteriora* I 3. See Radde-Gallwitz, *Basil of Caesarea*, 42.

It is this last point Clement emphasises in his own argument. In *Stromateis* II, he writes that ‘if someone should say that science is demonstrative along with an account, let him hear that the principles are indemonstrable.’<sup>19</sup> We can immediately see that the people who would say such a thing are precisely those who, like Galen, accused the Christians of making claims without arguments. According to Clement, all philosophers since Aristotle have done the same and cannot therefore complain about the Christians.

Of course, the ‘first principle’ on which Christian knowledge depends is rather different from the principles Aristotle would accept as the basis of demonstration. The following passage from Book Two of the *Stromateis* is instructive in this regard:

Now, there being four things in which the true resides, namely, perception, understanding, science, and belief, intellect is prior in nature, but perception is prior for us and with respect to us. Moreover, the essence of science is constituted from both perception and understanding, and the property of being evident is common to both understanding and perception. But perception is a foundation for science, while faith, when it has travelled through sensible objects, leaves behind belief, hastens towards things free of deception, and reposes in the truth.<sup>20</sup>

Clement here shows his hand rather clearly. In the former part of the statement, he uses concepts other philosophers had employed in the context of epistemology, such as (sense)-perception and understanding (*nous*) only to then introduce faith (*pistis*) into the mix without much ado.<sup>21</sup> Faith, according to Clement, fulfils a function analogous to that of perception or the intellect, but it does so in a superior manner:

So then, it is possible to reach the first principle of the universe by faith alone. For every science can be learned. And what can be learned is learned from that which is known beforehand. But the first principle of the universe was not known beforehand by the Greeks.<sup>22</sup>

We may want to protest here that Clement exchanges epistemic for ontological principles, but the reality is that this distinction was not necessarily observed by other ancient philosophers either.<sup>23</sup> Be this as it may, Clement can now turn the tables on his philosophical conversation partners. Far from offering an inferior form of knowledge,

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<sup>19</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* II 4.13.4: εἰ δέ τις λέγοι τὴν ἐπιστήμην ἀποδεικτικὴν εἶναι μετὰ λόγου, ἀκουσάτω ὅτι καὶ αἱ ἀρχαὶ ἀναπόδεικτοι. Translation: Radde-Gallwitz, *Basil of Caesarea*, 48.

<sup>20</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* II 4.13.2–3: τεσσάρων δὲ ὄντων ἐν οἷς τὸ ἀληθές, αἰσθήσεως, νοῦ, ἐπιστήμης, ὑπόληψεως, φύσει μὲν πρῶτος ὁ νοῦς, ἡμῖν δὲ καὶ πρὸς ἡμᾶς ἡ αἴσθησις, ἐκ δὲ αἰσθήσεως καὶ τοῦ νοῦ ἡ τῆς ἐπιστήμης συνίσταται οὐσία, κοινὸν δὲ νοῦ τε καὶ αἰσθήσεως τὸ ἐναργές. ἀλλ’ ἡ μὲν αἴσθησις ἐπιβάθρα τῆς ἐπιστήμης, ἡ πίστις δὲ διὰ τῶν αἰσθητῶν ὁδεύουσα ἀπολείπει τὴν ὑπόληψιν, πρὸς δὲ τὰ ἀψευδῆ σπεύδει καὶ εἰς τὴν ἀλήθειαν καταμένει. ET: Radde-Gallwitz, *Basil of Caesarea*, 45.

<sup>21</sup> On faith see Osborn, ‘Arguments for Faith’; Giulea, ‘Apprehending “Demonstration”’; Havrda, ‘Demonstrative Method’, 264–5.

<sup>22</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* II 4, 14, 1-2: πίστει οὖν ἐφικέσθαι μόνη οἷόν τε τῆς τῶν ὅλων ἀρχῆς. πᾶσα γὰρ ἐπιστήμη διδακτὴ ἐστὶ· τὸ δὲ διδακτὸν ἐκ προεγνωσμένου. οὐ προεγνωσκέτο δὲ ἡ τῶν ὅλων ἀρχὴ τοῖς Ἕλλησιν. ET: Radde-Gallwitz, *Basil of Caesarea*, 48.

<sup>23</sup> For Aristotle see Terence Irwin, *Aristotle’s First Principles* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 4. Discussed in Radde-Gallwitz, *Basil of Caesarea*, 43.

Christian science is superior and, in fact, the only adequate one insofar as it is built on the reliable familiarity with the first principle of the all.

The medium through which we have certain knowledge is, therefore, Scripture as the written expression of the eternal Word of God which, according to Clement, is ‘the surest of all demonstrations, or rather is the only demonstration’.<sup>24</sup> Human beings may spend their time searching for the truth; they will only find it through Scripture. For Christians, the consequences are as clear as they are attractive:

Certainly we use it [Scripture] as a criterion in the discovery of things. What is subjected to criticism is not believed till it is so subjected; so that what needs criticism cannot be a first principle. Therefore, as is reasonable, grasping by faith the indemonstrable first principle, and receiving in abundance, from the first principle itself, demonstrations in reference to the first principle, we are by the voice of the Lord trained up to the knowledge of the truth.<sup>25</sup>

Scripture and faith, then, make Christian science, the former is its objective basis, the latter the principle of its subjective appropriation. This, admittedly, is no straightforward affair. Clement concedes that the heretics too draw on Scripture. It therefore has to be read in the right spirit, the spirit of the Catholic Church, in order to yield the truth. Faith is itself ‘grace’ as he writes elsewhere,<sup>26</sup> although it is also voluntary assent (Clement is aware of the predestinarian views of Valentinus<sup>27</sup>).

