

“Even with Nature”: Disability and Divine Perfection in  
Gregory of Nyssa’s Theology of *Epektasis*

by

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## Abstract

This thesis seeks to explore Gregory of Nyssa's theology of *epektasis*, his view of the body as vessel of the mind/soul and medium for interpersonal communication and the implications for contemporary theological discussions of disability. *Epektasis* is commonly understood as the human being's perpetual progress towards God. This perpetual progress is required for the flawed human being to better him/herself in hopes of drawing closer to the inexhaustible goodness of God. Although the study of *epektasis* most often focuses on the individual aspect, Gregory often emphasizes the relational importance of perpetual progress. Gregory's depiction of the body as the medium for communications shows the way our bodies exist as both perceivers and expressers. Bodies are perceivers in that they are at all times taking in information and communicating with others, and expressers in the way they allow the bodies we come into contact with to see the content of both the mind and soul. Gregory suggests that the human communication that takes place between bodies has positive implications for the perpetual progress exhibited in *epektasis*. Human beings are able to learn from the bodies of more virtuous examples, ultimately imitating the virtue these models exhibit in their lives. For Gregory, this bodily communication is important because the human person is not classified by the ability to make rational decisions or to prove ideas with intellect. The notion that the body is able to communicate freely without reliance on intellect creates an accessible connection to contemporary considerations of disability.

The argument of the thesis proceeds as follows. Gregory's thought is hierarchical with a perfect God at the top and humans striving upwards towards that perfection through *epektasis*. Gregory's theology of virtuous models allows individuals to resist the assumption that disabled persons are located below abled persons on this hierarchy. His theology pushes us to recognize that fragility is constituent of God's perfection. The role of disabled persons as models of virtue is one way that this fragile perfection is made known. *Epektasis* is the human attempt to strive toward a perfect union with God by way of communicating with others, especially virtuous models, through the human body. This communication takes place through sense experiences highlighted by philosophers concerned with the human body such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty. These conversations between Gregory and other thinkers add supplemental thought, explaining the ways Gregory's theology accounts for the communicative nature on the surface and visceral levels of the body. The application of Gregory's theology to contemporary thoughts on disability and the body is seen most clearly through an account of the author's relationship with an individual with disabilities named Brooke. This application works to show the way Gregory's theology of *epektasis* remains contemporarily relevant, and solidifies the argument of individuals with disabilities existing as exemplary models of virtue.

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## Introduction

Gregory of Nyssa was born in the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE to an aristocratic and wealthy family in or around Pontus in Neocaesarea.<sup>1</sup> His family's wealth afforded him the opportunity of significant education, a path he flourished on, along with his siblings. Although little is known about the specifics of his education, his writings indicate that he was well versed in classical literature, had a masterful understanding of rhetoric, and had a vast philosophical reach having read Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, Plotinus, Posidonius of Apadema, and others.<sup>2</sup> Around the time Gregory completed his studies, his sister Macrina embraced a "philosophical and immaterial" lifestyle, which she practiced at the family estate in Annisa.<sup>3</sup> Gregory's mother and family servants joined in this ascetic lifestyle, and his brother Naucratus rejected a career that promised to be lucrative in order to live as a hermit in the neighboring forests.<sup>4</sup> Although influenced by his family's turn to asceticism, Gregory ultimately began a career as a rhetorician.<sup>5</sup> In 376, after a significant shortage of bishops, his brother Basil of Caesarea, who as Metropolitan, called Gregory for election into the episcopate.

What followed was a brilliant career wrought with controversy and significant contributions to the theological landscape. Although Gregory lacked the natural leadership abilities of his brother Basil in his role as bishop, he was, nonetheless, a sharp and incisive theologian, who is perhaps best recognized for his contributions to the doctrine of the Trinity. In the introduction to his monograph on Gregory of Nyssa, Hans Urs von Balthasar writes, "Only a

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Maraval, "Biography of Gregory of Nyssa," in *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, eds. Lucas Francisco Mateo-Seco and Guilio Maspero, Trans. Seth Cherney (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2010), 105.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> "The Life of Macrina" *Vita s. Macrina*, henceforth *Macr*, The English translations used for this thesis are by Virginia Woods Callahan (ed.) *Gregorii Nysseni Opera* vol.3 VIII.i (Leiden: Brill, 1952) and Kevin Coorigan, *The Life of St. Macrina* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2005), GNO VIII.i, 381.

<sup>4</sup> Pierre Maraval, "Biography of Gregory of Nyssa," 105.

<sup>5</sup> Gregory was also married at this time of his life, although little is known about his wife. Her name is known through the writings of Gregory of Nazianzus, who referred to her as Theosebia in *Epig.* 197: cfr. P. Devos, 1983.

small number of initiates have read and are aware of Gregory of Nyssa, and they have jealously guarded their secret.”<sup>6</sup> However, this is no longer the case. The latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a large surge in Gregory scholarship as contemporary scholars have explored the ways in which his theology relates to modern academic sensibilities.

One aspect of Gregory’s theology that has become a preeminent theme in modern scholarship of Gregory is the idea of humanity’s perpetual progress towards God, or *epektasis*. Jean Daniélou first brought this idea to attention in his 1944 monograph, *From Glory to Glory*.<sup>7</sup> In this text, Daniélou depicts *epektasis* as a mostly solitary journey, in which the human being strives to ascend into a union with God. However, within the canon of Gregory much time is spent considering the various ways the human body functions. Specifically, Gregory works to show the ways in which the body exists as a medium for interpersonal communication, thus connecting an individual to other human beings. Gregory’s portrayal of the relational body therefore adds a new dimension to his understanding of *epektasis*, often ignored by theologians such as Daniélou who emphasize the individuality of the perpetual progress. Instead, Gregory emphasizes that the journey towards God necessitates and is benefitted by a human being’s relationship to Christ, Christian communities, ecclesial life, and the sacraments of the Church. Thus, the body acts as the means for a human being to be in relation with others as a way of progressing towards a union with God.

This thesis will explore Gregory of Nyssa’s theology of *epektasis*, his view of the body as vessel of the mind/soul and the medium for interpersonal communication, and the implications for contemporary theological discussions of disability. Chapter One will focus on Gregory’s

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<sup>6</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought: An Essay on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa*, trans. Mark Sebanc (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 15.

<sup>7</sup> Jean Daniélou, “Introduction,” in *From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa’s Mystical Writings*, (Yonkers, New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1979), 3-10.

theological anthropology. For Gregory, the human soul and body do not exist as two separate entities. Instead, the soul is housed inside the body, where the body ministers to the needs of the soul, and the soul uses the body as its instrument.<sup>8</sup> This understanding of the soul puts the body in a relational situation where it is responsible for perceiving the virtuous contents of other people's souls and expressing the virtuous contents of its own soul. The theological understanding of embodied virtue is perhaps best illustrated within Gregory's writings about his sister Macrina. Macrina exists for Gregory as a pseudo-allegorical figure who is shown literarily as a conversation partner in some of Gregory's writings. In these conversations, Gregory shows the way in which embodied virtue makes itself known to those it comes into relationship with, thus benefitting an individual in their perpetual progress towards God. From here, the chapter turns to Gregory's understanding of the *imago Dei*. Within Gregory's theology lies a consistent reminder that God exists as unobtainable perfection, in a hierarchical divide above an imperfect humanity. However, the notion that imperfect human beings are created within the image of God must create some space for the possibility that fragility is constituent of God's perfection.

Chapter Two looks at Gregory of Nyssa's theological anthropology through the lens of modern philosophies of the body. Beginning with the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, this chapter argues that Merleau-Ponty's understandings of the "lived body" and the "chiasmus of the flesh" lend themselves to further clarification of Gregory's theological anthropology. For Merleau-Ponty, flesh is portrayed as a tool for perception and touch, but is also seen as a unifying element that is shared by humanity. This understanding of flesh can be seen in Gregory's Christology as he highlights the link between the shared flesh of humanity and

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<sup>8</sup>"On the Soul and the Resurrection" *De anima et resurrectione*, henceforth *An et res*. The translation used in this thesis is by Catherine P. Roth in *St. Gregory of Nyssa: On the Soul and the Resurrection* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1993), 114.

that of Christ, who exists as the ideal model of virtue. From there, the chapter will examine the philosopher Drew Leder, who offers a supplement to Merleau-Ponty's notion of perception that moves beyond the surface of the body. Leder suggests that in order to truly understand the perceptual abilities of the body, an account must be made for the visceral body as well as the visible. Although internal organs are not often responsible for perceptual tasks, the surfaced perceptual organs are sustained by their work, and would cease to function without their existence. Leder calls for a deeper relationality among human beings through the visceral nature of their bodies. Although Gregory lived in a time period with a more narrow medical understanding, he often hypothesizes about the inner workings of the body. One example of this is a conversation that took place with his sister Macrina, about the connection between the location of the soul in relation to the inner organs, noting the qualities of expression and perception within the visceral organs.

These notions of the body's ability to perceive and express are brought together through the thought of the philosopher Donn Welton and his theory of the "habitual body." Welton's view of the body suggests that the importance of the human person is not that they possess a body, mind, or soul. Instead, the significance of the body is seen in the fact that its actions are done habitually. Consistently, Welton's writing reminds the reader of the limitations of human beings in the perceptual act. The body is at all times perceiving, yet it is always unable to perceive the entirety of what is around it. These reminders of finitude and fallenness are both vital motifs within the theology of Gregory. Thus, Gregory's theological anthropology includes perceptual abilities in a way that is analogous to Donn Welton's perceptual body.

Chapter Three engages two prominent voices within the academic study of disability, Tobin Siebers and Fiona Kumari Campbell. Through the framework of Gregory of Nyssa, this

chapter further argues that Gregory's thought speaks to current discussions of disability. In Siebers, a correlation is seen between the theorist's understanding of disability aesthetics and Gregory's own conception of beauty and the imperfection that is fundamental to humanity. Siebers shows the ways in which perfection exists as an unobtainable objective when thinking about beauty. Similarly, Gregory understands beauty to be limited by human finitude, and focuses more on how the human being postures themselves in order to see beauty. In Gregory, the notion of perfection as a standard for beauty is present, but only applicable when the perfect beauty is in reference to God.

Fiona Kumari Campbell argues that individuals with disabilities not only have the ability to fulfill the role of pedagogical models, but that disabilities afford individuals a privileged status for teaching. This is because of the self-emptying that naturally occurs for individuals with disabilities. A self-emptying demeanor is necessary for *epektasis*, which Gregory's suggests is more easily achieved when a person observes and models the behavior of a virtuous person. In Gregory, this achievement is again seen in his interactions with Macrina, who is portrayed as incredibly ill and decrepit in the time before her death, yet is still shown by Gregory to be a flawless model of virtue. Gregory therefore shows the ways in which a body, that is considered infirmed, is able to exist performatively as a model to emulate. Chapter Three concludes by discussing how Gregory's understanding of fragility works to shape his considerations of virtue and beauty. For Gregory, virtue and beauty are not merely noetic; they extend into the human body. In light of the story of Brooke, space is created to argue that *epektasis* takes place through an imperfect relationship between two imperfect bodies.

Chapter Four shifts its attention to the story of Brooke, an individual with developmental disabilities, and the author's relationship with her. Her story ultimately works to show the ways

in which Gregory's understanding of the body and theology of *epektasis* has clear implications for the relationships between individuals with disabilities and nondisabled persons.

The thesis will conclude by connecting the main themes of Gregory of Nyssa's theology with contemporary ideas of disability. Through these connections I will solidify the main argument of the thesis that individuals with disabilities qualify as ideal examples of the virtuous models within Gregory's theology of *epektasis*. Approaching a theology of disability through the lens of Gregory also raises a secondary question regarding Gregory's understanding of the hierarchical divide between God and humanity. Typical theologies of disability cast God in a light of accessibility, by asserting that because God allows disability or suffering among creation, these things must be constituent of God. However, Gregory's hierarchy, with a perfect God categorically existing above a flawed earth, leaves little space for this dynamic. An account will therefore be made for the ways in which disability can virtuously exist inside Gregory's notion of perfection.

## Chapter 1

### Gregory of Nyssa's Theological Anthropology and Theology of *Epektasis*

Gregory of Nyssa is probably best known to those who study historical Christianity for his work on the development of the Trinity. Although his contributions to Trinitarian thinking would prove influential, they were not the only contribution Gregory made as he was also among the earliest theologians to develop a detailed theological anthropology. Specifically, Gregory argued that the body exists as an important medium through which an individual has the capacity to be connected to other human beings, including Jesus Christ who existed on earth with a body. This understanding of the body provides the framework for one of the paramount themes of his theology, the human person's perpetual progress towards God, or *epektasis*. Gregory's theological anthropology suggests that this progress towards God never exists as a solitary journey. The interdependence among human beings through the body exists as the vehicle through which human beings pursue a union with God. It is important for a person to reconnect through *epektasis* due to the separation that exists between God and humanity. This separation is not spatial, but is instead a matter of virtue. Human beings grow in *epektasis* by observing and learning from one another's virtue. In a strict sense, no human being can be called virtuous, because no human being is able to ever truly attain the perfection that characterizes divine virtue. Thus, for Gregory, human beings can only ever be called virtuous in a derived and indirect sense.<sup>9</sup>

This chapter will examine Gregory of Nyssa's understanding of the human body and its role as medium for the bodily communication that facilitates *epektasis*. The chapter will begin by looking at Gregory's understanding of the role and location of the soul within the human body.

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<sup>9</sup> Hans Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa: An Anagogical Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 4.

The soul's locale and function are important to Gregory's representation of the ways the body perceives the contents of other people's souls and expresses the contents of its own soul. Within Gregory's corpus, this process is seen most clearly in his writings that feature his sister Macrina, whom Natalie Carnes, in reference to Gregory, refers to as "the hidden heroine of our story."<sup>10</sup> In Macrina, Gregory provides a glimpse of embodied virtue existent in a human body. In this chapter, Gregory's depiction of Macrina is explored as a way of seeing that all bodies are able to be relational, thus participating in *epektasis*. The embodiment present within the example of Macrina depicts the way that a person's innermost spiritual qualities can be lived out and shared through their body, allowing the person to exist as a model of virtue. Finally, the chapter will depict the ways in which Gregory's writings argue that human beings exist as the *imago Dei*, while still maintaining a hierarchical divide between God and humanity. Through this, an argument will be made that *epektasis* is able to take place through the bodily sharing of human virtues, despite perfection being unattainable by human beings.

