

Nyssa and Marion: Reflections on Two Distinct Specular Economies¹

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As Sarah Coakley has noted, “No one who works in systematic theology, let alone in patristic studies, can have failed to notice the recent upsurge of interest in the writings of Gregory of Nyssa.”² She lists three reasons for this phenomenon, and engages two of these currents in her own academic writings. First, with respect to the increasing interest in trinitarianism in post-modern thought, she has criticized certain contemporary proponents of a social or relational model of the Trinity for giving an inadequate reading of Gregory.³ Second, with respect to Gregory’s views on asceticism and desire, Coakley has brought the writings of the feminist theorist Judith Butler into conversation with Gregory’s patristic works.⁴ It will be the task of this presentation to engage the third current of contemporary interest in Gregory identified, but not systematically engaged, by Coakley. That is, namely, how a new appreciation of Christian apophaticism has arisen within a particular strand of post-modern theory.⁵

In this essay, I shall bring Gregory into conversation with the contemporary French phenomenologist Jean-Luc Marion, which is apt for several reasons. First, as Coakley notes, Gregory’s apophaticism naturally makes him of interest in this area. Second, there is a methodological basis, in that exegeses of the works of certain Christian writers have figured significantly in the debates regarding the nature of ‘negative theology’

1. I owe the discovery of the interesting expression “specular economy” to David Bentley Hart, “The Mirror of the Infinite: Gregory of Nyssa on Vestigia Trinitatis,” *Modern Theology* 18:4 October 2002, 547.

2. Sarah Coakley, “Re-Thinking Gregory of Nyssa: Introduction—Gender, Trinitarian Analogies, and the Pedagogy of The Song,” *Modern Theology* 18, no. 4 (2002): 431.

3. Coakley, “Re-Thinking Gregory of Nyssa,” 434; Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 109–29.

4. Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, 154.

5. Coakley, “Re-Thinking Gregory of Nyssa,” 431.

between Marion⁶ and his former teacher Jacques Derrida.⁷ While the most prominent figures treated in these debates have tended to be Meister Eckhart and Denys the Areopagite, Gregory of Nyssa has also warranted mention.⁸ In this regard it seems valuable to include Gregory as a figure whose significance for contemporary discussions, while noted in passing, has not yet been fully appreciated. Third, and most significantly, there is the striking use of specular imagery in both Marion and Gregory to engage issues of the mediation of the knowledge of God. The range of inquiry will encompass Gregory's fifteen homilies in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, and Marion's early work *God Without Being*. One of the main points this investigation will seek to demonstrate is that where the manner of their use of specular imagery does not overlap (human knowledge of God) there actually exist notable similarities in Marion's and Gregory's thinking, whereas their common affirmation of the human person's possibility of mirroring the divine in fact conceals fundamental differences between them.

Specular Imagery in Gregory of Nyssa's Homilies on the Song of Songs

The mirror is perhaps the most significant image in Gregory's thought in his homilies on the Song of Songs,⁹ and Gregory's apophaticism provides the context for an appreciation of the significance of his use of specular imagery

6. Jean-Luc Marion, *The Idol and Distance*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), 139–95; Jean-Luc Marion, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, trans. Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 128–62.

7. Jacques Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," trans. Ken Frieden, in *Negative Theology*, ed. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), 73–142.

8. Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," 73–142. Jean-Luc Marion, Jeffrey L. Kosky, trans., "In the Name: How to Avoid Speaking of 'Negative Theology,'" in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, ed. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 20–42. See pg. 34 of this latter work for a passing reference to Gregory of Nyssa.