While Christians gain reliable knowledge through faith, even this knowledge has limits:

Science is a demonstrative state, while faith is a grace causing one to ascend from indemonstrable things to that which is absolutely simple, which is neither with matter nor is it matter nor is it made by matter.<sup>28</sup>

At the pinnacle of Clement’s ontological universe, there is the absolutely simple God who cannot be known at all. Right after him, however, comes the Word which is no longer absolutely simple:

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<sup>24</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* VII 16.95.8: ἡ πασῶν ἀποδείξεων ἐχεγγυωτέρα, μᾶλλον δὲ ἢ μόνη ἀπόδειξις οὔσα τυγχάνει.

<sup>25</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* VII 16.95.5–6: ἀμέλει πρὸς τὴν τῶν πραγμάτων εὕρεσιν αὐτῇ χρώμεθα κριτηρίῳ· τὸ κρινόμενον δὲ πᾶν ἔτι ἄπιστον πρὶν κριθῆναι, ὥστ’ οὐδ’ ἀρχὴ τὸ κρίσεως δεόμενον. εἰκότως τοίνυν πίστει περιλαβόντες ἀναπόδεικτον τὴν ἀρχήν, ἐκ περιουσίας καὶ τὰς ἀποδείξεις παρ’ αὐτῆς τῆς ἀρχῆς περὶ τῆς ἀρχῆς λαβόντες, φωνῇ κυρίου παιδευόμεθα πρὸς τὴν ἐπίγνωσιν τῆς ἀληθείας.

<sup>26</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* II 4.14.3.

<sup>27</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* II 3.10. Osborn, ‘Arguments for Faith’, 7. Cf. also Judith Kovacs, ‘Grace and Works: Clement of Alexandria’s Response to Valentinian Exegesis of Paul’, in Tobias Nicklas, Andreas Merkt, and Joseph Verheyden (eds.), *Ancient Perspectives on Paul*, 191–210 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013).

<sup>28</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* II 4.14.3: ἡ μὲν γὰρ ἐπιστήμη ἕξις ἀποδεικτικῆ, ἡ πίστις δὲ χάρις ἐξ ἀναπόδεικτων εἰς τὸ καθόλου ἀναβιβάζουσα τὸ ἀπλοῦν, ὃ οὔτε σὺν ὕλῃ οὔτε ὕλη οὔτε ὑπὸ ὕλης. ET: Radde-Gallwitz, *Basil of Caesarea*, 49.

God, being indemonstrable, is not the object of scientific knowledge. But, the Son is wisdom, science, truth and all other things of this kind, and indeed he also admits of demonstration and description.<sup>29</sup>

Through faith, Christians have privileged access to the second principle who revealed himself through Scripture and in person in the Incarnation. In him, they also know the first God although this knowledge must always remain limited – it cannot, notably, be part of any science not even the Christian science of revelation.<sup>30</sup>

From this brief and somewhat rough account, it should be clear why students of Clement's work have seen in this line of thought a fundamental axis of his overall theology. For my present purpose, however, I restrict myself to the question of what kind of epistemology Clement presents here. It seems to me that a number of observations on this point can be made on the basis of the statements I have investigated in the above.

First, Clement's idea of knowledge is primarily concerned with first principles. To him, the fundamental question seems to be how we can rest assured that what we believe to know is certain. He does refer to our senses and does not dismiss them entirely,<sup>31</sup> but it seems evident that he expects knowledge to derive deductively from first principles. This is why the notion of demonstration is so important to him.

Second, from this observation it can be surmised that for Clement philosophical scepticism was a force to be reckoned with if only for apologetic purposes. This would not be surprising, in my view, given how evident is the influence of scepticism on Stoic, Peripatetic, and Platonic philosophers during the Hellenistic and early imperial period.<sup>32</sup> They all operated in full awareness of the fact that the possibility of knowledge could not be taken for granted. Clement, who included anti-sceptical arguments in the so-called eighth book of the *Stromateis*,<sup>33</sup> seems to pitch his account of knowledge against this very problem (much later, Augustine will do something similar).<sup>34</sup>

Third, for the same reason Clement's account of knowledge is thoroughly Christian or theological. The whole point of Clement's account is that faith and Scripture, based on the revelation of the divine Word, provide a basis of certainty that cannot be matched by philosophical investigation.

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<sup>29</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* IV 25.156.1: ὁ μὲν οὖν θεὸς ἀναπόδεικτος ὧν οὐκ ἔστιν ἐπιστημονικός, ὁ δὲ υἱὸς σοφία τέ ἐστι καὶ ἐπιστήμη καὶ ἀλήθεια καὶ ὅσα ἄλλα τούτῳ συγγενῆ, καὶ δὴ καὶ ἀπόδειξιν ἔχει καὶ διέξοδον. ET: Radde-Gallwitz, *Basil of Caesarea*, 55.

<sup>30</sup> Radde-Gallwitz, *Basil of Caesarea*, 49–59; Hägg, *Clement of Alexandria*, ch. 5.