### **The Soul and the Human Body**

The importance of the human body in the theology of Gregory of Nyssa can first be seen in his exposition of the dualism between body and soul. For Gregory, a human is a fusion of body and soul, which are first brought together in an "inexplicable and incomprehensible way."<sup>11</sup> Separating himself from the theological supposition of the soul's preexistence, Gregory instead insists that God created the body and soul at the same time.<sup>12</sup> This depiction of dualism between

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<sup>10</sup> Natalie Carnes, *Beauty: A Theological Engagement with Gregory of Nyssa*, (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2014), 4. It is difficult to decipher the full depiction of the historical Macrina because Gregory mediates all access to her. Although the fact she existed in history is undisputed, Morwenna Ludlow probably comes closest to the consensus argument by saying that Macrina is, "at least to some degree" a "literary construction." Morwenna Ludlow, *Gregory of Nyssa: Ancient and (Post)modern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 214.

<sup>11</sup> "On the Making of Man" *De hominis opificio*, henceforth *Op hom* 15.3; The English translation of this discourse is by H.A. Wilson, collected in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Series II, Vol. V. Wilson, 404.

<sup>12</sup> *Op hom* 29.1; Wilson, 420.

body and soul is true for Gregory only in our current life. It is different than both the pre-fallen state and the future state of our resurrected bodies. In both the pre-fallen and post-resurrected states, the human person is depicted as existing without sin, in which case Gregory regards the soul as governing over the body yet existing in congruence. But it is in the human's current, post-fallen state, where the role of the human body becomes of paramount importance for Gregory's theology. In this state, the body maneuvers according to the needs of the soul, and the soul uses the body as its instrument. It is because of their different natures that the body and soul rely on one another.<sup>13</sup> This codependency is necessary in Gregory's thought since for Gregory the soul is not confined to any one part of the body. Rather, the soul extends throughout the body, existing in connection with every body part.<sup>14</sup> The various features of the human body thus take on special characteristics in the post-fallen state for Gregory, as they become the tool for the human to communicate the contents of the soul. The concept of the body often looks different for Gregory depending on what stage of bodily resurrection he is thinking about. For example, sexual organs are given to human beings as a tool for reproduction in so that "the multitude of human souls might not be cut short by the fall."<sup>15</sup>

Gregory suggests that the "power of life and soul may be considered in three divisions," the nutritive, sensitive, and intellectual.<sup>16</sup> These separate faculties do not represent three different spiritual entities, or even dissimilar aspects of the same person, but rather exist within one body as a "psychosomatic whole."<sup>17</sup> Gregory roots these three faculties in scriptural prayers for a person's "body, soul, and spirit" using the word 'body' for the nutritive part, denoting the

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<sup>13</sup> *Op hom* 12.1-4; Wilson, 397.

<sup>14</sup> *Op hom* 15. 1-2; Wilson, 403.

<sup>15</sup> *Op hom* 17.4; Wilson, 407.

<sup>16</sup> *Op hom* 8.4-5, Wilson, 393. These faculties are often referred to by different names, such as natural/vegetative, sensitive, and rational.

<sup>17</sup> John Behr, "The Rational Animal: A Rereading of Gregory of Nyssa's *De hominis opificio*," in *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 7:2 (1999), 230.

sensitive by the word ‘soul’, and the intellectual by ‘spirit.’<sup>18</sup> Gregory highlights these faculties of the soul in light of the perceived soul of non-rational animals. The rational soul of a human encompasses these faculties, as well as that of non-rational animals, but is also capable of choosing freely based on reason.<sup>19</sup> The ability for the various faculties of the soul to correspond with one another through the body is referred to by Gregory as “the perfect bodily life.”<sup>20</sup>

The perfect bodily life takes place through the intellectual/rational soul and can be described as the ruling of the rational soul over the human body, including all organs and sensory functions. The perfect bodily life also factors in parts of the body that separate humans from non-rational animals. Gregory, following his forbearers in the Greek philosophical tradition, generally depicts the soul as interchangeable with the rational mind.<sup>21</sup> The rational soul with its compliant body parts work together to depict the inner character of the mind/soul. It is important for Gregory’s theological anthropology that human beings have body parts that allow the human to exercise its rational ability. Bodily makeup and functionality are intricately designed to allow for the soul to exist rationally.

This theological presupposition that bodily functionality is designed for the soul to exist rationally appeals to the medical knowledge of Gregory’s day, and he considers several options. In *On the Making of Man*, in his exposition about where the mind lives, Gregory speaks of those who have concluded that the mind/soul live within the brain. The argument for this location involves the knowledge that injury to the cerebral membrane has the capacity to distort an individual’s ability to reason.<sup>22</sup> Gregory also writes of skilled physicians who have concluded

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<sup>18</sup> *Op hom* 8.5, Wilson, 394. Although Gregory incorrectly attributes the scripture to the Apostle Paul’s interaction with the Ephesians, the reference is actually to 1 Thessalonians 5:23.

<sup>19</sup> *Op hom* 8.4, Wilson, 393.

<sup>20</sup> *Op hom* 8.4, Wilson, 393.

<sup>21</sup> Enrico Peroli, “Gregory of Nyssa and the Neoplatonic Doctrine of the Soul” *Vigiliae Christianae* 51 (1997): 117-139.

<sup>22</sup> *Op hom* 12.1; Wilson, 397.

that when illness underlies different parts of the human body, the mind ceases to work properly.<sup>23</sup> Alternatively, the mind/soul also finds its home in the heart; Gregory attributes this location to the origin of human grief.

Gregory's response to assertions that the mind/soul could originate from a singular body part is indicative of his theological anthropology as a whole. For example, in reply to the understanding that grief comes from the heart, Gregory suggests that sorrow involves far more than discomfort in the heart. The feeling of sadness also results from an opening and closing of pores, the shifting of shape in the cavities within the body which causes different types of pressure on various organs, increased difficulty in breathing, and various other physical changes to the human anatomy. For Gregory, just as God is able to be present in every aspect of the cosmos without being confined to any particular part of it, the mind/soul has the capacity to be present with all bodily organs without being contained by any of them.<sup>24</sup>

One way that Gregory depicts this relationship between body and soul is through the metaphor of a musician who is unable to express music without an instrument such as a flute or lyre.<sup>25</sup> In this analogy, aspects of the human body take on a deeper meaning and responsibility. For example, Gregory writes that human body parts such as hands and vocal chords contribute to the human capacity for rationality because these physical body parts separate humans from "non-rational creatures" that lack the same bodily make up.<sup>26</sup> It is through the physical body, rather than the intellect, that human beings have the capacity to be rational. Gregory writes,

Now since man is a rational animal, the instrument of his body must be made suitable for the use of reason...For this reason the hands were attached to the body; for though we can count up very many uses in daily life for which these skillfully contrived and helpful

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<sup>23</sup> *Op hom* 12.4; Wilson, 397.

<sup>24</sup> Xueying Wang, "Gregory of Nyssa on the Corporate Nature of the Human Body" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 2014), 83.

<sup>25</sup> *Op hom* 9.2; Wilson, 395.

<sup>26</sup> *Op hom* 9.2; Wilson 395.

instruments, our hands, that easily follow every art and every operation, alike in war and peace, are serviceable, yet nature added them to our body pre-eminently for the sake of reason...but now, as the hand is made part of the body, the mouth is at leisure for the service of the reason. Thus the hands are shown to be the property of the rational nature, the Creator having thus devised by their means a special advantage for reason.<sup>27</sup>

Gregory goes as far as to say that hands are foundational in the human ability to speak because they unfetter the mouth from tedious tasks such as feeding. This allows the other parts of the mouth (tongue, lips, etc.) to be constructed in a way that is appropriate for speaking. Likewise, without the soul, the body ceases to properly function. In *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, Gregory says “it is the mind which sees, and the mind which hears.”<sup>28</sup> This reiterates that for Gregory, the body is a collective vessel working together to communicate the yearnings of the soul.

It is also within *On the Soul and the Resurrection* that Gregory and his sister Macrina speak of the qualifications of usefulness for bodily organs. This is done by looking at the functions of various parts of a current human body in light of Gregory’s theology of a post-resurrected body. Belief in the resurrection of bodies requires further questioning in regards to what is different or the same between the human body before and after the eventual resurrection. Or, as Gregory asks, “what is the resurrection to me, if instead of me someone else will return to life?”<sup>29</sup> This question exists among further inquiries by Gregory, such as what becomes of parts such as hands, teeth, sexual organs, and feet.<sup>30</sup> If a purpose of the human body is to ultimately be resurrected, what will the need be for bodily organs whose main purpose is communicative?

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<sup>27</sup> *Op hom* 8.8, Wilson, 394-395.

<sup>28</sup> *An et res*, Roth, 38. This specific quote is spoken to Gregory by his sister Macrina.

<sup>29</sup> *An et res*, Roth, 38.

<sup>30</sup> Robin D. Young “Gregory of Nyssa’s Use of Theology and Science in Constructing Theological Anthropology,” *Pro Ecclesia* 2 no 3 (Summer 1993), 359.

Ultimately Gregory decides that these organs will not be necessary to the resurrected human body, writing “logically none of the organs which now complete the body should exist.”<sup>31</sup>

In a similar way as his division of the soul into three operational faculties, Gregory also separates human organs into groups according to their different aptitudes. One group consists of organs within the body that Gregory sees as necessary to human life, such as the brain, heart, and liver.<sup>32</sup> Conversely are the “organs of sense,” which Gregory describes as being bestowed on humanity for the “gift of living well.”<sup>33</sup> Body parts such as a nose to smell flowers or ears to hear music are not seen as vital, but if absent make it “impossible to joy in the pleasures of life.”<sup>34</sup> Gregory uses these categorizations to emphasize that life is not solely supported by any single part of a body. Instead, Gregory argues that it is crucial that the significance of bodily function is distributed among different parts of the body, writing, “The contribution of each individual is necessary for the whole.”<sup>35</sup> It is through the lens of biological cohesiveness that Gregory shows the communicative nature of the human body.

### **The Body as Perceiver/Expresser**

The aforementioned metaphor of the body as a musical instrument becomes important again for understanding the corporate and relational nature of Gregory’s theological anthropology. The instrument of the body not only works to express the concepts that are created in the mind, but also exists as the medium through which the mind/soul acquires information from the world it is interacting with. The body thus acts as the tool through which the human being’s character and virtues are portrayed. Although it is the body, like the lyre, that

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<sup>31</sup> *An et res*, Roth, 112.

<sup>32</sup> *Op hom* 30.2, Wilson, 422.

<sup>33</sup> *Op hom* 30.2, Wilson, 422.

<sup>34</sup> *Op hom* 30.2, Wilson, 422.

<sup>35</sup> *Op hom* 30.2, Wilson, 422.

communicates meaning, the body also creates meaning through multiple opportunities of perception. As Gregory explains,

The operation of the instrument, however, is twofold; one for the production of the sound, the other for the reception of concepts from without; and the one faculty does not blend with the other, but abides in the operation for which it was appointed by nature, not interfering with its neighbor either by the sense of hearing undertaking to speak, or by the speech undertaking to hear; for the latter is always uttering something, while the ear, as Solomon somewhere says, is not filled with continual hearing.<sup>36</sup>

Gregory asserts that although the processes of perceiving and expressing are both executed by the human body, they remain two separate undertakings.

Gregory begins articulating his understanding of how the mind perceives in conjunction with the body by referring to the “city of the mind.”<sup>37</sup> In this metaphor, Gregory contends that a city receives individuals from a variety of different entrances. These visitors do not meet together in one isolated area, but instead spread out to innumerable destinations such as markets, houses, churches, theatres, etc. Similarly, the mind takes in information and experiences through a variety of different entry points. Gregory writes,

...some such city of our mind I seem to discern established in us, which the different entrances through the senses keep filling, while the mind, distinguishing and examining each of the things that enters, ranks them in their proper departments.<sup>38</sup>

The act of perceiving is not merely limited to the most obvious sense experience such as the verbal communication that takes place through speech and hearing, but also includes the entirety of bodily capabilities and senses such as taste, smell, touch and sight. The internal faculty “apprehends those things which are external to the body, and draws to itself the images of phenomena, marking in itself the impressions of the things which are seen.”<sup>39</sup> Gregory affirms

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<sup>36</sup> *Op hom* 10.2, Wilson, 395.

<sup>37</sup> *Op hom* 10.4, Wilson, 395.

<sup>38</sup> *Op hom* 10.4, Wilson, 396.

<sup>39</sup> *Op hom* 10.3, Wilson, 396.

that people both perceive things around them with a singular sense, and perceive the same object with different senses. To explain the body's experience with sensory knowledge, Gregory turns to a useful metaphor involving the various ways a person experiences their interaction with honey. Human beings do not merely taste honey, they see it, hear its name, recognize its odor by smell, and feel its consistency by touch.<sup>40</sup> Gregory highlights that even though it may seem like humanity is interacting with an object with a singular sense, it is the combination of all senses housed within the human vessel that perceives and engages with an object.

The concatenation of different senses working together to perceive is also essential to the way the person expresses the contents of the mind/soul. The process of bodily expression causes Gregory to think critically about his metaphor of the body as musical instrument. Just as it is necessary for the instrument to be in an appropriate condition in order for the musician to create music, the various parts of the body used to express and perceive must also be able to perform the tasks required of it. This logic, when applied to Gregory's perceived relationship between the body and mind/soul leads to the conclusion that a body that is disabled falls short in its capacity to communicate:

But since the whole body is made like some musical instrument, just as it often happens in the case of those who know how to play, but are unable, because the unfitness of their instrument does not admit of their art, to show their skill (for that which is destroyed by time, or broken by a fall, or rendered useless by rust or decay, is mute and inefficient, even if it be breathed upon by one who may be an excellent artist in flute-playing): so too the mind, passing over the whole instrument, and touching each of the parts in a mode corresponding to its intellectual activities, according to its nature, produces its proper effect on those parts which are in a natural condition, but remains inoperative and ineffective upon those which are unable to admit the movement of art.<sup>41</sup>

This assessment by Gregory is the logical conclusion to the metaphor of the body as musical instrument. Although Gregory confirmed the strong choreographed unison that the body

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<sup>40</sup> *Op hom* 10.6, Wilson, 396.