9. David Bentley Hart, "The Mirror of the Infinite," 547. As Hart states, "Certainly if one were to attempt to isolate the one motif that pervades Gregory's thought most thoroughly, and that might best capture in a single figure the rationality that unifies it throughout, it would be that of the mirror."

in this work. The apophatic theme recurs throughout these homilies, but is well represented with just one citation. According to Gregory,

. . . the Nature which has no boundaries cannot be accurately comprehended by means of the connotations of words On the contrary, it is as if by certain traces and hints that our reason guesses at the Invisible. . . .¹⁰

Furthermore, even when one passes beyond conceptual knowledge to the embrace of God in unknowing experience or the darkness of faith, even then the soul has not laid hold of its desired object.¹¹

While a full apprehension of the infinite—whether articulate or mute—must by definition always remain beyond our finite grasp, there are nevertheless very real mediations, cognitive and otherwise, that endure. For example, while doctrinal instructions are certainly very limited with respect to what they can say *about* God,¹² they are nevertheless necessary signposts on the path *to* God. Creation, too, is able to provide intimations of God's nature, insofar as the marvels of the universe provide matter for

10. Richard A. Norris, trans., "Gregory of Nyssa: Fifteen Homilies on the Song of Songs" (2002), 21; W. Jaeger, ed., *Gregorii Nysseni Opera* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1952–), Vol. 6:36–37 (Hom. 1). All of the translated references to Nyssa's work have been drawn from a soon-to-be-published manuscript, cited above, by the late Richard A. Norris. The draft of the document with which I was working, generously shared by Dr. Norris with my professor Dr. Brian Daley, dated from 2002. The upcoming published version will be provided by the Society of Biblical Literature, under the title *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Song of Songs*, and was scheduled to be released on September 30, 2008. In an unfortunate non-coincidence of dates, this article had to be submitted prior to my being able to access a copy of this new publication, so the pages referenced here will be to the unpublished manuscript. The locations of the cited texts according their location in *Gregorii Nysseni Opera* (hereafter referred to as GNO) have been provided in order to assist in the process of cross-referencing the original Greek, and the homily numbers have also been provided for cross-referencing other translations, whether in English or additional languages.

11. Norris, "Song of Songs," 204; GNO 6:333 (Hom. 11). In this passage, for example, Gregory states that though the soul may strive to open itself completely to God, throwing its gateway wide open so that the King of glory might come in, nevertheless the wide space of the open gate turns out to be no more than "a tiny hole, narrow and confined." Through this tight space the hand of the Bridegroom will scarcely pass and the entire gain of the soul, therefore, "consists in no more than this: to know that that hand belongs to the One she longs for."

12. Norris, "Song of Songs," 56; GNO 6:87 (Hom. 3). Gregory here refers to them as "spark-like embers which cannot with accuracy express the intuition they carry."

our theological reflection, and help us to name God as wise, powerful, good, holy, eternal, etc.¹³

However, while both theological doctrines and the wonders of creation can in different ways convey something of God's nature, for Gregory the privileged site of such mediation is humanity itself. As he states in his second homily, nothing else in all of creation came into being as the image of God; only humanity has the high honor of being a likeness of the incorruptible beauty, an impress of the true Deity.¹⁴ But, one must hasten to add, not merely humanity *per se*. It is, rather, the humanity transformed by its ascent to God that is able to portray something of the divine nature itself. In what does this ascent consist?

In order to understand the nature of the first ascent to be identified, one must take note that for Gregory it is "on the borderline" between the appearance of things and invisible realities that he believes human beings to exist. Moreover, that by which humanity is truly constituted are the invisible, intelligible realities of the soul, rather than those things associated with the body, e.g., strength or beauty, that in fact only hang about "the outer borders of oneself."¹⁵ Consequently, Gregory informs us that the goal for human beings treading the border between the intelligible and the sensible is to follow the path of impassibility toward intelligible realities. The call is for people to become insensible to the sensible in their ascent to the intelligible,¹⁶ *in the service of a growth and ascent into greater virtue.*¹⁷ This is the first form of ascent we, independently but in agreement with Richard A. Norris, are identifying in Gregory's depiction.¹⁸ However, the desires arising from the body's passions wage continual war against these

13. Norris, "Song of Songs," 21; GNO 6:37 (Hom. 1).

14. Norris, "Song of Songs," 40; GNO 6:67–68 (Hom. 2).

15. Norris, "Song of Songs," 38; GNO 6:63 (Hom. 2).

16. Norris, "Song of Songs," 295; GNO 6:451 (Hom. 15).

17. Thus, for example, in speaking of "intelligible goods" Gregory states that "virtue's natural growth is upwards and it looks towards what is above." Norris, "Song of Songs," 77. GNO 6:125 (Hom. 4).