<sup>31</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* II 4.13.

<sup>32</sup> Karamanolis, *Philosophy*, 9–10.

<sup>33</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* VIII 5 and 7. Okafor, *Theory of Knowledge*, 135–9. For the general problem of the 'eighth book' see Matyáš Havrda, *The So-Called Eighth Stromateus of Clement of Alexandria: Early Christian Reception of Greek Scientific Methodology* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), esp. 1–77.

<sup>34</sup> For a good account see Stéphane Marchand, 'Augustine and Scepticism', in Diego Machuca and Baron Reed (eds.), *Scepticism: From Antiquity to the Present*, 175–85 (London: Bloomsbury, 2018). Online at: <https://hal.science/hal-01718203>. Accessed on 16 October 2023, esp. 178–81.

Fourth, in this connection it is remarkable how strongly he emphasises the contrast between God and the Logos. We might say that, while the Word guarantees the possibility of Christian science, the unknowability of God underwrites its necessity. There is a stark, built-in asymmetry between the first God and his Logos in this regard, but this is once again not my main point here.<sup>35</sup> In epistemological terms it seems to me that despite the apophaticism about the first God, the latter has an absolutely fundamental function for human knowledge. He is the first principle from which we reason. It is in him that the Christian has faith based on revelation. Despite his utter transcendence, God is the ultimate basis of Clement's epistemology.

## 2. Gregory of Nyssa

Although there is an ever-growing literature on Gregory, his epistemology has not, I think, found the attention it deserves. Most of those who have studied it, have focussed their attention on the Eunomian controversy.<sup>36</sup> But I would argue that we understand the specific character of Gregory's approach to the problems of knowledge and of its limits better by exploring them in his more philosophical writings. Let me, therefore, try to show how Gregory thinks about cognition, by beginning instead from a truly remarkable section in his treatise *On the Making of Man* or *De hominis opificio*.<sup>37</sup>

### a) Gregory's account of sense-perception

The treatise as a whole is fascinating and has for good reasons been one of Gregory's few texts that his posterity never tired of reading and studying.<sup>38</sup> It shows with particular distinctness that Gregory at heart was a physicalist, a natural philosopher. His enthusiasm is palpable whenever he can find an occasion for introducing into his writings some extended explanation of natural phenomena, be they biological, medicinal, or astronomical.<sup>39</sup> Where Augustine is endlessly fascinated by the interior of his mind,<sup>40</sup> Gregory cannot get enough of the outside world. In a way that is reminiscent of eighteenth century physico-theology, it is from these observations that religious insights become plausible and meaningful to him. I shall return to that point.

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<sup>35</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* IV 25.156. See Radde-Gallwitz, *Basil of Caesarea*, 55–59; Hägg, *Clement of Alexandria*, ch. 6.

<sup>36</sup> Most recently, Giulio Maspero has chosen this approach in his magisterial study *The Cappadocian Reshaping of Metaphysics: Relational Being* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024), 164–85. See also Karamanolis, *Philosophy*, 121–5.

<sup>37</sup> On the *De hominis opificio* see now: *Gregory of Nyssa: On the Human Image of God*, edited and trans. by John Behr (Oxford: OUP, 2023), esp. 89–138 for introductory comments on the treatise. In what follows, I shall use the Greek text of Behr's edition while supplying the Migne pagination for ease of reference. See also Hubertus R. Drobner, 'Gregory of Nyssa as Philosopher: *De anima et resurrectione* and *De hominis opificio*', *Dionysius* 18 (2000): 69–102, esp. 82–100.

<sup>38</sup> A full study of the reception of the treatise remains a desideratum, but its significance is indicated by the fact that it is the only major work by Gregory that was widely known in the West as it was translated into Latin twice, by Dionysius Exiguus and later by John Scotus Eriugena.

<sup>39</sup> In *De anima et resurrectione*, e.g., he offers detailed reflections proving that the moon merely reflects the sun's light (ed. Andreas Spira and Ekkehard Mühlenberg. GNO III/4 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 17, 4–19, 9) in order to make the general point that cognition proceeds from observation but relies ultimately on rationality.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Philip Cary, *Augustine's Invention of the Inner Self: The Legacy of a Christian Platonist* (Oxford: OUP, 2003).

It is therefore no surprise how strongly Gregory emphasises the senses when explaining how we come to know things. An excellent example of this approach is to be found in Chapter 10 of *De hominis opificio*. He starts off from the rather remarkable claim that human beings would not be rational if we needed our lips for feeding:

[We] would not, as I suppose, have the grace of reason if we used our lips to supply the need of the body, the heavy and burdensome part of the task of providing food. As it is, however, our hands, appropriating this ministry to themselves, leave the mouth well-adapted for the service of reason.<sup>41</sup>

Gregory is entirely clear here that our rational constitution depends on organic, biological factors, specifically the fact that the extraordinary dexterity of our hands enabled our mouth to become specialised in speech. We could not have rational knowledge without these factors despite the fact that rationality is ultimately associated with the mind which for Gregory is intelligible and not material. But the mind works through the senses, and this fact matters to him.