<sup>41</sup> *Op hom* 7.8, Wilson, 398.

accomplishes in the acts of perceiving and expressing, accessibility to detailed medical knowledge was sparse. Thus, the temptation existed to think narrowly about the abilities of specific organs. Gregory suggests that in the same way a broken flute ceases to make beautiful music, a person who has, for example, damaged eyes will cease to see. But what happens to the human body's capacity to act as the medium of interpersonal communication, if part of the body is unable to function? Does the corporate nature of the human body that Gregory describes cease to be when an organ is unable to be used to express or perceive?

The answers to these questions rest in further exploration of Gregory's theological anthropology. In *Contra Eunomium* II, Gregory highlights the various ways communication takes place between bodies. This begins with the obvious human encounter of communicating with speech, but shifts to various other bodily movements that are used to convey messages. Gregory writes, "There are occasions when by simply nodding we make it clear to others what needs to be done, and even the eye glancing in a particular manner indicates the purpose we have in mind, and a hand moving in a certain way either forbids something or allows it to be done."<sup>42</sup> Gregory mentions the process of writing a note to someone when distance is such that they would be unable to communicate by speech. Gregory pushes the idea further by asking what, if anything, is lost if the contents of the mind/soul are shared without a word being spoken.<sup>43</sup> In his discourse with Eunomius, Gregory attests that verbal silence causes no impediment to the intended action of the communicator, just as verbal discourse was not a necessity for communication for the Father to make known God's will to the Son.<sup>44</sup> Human beings, as

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<sup>42</sup> "Against Eunomius Book II," *Contra Eunomium*, Henceforth *c. Eunom.* II. 208; The English translation of this discourse is by Stuart George Hall collected in *Gregory, Bishop of Nyssa: The Second Book Against Eunomius* eds. Scot Douglass, and Johannes Zachuber (Leiden: Brill, 2007) Hall, 104.

<sup>43</sup> *c. Eunom.* II. 209; Hall, 104.

<sup>44</sup> *c. Eunom.* II. 209; Hall, 104.

creations of God, have access to the same sort of medium where dialogue is possible despite an absence of speech.

Gregory also notes that expression of the mind/soul takes place in a deeper context than mere replacements for speech. This means that not only does the body have the capacity to produce the content of the mind in different ways that are as efficient as speaking, but it also communicates the moral and ethical contents of the soul. This includes spiritual considerations of virtues and vices. Gregory thus posits an embodiment of virtues and vices that has the capacity to be lived out through the physical body. This theory of embodiment is specific to the singular individual and can be seen through Gregory as an essential aspect of a person's identity.<sup>45</sup> These individuals work to demonstrate glimpses of the divine by conducting themselves in a manner conducive to God's goodness.

### **Macrina and Embodied Virtue**

An excellent example of the ability to communicate embodied virtues is found in the written reports of Gregory's interactions with his sister Macrina. These texts, which often speak of the body through the lens of bodily performativity and spiritual asceticism, provide an example of a person who not only eloquently speaks her inner thoughts and convictions but also shares her virtues through her body's actions. Not only do they discuss deeper meanings of bodily expressions in their dialogue, but Gregory also describes the theological meaning of Macrina's corporeal life. Gregory writes,

Since you were convinced that the story of her good deeds would be of some use because you thought that a life of this quality should not be forgotten for the future and that she who had raised herself through philosophy to the highest limit of human virtue should not pass along this way veiled and in silence, I thought it good to obey you and tell her story, as briefly as I could, in a simple, unaffected narrative.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Hans Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa*, 6-9.

<sup>46</sup> *Macr.* GNO VIII. i. 379, Corrigan 26.

Macrina and Gregory were born to a wealthy family, and Macrina was married at a young age to a rhetor who died early on in their marriage. Upon her husband's death, Macrina refused to be married again, and instead committed herself to a celibate lifestyle devoted to theological contemplation. This commitment to asceticism not only took place in her inner thoughts, but permeated into her actions and communications with others. Macrina began actively expressing countercultural gestures such as freeing the family's slaves and turning their expansive property into a religious community.<sup>47</sup> She also gave wise counseling and a calming physical presence to her family and spiritual community. This included being a strong source of support and comfort to her mother following the death of her brother Naucratus and for Gregory in the face of their brother Basil's death.<sup>48</sup> Gregory spoke of Macrina's work after Naucratus' death by saying "the excellence of the great Macrina became clear. Placing reason in opposition to passion, she kept herself from falling and, by becoming a support to her mother's weakness, she drew her back again from the depths of grief."<sup>49</sup>

Looking at Macrina's life in light of considerations of the bodily capacities to express and perceive virtues also highlights the way bodily observations become intellectual thoughts. For Gregory, there remains a difference between the information a person perceives and what benefits the person on an intellectual level. Returning to the metaphor of the musical instrument, Gregory argues that Macrina's life works as an instrument because of the design of her creator. Macrina tells Gregory, "Do you see what your sight teaches you? It would not provide you with such understanding by its own power, if there were not something looking through the sense of sight which can use the things which come to perception as guides to penetrate through the

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<sup>47</sup> *Macr.* GNO VIII. i. 378, Callahan, 168.

<sup>48</sup> Medi Ann Volpe, *Rethinking Christian Identity: Doctrine and Discipleship*, (Madden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 179-180.

<sup>49</sup> *Macr.* GNO VIII. i. 380, Corrigan, 27.

appearances to that which does not appear.”<sup>50</sup> Skills such as vision do not exist as singular abilities contained within an isolated organ, but instead rely on the entirety of the body in its interconnected system, allowing for deeper considerations of the objects the body experiences. The materiality of human beings is therefore seen as essential to the tasks of perceiving and expressing, and it is through this process where the human person has the capacity to use and strengthen the intellectual capabilities of the mind. It is therefore through the human being’s capacity to perceive the happenings of the world around them and express the inner contents of their own mind that allows the person to strengthen their own soul. In this regard the soul’s activity is imaginative, providing intellectual space and energy to combine its perceptions with knowledge.<sup>51</sup> “Intellectual” in this context does not necessarily mean intelligent. Rather, it represents the ability to generate meaning from what is perceived, and strive to express this meaning through bodily communication.

Gregory’s theological anthropology creates space for knowledge that resists the urge to be rooted in the typical acquisition of mental knowledge. Instead, the framework of this type of knowledge is relational and is concerned with the ways in which the soul matures and influences in its bodily interactions with others. In this light, the human ability to embody virtue is seen through a lens of inclusivity. Knowledge and intelligence is not something that can be qualified or ranked in comparison with others. Instead, it exists in the ability to perceive and express the contents of the soul, an ability that is present in everyone.

### ***Epektasis* and the Relational Body**

Among the more prominent aspects of Gregory's theological discourse is his theory of *epektasis*. *Epektasis* is most simply defined as the process of flawed human beings continually

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<sup>50</sup> *An et res*, Roth, 40.

<sup>51</sup> Medi Ann Volpe, *Rethinking Christian Identity*, 170.

striving towards the perfection that is the divine. This is stressed by Gregory to be the highest calling of human beings. It is in *epektasis* where the convergence of much of Gregory's theology happens, including the consideration of divine infinity and ineffability, which works to simultaneously portray God as both transcendent and completely present to the human person.<sup>52</sup> *Epektasis* also works to communicate the understanding that relational emotions such as love and desire are not limited in their capacity to develop.<sup>53</sup> Jean Daniélou referred to *epektasis* as "the synthesis of Gregorian spirituality" saying that "it belongs to the very essence of the spiritual life to be a continual progress, so that, however paradoxical it might seem, perfection exists in a continual progress."<sup>54</sup> By qualifying the human person as continuously attempting to progress towards perfection, Gregory gently depicts the person as less than perfect. It is also through *epektasis* where Gregory departs from the popular Greek thought of his time, which considered human perfection as an eventual accomplishment, similar to reaching a goal.<sup>55</sup> For Gregory, all human beings are imperfect striving to move closer to the all-encompassing perfection that is God.

Proper understanding of Gregory's theory of *epektasis* requires engagement with three sources from the 20<sup>th</sup> century that have each worked to further clarify Gregory's thought: Jean Daniélou's *Platonisme et théologie mystique*, Ekkehard Mühlenberg's *Die Unendlichkeit Gottes bei Gregor von Nyssa*, and Ronald Heine's 1975 monograph, *Perfection in the Virtuous Life: A Study in the Relation between Edification and Polemical Theology in Gregory of Nyssa's De Vita*

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<sup>52</sup> Lucas Francisco Mateo-Seco, "Epektasis" in *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, eds. Lucas Francisco Mateo-Seco and Guilio Maspero, Trans. Seth Cherney (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2010), 263.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Jean Daniélou, *Platonisme et théologie mystique: Essai sur la doctrine spirituelle de Gregoire de Nysse*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Paris: Aubier, 1953), 291-292.

<sup>55</sup> Lucas Francisco Mateo-Seco, "Epektasis", 263.

*Moysis*.<sup>56</sup> Jean Daniélou's 1944 dissertation *Platonisme et théologie mystique* locates the theme of eternal progress within the framework of Gregory's spiritual doctrine and his vision of the three stage ascent of the soul.<sup>57</sup> Paul Blowers summarizes Daniélou's work on *epektasis* as representing "the process of perfection in general, but is an expression *par excellence* of Gregory's third stage of spiritual development, the "darkness" wherein the soul's indefatigable yearning for God stands in perpetual tension with God's inexhaustible beauty and mystery."<sup>58</sup>

In his work *Die Unendlichkeit Gottes bei Gregor von Nyssa*, Ekkehard Mühlenberg argued against Daniélou's interpretation by saying that he is inserting a medieval western idea of mystical relationship between God and human into Gregory's thought.<sup>59</sup> According to Blowers, Mühlenberg instead approaches *epektasis*, specifically as it is seen in the *Contra Eunomium*, through the lens of Gregory's philosophical theology.<sup>60</sup> For Mühlenberg, human beings' progression of *epektasis* in light of God's divine infinity should not be interpreted as an impediment of human knowledge, but rather, as Blowers writes, "an open field of action, of eternal movement and self-realization."<sup>61</sup> Mühlenberg reminds readers of Gregory's thought that the limited nature of human beings is not something that will be overcome, but rather exists as an important reminder of God's perfection. A limited nature and inability to reach perfection is simply part of what it means to be a human person.

In Ronald Heine's 1975 monograph, *Perfection in the Virtuous Life: A Study in the Relation between Edification and Polemical Theology in Gregory of Nyssa's De Vita Moysis*, Heine portrays *epektasis* as Gregory's attempt to overcome the dominant influence of Origen.

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<sup>56</sup> Paul Blowers, "Maximus the Confessor, Gregory of Nyssa and the Concept of 'Perpetual Progress'" *Vigiliae Christianae* 46 (1992), 151-152.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Blowers, "Maximus the Confessor, Gregory of Nyssa and the Concept of 'Perpetual Progress,'" 151.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

Heine highlights the Origenist understanding that the product of fallen souls is based on an overindulgence, or satiety (*χόρος*) of God's goodness.<sup>62</sup> For Origen, humanity has a fall of souls due, in part, to the limitedness of human beings clashing with the continual perfection of God. Humanity lacks a similar perfection, and is unable to adequately interact with God's perfection, allowing a satiation to take place. Gregory's development of *epektasis*, particularly in texts such as *The Life of Moses*, therefore exists as a polemic against Origenism.<sup>63</sup> For Heine, *epektasis* is Gregory's attempt to understand human beings' limitedness in light of the relationship between body and soul.

These three works on *epektasis* all agree that it is important for Gregory's thought that the human life never be stagnant. Transition, change, and progress are both unavoidable and good for humankind. It is this mutability that becomes the primary difference between creation and the divine. Human beings are mutable, and God is immutable.<sup>64</sup> Gregory argues that the soul can never tire of the divine beauty, for each time a person experiences it, a new desire is born.<sup>65</sup> Although the progress exhibited in *epektasis* is not physical, Gregory often describes the process with vivid language such as climbing a mountain or taking part in a race.<sup>66</sup> The soul, after taking part in the experience described in these metaphors, is able to "grow without limit in the capacity for good".<sup>67</sup> Or, as described by Lucas Francisco Mateo-Seco, "the point of arrival (*πέραις*) is transformed into the beginning (*ἀρχή*), closer to that which is further ahead."<sup>68</sup> *Epektasis* is not

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<sup>62</sup> Ronald Heine, *Perfection in the Virtuous Life: A Study in the Relation between Edification and Polemical Theology in Gregory of Nyssa's De Vita Moysis* Patristic Monograph Series, No. 2 (Cambridge, MA: Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, 1975), 71-97.

<sup>63</sup> Blowers, "Maximus the Confessor, Gregory of Nyssa and the Concept of 'Perpetual Progress,'" 152.

<sup>64</sup> Lucas Francisco Mateo-Seco, "*Epektasis*," 264.

<sup>65</sup> "Homilies on the Song of Songs" *In Canticum canticorum*, henceforth *Cant.* The English translations used for this thesis are by Hermannus Langerbeck (ed.), *Gregorii Nysseni Opera* IX (Leiden: Brill, 1952), and Richard A. Norris Jr., *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Song of Songs* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), GNO VI, 132.

<sup>66</sup> Lucas Francisco Mateo-Seco, "*Epektasis*," 264.

<sup>67</sup> *An et res*, Roth, 20.

<sup>68</sup> Lucas Francisco Mateo-Seco, "*Epektasis*," 264.

to be seen as a process of continual longing in which the human person never attains the goodness that is present within God. Instead, it is a continuous enrichment in divine perfection that inspires the soul to strive again towards God's unremitting love.