18. Cf. Richard A. Norris, "The Soul Takes Flight: Gregory of Nyssa and the Song of Songs," *Anglican Theological Review* 80, no. 4 Fall (1998): 526. Prior to reading Norris' very helpful article we had already identified in Gregory's homilies the distinct trajectories of growth into God in virtue, knowledge, and desire, and the significance of their interconnections, but we owe to Norris the assistance of the evocative terminology of three "ascents."

higher desires of the soul. Moreover, Gregory depicts this struggle as being an even match—the intelligible cannot gain any lasting victory over the sensible without some kind of assistance. For Gregory, the deciding factor in this case must be “our power of choice and self-governance, which is stationed in the middle between these . . . [and] assigns the reward of victory to whichever side it takes.”¹⁹

Second, Gregory describes an ascent in the knowledge of God, which second ascent is in a very real way dependent upon the first, since “[k]nowledge of the Good that transcends every intellect comes to us through the virtues, even as it is possible through some image to get a glimpse of the archetypal beauty.”²⁰ Just as our limited accomplishments in virtue did not cause Gregory to despair with respect to the possibility of ongoing human progress into the good, so he did not perceive our limited notions of the divine only as a lack, or an impediment vis-à-vis a true knowledge of God. Rather, “the intelligence that makes its course upward by searching into what lies beyond it is so constituted that every fulfillment of knowledge which human nature can attain becomes the starting-point of desire for things yet more exalted.”²¹

Third, and as indicated by the preceding citation, central to Gregory’s commentary on the Song of Songs is the ascent of desire. If human choice is the means by which at a given point a person resists the pull of the passions and opts for the higher spiritual life of virtue, human *desire* is the dynamic that draws the soul along each progressive step of its spiritual journey. Therefore as Norris notes, for Gregory desire may be called “the very engine of sanctity,”²² with each advance in the ascents of virtue or knowledge occasioning a corresponding heightening of the desire for God, which desire itself is always limited and in need of its own climbing ascent.²³ Thus, the best accomplishment of a human soul lies not in any achieved state but rather in an unending progress toward God’s immutable infinity

19. Norris, “Song of Songs,” 213–214; GNO 6:345 (Hom. 12).

20. Norris, “Song of Songs,” 58. GNO 6:91 (Hom. 3).

21. Norris, “Song of Songs,” 115; GNO 6:179–180 (Hom. 6). There are many similar passages one could identify, for example in GNO 6:247 (Hom. 8) and GNO 6: 321 (Hom. 11).

22. Norris, “The Soul Takes Flight,” 531.

23. Norris, “Song of Songs,” 221; GNO 6:358 (Hom. 12). See further in this section: “Nor indeed is she able to want all that he is, but only as much as her faculty of choice can purpose.”

made possible, surprisingly enough, by the infinite mutability characteristic of her human finitude.²⁴

Having realized its true invisible nature by means of these three ascents, for Gregory the human being as it manifests the virtues truly comes to be a privileged mediation of God, a real reflection of the divine nature. A few citations can illustrate this point. In the third homily we read,

If a person, having gathered every sweet-smelling flower or scent from the various blooms of virtue . . . should become perfect in all respects, he does not have it in him to look intently upon the divine Word itself any more than upon the disc of the sun; yet he sees the Sun within himself as in a mirror. For the rays of that true and divine Virtue shine upon the purified life through the impassibility which flows from them, and they make the Invisible visible for us, and the Incomprehensible comprehensible, because they portray the Sun in the mirror that we are.²⁵