He continues along the same lines. How marvellous, he observes, is the collaboration of the senses in producing our perception so that, for example, our own production of sound through our mouth does not preclude us from taking in sound through our ears.<sup>42</sup>

What is the breadth of that inner receptacle into which flows everything that is poured in through the hearing? Who are the note-takers of the words that are brought in by it? And what kind of containers are there for the concepts inserted by the hearing? And how is it that, with many and various kinds pressing one upon another, there does not occur a confusion and error in the respective places of things laid up there?<sup>43</sup>

I must confess that I find this passage quite remarkable. Gregory here describes the problem Kant later discusses as the ‘unity of apperception’ (How can the many different sense data become experience?),<sup>44</sup> and as in Kant, Gregory’s line of argument indicates (I think) his awareness of the fundamental importance of sense perception but also of the limits of empiricism.

What is the answer? Gregory goes on to introduce the beautiful image of a city, ‘receiving those coming in by different entrances’ and filling the streets in different directions, going to the market or to churches or to theatres.

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<sup>41</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *De hominis opificio* 10.1 (PG 44, 152B): οὐκ ἂν (ὡς οἶμαι), ἔχοντες τὴν τοῦ λόγου χάριν εἰ τὸ βαρὺ τε καὶ ἐπίπονον τῆς κατὰ τὴν βρῶσιν λατρείας τοῖς χεῖλεσι τὴν χρεῖαν τοῦ σώματος ἐπορίζομεν. ET: Behr, *On the Human Image*, 183.

<sup>42</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *De hominis opificio* 10.2.

<sup>43</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *De hominis opificio* 10.3 (PG 44, 152C): τί τὸ πλάτος ἐκείνου τοῦ ἔνδοθεν χωρήματος, εἰς ὃ πάντα συρρεῖ τὰ διὰ τῆς ἀκοῆς εἰσχεόμενα; τίνες οἱ ὑπομνηματογράφοι τῶν εἰσαγομένων ἐν αὐτῇ λόγων; καὶ ποῖα δοχεῖα τῶν ἐντιθεμένων τῇ ἀκοῇ νοημάτων; καὶ πῶς, πολλῶν καὶ παντοδαπῶν ἀλλήλοις ἐπεμβαλλομένων, σύγχυσις καὶ πλάνη κατὰ τὴν ἐπάλληλον θέσιν τῶν ἐγκειμένων οὐ γίνεται; ET: Behr, *On the Human Image*, 183–5.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* §§15–18.



I see some such city of our intellect also established in us, which the different entrances through the senses fill up, while the intellect, distinguishing and examining each of the things that enters, stores them in their proper departments of knowledge.<sup>45</sup>

This, according to Gregory, is how human knowledge is generated. The senses offer the material, while the mind examines and categorises it. This is not yet the whole story; nevertheless, it is worthwhile making a few observations on the big picture which is emerging so far.

First, it is notable how important the experience of the external, physical world is within Gregory's account of human knowledge. He is in this regard really rather different from either Plotinus or Augustine, but also – more to the point in the present context – from Clement. For the latter, as we saw, epistemology was a matter of clarifying the principles of demonstration. For Gregory, it is first and foremost a matter of understanding the physical transformation of information into knowledge by means of our mind and our senses.

My second observation is directly related. Gregory, it seems, is remarkably unaffected by concerns about philosophical scepticism. The contrast with Augustine is once again clear,<sup>46</sup> but if my earlier suggestion is accepted, he is also remarkably different from Clement in that regard as well.

Third, Gregory's account of the generation of knowledge is largely devoid of specifically Christian concerns. In fact, this is the significance of not approaching Gregory's epistemology primarily through his anti-Eunomian polemics. It seems to me both evident and important that Gregory's views about knowledge were first and foremost non-theological in the sense that they did not require assent to any specifically Christian doctrine to be articulated. This, I believe, is a consequence of his unapologetically empirical starting point, once again in contrast to what we have found in Clement.

In these observations, the contours emerge of an epistemology that is starkly different from the kind of theory encountered in Clement. Clement's approach was driven by the concern that knowledge may be impossible and, therefore, constructed top-down with a strong emphasis on the need of faith as a truly reliable starting point of our cognition. Gregory, by contrast, starts from a sense of wonder in view of the miraculous *working* of our senses in the process of cognition. He therefore seems content with a more bottom-up approach to our understanding of the generation of reliable knowledge.

#### b) The role of mind

Gregory's starting point 'from below' does not mean, however, that he is content with the world that the senses present to us. As much as he emphasises the role of the senses in the process of cognition, as much does he also stress the indispensable role of mind.

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<sup>45</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *De hominis officio* 10.4 (PG 44, 152D): τοιαύτην τινὰ βλέπω καὶ τὴν τοῦ νοῦ πόλιν τὴν ἔνδοθεν ἐν ἡμῖν συνωκισμένην, ἣν διάφοροι μὲν αἱ διὰ τῶν αἰσθήσεων εἴσοδοι καταπληροῦσιν· ἕκαστον δὲ τῶν εἰσιόντων φιλοκρινῶν τε καὶ διεξετάζων ὁ νοῦς, τοῖς καταλλήλοις τῆς γνώσεως τόποις ἐναποτίθεται. ET: Behr, *On the Human Image*, 185. On this metaphor also Karamanolis, *Philosophy*, 123.

<sup>46</sup> See n. 34 above.