The perfection that is present in the process of *epektasis* is most often classified as virtue. This perfection in virtue exists beyond words, because the perfect life is beyond definition.<sup>69</sup> Because the divine goodness is unlimited, consequently, the desire of the person who searches to participate in divine goodness also has no limits.<sup>70</sup> Virtue, like perfection, is not limited by anything outside of itself, but only limited by the unlimited.<sup>71</sup> Gregory's theological understanding of virtue is nearly identical to his understanding of perfection. That is, for Gregory, it is not the case that a human being cannot reach virtue through spiritual progress, but rather that a person always has the capacity to grow in virtue. Gregory writes, "The perfection of human nature consists in being always disposed to reach a greater good."<sup>72</sup> *Epektasis* does not exist for Gregory as a theological strategy to show the ways in which the human person has the capacity to reach a nearly similar level of goodness that God exhibits. Instead, *epektasis* exists to show the perpetuity and transcendence of the Divine. Or as Mateo-Seco suggests, "It is not that God is 'unreachable,' but that, even if possessed, He always surpasses the one who possesses him already."<sup>73</sup>

*Epektasis*, however, is not to be solely understood as relationship summarized as the connection between the human person and God. Instead, Gregory also speaks of *epektasis* in a

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<sup>69</sup> Lucas Francisco Mateo-Seco, "*Epektasis*," 265.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. Here the Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa is engaging Nyssa's work *The Life of Moses* henceforth *Vit Moys* I GNO VII/1,4, of which an alternate title is *Concerning Perfection in Virtue*.

<sup>72</sup> "The Life of Moses" *De vita Moysis*, Henceforth *Vit Moys*. The English translation used for this thesis are by Werner Jaeger and Hermannus Langerbeck (eds.), *Gregorii Nysseni Opera VII* (Leiden: Brill, 1964), and Abraham J. Muhlherbe and Everett Fergusson, *The Life of Moses: Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist, 1978), GNO VII.1, 4-5.

<sup>73</sup> Lucas Francisco Mateo-Seco, "*Epektasis*," 265.

communal manner, encompassing all interactions that human beings have with one another. This is not to say that the perpetual progress human beings make towards the goodness of God is not, in part, an isolated effort left up to the individual decisions of the human person. Instead, since the human experience takes place in community with one another, the process of *epektasis* must also factor in human relationality.

The interpretation of *epektasis* as an individual pursuit is the easiest to identify and is the perspective in which most work on the subject has been done. It involves an understanding of the individual person having the capacity to undergo a positive form of change. This understanding involves a rejection of the popular thought of Plato and Origen in Gregory's day, is referred to by Paul Blowers as "a watershed in Greek patristic anthropology."<sup>74</sup> By focusing on the individual pursuit within *epektasis*, Gregory truly separates his thought from his antecedents due to his understanding of the personal change a human goes through in *epektasis* as a positive experience. This unique perspective is clearly portrayed in Gregory's twelfth homily *In Canticum Canticorum*, where Gregory depicts the individual's free will as caught between the upward change of the Holy Spirit and the downward movement of the human body.<sup>75</sup> It is in this isolated pursuit that an individual is able to find their true ontological and eschatological stability.<sup>76</sup>

The emphasis of the individual pursuit within *epektasis* can also be seen in the biblical texts Gregory uses to illustrate the process, particularly in his *Life of Moses* and *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, two texts commonly referenced in the study of perpetual progress. The mystical nature of the *Life of Moses* is impossible to ignore. The work features detailed prose

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<sup>74</sup> Blowers, "Maximus the Confessor, Gregory of Nyssa and the Concept of 'Perpetual Progress,'" 156.

<sup>75</sup> *Cant hom.* 12, GNO VI, 345, 11-346, 2.

<sup>76</sup> Blowers, "Maximus the Confessor, Gregory of Nyssa and the Concept of 'Perpetual Progress,'" 156.

about Moses' encounter with divine darkness and depicts his journey as an isolated, personal, journey that culminates in an engagement with God. Similarly, in the *Commentary on the Song of Songs* Gregory chooses to focus on the bride in the story as an individual person as well as an allegorical representation of the church. This individual experience is seen depicted in Homily 1, where Gregory writes, "what is described there is an account of a wedding, but what is intellectually discerned is the human soul's mingling with the divine."<sup>77</sup> Gregory views the marriage depicted in the scriptural passage as taking place between the individual soul and the divine.

However, there also exist obvious examples within these scriptures in which *epektasis* takes place not just between God and individual, but rather among community. In thinking about the capacity of perpetual progress to exist within a corporate body Xueying Wang writes, "admitting that *epektasis* is often described as the ascent of an individual, we must not lose sight of the fact that in Gregory's vocabulary, an *individual* ascent is not an *individualistic* ascent."<sup>78</sup> In her dissertation, she goes on to highlight the communal aspects within the stories of Moses and the bride. For example, although Moses climbs Mount Sinai alone in an isolated pursuit for a mystical union with God, he eventually comes down to the Israelites with two tablets from God so that they could also ascend to God.<sup>79</sup> Moses, despite journeying up the mountain and into the life of God by himself, is at all times connected to the life and vitality of the people of Israel. Similarly, in the *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, Wang highlights that the union of love between the bride and Christ is never presented as self-contained or exclusive.<sup>80</sup> This is

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<sup>77</sup> *Cant hom 1*, GNO VI.23; Norris, 25

<sup>78</sup> Xueying Wang, "Gregory of Nyssa on the Corporate Nature of the Human Body" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 2014), 177.

<sup>79</sup> Wang, "Gregory of Nyssa on the Corporate Nature of the Human Body," 177.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 177-178.

supported by Gregory's insistence that the bride expresses "an ecclesiastical concern" throughout her ascent.<sup>81</sup> Gregory suggests that at each stage of the bride's spiritual ascent she shares her experiences with her companions and encourages them to make progress in their own individual spiritual journey. Thus even when *epektasis* is portrayed as an individual spiritual journey, it is not separated from the rest of the body of Christ.<sup>82</sup>

*Epektasis* is portrayed as bettering oneself as a way of gaining progress towards the goodness of God. In the *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, Gregory shows two different paths humanity can follow as a way of growing closer to God, the word of faith and the manner of life.<sup>83</sup> The word of faith is not merely belief in God, but also accounts for the disposition and character qualities of the individual. For Gregory, a strong word of faith is necessary, partly as a way of avoiding the erroneous depictions of God that heretics describe. Thus, before individuals can begin on their journey of *epektasis*, they must first set their mind to the proper disposition of belief so that they not get dissuaded from their progress. Conversely, the manner of life is less about a mental mindset and is concerned more with the soul's control of the body to physically live out a virtuous life. The character of the connection between the incorporeal responsibilities of the human soul and the corporeal actions of the body is vital to Gregory's theological anthropology.

### **Examples of Virtue**

Gregory portrays *epektasis* as a process that involves the individual and the community, as well as the corporeal and incorporeal features of the body. In light of his aforementioned interpretation of the body as the medium for interpersonal communication, Gregory argues for a

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 178. Wang is citing *Cant* GNO VI. 40 and uses the translation of Casimir McCambley.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 178-179.

<sup>83</sup> *Cant* GNO VI. 377; Norris, 397.

portion of *epektasis* to take place within human relationships.<sup>84</sup> For Gregory, not everyone has access to divine language directly from God. Because of this reality, spending time with those who are understood to be virtuous is of paramount importance for an individual's own journey of *epektasis*. These individuals exist in the theology of Gregory as virtuous models for others to learn from by observing and imitating their bodily presence. Because the body acts as the medium for communication between individuals, it also acts as the vehicle for individuals to learn lessons of virtue from one another.

In describing the significance of the ecclesial body, Gregory resorts to metaphors of the human body culminating with Christ at the head.<sup>85</sup> Citing Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, Gregory writes,

Those members that are grafted into him (Christ) through faith he fits into the common body, and he fashions a comely whole by fitly and appropriately assigning believers to roles such as eyes and mouth and hands and the other members... Yet all the members do not have the same function. Instead, there is one member that is an eye in the body, though it does not look down on the hand, and another, though it is the head it does not spurn the feet; but through its members the whole body is bound together with itself by their various functions, lest the parts be at odds with the whole.<sup>86</sup>

Gregory thus depicts human persons as having specific talents that are unique to themselves and different from those around them. Although humans are made up of different spiritual inclinations and character qualities, they nonetheless have access to the things they lack through the observation of virtuous models. This requires the person to interact with the community around them in order to glean a more robust depiction of the virtuous life.

A common motif within the theology of Gregory of Nyssa is that direct knowledge of God is inaccessible to the limited mind of human beings. However, according to Gregory it is

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<sup>84</sup> Wang, "Gregory of Nyssa on the Corporate Nature of the Human Body," 178-179.

<sup>85</sup> *Cant* GNO VI. 390; Norris, 413.

<sup>86</sup> *Cant* GNO VI. 390; Norris, 413.

through the aforementioned relationality that human beings are able to know anything about God. Gregory speaks of this knowledge allegorically, comparing human knowledge of God to an interaction with gold. All ingenuous statements about God are not the pure gold itself, but are considered to be likenesses of gold.<sup>87</sup> Communication from God is rare and mystical for Gregory and happens only to a very small portion of the people in the world. The majority of people are left to learn from the virtuous people around them who have discovered important lessons during their own *epektasis*. As Gregory reminds his readers, Moses is the only Israelite who makes the journey up Mount Sinai. The rest of the community is left to wait and learn from the model of virtue.

Human relationality also allows for glimpses of the divine life in corporeal ways. This move away from intellectuality into the physical allows for what Rowan Williams refers to as “permeating the whole of life.”<sup>88</sup> The body, as instrument of communication for the contents of the mind/soul has the capacity to speak its spiritual wisdom to others. While experiencing their own *epektasis*, human beings also exist as models of virtuous living from whom others may glean wisdom. This means a person’s interactions with others are not merely a chance to verbally exchange information, but rather an opportunity to be a witness of the virtuousness that they exhibit in their own life.

The conveying of virtues is most obviously done through the demonstration of love, which Gregory considers to be the highest virtue. Because human beings’ communication with one another must overcome different planes of intellectual capabilities, the physical signification of love becomes the most efficient vehicle of interpersonal communication. This is seen through

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<sup>87</sup> *Cant hom 3* GNO VI. 85; Norris, 95.

<sup>88</sup> Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St. John of the Cross*, (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publishing, 1979), 60.

physical signifiers such as touch, which communicates virtues without the use of typical sensory organs. Rowan Williams describes this by writing,

In his commentary on the Beatitudes (Gregory) says simply that, since “intellectual” knowledge of God is impossible, he must be found and known in the converted heart of the believer and in the purity of his or her life and actions... Thus the focus of attention is subtly shifted from the experiences of the interior life to the whole history of human growth; more than most previous Christian writers, Gregory exploits the classical term *arête*, “moral virtue,” in his writing, regarding the attainment of this quality as the end of all “spiritual” experience.<sup>89</sup>

Thus the corporeal body takes on a deeper, more spiritual responsibility as the vessel of the mind/soul and vehicle of communication. It is not only to be considered as a part of the mouth or speech organs that talk or the ears that listen, nor are its capabilities limited to the communication that can take place with a meaningful glance or facial expression. Included in all of this, the body also has the capacity to mystically communicate spiritual understandings, as wisdom, morality, and virtues are visible by watching a person’s body. This communication creates a physical example of *epektasis* from which the observing person can learn from and model themselves after.

Models of embodied virtue also exist in places outside the human body. The first place virtue is embodied for Gregory is within scripture. Hans Boersma states, “That for Gregory the virtuous life is the aim of all biblical interpretation.”<sup>90</sup> One example of this is Gregory’s interpretation of Ecclesiastes, which Gregory says begins by addressing the futility of temporal enjoyments before moving on to discuss the attainment of virtue.<sup>91</sup> In discussing his summarizing of the book, Gregory writes that Ecclesiastes is about “how one may live virtuously

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>90</sup> Hans Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa*, 211.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

(κατὰρετὴν) by obtaining from the text some art and method, so to speak, of successful living.”<sup>92</sup>

This hermeneutic allows for the human body to learn from virtue that exists outside of human interpersonal communication.

Above scripture and relationality, Gregory emphasizes that the earthly life of Christ exists as the preeminent model of virtuous living. This is not to belittle the importance, for Gregory, of modeling the morality of other human beings, but exists as a reminder that even the most virtuous of human beings do not exist near the same extent of perfection of Christ.<sup>93</sup> In calling the human person to mirror the virtuous example of Christ, Gregory is clear that he is referring to the human nature of Christ and not the divine. This means that, for Gregory, the human virtues and divine virtues are separate. Thus, although Gregory’s theology avers that knowledge of the divine is unattainable, Christ as a perfect human being exists as a bodily model for human beings to imitate.<sup>94</sup> Imitation of the bodily life of Christ therefore becomes quite similar to mirroring certain examples of human saints.<sup>95</sup> This imitation, together with the aforementioned virtues in scripture, works to create a cohesive network of virtue that the human being has access to learn from. This takes place not only through a scriptural and spiritual lens, but reaches out to the corporeal and observable.

### ***Imago Dei* and Human/Divine Hierarchy**

Christ’s capacity to exist as a model of virtue extends to the human being, who lives in the world as the *imago Dei*. Christ, in His time on earth, exists as the perfect example of virtuous

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<sup>92</sup> “Homilies on Ecclesiastes” In *Ecclesiasten homiliae* Henceforth *Eccl.* The English translation used for this thesis is by Stuart George Hall and Rachel Moriarty in Stuart George Hall (ed.) *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on Ecclesiastes: An English Version with Supporting Studies: Proceedings of the Seventh International Colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa St. Andrews, 5-10 September 1990.* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1993) 6.673.12-13, Hall, 99.

<sup>93</sup> Johannes Zachuber, *Human Nature in Gregory of Nyssa: Philosophical Background and Theological Significance*, Supplements to *Vigiliae Christianae*, 46 (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 190.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 190-193.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

living for human beings to imitate. Human beings, because they have been created in the image of God, therefore have the ability to exist as representations of virtuous living for other human beings that observe them. Although the human being lacks the intellectual capabilities of understanding specific character qualities of God, to say that creation exists in the image of God must denote some shared attributes with the divine.

Gregory suggests that human beings are like God, not merely because God has created humanity to rule over the rest of creation in a way that is similar to God ruling over creation.<sup>96</sup> Instead, human beings rule over creation by virtue of sharing in the image of God and sharing in specific divine qualities.<sup>97</sup> In his introduction to a collection of Gregory's mystical writings, Jean Daniélou gives the example of freedom as an attribute shared between God and humanity. Daniélou emphasizes human's capacity for free will as evidence.<sup>98</sup> In the theology of Gregory, Daniélou sees an emphasis on the human's ability to exercise free will over other mental characteristics such as intelligence.<sup>99</sup> Free will exists as something that every human being has access to, regardless of intellectual aptitude or mental capabilities.