Those who follow along the path of ascending virtue become, according to their individual capacity,²⁶ like the apostle Paul, a “palpable dwelling of the impalpable Nature.”²⁷ Finally, it is significant to note that the transformed human soul, as a mirror of the divine Nature, reveals God even to the heavenly powers. For according to Gregory, it is by means of “the clear mirror of the church”²⁸ that “the multiform wisdom of God” is made known “to the powers above the cosmos.”²⁹

24. In this regard Norris made a highly significant observation in an endnote (endnote 11). “Gregory is perhaps the first Christian teacher to state a positive view of the mutability that was taken to be proper to human beings in virtue of their createdness. Origen seems to have pictured changeability simply as a perpetual liability to departure from the good. Gregory by contrast envisages it as empowering an unending process of approximation to the Divine, the limitless Good, with the result that changeability becomes, perhaps somewhat paradoxically, the mirror in human nature of God’s infinity.” Norris, “Song of Songs,” 166.

25. Norris, “Song of Songs,” 57; GNO 6:89 (Hom. 3).

26. Norris, “Song of Songs,” 61; GNO 6:96 (Hom. 3).

27. Norris, “Song of Songs,” 56; GNO 6:88 (Hom. 3).

28. Norris, “Song of Songs,” 163; GNO 6:257 (Hom. 8).

29. Norris, “Song of Songs,” 162; GNO 6:254–255 (Hom. 8).

Specular Imagery in Jean-Luc Marion's *God Without Being*

The context of Jean-Luc Marion's thought as articulated in this paper is Martin Heidegger's critique of onto-theology. While there is not the space to outline the contours of this critique in any detail, we may at least observe in passing that according to Heidegger onto-theology presupposes the primacy of theoretical reason with the result that the onto-theological God enters philosophy "only insofar as philosophy, of its own accord and by its own nature, requires and determines how the deity enters into it."³⁰ As Heidegger elsewhere complains, we "can neither pray nor sacrifice to this god. Before the *causa sui*, man can neither fall to his knees in awe nor can he play music and dance."³¹

For Marion, to think God in such onto-theological terms is an instance of idolatry: a key concept which Marion fills with his own particular content. In the usual understanding an idol is a kind of false or untrue image of God, but for Marion this is not an adequate formulation of the problem. As he states it, if the statues of the ancient Greek gods no longer have the power to inspire in us a sense of the divine, "the fault . . . comes back neither to the divine nor to the Greeks."³² Quite simply, it is rather a case that there are no more Greeks left for whom these statues speak of that aspect of the divine which they alone uniquely apprehended. Far from representing an essentially false image of the divine, idols are precisely a "low-water mark" of the experience of the divine, "a real, limited, and indefinitely variable function of *Dasein* considered in its aiming at the divine."³³

The essence of idolatry is thus not essentially one of falsity but partiality, in at least two senses of that term. Partial, in that what is revealed of the divine is restricted to that at which I aimed with my intention. Partial, in that what I see necessarily reflects the trajectory of my desire, that to which I happen to be partial. As a kind of "hidden mirror" the idol reflects

30. Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 56.

31. Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, 72.

32. Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 27.

33. Marion, *God Without Being*, 28.

the human gaze back to its origin and in its brilliance offers to sight “the trace of the bounce.” The dazzling idol is the point at which, its aim satisfied, satisfied with what it sees and aiming to go no further, the gaze *rests*. Looking at an idol in this way, one sees only “the gaze gazing at itself gazing.”³⁴ Thus the idol is not the source of the limited gaze but a *reflection* of it, and if this analysis accurately describes the dynamic at work in the old aesthetic idols of ancient Greece, they apply *a fortiori* to the varieties of conceptual idolatry in naming/defining God that occur in our own time, e.g., the “moral God” denounced in Friedrich Nietzsche’s “so-called (and vulgar) atheism.”³⁵

In contrast to this partial approach to the divine via the idol, Marion also enunciates an alternate means of approach by way of the icon. Whereas in the first instance of Marion’s specular imagery the idol acts as a mirror, reflecting the aim of a human gaze insofar as it aspires to and is able to grasp (constrain) the divine, in the second case the icon initiates its own gaze, the “glory” of which is reflected in the face upon which it gazes. Whereas in the case of the idol the dynamic arises from the site of the human gaze, in the case of the icon it arises from that of the divine.