In fact, he goes out of his way to emphasise the fact that mind is the operational centre behind the work of our sensual apparatus:

The faculties which apprehend things [are not] many, although we are in touch in many ways, through the senses, with those things pertaining to life; for there is one faculty, the implanted intellect itself, which passes through each of the organs of sense and grasps the beings beyond: this, by means of the eyes, contemplates what appears; this, by means of the hearing, understands what is said ...<sup>47</sup>

Technically, then, it is the mind that sees and hears although it uses eyes and ears to that purpose. Gregory, in other words, is in no doubt that what we call perception is strictly speaking an intelligible act although this act could not occur without the aid of our senses.<sup>48</sup> In Gregory's *De anima et resurrectione*, he introduces this argument with a powerful analogy. Macrina points to the 'physician who was sitting to watch her state' asking how

... by putting his fingers to feel the pulse, [he can] hear in a manner, through this sense of touch, Nature calling loudly to him and telling him of her peculiar pain; in fact, that the disease in the body is an inflammatory one, and that the malady originates in this or that internal organ; and that there is such and such a degree of fever? [...]

Could this be so if there were not a certain force of intelligence present in each organ of the senses? What would our hand have taught us of itself, without thought conducting it from feeling to understanding the subject before it? What would the ear, as separate from mind, or the eye or the nostril or any other organ have helped towards the settling of the question, all by themselves? Verily, it is most true what one of heathen culture is recorded to have said, that it is the mind that sees and the mind that hears.<sup>49</sup>

Insofar as like knows like, what the mind eventually intuits in the reality around it, is thus more than the conglomerate of the kind of sensual impressions provided by our eyes and

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<sup>47</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *De hominis officio* 6.1 (PG 44, 137D–140A): Οὐδὲ γὰρ ἡμῖν πολλάι τινές εἰσιν αἱ ἀντιληπτικαὶ τῶν πραγμάτων δυνάμεις, εἰ καὶ πολυτρόπως διὰ τῶν αἰσθήσεων τῶν κατὰ ζωὴν ἐφαπτώμεθα. Μία γὰρ τις ἐστὶ δύναμις, αὐτὸς ὁ ἐγκείμενος νοῦς, ὁ δι' ἐκάστον τῶν αἰσθητηρίων διεξιῶν, καὶ τῶν ὄντων ἐπιδρασσόμενος. Οὗτος θεωρεῖ διὰ τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν τὸ φαινόμενον· οὗτος συνιᾷ διὰ τῆς ἀκοῆς τὸ λεγόμενον [...] ET: Behr, *On the Human Image*, 167.

<sup>48</sup> Karamanolis, *Philosophy*, 123.

<sup>49</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *De anima et resurrectione* (ed. Spira and Mühlenberg, 15,9–16; 16, 8–10): καὶ ἅμα ταῦτα λέγουσα δείκνυσι τῇ χειρὶ τὸν ἰατρὸν τὸν ἐπὶ θεραπείᾳ τοῦ σώματος αὐτῆ προσκαθήμενον καὶ φησιν Ἐγγὺς ἡμῖν τῶν εἰρημένων ἢ μαρτυρία· πῶς γάρ, εἶπεν, οὗτος ἐπιβαλὼν τῇ ἀρτηρίᾳ τὴν τῶν δακτύλων ἀφήν ἀκούει τρόπον τινὰ διὰ τῆς ἀπτικῆς αἰσθήσεως τῆς φύσεως πρὸς αὐτὸν βοώσης καὶ τὰ ἴδια πάθη διηγουμένης, ὅτι ἐν ἐπιτάσει ἐστὶ τῷ σώματι τὸ ἀρρώστημα καὶ ἀπὸ τῶνδε τῶν σπλάγχνων ἡ νόσος ὠρμηται καὶ ἐπὶ τοσόνδε παρατείνει τοῦ φλογμοῦ ἡ ἐπίτασις; [...] ἄρ' οὖν εἰ μή τις δύναμις ἦν νοητὴ ἢ ἐκάστῳ τῶν αἰσθητηρίων παροῦσα, τί ἂν ἡμᾶς ἢ χεῖρ ἀφ' ἑαυτῆς ἐδιδάξατο μὴ τῆς ἐννοίας πρὸς τὴν τοῦ ὑποκειμένου γνῶσιν τὴν ἀφήν ὀδηγούσης; ET: NPNF, 683.

ears. Knowing the world means piercing the veil of its sensible appearance towards its truer reality, 'nature calling loudly to him', as Gregory (Macrina) put it.<sup>50</sup>

In this way, we find a path paved from our experience of perceiving reality around us to an understanding of intelligible being and, ultimately, of God. In *De infantibus*, Gregory argues this point by way of a detailed description of a person who closely observes the natural world looking at

[...] an ear of corn, the germinating of some plant, at a ripe bunch of grapes, at the beauty of early autumn, whether in fruit or flower, at the grass springing unbidden, at the mountain reaching up with its summit to the height of the ether, at the springs on its slopes bursting from those swelling breasts, and running in rivers through the glens, at the sea receiving those streams from every direction and yet remaining within its limits, with waves edged by the stretches of beach and never stepping beyond those fixed boundaries of continent.<sup>51</sup>

How can such a person, he then rhetorically asks 'not use the eye of reason through which those who study divine things are educated about being'?<sup>52</sup> As in previous texts, Gregory's penchant for the marvels of the natural world is evident, but so is his conviction that the observation and admiration of these phenomena can only be the starting point for an essentially rational reflection that can lead to their ontological core.