Free will, as an attribute shared with God, calls into question what human beings have the ability to exercise free will over. After all, the omnipotent God exists without limits in regards to governing influence. However, although human beings exist as the image of God, and therefore share aspects of divine attributes, they are still comparatively limited in relation to God. For Gregory, God designed the human being's bodily form in a specific way so that it could be governed by the person's free will.<sup>100</sup> This understanding of the human being's use of free will

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<sup>96</sup> Morwenna Ludlow, *Gregory of Nyssa: Ancient and (Post)modern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 173.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> Jean Daniélou, "Introduction," in *From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa's Mystical Writings*, 12.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> Morwenna Ludlow, *Gregory of Nyssa: Ancient and (Post)modern*, 173.

mirrors the aforementioned explanation of Gregory's understanding of body/soul dualism.

Although the soul participates directly with shared divine character qualities, the body facilitates and acts out this participation. The ability for the human mind/soul to rule over different aspects of the body through its free will shows the similarities to divine attributes of God who governs over creation.

These shared divine attributes therefore act as a unifier among humanity. That is, all humans, in both material and immaterial forms, are united to one another.<sup>101</sup> The unity of humanity, as image of God, extends past corporeality and temporality, and always exists from the eternal perspective of God.<sup>102</sup> Gregory metaphorically depicts this unity by comparing humanity to the lost sheep that wandered, suggesting that the act of bringing the lost sheep together is indicative of Christ's unifying work. Although human beings have the ability to portray the image of God in varying degrees, the aptitude, nonetheless, brings a certain harmony to humanity.<sup>103</sup> This is neatly summarized by Rowan Greer, who writes that the two major lessons that can be pulled from Gregory and the Cappadocians are a "a corporate understanding of human nature" and that "humanity, as the image of God, must mirror God and by doing so find the power to govern the body and to harmonize and divinize the entire created order; contemplation leads to incorruption not only for the individual but also for the whole of creation."<sup>104</sup> However, this sentiment begs the question of which characteristics of the *imago Dei* are human beings best suited to reflect.

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid.,179.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Jean Daniélou, "Introduction," in *From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa's Mystical Writings*, 18.

<sup>104</sup> Rowan A. Greer, *Broken Lights and Mended Lives*, Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, 1986), 210.

Gregory's understanding of human beings as the image of God is often portrayed through two lenses, beauty and power.<sup>105</sup> Gregory's depiction of beauty in light of the image of God is often seen in his writings on virginity. This is because earthly passions have the potential to weaken the beauty of the soul, thus corrupting the soul's reflection of the divine image.<sup>106</sup> The virtuous soul will reflect God's beauty, just as a mirror pointed at the sun would reflect sunlight.<sup>107</sup> However, because of humanity's disposition to sin, humanity is often found turning its back towards the light of God. The human senses beginning in adolescence lead individuals to seek out earthly pleasure before a sense of maturity is present in their souls.<sup>108</sup> This creates the initial instinct of seeking the pleasing rather than the Beautiful.<sup>109</sup> For Gregory, the process of returning back to the reflection of divine beauty is a matter of perception. In order for a person to position themselves toward what is beautiful, they must first learn to perceive it.<sup>110</sup> This perception, which is executed by the body, does not happen immediately, but rather requires a certain degree of conditioning in order to happen. The more one seeks the truly beautiful, the better they are able to perceive it.<sup>111</sup> The better a person is at perceiving the beautiful, the more desirable it ultimately becomes. Gregory writes,

The man who has purified the eye of his soul is able to look at such things and forget the matter in which the beauty is encased, and he uses what he sees as a kind of basis for his

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<sup>105</sup> Although seen in a variety of places throughout Gregory scholarship, it is of primary concern for both J. Warren Smith and Medi Volpe. J. Warren Smith, *Passion and Paradise: A Study of Theological Anthropology in Gregory of Nyssa*, (New York: Herder and Herder, 2003), Rowan A. Greer and J. Warren Smith, *One Path for All: Gregory of Nyssa on the Christian Life and Human Destiny* (Cascade Books: Eugene, Oregon, 2015), 209. Medi Anne Volpe, *Rethinking Christian Identity*, 156-163.

<sup>106</sup> Medi Anne Volpe, *Rethinking Christian Identity*, 158.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Verna Harrison, *Grace and Human Freedom According to St. Gregory of Nyssa*, (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), 156.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Medi Anne Volpe, *Rethinking Christian Identity*, 159.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

contemplation of intelligible beauty. By a participation in this beauty, the other beautiful things come into being and are identified.<sup>112</sup>

Beauty in light of the *imago Dei* is not merely a visual experience, but a matter of full perception. This perception enlists the human body to not only act as the medium for communication, but also as perceiver for the soul. The ability to perceive divine beauty involves the person embodying virtues that are shared with the divine, and participating in divine beauty. This again reinforces the idea that the image of God is found in the whole person and not merely the intellect.

The metaphor of human participation as a mirror of divine beauty also means that a person living a less-virtuous life can obscure the image of God so that the divine beauty is unable to be seen. This can be seen in Gregory's metaphor of the body as the instrument for the image of God. That is, an un-virtuous life is like an instrument that is not being "played," or the activity of reflection is not happening.<sup>113</sup> This does not mean that the beauty of God is now void in the un-virtuous person.<sup>114</sup> Rather, it is necessary for a person to be actively participating in virtue with their body. This participation happens through the body's ability to perceive and express the contents of the soul. Thus, a person that ceases to express virtue is not fully realizing their bodily ability to act as a medium for communication. This does not exist as a bodily deficiency, but a spiritual one. Gregory posits that the answer to a sinful life that does not reflect divine beauty is spiritually participating in things such as imitation, learning Scripture, and taking part in the practices and life of the community.<sup>115</sup> These spiritual practices all exist without the necessity of

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<sup>112</sup> "On Virginity," *De Virginitate* Henceforth, *Virg* the English translations used for this thesis are by J.P. Cavaros (ed.) *Gregorii Nysseni Opera VIII/I*, 292 and Virginia Woods Callahan, *Fathers of the Church 58* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1999), 39.

<sup>113</sup> Medi Anne Volpe, *Rethinking Christian Identity*, 160.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

intellect. Rather, the ability to more fully realize the image of God present in oneself is to further surround oneself with a virtuous community.

Gregory's second lens in which to view the *imago Dei* in humanity is to think of human beings as the image of the power of God. This power is exercised in the aforementioned human capacity of free will and makes humanity "like the One who has power over all things, being enslaved by necessity to none of the things outside of himself, and he acts according to what seems best to him."<sup>116</sup> Gregory is also seen portraying the power of God within humanity through the bodily ability of senses or in other experiences of perception.<sup>117</sup> Although shared, the power in humanity is not the same as the power of God.<sup>118</sup>

Hans Urs von Balthasar concisely summarizes the idea of divine power shared with humanity through immanence by pulling brief passages from a variety of Gregory works and adding his own commentary:

God has given and always gives to beings the power of coming to be and also perseverance in being", and without this divine power, matter would remain eternally inert. The best image of this immanence is that of the soul in the body. For just as the soul shows her superiority over matter precisely by her power to touch it, not merely on the surface, but in all its depths and at each point of its substance, so God shows his absolute transcendence precisely by means of a very intimate contract with things and a deep-seated immanence: "We do not hesitate to say that the divine Nature and Power are immanent in all things." Even though there is no fusion of substances, there is a union so intimate that Gregory calls it a mingling. If one can already say that the divine will is "the matter and substance of created works" or better still, that it is "the matter and form and energy of the world", this will apply in a very particular way to the rational creature.<sup>119</sup>

In this instance "rational creature" alludes to an individual who has positioned themselves "toward God" in attempt of mirroring divine virtue, which circumvents the requirement of

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<sup>116</sup> *Virg* 12, GNO VIII/I, 298; Fathers of the Church 58, 43.

<sup>117</sup> Michel René Barnes, *The Power of God: Dynamis in Gregory of Nyssa's Trinitarian Theology*, (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 2000), 9.

<sup>118</sup> Medi Anne Volpe, *Rethinking Christian Identity*, 161.

<sup>119</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought*, 84.

intellectual capabilities. This connection to the non-essential nature of the intellect will become important for the later application of Gregory's theological anthropology to considerations of individuals with disabilities. Gregory argues that since standard spiritual rhetoric often argues that God's power is immanent in all things, why should all human bodies be any different?

However, Gregory would certainly argue that although various aspects of divine nature are shared with humanity, this does not necessarily mean they are identical. Always present in the theology of Gregory is the understanding that God exists in a perfection that is inaccessible to human beings. This means that any shared attributes or knowledge of God that humanity experiences are mere fractions of what is true about God. In a sense, no human being can be called virtuous, because no one can ever truly attain the perfection that characterizes the divine virtue of God.<sup>120</sup> Thus, human beings can only ever be virtuous in an indirect way in light of God's virtues. This becomes the impetus for Gregory's theology of *epektasis*. No matter how far the human being progresses in virtue, they will never come near the perfection of God. Gregory is blatant about the disparity between the perfection of God and the limitedness of human beings. He writes, "It is beyond my power to encompass perfection in my treatise or to show in my life the insights of the treatise."<sup>121</sup> Gregory goes on to say that this inability is the same for even great and virtuous individuals, writing that it is "impossible for those who pursue the life of virtue to attain perfection."<sup>122</sup> Although Gregory is adamant about the hierarchical divide of perfection between God and humanity, his theology of *epektasis*, specifically as it relates to bodily participation, has to allow for some fragility within the relationship between humanity and the divine.

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<sup>120</sup> Hans Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa*, 4.

<sup>121</sup> *Vit Moys* 2.24-6 (Malherbe and Ferguson 30).

<sup>122</sup> *Vit Moys* 4.3-4 (Malherbe and Ferguson 31.)

## **Fragility and the Divine**

In thinking about the person existing as the *imago Dei*, certain questions arise regarding the limitations of the human body in light of Gregory's notion of divine perfection. What does it mean that a human shares and communicates divine character qualities with their body, but also has the capacity to exist physically in an un-virtuous state? How do bodies that are aged, or physically disabled, depict their stake in divine perfection? It is in thinking about the limitations where an understanding of the flawed human body points to a fragility that exists in God. Fragile, in this sense, does not mean frail or breakable. Rather, God's fragility exists inside divine perfection as a way of explaining the existence of perceived limitations in humanity. Gregory's theology pushes his readers to recognize that this sort of fragility is constituent of God's perfection. Fragility inside of God's perfection is not to be viewed as a flaw or a defect, but rather creates an avenue for a perfect God to share in a human experience that can often result in varying levels of physical or mental brokenness.<sup>123</sup>

The fragility in this dynamic shows that the divide between God and humanity is not static. Rather, this relationship is participatory where human beings strive and God allows fractions of Godself to be experienced. This fragility is seen in Macrina's understanding of the image of God, which she argues is not a possession of the individual, but an activity in which the soul, contained in the body, turns toward the divine and comes to participate in the divine life.<sup>124</sup> Although separated hierarchically in light of God's unattainable perfection, humanity and God are not entirely separate due to the human need for participation in the divine. For Gregory, the whole nature of humanity, including both body and soul, is made so as to take part in the divine

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<sup>123</sup> Thomas Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008), 165.

<sup>124</sup> Medi Anne Volpe, *Rethinking Christian Identity*, 166.

image, constructed so as to be filled with the image-bearing soul.<sup>125</sup> The creation of the body would not need to factor in the potential for this type of work if the hierarchical separation of God and humanity was so great that human beings were unable to participate in aspects of the divine life. For Gregory, if the divide were this concrete, and relation with God was so intangible, God would not have created human beings with the capability of experiencing the divine life.

This fragility does not mean that God is in any way limited or outside of the pure perfection that Gregory portrays. Rather, it allows for glimpses of the divine life to be seen, so that human beings may strive toward divine perfection through the process of *epektasis*. This hierarchical line must also remain fragile in order to allow equal access for participation in the divine life for all of humanity. In the theology of Gregory, the most basic necessity for progressing toward the divine life is not the ability to reason, or the ability to consciously seek God. Instead, it is love. Anthony Meredith explains Gregory's theology by writing, "to fail to display love is as fatal to our claim to be the image of God as to be devoid of reason."<sup>126</sup> The divine life is nothing more or less than the operation of divine love.<sup>127</sup> Although this divine love exists in God, who is the quintessential example of perfection, it does not exist as separate from humanity, or limited to anyone based on ability. As Macrina explains in *On the Soul and Resurrection*, "For the life of the superior nature is love, since the beautiful is in every respect loveable to those who recognize it, and the divine knows itself."<sup>128</sup>

## **Conclusion**

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<sup>125</sup> Morwenna Ludlow, *Gregory of Nyssa: Ancient and (Post)modern*, 174.

<sup>126</sup> Anthony Meredith, "The Concept of Mind in Gregory and the Neoplatonists," in *Studia Patristica* 22 (1989), 39.

<sup>127</sup> Medi Anne Volpe, *Rethinking Christian Identity*, 166.

<sup>128</sup> *An et res*, Roth, 81.

Gregory's view of the body begins in his understanding of body/soul dualism. That is, in the current post-fallen, pre-resurrected state, the body and soul rely on one another. The body maneuvers and acts according to the direction of the soul, and the soul exists throughout the body, allowing the body to physically act out the contents of the soul. The soul consists of three faculties, the nutritive, sensitive, and the intellectual, that the body works to portray along with the soul and the spirit.<sup>129</sup> The correspondence of the various faculties of the soul lived out through the body is what gives human beings their rationality, and is referred to by Gregory as "the perfect bodily life."<sup>130</sup> The soul and body thus rely on one another in a way that resembles a musician and their instrument.