As opposed to the idol that is offered in an invisible mirror—invisible because dazzled as much as dazzling for and by our aim—here our gaze becomes the optical mirror of that at which it looks only by finding itself more radically looked at: we become a visible mirror of an invisible gaze that subverts us in the measure of its glory.³⁶

Furthermore, it remains to emphasize that the phenomenon of the icon arises out of the dynamic of divine love, *agapē*. Because “love gives itself only in abandoning itself, ceaselessly transgressing the limits of its own gift

34. Marion, *God Without Being*, 26.

35. If “man is the origin of his idol” (Feuerbach), and the “God” resulting from human projection is the ideal “moral Governor of the world” as presented only to our practical reason (Kant), then as the very letter of Nietzsche’s text identifies, only the “moral God” dies as a result of the *Götzendämmerung*. What cannot be legitimately assumed is the equivalence of this “regional concept” with God, and as a result the failure of this regional concept of “God” in fact provides the possibility of a liberation of God beyond any human conceptualization. Marion, *God Without Being*, 29–33.

36. Marion, *God Without Being*, 22.

... [it] at once prohibits fixation on a response, a representation, an idol.”³⁷ Thus, insofar as the gaze is initiated from the human side the mirror is an image of idolatrous rest. Insofar as the gaze is initiated from the divine side the mirror is an image of the invisible as such, and a summons to traverse the distance back up the infinite stream of the invisible in praise.

Comparison and Analysis

Having outlined both Gregory’s and Marion’s thought in varying levels of detail, we are now in a position to make some comparisons between them regarding their respective specular economies. To begin we may note that while both Gregory and Marion use specular imagery in relation to humanly initiated attempts to know God, they do so in quite different ways. In this instance, Marion speaks of a “stable mirror” associated with verbs like “rest” and “freeze,” and with the figure of the idol which (as the trace of the bounce of our limited gaze) is by definition “inadequate (objectively) and impassable (subjectively).”³⁸ While Marion does allow for the possibility of iconic concepts in which are inscribed “the distance of infinite depth,” he does not use the figure of the mirror to describe this phenomenon.³⁹ In contrast, for Gregory the limited extent to which any human knowledge may reflect God only “darkly, in a mirror and a mystery” does not lead to a conclusion of idolatrous satisfaction and stasis.⁴⁰ Thus, ironically, it would appear that where Marion does not use specular imagery (the iconic concept), his similarity to the aim of Gregory’s use of specular imagery to describe an endless reference to and progress into infinity is nevertheless the greatest.

A second major site of specular imagery in both Gregory and Marion relates to the possibility of human beings reflecting God’s nature; in fact both authors affirm this possibility but once again the details of their respective specular economies differ. Marion emphasizes intelligible/intellectual realities in one sense with which Gregory would agree, namely, that the

37. Marion, *God Without Being*, 48.

38. Marion, *God Without Being*, 13, 55.

39. Marion, *God Without Being*, 23.

40. Norris, “Song of Songs,” 55. GNO 6:86 (Hom. 3).

invisible is what is most real.⁴¹ Thus, our faces can reflect the glory of God as in a mirror insofar as we become an icon of God's glory: "visibility of the invisible as such."⁴² The dynamic at work is strictly the same as that described for the iconic concept, but in the case of persons the reference to infinity manifests itself in the acknowledgement of distance in praise.⁴³ Gregory, while similarly privileging the insensible over the sensible, does so in a different manner. That is, for him the extent to which a person is able to reflect the invisible divine nature is in direct proportion to the extent that she willingly pursues and cultivates the virtues of the Christian life.