In the *De anima* likewise, the point of introducing the doctor who reads the pulse to understand the nature of the illness is ultimately to argue for the existence of soul and of God.

The Creation proclaims outright the Creator; for the very heavens, as the Prophet says, declare the glory of God with their unutterable words (cf. Ps. 19, 1). Who, seeing the universal harmony in the wondrous sky and on the wondrous earth [...] with the piercing eyes of mind, will not be clearly taught by means of the phenomena that a divine power, working with skill and method, is manifesting itself in this actual world, and, penetrating each portion, combines those portions with the whole and completes the whole by the portions, and encompasses the universe with

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<sup>50</sup> I leave to one side here the question of what role, if any, Macrina's own ideas play in the extant text of the dialogue.

<sup>51</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *De infantibus praemature abreptis* (ed. Hadwig Hörner. GNO III/2 (Leiden: Brill, 1986), 86, 2–11): ἀλλὰ καὶ στάχυν τις ἰδὼν ἐπὶ γῆς καὶ τὴν ἐκ φυτοῦ βλάστην καὶ βότρυν ὠρῖμον καὶ τὸ τῆς ὀπώρας κάλλος ἢ ἐν καρποῖς ἢ ἐν ἄνθεσι καὶ τὴν αὐτόματον πόαν καὶ ὄρος ἐπὶ τὸ αἰθέριον ὕψος ἀπὸ τῆς ἄκρας ἀνατεινόμενον καὶ τὰς ἐν ὑπωρείαις πηγὰς, μαζῶν δίκην ἐκ τῶν λαγόνων τοῦ ὄρους ἐπιρρεοῦσας, ποταμούς τε διὰ τῶν κοίλων ρέοντας καὶ θάλασσαν ὑποδεχομένην τὰ πανταχόθεν ρεύματα καὶ ἐν τῷ μέτρῳ μένουσαν κύματά τε τοῖς αἰγιαλοῖς ὀριζόμενα καὶ οὐκ ἐπεξιοῦσαν ὑπὲρ τοὺς τεταγμένους ὄρους κατὰ τῆς ἠπείρου τὴν θάλασσαν. ET: NPNF, 596.

<sup>52</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *De infantibus praemature abreptis* (ed. Hörner, 86, 11–3): ὁ ταῦτα καὶ τὰ τοιαῦτα βλέπων πῶς οὐκ ἂν τὰ πάντα διαλάβοι τῷ λόγῳ, δι' ὧν γίνεται τοῖς θεολογοῦσιν ἡ διδασκαλία τοῦ ὄντος; ET: NPNF, *ibid.* (with changes).

a single all-controlling force, self-centred and self-contained, never ceasing from its motion, yet never altering the position which it holds.<sup>53</sup>

### c) The limits of knowledge

And yet, as important as this step is, it is also fraught with difficulty and ambiguity. It is well known that Gregory imposes strict limitations on our knowledge of God.<sup>54</sup> What is not always seen with equal clarity, I think, is that this apophaticism is a direct consequence, in his case, of his experiential approach to cognition. This becomes immediately clear where Gregory without hesitation extends the limits of our knowledge from God to intelligible being more generally. Specifically of mind he writes as follows:

‘Who has known the mind of the Lord?’ asks the apostle (Rom. 11, 34), and I ask further, who has understood his own intellect? Let them tell us, those who make the nature of God to be within their comprehension, whether they understand themselves! Whether they know the nature of their own intellect? Is it something manifold and much compounded? But how can that which is intelligible be composite? Or what is the mode of mixture of things that differ in kind? Or is it simple and incomposite? But how then is it dispersed into the manifold divisions of the senses? How is there diversity in unity? How is the one in diversity?<sup>55</sup>

It is true that Gregory in what follows makes the specific claim that the incomprehensibility of the human mind is the consequence of its creation ‘in the image’ of God from which follows its participation in divine incomprehensibility,<sup>56</sup> but it seems to me that the reason he is so bewildered is a direct consequence of his epistemological approach. Mind is one and many, it is dispersed to various places but still a unit. It is, in other words, unlike the kind of thing we apprehend with our senses, and it is for that reason that our knowledge of it remains dim. We know that it must exist, but it is hard to say more than that.

Earlier in this chapter, I wrote that for Gregory philosophical scepticism was apparently not a major concern. Now we see that this assessment needs to be qualified. He was unconcerned, or so it seems, by doubts regarding the reliability of our senses. It seems that