The body therefore works as the vessel of the soul and the tool used to express the soul's contents. However, its responsibility does not end there. The body also takes on the task of perceiving all of the exchanges the person comes into contact with. The tasks of expressing and perceiving are not limited to the most obvious sense locations, such as the mouth for speaking or the ears for listening. Rather, Gregory suggests that when the body is perceiving an object it does so with the entirety of available parts and senses. Similarly, when the body expresses something it does so through a variety of bodily functions outside of speech such as touch, glances, body language, etc. For Gregory, the body serves to perceive and express the contents of the soul through a variety of different corporeal sources. This also means the body has the capacity to perceive and express despite deficiencies. If, for example, a person does not have the ability to properly speak or form words, Gregory's theology would suggest that the ability to convey messages still exists. This does not merely mean that a person with this type of disability is able to express that they have a physical need by communicating through glances or hand

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<sup>129</sup> *Op hom* 8.5, Wilson, 394.

<sup>130</sup> *Op hom* 8.4, Wilson, 393.

movements. It also means that such a person has the ability to express the contents of their embodied virtues.

The most obvious example of embodied virtues in Gregory's canon is his writing on his sister Macrina. Not only did Macrina become a significant spiritual leader to her religious community despite obvious gender inequalities of her day, but her ministry also coincided with significant challenges to her health.<sup>131</sup> Macrina's understanding of her body's experience with illness serves as an example of the ways embodied virtues can ultimately become strands of intellectuality. Without the body, human beings would cease to have the tools to learn or engage with the rest of creation. A person's access to intellectual knowledge is less about the amount of information they can retain, and more about the ways they are able to embody the lessons learned from perceiving. The embodiment of virtues through perceiving and expressing others who are virtuous is therefore accessible to all people despite intellectual prowess. This is important due to the essentiality of this task for the process of *epektasis*.

Present in the theological understanding of *epektasis* is Gregory's emphasis that the human life never remains spiritually stationary. Because a person is always in a constant state of transition, Gregory accentuates the importance of directing this progression towards the virtue present in the divine life. The divine perfection that human beings strive for in *epektasis*, like God, has no end. Virtue, like perfection, always exists for the human being to strive towards. God's perfection is unobtainable because God has the ability to continuously surpass the virtuous person striving through *epektasis*. Because of Gregory's depiction of God as existing beyond all human comprehension, *epektasis* cannot exist as an isolated effort between human and the

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<sup>131</sup> Medi Anne Volpe, *Rethinking Christian Identity*, 170. Macrina is even seen using her frequent interactions with doctors and the way they diagnose her illness to further explain the way the person comes to make rational decisions through engagement with all of the senses.

divine. Instead, *epektasis* must also occur in the relational communication that takes place between humans. *Epektasis* is therefore enriched by the observance and imitation of virtuous models.

Because direct knowledge of God is inaccessible to human beings, knowledge garnered through the observance of virtuous models becomes of paramount importance. These models exist both as virtuous people on earth, as well as Christ, who lived a virtuous life after becoming human. The growth vis-a-vis *epketasis* that takes place through the observance of others is not possible without the body. The conveyance of virtue among human beings is most obviously done through the demonstration of love, which Gregory considers to be the highest virtue. Love is also important as a communication device because it transcends different levels of intellectual capabilities. All people are able to demonstrate love through the vessel for communication that is their body.

The ability for both human beings and Christ to exist as virtuous models highlights the similarities and differences between the divine and human beings who exist as *imago Dei*. It is possible for human beings to exist in this way because they share muted versions of the same character qualities as God. These character qualities, such as free will, allow for the human person to govern over portions of creation like animals and vegetation in a similar way that God governs over humanity. The human person also has the ability to reflect divine beauty, through their life as a virtuous person. This beauty is seen by others who are observing the bodies of virtuous models, therefore benefitting their *epektasis*. It is the shared character qualities between God and humanity that are able to be expressed and perceived by the human body.

It is in the shared character qualities of God and humanity as *imago Dei* where an account of God's fragility must also be established. Although God exists as unobtainable perfection in a

way that human beings could never fathom, the reality of these shared qualities means a level of fragility must also exist inside God's perfection. This is not to say that God is limited or hindered in any way, but rather that the connection that exists between God and humanity is such that God maintains the ability to share in human limitations within divine perfection. The limitations that exist within humanity are not indicative of God, but are ramifications of the human's life on earth. In light of this, human limitations such as bodily disabilities are not consequences of mirroring the divine life. They are instead a reality of human existence on earth. In this, God remains the ideal of perfection that stands hierarchically above humanity, while still allowing room for the existence of imperfections in humanity's bodily existence.

## Chapter 2

### A Proposed Theological Anthropology of Disability

Gregory of Nyssa's theological anthropology focuses on the body as the vehicle for the soul and the medium for interpersonal communication. This works to depict communication as the process of two bodies simultaneously perceiving and expressing the contents of their respective souls. Although the specific actions involved with communication can seem obvious, Gregory suggests that the body works to perceive and express on a variety of different planes. In order to look more intricately at the ways in which Gregory's body works, this chapter looks at his theological anthropology through the lens of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Drew Leder, and Donn Welton, three philosophers who address the purpose and being of the body. Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the body helps further extrapolate Gregory's understanding of how perception works in both visible and invisible ways. For Merleau-Ponty a person's flesh exists not only as a perceptual tool, but also as a commonality that links all human beings, sharing parallels to Gregory's Christological interpretation that Christ's embodiment of flesh bonded Him to the flesh of humanity. Drew Leder provides a supplement to Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the body by turning to the visceral nature of the inner organs. Leder suggests that although these body parts operate without conscious perceptual thought, they remain chiasmatically linked to the perceptual nature of the surface body. Leder's understanding of the whole body's capacity to perceive and express helps further push our understanding of Gregory's theological anthropology. This is seen most evidently in Gregory's depiction of his sister Macrina, whose illness prompted her to speak eloquently about the ways in which her blood and inner organs communicated with her physician. Donn Welton's overlap with Gregory comes in his representation of the "habitual body," which maintains that the body operates perceptually

without the necessity of intentionality or conscious thought. Welton's habitual body is at all times limited, sharing similarities with the overarching lens of Gregory's theology that human beings are finite in light of an infinite God. Welton's habitual body thus helps to show the shared performative aspects of all bodies brought forth by Gregory, while still operating within the scope of finitude.

This chapter is a supplemental continuation of the theological anthropology of Gregory of Nyssa. The proposed applications of these contemporary philosophies do not exist as a way of imposing modern motifs that were originally absent from the Gregory canon, nor do they exist as a reductive reading of Gregory or presume that his doctrine can be explained away in regards to something else. Rather, the aim of this chapter is to approach Gregory's view of the body through the lens of complimentary bodily interpretations in order to more intricately explain the ways in which Gregory's theological anthropology applies to individuals with disabilities. This shows the ways in which Gregory of Nyssa is helpful in developing a theological anthropology of disability.

### **Maurice Merleau-Ponty's Lived Body and the Chiasm of the Flesh**

The French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty emphasized the body as the primary location for knowledge of the world. This lens rejected the longstanding philosophical tradition of understanding consciousness as the source of knowledge. Instead, for Merleau-Ponty it is through the body that perception takes place, allowing the human being to engage with the world and create meaning from experience. In the *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty identifies the *corps propre* or "lived body" as the foundation for all human relation to the world. In this work, he considers perception in an immensely broad sense, which remains inextricably

linked to conscious bodily movement and concrete expressiveness through language.<sup>132</sup> By establishing what Merleau-Ponty refers to as the “primacy of perception,” the *Phenomenology of Perception* calls into question Descartes’ body/soul dualism in favor of a more intentional concept of perception, a perception that takes place through human bodies. This shares parallels with the work of Gregory of Nyssa, who also focused on the soul’s relationship with the body in wake of a popular thought that was comfortable with the split of the two entities.

In the working notes for *The Visible and Invisible*, which was Merleau-Ponty’s last completed work, the philosopher criticized his earlier work, “due to the fact that in part I retained the philosophy of ‘consciousnesses.’”<sup>133</sup> It was Merleau-Ponty’s desire for *The Visible and Invisible* to bring “ontological explication” to his previous works on phenomenology.<sup>134</sup> Merleau-Ponty wanted to explicate his previous work with a more corporeal understanding of the human body as perceiver. This means the body is able to perceive through a chiasmatic network of visible and invisible senses, which exceeds ontological categories.

Merleau-Ponty’s chiasm of the body works to push the understanding of the body beyond that of a biological object. Through the lens of his “lived body,” Merleau-Ponty works to depict the body as a vessel for human perception, responsible for generating meaning from interactions with the world. This is a body that mediates meaning, is mediated by meaning, and is thus the human being’s opening to meaningful being.<sup>135</sup> This body’s natural inclination to perceive opens up meaningful possibilities for an articulation of theological anthropology.

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<sup>132</sup> Drew Leder, “Flesh and Blood: A Proposed Supplement to Merleau-Ponty” in *The Body: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Donn Welton, (Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 1999), 200.

<sup>133</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis, (Evanston, Illinois, Northwestern University Press, 1968), 183.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>135</sup> David Morris, “Body,” in *Merleau-Ponty Key Concepts*, eds. Rosalyn Diprose and Jack Reynolds, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003), 114.

To understand the chiasmic qualities of the flesh, Merleau-Ponty first creates an account of the lived body. The body exists as *exemplar sensible*, which allows the human person to have “the wherewithal to sense everything that resembles himself on the outside, such that, caught up in the tissue of the things, it draws it entirely to itself, incorporates it, and, with the same movement, communicates to the things upon which it closes over that identity without superposition...”<sup>136</sup> Merleau-Ponty makes the argument that the body exists as both perceiver and perceived, similar to the sensations felt when one hand embraces another. Merleau-Ponty writes,

We say therefore that our body is a being of two leaves, from one side a thing among things and otherwise what sees them and touches them; we say, because it is evident, that it unites these two properties within itself, and its double belongingness to the order of the “object” and to the order of the “subject” reveals to us quite unexpected relations between two orders. It cannot be by incomprehensible accident that the body has this double reference; it teaches us that each calls for the other.<sup>137</sup>

The body has two functions that never quite coincide. There exists a sort of divergence that stops the phenomenal and objective body from merging.<sup>138</sup> Yet, in Merleau-Ponty’s account there remains an “identity-in-difference.”<sup>139</sup> This means that the two sides of the body that Merleau-Ponty proposes do not exist as two separate ontological categories. It is important that the physical body is tangible and exists in the same world as other physical objects. The body is chiasmic because it has the ability to be both perceiver and perceived. This chiasm characterizes not only the nature of the human body, but also its relationship to the world.<sup>140</sup> In considering the body as perceiver, Merleau-Ponty asserts that the human person is made up of the same sort of

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<sup>136</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 135.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>138</sup> Drew Leder, “Flesh and Blood: A Proposed Supplement to Merleau-Ponty,” 201.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

flesh as the world they are interacting with. Drew Leder writes, “For Merleau-Ponty, the world is always world-as-perceived, clothed with the flesh of my gaze.”<sup>141</sup>

Merleau-Ponty wanted to explicate his previous work with a more corporeal understanding of the human body as perceiver. He does this by supplanting his terminology of perception through the body with the ontological notion of “flesh” (*la chair*).<sup>142</sup> For Merleau-Ponty, flesh exists as a primal “element” for human beings.<sup>143</sup> This means that flesh belongs neither to the subject, nor the world exclusively.<sup>144</sup> Instead of being considered a material subject, human flesh acts as a unifying component of life that all human beings are born with. Merleau-Ponty’s exposé on the flesh, therefore, becomes a matter of chiasmus, or bodily interconnections, which exemplify human flesh.

The significance for the mutuality of flesh is not seen in the ability of sight or other perceiving senses. Rather, it is the mutual reference and intertwining of all forms of perception.<sup>145</sup> It is not important that all of humanity sees, feels, or smells the same things in the same way. Instead, significance is found in the understanding that all human beings have access to an interconnected system of perception. Merleau-Ponty writes, “My synergic body is not an object, that it assembles into a cluster the ‘consciousness’ adherent to its hands, to its eyes, by an operation that is in relation to them lateral, transversal...”<sup>146</sup> It is the chiasmic connection of sense opportunity within the human body that connects humanity to the larger world around them, including to other perceivers. Without coinciding, an individual’s perspective stands in mutual validation to the perspective of another.

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>143</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 139.

<sup>144</sup> Drew Leder, “Flesh and Blood: A Proposed Supplement to Merleau-Ponty,” 201.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>146</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 141.

Merleau-Ponty also asserts that there is a chiasmatic relationship between the “visible” and the “invisible.” “Being is fleshed out by virtue of invisible dimensions which are *not* ‘non- visibles’ opposed to perception but installed within the visible world.”<sup>147</sup> This means that there is an invisibility that lines the human body. Correlatively, there is an invisible ideality that adheres to all sensible objects.<sup>148</sup> Although a physical body can be seen and observed due to its corporeality, there is also an incorporeal nature that cannot be accounted for through physical observations. Merleau-Ponty writes,

Meaning is *invisible*, but the invisible is not the contradictory of the visible; the visible itself has an invisible inner framework (*membrure*), and the in-visible is the secret counterpart of the visible, it appears only within it, it is the *Nichturpräsentierbar* which is presented to me as such within the world- one cannot see it there and every effort to *see it there* makes it disappear, but it is *in the line* of the invisible, it is its virtual focus, it is inscribed within it (in filigree)...The other’s visible is my invisible; my visible is the others invisible; this formula (that of Sarte) is not to be retained. We have to say: Being is this strange encroachment by reason of which my visible, although it is not superposable on that of the other, nonetheless opens up to it, that both open upon the same sensible world.<sup>149</sup>

The ideality of visible and invisible is characterized, for Merleau-Ponty, in the human flesh. This includes language, which is embodied by the signifier.<sup>150</sup> For words present in language are always dependent on the flesh, drawing meaning from an ideality which “already streams forth along the articulations of the aesthesiological body, along the contours of the sensible things...”<sup>151</sup> Thus, the understanding of knowledge and communication garnered through senses, both visible and invisible, all fall under the umbrella of the chiasm of the human body. The flesh exceeds an ontology of perception.

### **Gregory of Nyssa’s Lived Body and Chiasmus of the Flesh**

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<sup>147</sup> Drew Leder, “Flesh and Blood: A Proposed Supplement to Merleau-Ponty,” 202. Leder is summarizing a variety of sections from *The Visible and Invisible*, including pp. 149, 215, 227-228, and 236.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>149</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 215-216.