One could see in the practice of virtue a similar "reference to infinity" such as Marion describes, but in fact this distinction indicates the presence of fundamental differences between Marion and Gregory. The first difference relates to the position of knowledge in their depictions. For Marion knowledge is the primary aim of his project, i.e., "to give pure giving to be thought," and his main question is whether "the conceptual thought of God . . . can be developed outside of the doctrine of Being."⁴⁴ Marion thus construes *agapē* in intellectual terms in connection with his analysis of the gift. This intellectual (in the cognitive sense of the word) apprehension of God might have implications for virtue, though neither the necessity nor the intended manner of this connection is clearly spelled out since a decidedly a-moral approach seems to determine Marion's treatment of the knowledge of God in connection to "holiness,"⁴⁵ "idolatry,"⁴⁶ and even "sin."⁴⁷ It is thus

41. Marion, *God Without Being*, 180.

42. Marion, *God Without Being*, 22.

43. "To praise the Requisite as such, hence as goodness, amounts to opening distance." Marion, *God Without Being*, 76.

44. Marion, *God Without Being*, xxv, xxiv.

45. In speaking of the "holiness" the theologian is required to develop, Marion states that "the morality or private virtues of the theologian are not first at stake," but rather the "competence acquired in the matter of charity, in short of knowing the Word nonverbally, in flesh and Eucharist." Marion, *God Without Being*, 155.

46. Likewise, idolatry does not have a fundamentally ethical valence. "But that which renders a gaze idolatrous could not, at least at first, arise from an ethical choice: it reveals a sort of essential fatigue." Marion, *God Without Being*, 13.

47. In light of this, one suspects that even sin has primarily a conceptual denotation, cf. "the ignorance of *agapē* implied by the condition of sinner . . ." Marion, *God Without Being*, 109. Also, see Marion's statement that the prodigal son's dissipation of his goods (*ousia*) did not result from "the sudden immorality of an heir seized by debauchery," but rather in "the

in the mode of a distinct intellectual program that Marion seeks to prioritize the *thinking* of love over that of Being.

Still continuing our reflection on this first difference, we have seen that for Gregory the ascent of knowledge is in a very real way dependent upon the ascent of virtue. For him “knowledge of God is strictly correlative with the practice of virtue, for it is in apprehending the quality of virtue as we come to embody it that we know God.”⁴⁸ If Gregory’s “knowledge” corresponds however roughly to Marion’s “philosophy” and therefore “Being” (insofar as “the first thing conceived by the intellect is being”),⁴⁹ then Gregory too indicates, albeit in a different manner than Marion, the priority of “the Good” (virtues) over that of “Being” (knowledge) by placing virtue as the gateway to knowledge of God.” The difference resides in the fact that for Gregory goodness precedes knowledge not only in the order of thought, but also concretely in the life of the human person.

A second set of differences, deriving from the first described above, is that Gregory’s emphasis on the virtues indicates a different view of the role of human initiative and capacities in relation to God. With respect to the issue of initiative, whereas for Gregory the initiative of a soul genuinely seeking God can lead to ongoing progress into the Good, for Marion the only possible resolution to the aporias of an idolatrous knowledge of “God” arising from human initiative is that of an iconic knowledge of Gød arising from a divine initiative. Regarding human capacities, whereas Marion’s relegation of Being to a secondary status with respect to love serves to eliminate anything human as the starting point for knowledge of Gød, Gregory’s description concerning the necessary prerequisite of a virtuous life for the revelation of knowledge emphasizes the unavoidably human matrix through which all of our knowledge of God is mediated. Marion states that,

abandonment of the paternal gift as place, meaning, and legitimacy of the enjoyment of the ousia.” Marion, *God Without Being*, 98.