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<sup>53</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *De anima et resurrectione* (ed. Spira and Mühlenberg, 11, 17–12, 2; 12, 19–13, 5): βoῶ γὰρ ἄντικρυς τὸν ποιητὴν ἢ κτίσις αὐτῶν τῶν οὐρανῶν, καθὼς φησιν ὁ προφήτης, ταῖς ἀλαλήτοις φωναῖς τὴν δόξαν τοῦ θεοῦ διηγούμενων. τίς γὰρ βλέπων τὴν τοῦ παντὸς ἁρμονίαν τῶν τε οὐρανίων καὶ τῶν κατὰ γῆν [...] ὁ ταῦτα βλέπων τῷ διανοητικῷ τῆς ψυχῆς ὀφθαλμῷ, ἄρ’ οὐχὶ φανερώς ἐκ τῶν φαινομένων διδάσκεται, ὅτι θεία δύναμις ἔντεχνός τε καὶ σοφὴ τοῖς οὖσιν ἐμφαινομένη καὶ διὰ πάντων ἤκουσα τὰ τε μέρη συναρμόζει τῷ ὅλῳ καὶ τὸ ὅλον συμπληροῖ ἐν τοῖς μέρεσι καὶ μιᾷ τινι περικρατεῖται δυνάμει τὸ πᾶν αὐτὸ ἐν ἑαυτῷ μένον καὶ περὶ ἑαυτὸ κινούμενον καὶ οὔτε λῆγόν ποτε τῆς κινήσεως οὔτε εἰς ἄλλον τινὰ τόπον παρὰ τὸν ἐν ᾧ ἐστὶ μεθιστάμενον; ET: NPNF 681-2 (with changes).

<sup>54</sup> On Gregory’s apophaticism see Ivana Noble, ‘The Apophatic Way in Gregory of Nyssa’, in Petr Pokorný and Jan Roskovec (eds.), *Philosophical Hermeneutics and Biblical Exegesis*, 323–339 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002).

<sup>55</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *De hominis opificio* 11.2 (PG 44, 153D–156A): «Τίς ἔγνω νοῦν Κυρίου;» φησὶν ὁ Ἀπόστολος. Ἐγὼ δὲ παρὰ τοῦτο φημι, τίς τὸν ἴδιον νοῦν κατενόησεν; Εἰπάτωσαν οἱ τοῦ Θεοῦ τὴν φύσιν ἐντὸς ποιούμενοι τῆς ἑαυτῶν καταλήψεως, εἰ ἑαυτοὺς κατενόησαν; εἰ τοῦ ἰδίου νοῦ τὴν φύσιν ἐπέγνωσαν; Πολυμερὴς τίς ἐστὶ, καὶ πολυσύνθετος. Καὶ πῶς τὸ νοητὸν ἐν συνθέσει; ἢ τίς ὁ τῆς τῶν ἑτερογενῶν ἀνακράσεως τρόπος; Ἄλλ’ ἀπλοῦς καὶ ἀσύνθετος· καὶ πῶς εἰς τὴν πολυμέρειαν τὴν αἰσθητικὴν διασπείρεται; πῶς ἐν μονότητι τὸ ποικίλον; πῶς ἐν ποικιλίᾳ τὸ ἓν; ET: Behr, *On the Human Image*, 189.

<sup>56</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *De hominis opificio* 11.3.

he had a deep-seated faith in the proper functioning of our cognitive apparatus. As far as our knowledge of the things around us is concerned, this to him appears to have been unproblematic. Yet the danger of scepticism, the possibility that our knowledge is treacherous and unreliable is not therefore absent from his thought. Rather, it emerges where our cognition moves from the perception of the visible world to the immaterial reality underlying it. It is the existence of such intelligible reality that is threatened by radical doubt.

In the *De anima*, Gregory voices the concern that the soul might not exist.<sup>57</sup> Such a concern is extremely rare in antiquity, possibly unique. If my interpretation here is accepted, we can perhaps see that this doubt is not, however, introduced for purely rhetorical reasons. There seems to be a connection between Gregory's proclamation in *De hominis opificio* that the mind is in principle unknowable, and the frightening possibility, acknowledged in *De anima* that the soul might be inexistent: both arise as a consequence of Gregory's assumption that knowledge depends on sense perception.

Yet this is not all. More frightening than the possibility that there is no soul is the conceivability that God himself might not exist. In a rather extraordinary passage, Gregory takes it upon himself to utter this horrible suspicion:

That is the very point, I said, upon which our adversaries cannot fail to have doubts; viz. that all things depend on God and are encompassed by him, or, that there is any divinity at all transcending the physical world.<sup>58</sup>

Just how inappropriate it is even to give voice to this kind of possibility is unfailingly made clear by Macrina in her direct response:

It would be more fitting, she cried, to be silent about such doubts, and not to deign to make any answer to such foolish and wicked propositions.<sup>59</sup>

Indeed, one wants to comment, and yet Gregory makes himself the mouthpiece of this very sacrilegious suspicion, a stunning rhetorical device apparently permitting him both to offer an authoritative rebuke of such a thought through the person of the teacher while nevertheless indicating its seriousness as a problem.

If this interpretation is accepted, another one of my earlier, provisional conclusions about Gregory's epistemology needs qualification as well. I had observed that for Gregory cognition could largely be explained without the assistance of Christian theological assumptions. We can now glimpse that, while Gregory apparently did not think Christian revelation was needed to underwrite the reliability of empirical knowledge, its importance

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<sup>57</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *De anima et resurrectione* (ed. Spira and Mühlenberg, 25, 4–13).

<sup>58</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *De anima et resurrectione* (ed. Spira and Mühlenberg, 11, 4–7): Αὐτὸ δὲ τοῦτο, εἶπον ἐγώ, πῶς ἂν τοῖς ἀντιλέγουσιν ἀναμφίβολον γένοιτο, τὸ ἐκ Θεοῦ εἶνα τὰ πάντα, καὶ ἐν αὐτῷ περικρατεῖσθαι τὰ ὄντα, ἢ καὶ ὅλως τὸ εἶναί τι Θεῖον τῆς τῶν ὄντων ὑπερκείμενον φύσεως; ET: NPNF 681.