<sup>150</sup> Drew Leder, “Flesh and Blood: A Proposed Supplement to Merleau-Ponty,” 202.

<sup>151</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 152.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the body helps to further clarify the theological anthropology of Gregory of Nyssa. Foundational to both approaches and understandings of the body is a rejection of dualism, inserting in its place the idea that the body and soul exist through one unified system. It is in this rejection that the body becomes more than a mere container for the soul or intellectual organs and instead finds its importance as the tool through which a person perceives the world around them. In light of this, the most obvious overlaps in thought are seen in Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the "lived body" as the foundational medium of perception and engagement with the world and Gregory's concept of the body as the moderator of interpersonal communication.

Gregory similarly prescribes ontological responsibility for the human body, which echoes the scholarship brought forth by Merleau-Ponty. One example of this is Gregory's explanation of the "special advantage of reason" which emphasizes the human's usefulness of organs to communicate effectively such as voice and hands.<sup>152</sup> Although originally used by Gregory to separate the human from what he referred to as "non-rational animals," this assessment also highlights parts of the body that function as perceivers and expressers. The Creator has given the human being body parts like hands, a mouth, and vocal chords in order to appropriately express human thought.<sup>153</sup> Xueying Wang depicts Gregory's portrayal of the body as a metaphor for human relationship:

Besides the fact that different bodily members are joined together by functions to form a harmonious whole, an individual, once isolated from other human beings, is not complete. In other words a man or woman is bid by nature to reach out to others, and the body, through the organs which we convey our thoughts in words and in action, constitutes the indispensable medium for interpersonal communications.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> *Op hom* 8.8; Wilson, 395.

<sup>153</sup> *Op hom* 8.8; Wilson, 393-395.

<sup>154</sup> Xueying Wang, "Gregory of Nyssa on the Corporate Nature of the Human Body," 18.

This interpretation of Gregory places the body's perceptual compulsion as divinely preordained by God in creation. The importance of perception, for Gregory, is not limited to creating meaning from the world. Rather it becomes an essential task for fostering human relationships. The framework of human relationships rests in perceiving various things from interactions. Objects that a person values or ideas, items, and relationships they care about are all able to be perceived by those that they interact with. Perception therefore becomes paramount to the ways in which individuals grow closer to others. For example, if they perceive concerns and character qualities that are similar to their own, they are more likely to form a closer relationship. This is seen in Merleau-Ponty's declaration that "all knowledge takes its place within the horizons opened up by perception."<sup>155</sup> Included in these horizons is knowledge garnered within human relationships. Gregory's notion of a "lived body" is relational.

Merleau-Ponty's concept of flesh is also useful in the consideration of Gregory's theological anthropology. For Merleau-Ponty, flesh is portrayed as a tool for perception and touch, but is also seen as a unifying element that is a characteristic of all human beings. Flesh acts as a unifying agent for both perceiver and expresser, who, through flesh, find an "intimacy in the visible."<sup>156</sup> Flesh acts as a basis of commonality between all human beings. This understanding shares overtones of Gregory's understanding of creation's relationship with Christ, who took on human flesh. Johannes Zachhuber refers to this as the "humanistic solution" within Gregory's theology. Zachhuber argues that, for Gregory, the divinity of Jesus is far less important than his humanity.<sup>157</sup> Christ's taking on flesh is vital to humanity's call to imitation, which Zachhuber compares to "pupils, who learn to paint by looking at a well drawn picture, [just as]

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<sup>155</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1962), 202.

<sup>156</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 187.

<sup>157</sup> Johannes Zachhuber, *Human Nature in Gregory of Nyssa*, 191.

human beings ought to learn perfection in the virtuous life from the perfect example set before them by Christ.”<sup>158</sup> Christ’s taking on flesh provides a visible representation for the virtuous life for humanity to imitate. Human flesh works as a unifying agent, linking humanity to the eternal logos who shared the same flesh.

Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of the lived body helps to clarify Gregory’s theology of the body as medium for communications. However, Merleau-Ponty’s presentation of the lived body fails to show how the body exists as perceiver and expresser when the body’s tools of perception cease to function. The notion of ontological responsibility through the lived body alienates individuals whose bodies are disabled. What does Gregory’s assertion that human beings operate with a “special advantage of reason” mean if the hands or mouth do not operate in their fullest potential? Interpreting Gregory’s theological anthropology through the lens of disability requires a more comprehensive look at the body as a whole.

### **Drew Leder’s Visceral Body**

Drew Leder proposes a supplement to Merleau-Ponty’s notion of perception that moves beyond the sentient/sensible surface of the body and rests on a deeper and visceral foundation.<sup>159</sup> Leder understands Merleau-Ponty’s lived body as a rejection of the Cartesian conflation of two separate entities (body and soul) by arguing that to view the body this way an account must be made for bodily intentionality. In regards to the lived body, Leder writes, “It holds that the body of a living being has an essential structure of its own which cannot be captured by the language and concepts used to explain inanimate nature. If one notion can be said to lie at the heart of this

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Drew Leder, “Flesh and Blood: A Proposed Supplement to Merleau-Ponty,” 203. Leder is uniquely qualified to speak in depth about the body. Prior to pursuing his Ph.D. in philosophy, he received an M.D. from the Yale University School of Medicine.

paradigm, it is that the lived body is an ‘intending’ entity.”<sup>160</sup> However, the human body exists as much more than the sensory organs that are consciously enacted to move or communicate. The phenomenological emphasis on the visible, surface body often means the disregard of the invisible, visceral body.

Leder points out that like the visible body, the visceral cannot properly belong to the subject.<sup>161</sup> Rather, the visceral aspects of the body labors without conscious intention, granting life in ways a human has neither willed nor understood.<sup>162</sup> These organs are not the medium through which the world is perceived or by which another perceiver recognizes a person. Leder also points out the natural inclination to think of these parts of the body as their own isolated entity writing, “In terms of motility, the ‘I can’ of the surface body gives way, on the visceral level, to something like an ‘it can.’”<sup>163</sup> A human cannot choose to contract an inner organ in the same way they can contract a part of the surface body. Bodily actions like digestion or breathing are simply accomplished within a human, without intervention, guidance, or skill.<sup>164</sup>

Although happening beyond the visible, these organs are still chiasmatically linked to the bodily life. Contemporary science is able to explain the appearance and function of these organs, and a surgeon can see and interact with them on the operating table. External organs that perceive are sustained by the labor of the internal and visceral.<sup>165</sup> The eyes or ears, in part, rely on proper blood circulation or digestion in order to execute their responsibilities of sight or hearing. Leder’s bodily understanding does not work to undermine the chiasm brought forth by

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<sup>160</sup> Drew Leder, “A Tale of Two Bodies: The Cartesian Corpse and the Lived Body” in *Body and Flesh: A Philosophical Reader*, ed. Donn Welton, (Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 1998), 123.

<sup>161</sup> Drew Leder, “Flesh and Blood: A Proposed Supplement to Merleau-Ponty,” 203.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 204.

Merleau-Ponty, but rather seeks to add a deeper dimension. That is, the body's ability to perceive and express is not merely dependent on its external features.

Where Merleau-Ponty would say that perception is only possible through the mutual exteriority of perceiver and perceived, Leder calls for a deeper relational ontology than exists through the perceptual communion of the flesh.<sup>166</sup> By pushing the previously established ontological notion of flesh deeper, to include "blood," Leder aims to express "the chiasmatic identity-in-difference of perceptual and visceral life."<sup>167</sup> This recognition of blood shows a mutual sustaining of relationship with the rest of creation. Blood is a part of the human being from birth and does not rely on outside force for acquisition. Leder writes, "In sleep I give myself over to anonymous breathing, relinquishing the separative stance of distance perception. Even waking perception is ultimately in service to the visceral."<sup>168</sup> It is thus through the visceral, coupled with the perceptual, that total interpretation of body and creation is actualized.

Through the lens of Merleau-Ponty, the human being discovers their own visibility and visibility of the world through the lens of another. Leder argues that although this is true, prior to the intertwining of external bodies from without, there is an intertwining of internal bodies from within.<sup>169</sup> Beginning in birth a lived body is formed from within that of another, thus challenging the Merleau-Ponty concept of the visible and invisible. These described invisibilities all rely in some capacity on an expressive body, ultimately concluding in bodily language.<sup>170</sup> Leder alternatively suggests that the understanding of invisibility does not only include Merleau-Ponty's understanding of flesh as perceptual unit, but also forgotten visceral organs that make

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 205.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 204-205.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 205.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>170</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 136, 149.

external perception possible. He writes, “The visceral organs, the fetal body from which I emerge, the sleeping body into which I lapse, are regions ineluctably hidden from my perception. Yet my lived world is textured by this unconscious vitality, as much as by the sublimations of language and thought.”<sup>171</sup>

It is true that Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of bodily perception supersedes intellectual or physical capability by rooting the tools for perceiver/perceived in the flesh. However, this phenomenological understanding leaves large portions of the body unrepresented. By accounting for the visceral nature of the human body, Drew Leder develops an embodiment of perception that portrays external and internal sensory organs through the same lens of importance. This depiction thus creates a more in depth relational ontology, because interactions between the perceiver and the perceived are not limited to the perception that takes place at the external level. Instead, perceiver and perceived are already intricately connected due to their shared blood and viscosity. Not only does this interpretation continue to include all human beings regardless of ability, but it also works to include the entirety of the human body.

### **Gregory of Nyssa and the Visceral Body**

An engagement of viscosity within Gregory of Nyssa’s theological anthropology begins in creation. To think critically about the ways in which internal and external organs exist in cohesion, as tools of perception, requires careful consideration of the ways in which God created humans to exist.<sup>172</sup> Chapter One of this thesis, in part, explores the ways in which Gregory views

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<sup>171</sup> Drew Leder, “Flesh and Blood: A Proposed Supplement to Merleau-Ponty,” 207.

<sup>172</sup> Dialogue surrounding creation in light of Gregory’s view of the human body often seeks to articulate Gregory’s interpretation of human sexual organs. Although not necessarily within the scope of this thesis, the debate is worth noting. For a complete depiction of this debate see John Behr, “The Rational Animal: A Rereading of Gregory of Nyssa’s *De hominis opificio*.” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 7 (Summer 1999), 219-247; Sarah Coakley, “The Eschatological Body: Gender, Transformation, and God.” in *Powers and Submissions* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002); Mark Hart, “Reconciliation of Body and Soul: Gregory of Nyssa’s Deeper Theology of Marriage.” *Theological Studies* 51 (1990), 450-478; and J. Warren Smith, “The Body of Paradise and the Body of the Resurrection: Gender and the Angelic Life in Gregory of Nyssa’s *De hominis opificio*.” *HTR* 92.2 (2006), 207-228.

humanity as the *imago Dei*. An aspect of this aforementioned explanation was that human beings exist as the *imago Dei* because they are able to oversee features of creation (plants, animals, etc.) in a way that is analogous to how God governs humanity. To realize this, it can be assumed that God first decided prior to the creation of humanity what faculties were necessary to exert this sort of dominion over the earth. There are obvious body parts that come to mind when considering the human responsibility to lead creation: a torso, legs that facilitate quick movement and the ability to walk upright, and opposable thumbs and fingers that allow a hand to grasp and carry. However, this preordained structure must have also accounted for interior organs. It is the visceral tissue that sustains the body's life, thus making it possible to govern creation. The visceral component of the human body is therefore central to the person's existence as *imago Dei*. Vital to this incorporation of the visceral body into the theology of Gregory is the understanding that God endows life to humanity, not mere existence. This automatic labor of visceral organs and blood takes place detached from a person's own energies, showing that, God sustains life without assistance from humanity.

Due to the restricted medical knowledge in his day, Gregory's engagement with the inner workings of the body is somewhat limited. In *De anima et resurrectione*, Gregory and Macrina discuss the teleology of known bodily organs. The understanding of the current human body and what it will transition to in the post-resurrected state influences the discourse between the siblings. Although attempting to create an account for all aspects of the body and focusing mostly on external organs, Macrina and Gregory indirectly speak of the significance of the visceral. Macrina accounts for all aspects of the body in her claim that "nature has made no part of the body useless," arguing that bodily organs all serve an explicit need.<sup>173</sup> Yet, a deeper look

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<sup>173</sup> *An et res*, Roth, 111.

into the rhetoric of *De anima et resurrection* suggests a more intimate connection between the visceral organs and the soul. Macrina says,

If we desire to know ourselves, in obedience to that wise precept, the soul itself teaches us well enough what we should understand about the soul, namely that it is immaterial and bodiless, working and moving in accord with its own nature, and revealing its motions by means of the bodily organs. For the same arrangement of the bodily organs exists in the corpses of the dead, but the soul remains immobile and not activated by the psychic power which is no longer in it. It is moved when perception resides in the organs and intellectual power pervades perception, moving the organs of perception along with its own impulses as it chooses.<sup>174</sup>

Here, Gregory uses Macrina's voice to establish the way the soul moves inside the body. This involves being housed in the vessel of the body and permeating throughout external sense organs in order to perceive the world and express its inner contents. It also entails living in and among the visceral. Macrina addresses the arrangement of bodily organs in a corpse suggesting that she is referring to inner organs, which would be most visible after death. Not only is the soul housed in the bodily vessel with the visceral organs, but the life giving force of the visceral organs also aids in the bodily ability to perceive and express.

Gregory pushes this further by transcribing an ill Macrina's thoughts about her interactions with her physician. Macrina says,

The evidence for what I have said is close at hand. How does this man by laying his fingers on my artery hear somehow through the sense of touch how my nature calls out to him and explains its own condition? Because the sickness of my body is increasing; the disease arises from these internal organs, and the increase of the inflammation extends this far."<sup>175</sup>

In this context Macrina suggests that the hand of the doctor acts as perceiver, and the blood flowing through her artery acts as expresser. This shows the communicative properties of the visceral.

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<sup>174</sup> *An et res*, Roth, 37. The "wise precept" that is alluded to refers to the famous maxim "know thyself," from the shrine of Apollo at Delphi.

<sup>175</sup> *An et res*, Roth, 38.