48. Norris, “The Soul Takes Flight,” 528.

49. Marion, *God Without Being*, 79, citing Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q.5, a.2, resp.

In a word, the divine is figured in the idol only indirectly, reflected according to the experience of it that is fixed by the human authority—the divine, actually experienced, is figured, however, only in the *measure* of the human authority that puts itself, as much as it can, to the *test* [italics added].⁵⁰

This is, in fact, exactly how Gregory describes the reflection of God who “indwells in a way that accords with the *measure* of the one into whom he comes [italics added],” such that “[h]e is manifested in a character that fits the capacity of the one who takes him in.”⁵¹ Moreover, we have seen that for Gregory the extent of this capacity is determined by the *test* of the virtues. Marion states that no condition can restrict nor even any refusal rebuff God’s self-gift, since “to give itself, the gift does not require that an interlocutor receive it, or than an *abode* accommodate it, or that a condition assure it or confirm it . . . but purely and simply to accept it; to accept it or, more modestly, not to steal away from it [italics added].”⁵² For Gregory, on the other hand, God finds an accommodating “throne” and “*home*” within a person precisely to the extent that by her choosing a person privileges the passion for God over earthly passions.⁵³ What the soul chooses, the soul reflects.⁵⁴

To sum up, the similarities and differences between Marion’s and Gregory’s specular economies may be described as follows. First, while Marion’s description of the idol conveyed a notion of the “impassability” of the “stable mirror,” Gregory’s depiction of our limited knowledge of God as a “stepping-point” to ever greater knowledge portrayed a *moving* mirror that holds the possibility of endless progress into the Good. While it was identified that Marion’s notion of the iconic concept could be seen to recapitulate many of the essential characteristics of Gregory’s ascent of knowledge, an important exception was found in Marion’s negative evaluation of any human initiative vis-à-vis knowledge of God. Second, while both Marion and Gregory affirmed the possibility of human persons

50. Marion, *God Without Being*, 28.

51. Norris, “Song of Songs, 61. GNO 6:96 (Hom 3).

52. Marion, *God Without Being*, 47.

53. Norris, “Song of Songs,” 56. GNO 6:87 (Hom. 3), italics added.

54. Thus Gregory writes that “our choice is so structured that it is given shape by whatever it determines to possess . . . For inasmuch as it is shaped in accordance with the reflections of its choices, the human person is rightly likened to a mirror.” Norris, “Song of Songs,” 67; GNO 6:104 (Hom. 4).

mirroring the divine, this apparent similarity in fact concealed fundamental differences. Marion's presentation emphasized the (passive?) reception of knowledge of, or mystical union with, God, which gift brooked no rebuff from any *a priori* human conditions (apart from the minimal condition of not "stealing away" from it). Gregory, on the other hand, precisely emphasized the human capacity for choosing the good, the ongoing exercise of which determined the measure in which a person could obtain ever-greater (if always limited) knowledge of God. An overarching observation thus presents itself. Whereas within the context of his apophaticism Gregory places the human person at the centre of his account of knowledge of God, Marion seeks to eliminate as much as possible any human contribution to this knowledge by depicting the human person's role in mirroring God in phenomenological terms as fundamentally receptive, or even passive.⁵⁵

Implications and Closing Thoughts

In conclusion, a few final reflections will be offered and implications drawn. First, the specular economies of Marion and Gregory could be construed as examples, in different eras and intellectual circumstances, of the ever-renewed contrast between the dialectical and correlational approaches to theology. At its extreme, Marion's dialectical approach which emphasizes the gift giving itself with no consideration of the conditions of its reception could vitiate the need for the very incarnation which such an approach takes as its proper starting point. For does not the incarnation, and indeed God's whole history of dealings with Israel and the church, bear witness not *only* to the priority of God's initiative, but *also* to the transcendent God's condescension to be encountered by human beings in the limited modes of our own capacities? One can, nevertheless, see the reason for Marion's articulation of a different position, namely, his joint struggle against Nietzsche's critique of the metaphysical "moral God," and Heidegger's

55. This tendency, already noticeable in the analyses of *God Without Being*, becomes fully developed in Marion's later work *Being Given* in his notion of l'adonné as a "screen" constituted by the phenomenon which crashes upon it. "Only the impact of what gives itself brings about the arising, with one and the same shock, of the flash with which its first visibility bursts and the very screen on which it crashes." Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 265.

understanding of theology as reflection on a particular, believing determination of *Dasein*, to which an incautious correlational approach could bear more than a little resemblance.⁵⁶ In this Marion offers a caution to readers of Gregory who might forget that, when he speaks *in homilies to fellow believers* of the role of human desire and initiative in the ascent to God, Gregory is already presupposing the revelation (and hence always prior divine initiative) for which Marion is trying to make a philosophical argument (in his concept of the icon).