<sup>59</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *De anima et resurrectione* (ed. Spira and Mühlenberg, 11, 8–9): Ἡ δὲ σιωπᾶν μὲν ἧν, φησὶν, ἐπὶ τοῖς τοιοῦτοις ἀρμοδιώτερον, μηδὲ ἀξιοῦν ἀποκρίσεως τὰς μωρὰς τε καὶ ἀσεβεῖς τῶν προτάσεων. ET: *Ibid.*

arises insofar as it may be needed to reassure us that our intuitions about God as the ontological source of the world are in fact justified.

To be clear, Gregory does not claim that the world fails to point us to the divine. On the contrary, he is emphatic about his conviction that human understanding when rightly exercised leads us from the visible to the invisible without the direct intervention of revelation. Nevertheless, he is conscious that this extension of our day-to-day experience is fragile and threatened. It is possible for human beings to make 'the visible [...] the limit of existence.' In this case, 'our senses [become] the only means of our apprehension of things.' We can close 'the eyes of [our] soul, and [become] incapable of seeing anything in the intelligible and immaterial world'.<sup>60</sup>

Macrina says all this about Epicurus, but it is important that she says it at all. Limiting ourselves to a life in the world of immanence is as much an existential threat as it is, for Gregory, an existential possibility.

#### d) Conclusion: Gregory, Clement and Eunomius

In this chapter, I have argued that Clement of Alexandria and Gregory of Nyssa represent radically different epistemologies both of which seem to have had their right within early Christian philosophy. Usually, when scholars distinguish different epistemologies in authors from the Patristic period, they contrast the epistemological 'modesty' of the apophatic tradition with more 'rationalist' approaches supposedly to be found in someone such as Eunomius of Cyzicus. Yet the present argument suggests that this dichotomy may need revisioning.

One reason for this need is that there may not be a single 'apophatic' epistemology. Both Clement and Gregory have strong views about the unknowability of God, but their reasons for doing so are rather different. In Clement's case, the absolute unknowability of God is the result of an approach that sets a high epistemic standard for anything that can be considered knowledge. Key is his notion of demonstration which, he claims, is ultimately dependent on first principles which must be revealed directly from God. Within this scheme, evidently, the first God himself is the *source* of any knowledge, but he cannot be known as this would require an even higher principle.

For Gregory, God's unknowability follows from the principle that cognition begins with sensual experience which is processed and transcended by the intellect. This process entails inevitable limitations as it is always the *attributes* of things we know, not their true being. Importantly, this principle is valid for created beings as well as for God. For Gregory, therefore, the *ousia* of every being is hidden, and the existence of intelligible entities, notably the soul, can reasonably be doubted and needs intellectual defending.

When scholars have therefore observed that Clement's apophaticism is stricter than that of the Cappadocians, this is true, but at the same time also misleading.<sup>61</sup> The point is not that Gregory of Nyssa applies a more moderate interpretation to the same set of assumptions,

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<sup>60</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *De anima et resurrectione* (ed. Spira and Mühlenberg, 9, 4–8). ET: NPNF, 680.

<sup>61</sup> Radde-Gallwitz, *Basil of Caesarea*, 39–40.

but that his epistemological principles are different and, therefore, lead him to different conclusions regarding our capacity for knowing God.

Where does this leave Eunomius and the Cappadocians' conflict with him about language and our knowledge of God? Andrew Radde-Gallwitz observed in 2009 that Eunomius shared many epistemological assumptions with Clement even though he eventually rejected the kind of apophaticism Clement embraced.<sup>62</sup> In his polemic, Gregory fastened on the latter point implying that his opposition to Eunomius was principally about the knowability of God. It will need more study to discern whether this is the case or whether the Cappadocian simplified a more complex issue for the purpose of doctrinal controversy. Such study should start from the recognition that 'the dispute is not primarily over the amount of knowledge one can have, but over what we mean by "knowledge" in this context', to cite Radde-Gallwitz one more time.<sup>63</sup>

If so, this confrontation does not have to be interpreted as a battle between orthodoxy and heresy. One might rather suspect that these contrasting approaches to knowledge have been of abiding significance throughout the Christian era. Does the Christian faith operate with its own principle of knowledge and is, as such, superior to rival approaches to reality? Or does it, rather, validate and deepen a universal form of interaction with the world around us based on our use of the senses and of our intellect? Read in this light, Clement and Gregory begin a story which subsequently continued through the Middle Ages and into modernity.

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<sup>62</sup> Radde-Gallwitz, *ibid.* I leave to one side the question of whether Eunomius did not have an apophaticism of his own. See Thomas Böhm, 'Gregors Zusammenfassung der Eunomianischen Position im Vergleich zum Ansatz des Eunomius', in Lenka Karfiková et al. (eds.), *Gregory of Nyssa: Contra Eunomium II. An English Version with Supporting Studies. Proceedings of the 10<sup>th</sup> International Colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa (Olomouc, September 15–18, 2004)*, 205–16 (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

<sup>63</sup> Radde-Gallwitz, *ibid.*