A second theological issue relates to Marion's treatment of *agapē*. His desire to "work love conceptually" seems to have left little that connects with more common notions of God's love that have to do with compassionate justice. In this, one wonders how Marion's understanding can adequately represent the New Testament conviction that "the primary worship of Christians is welcoming in their daily lives this grace of God through theological faith and charity," to which *ethical* praxis the cultic and liturgical language of the Old Testament is applied.⁵⁷ Thus, one could wonder about the apparent absence of the good construed in moral terms from Marion's understanding of the intellectual and the invisible; was this lacuna necessitated by an approach strongly emphasizing human receptivity vis-à-vis the divine? For while one could imagine a relatively passive reception of knowledge, any treatment of the virtues or ethics necessarily involves a consideration of co-operative human activity as acts which a *person* does (however empowered by God she may be). Thus Gregory's emphasis on the prerequisite centrality of the virtues for any knowledge of God linked to his different understanding of intelligible reality, seems to present itself as something of a correction to Marion on this point, and rather more clearly as an extension of the basic scriptural theme noted above.

Third, this practice of the virtues is related to the issue of apophaticism introduced at the beginning of this investigation. In Gregory's account our knowledge of God is in fact indirect and mediated through our own selves, transformed by our practice of the virtues. By privileging the transformed human subject as a locus of divine revelation in this way, Gregory provides

56. Marion, *God Without Being*, 65–69.

57. Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*, trans. Patrick Madigan and Madeleine Beaumont (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1995): 253–4.

an interesting means of protecting the affirmation that God is unknowable in God's essence, while still allowing for the possibility of some partial and developing knowledge of God.

Finally, we may remind ourselves again of how Marion's specular economy was shaped by his efforts to provide an *apologia* for that which Gregory presupposes, namely, divine initiative in self-revelation. Nevertheless, and notwithstanding his partially positive evaluation of "idoltrous" views of God, we might fairly argue that Marion does not adequately provide a positive account of human initiative in relation to the knowledge of God. In this regard, and recognizing his assumption of an already-given divine approach to humanity, Gregory appears to be more comprehensive in his treatment. Moreover, one wonders whether his speaking of "desire" in relation to God could not also be applied prior to any ("special") revelation, to describe the human reality Augustine spoke of with his "*inquietum est cor nostrum donec requiescat in te.*" In relation to the contemporary scene, Nyssa's value in the limited sphere circumscribed in this article seems to be the following. In an intellectual context which has seen the turn to, and subsequent dissolution of, the subject, Gregory's elevation of the human subject only insofar as she has been elevated and inscribed by God through her practice of the virtues seems to both maintain and dissolve the central significance of the anthropological turn in an interesting way.⁵⁸ On this point Gregory reminds us that Christian theology always deals with a "de-centered" subject who is only constituted in relation to an other, and others. A few questions thus present themselves. Is it really true that in relation to the divine other there are no possible responses to the obvious problems associated with a human instrumental approach to knowing than the unilateral approach of God to us by revelation, or the endlessly deferred irruption of *le tout autre*? In relation to human others, is there no possibility of an account of human willing that is not a will to power? It is just such possibilities that Gregory raises and invites us to consider by means of the specular economy reflected in his homilies on the Song of Songs.

58. While it may not be possible to directly appropriate Gregory's approach (in the aspects noted here or above) in a great leap back across the centuries, his thought can nevertheless remind us of important theological impulses that always call for our (re)consideration.