The visceral links humanity in its nature as a universal reality. This commonality of the visceral among humanity takes place regardless of ability or bodily characteristics. The visceral organs preserve life, without effort, freeing up the human being to use their sense organs to perceive and communicate. The visceral also has the capacity to communicate wants, needs, and passions of the body on its own, as seen in the interaction between Macrina and her doctor. Thus, to consider the communicative nature of the body, Gregory creates an account for the theological role of the visceral.

### **Donn Welton and the Habitual Body**

The body, within the theology of Gregory of Nyssa, is able to perceive and express in ways that supersede conscious thought. Bodies naturally depict emotion, intent, feelings, etc. without the need for human intellect to trigger bodily movements. This is particularly seen through the lens of the body as visceral, considering the work that inner organs put into bodily gestations such as digestion or breathing, without instruction from the brain. The absence of conscious thought in these particular bodily functions prompt the body to be understood as operating habitually. This is the approach of the philosopher Donn Welton, who outlines four interconnected dimensions that, when combined, make up a “habitual body.” These dimensions are: perceptual, pathetic, praxical, and dispositional. Welton’s view of the body suggests that the importance of the human person is not that they possess a body, mind, or soul. Rather, the significance of the body rests in the fact that these actions are done habitually. Although all four dimensions exist as an intricately established matrix, this thesis focuses specifically on the perceptual body and the pathetic body in its application to the theological anthropology of Gregory.

Welton's notion of the perceptual body stands out due to the limitations he places on the human being. It is not Welton's objective to deny that the body has perceptual abilities, but he does want to highlight that there is a finitude to the body's perception.<sup>176</sup> Objects that are perceived are always given from one side, thus being perceived by a singular perspective. Welton writes, "If we take the ideal of an object given according to all its perspectives as our definition of adequate givenness, then perception must be understood as essentially inadequate."<sup>177</sup> Because a person's perception is isolated, objects that are perceived are thus seen inadequately and in limited fashion. This is no fault of the human, but rather a realization that what compromises a person's cognitive abilities is the inadequacy of the human being. In communication, a perceiver can only act and work in relation to an expresser. If an expresser is absent, there is no body for the perceiver to perceive, and without a perceiver, the body has no direction to express. This dependency brings with it the recognition that the human body is situated.

Welton's perceptual body works to show that although the human body is at all times perceiving, the entirety of the world can never be perceived all at one time. The body as situated means that the body is finite.<sup>178</sup> It is within finitude that the human being is able to perceive.

Welton writes,

Each side or profile given indicates a whole which exceeds what is directly given, a whole whose presence can be understood only by recourse to that movement of indication that forms the core of perceptual intentionality, by recourse to what, strictly speaking, "transgresses" the side perceived as we see the object as a whole with its backside. The first seven notes of Beethoven's Ninth may be ringing in our ears yet it is the symphony that we are listening to... Whether it be a "passive" expectation in which our gaze is guided only by the present course of perception or an "active" anticipation in which we are deliberately looking for something, we can be mistaken only about what is

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<sup>176</sup> Donn Welton, "Biblical Bodies" in *Body and Flesh: A Philosophical Reader*, ed. Donn Welton, (Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 1998), 235.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

coming but, as new experience retroactively reframes our past and present cognitions, also about what we already know. This is not an accidental but an essential part of embodied experience. As finite we are also *fallible*. Without the capacity to err we would lack the capacity to perceive.<sup>179</sup>

Human fallibility thus becomes an essential part of a person's aptitude for perception. This places all human beings on equal footing for perceptual ability, with limitedness acting as a peculiar sort of asset for the body's ability to perceive and express with the rest of creation.

Human finitude, that is, the shortcomings in perception highlighted by Welton in his perceptual body, is also built into the structure and actions of the pathetic body. This account of finitude is dependent upon rescinding an abstraction of objects and body, viewed through cognition. Rescinding this abstraction shows the ways in which the body exists as pathetic, ultimately allowing a way to account for the passion and pathos of the body.<sup>180</sup> For Welton, the body is situated by the desirability of objects. Passions enter into human beings' interpretation of an object, distorting or enhancing it, and leading to new acts of perception and desire. Desire thus shapes a person's perception based on the limitations of the human person because "desire is reconfigured by the rhythms of need."<sup>181</sup> Welton encapsulates this idea by considering human touch, proposing that touch establishes a circuit of exchanges in which two bodies become one flesh, and each person becomes a part of the other.<sup>182</sup> Welton writes, "Because this reaches into dimensions of our being that only an occasional poet or singers have been able to articulate, we should not think of this exchange as a form of communication so much as a form of *communion*."<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 235.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 236.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., 237.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

Touch thus becomes crucial in the human attempt to overcome characteristics of the pathetic body. Touch exists as the medium for interaction with the desired object or desiring flesh. Welton writes, “In extending its hands, in reaching for what is desired, the flesh senses itself directly but still as only limited and delimited.”<sup>184</sup> This means that the flesh is never fully transparent to the person who occupies it, for it knows itself only through the situations that call it forth.<sup>185</sup> The various faculties of touch, in its ability to heal and express/perceive, discloses the body at its most pathetic. The crux of this line of thinking is not merely that bodies move beyond ways in which they make or unmake sense of the world, but rather that the emotions leading to desire or aversion are both, at times, present and absent, and have the capacity to shape a body which is both finite and fallible. Creation is not simply the backdrop of where the human person lives, but rather the living entity that the human being engages with through desires and dislikes. Human finitude postures the person to fallibility, which ultimately shapes them to vulnerability.

Welton’s praxical body attempts to move from the “docile” to the “dexterous” body by highlighting the various ways the body exercises power and has power exercised on itself.<sup>186</sup> The praxical context depicts the body engaging its surroundings through muscles and joints, as well as the dexterity that is required to incorporate the use of tools to better exploit the body’s interaction with its surroundings. In this, again, is the awareness of the body’s limitation in doing tasks. Although a person can condition the body to be in its peak physical or mental state to perform a task or incorporate a tool for more precise execution, the limit to the powers of the body creates frequent scenarios of limitation and failure at tasks. This leads to what Welton refers to as, “the *fallibility* of the praxical body.”<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid., 238. Welton uses “praxical” to describe the exercise of a specific ability or skill.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid., 239.

The concepts of finitude, fallibility, and vulnerability are collected in Welton's notion of the interconnected habitual body. For Welton, this shifts the understanding of the body from one of finitude and fallibility to one of "fallenness." This move entails a pivot away from a phenomenology of the body that deals with the body in regards to its possibilities, and moves to a hermeneutic of the signs, symbols, and narratives that place the body in the difficult balance of affirming life in light of death.<sup>188</sup> Welton writes,

This shift allows us to capture our fallenness in a way that does not turn it back into an issue of finitude. The approach I am pursuing here, then, rejects the thesis that finitude and its experiential counterpart in fragility constitutes the fallenness of our body in particular and our existence in general. Finitude creates the *possibility* of fallenness, not its necessity. As a result it is crucial to distinguish those structural features of the flesh that place it as an essential dimension of our being human from the specific configuration and deployment of the flesh in its concrete living.<sup>189</sup>

Welton calls this idea of fallenness, as it relates to the habitual body, the "*bondage* of the body," suggesting that the inclination of the body to chase its directions and its powers always lead the body away from itself, writing that the "body as habitual becomes the body as the residual effect of perverse finitude."<sup>190</sup>

### **Gregory of Nyssa and the Habitual Body**

The finitude and fallenness that become vital parts of Donn Welton's habitual body are prominent aspects of Gregory of Nyssa's theological anthropology. For Gregory, human beings are always limited. Gregory often portrays human finitude through two frequently visited topics: limitedness in ability compared to the divine, and the comprehension of dying and the afterlife. Gregory often uses the concept of *diastema* to signify the limitedness of creation. Everything the human being identifies is known through a *diastematic* manner. This not only means that human

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid., 240.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 241.

beings' perception takes place within a fixed timeframe, but also what is perceived is something determinate, a diastema defined by limits.<sup>191</sup> Conversely, the *adiastematic* God can never be comprehended, not even in an infinitely long interval of time.<sup>192</sup> Included within God's limitlessness is incomprehensibility to *diastemic* thought.<sup>193</sup> The *diastemic* character of the human being and the *adiastemic* infinity of God acts as the framework for understanding the human life as a limitless movement towards the infinite goodness of God.<sup>194</sup> Infinity, acting as the absence of an end, thus becomes of paramount importance for the human being, providing the orientation for them to pursue the infinite perfection of the divine through the process of *epektasis*. Because of this orientation, the posturing of human beings towards the perfection of the divine is portrayed, in a sense, as habitual.

The assertion of human limitedness in Gregory's theological anthropology includes perceptual abilities, in a way that is analogous to Donn Welton's perceptual body. One way that Gregory shows the limitations of perception is to portray them in an apophatic sense. This is seen in Gregory's attempt at deciphering what happens to a person's mind and perceptual senses when they fall asleep.<sup>195</sup> By recalling the aforementioned three faculties of the human soul (nutritive, sensory, and rational), Gregory believes that when a person sleeps the vegetative actions keeps their body alive. The mind does not experience any perception, and the only activity it experiences is dreaming.<sup>196</sup> In his depiction of dreaming, Gregory is therefore depicting a situation where a mind is active, yet disconnected from the senses. Both Gregory and Welton

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<sup>191</sup> Lenka Karfiková, "Infinity," in *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, eds. Lucas Francisco Mateo-Seco and Giulio Maspero, Trans. Seth Cherney (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2010), 423.

<sup>192</sup> *Eccl GNO V*, 411-414.

<sup>193</sup> Lenka Karfiková, "Infinity," 423.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, 425.

<sup>195</sup> *Op hom* 13.1-17; Wilson, 401-402.

<sup>196</sup> *Op hom* 13.11-12; Wilson, 401-402.

depict a human body with sophisticated communicative functions, while still maintaining a fragility that is constantly limiting the body.

By creating an account of a perceiving body that is finite, Welton inadvertently helps decipher Gregory's theology of *epektasis*. Welton writes,

Finitude means more than the idea that our acts of cognition have no resting place, that they cascade into an open future without an end; it also means that each new point of view displaces others, setting them in the shadows, that each act of uncovering also involves covering.<sup>197</sup>

Similarly, human growth in *epektasis* involves a similar path of continual growth, where the knowledge the human being gains through perception has no resting place. Yet, this does not mean that the perpetual progress accomplished exists as an open future without end. Rather, human nature is always being disposed to reach a greater good.<sup>198</sup> Progress in *epektasis* is not wasted due to the absence of a goal that portrays God as unreachable entity. Instead, Gregory is suggesting that human finitude is such, that even if God is possessed, God's nature as infinite surpasses the finitude of humanity.<sup>199</sup>

In Welton's depiction of the pathetic body, the body is situated by the desirability of objects. The desirability or rejections of particular objects influence a person's ability to create meaning from perceptions. The influence of human passions is also a primary concern within the theological anthropology of Gregory. For Welton, human desires prevent human beings from being able to perceive objects to their fullest extent. For Gregory, these same passions distract the person from fully living in the light of divine perfection. Gregory speaks allegorically of the human responsibility to manage their passions, comparing it to their interaction with creation. Just as human beings should govern over non-rational animals, so too should the rational mind

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<sup>197</sup> Welton, "Biblical Bodies," 235.

<sup>198</sup> *Vit Moys*, I, GNO VII/1, 4-5.

<sup>199</sup> Lucas Francisco Mateo-Seco, "*Epektasis*," 265.

reign over the sensual desires.<sup>200</sup> Gregory looks at the story of Eve in creation to demonstrate this point. Human rationality would suggest that obedience to an almighty God is self-evident. However, Eve ignores the understanding of her rationality and instead chooses to follow her own impulses shaped by desire. Gregory thus suggests that desire often causes human beings to ignore their natural relationship with God, a proclivity which Gregory refers to as the “passionate disposition.”<sup>201</sup> Gregory is therefore depicting the person as losing sight of their full capacity for perception due to the distortion caused by human passion. In light of Gregory’s depiction of human finitude, this shows the place for the pathetic body inside Gregory’s theological anthropology.

Gregory’s theological anthropology through the lens of Welton’s habitual body creates space for the perceptual nature of the body to exist because of the finitude and fragility of the human person. This is in accordance with Gregory’s understanding of the body as the medium for interpersonal communication, while also preserving the natural hierarchy of a perfect God existing above a flawed humanity. This hierarchical understanding is at all times in the background of Gregory’s theology and also works to develop the existential gap that is covered through the human progress made in *epektasis*. Gregory portrays human finitude as a limitation, which a human being does not have the opportunity to overcome. The body affords all of humanity the opportunity to perceive and express, and move closer to the perfection of God. However, this ability to perceive and express takes place within a boundary, a boundary that prevents humanity from ever overcoming its fragile nature and achieving equal footing with the infinite and perfect God. Humanity has the capacity to perceive glimpses of God’s divine perfection and beauty, but never fully grasp its depths.

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<sup>200</sup> *Virg* GNO VIII. i. 254; Callahan, 9

<sup>201</sup> *Virg* GNO VIII. i. 254; Callahan, 11.

## Conclusion

Gregory of Nyssa portrays the body as a vibrant and multifaceted communicator that works to express the contents of the soul. Although his writing speaks in depth to various locations and abilities of the human body, the limited medical knowledge of his day contained the extent in which he was able to pursue these ontological connections. However, the themes present in Gregory's theological anthropology find themselves in the work of other authors, three of which have been the focus of this chapter. The aim in applying these philosophers is not to challenge or replace the thought of Gregory, but rather to add auxiliary commentary to the theologian's limited writings on the subject.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's similarities with Gregory begin in their mutual understanding that the body is the primary location for knowledge of the world. Merleau-Ponty believes the body to be working through a chiasm of interlinked senses that provide the human being with their perceptual network. This chiasm prescribes an intricate connection between components of the body that are visible and invisible sense abilities that work to provide the foundations for human knowledge. A major aspect of the bodily chiasmus is the flesh, which exists as a unifying component of mutuality that all humans share. Merleau-Ponty's ontological assessment of the lived body shares much in common with Gregory's belief that the body exists as the medium for the tasks of perception and expression. In the same way that Merleau-Ponty believes that the body gives human beings the ability to acquire knowledge of the world, Gregory claims that the parts of the body give the human a "special advantage of reason."<sup>202</sup> For both Merleau-Ponty and Gregory the body is needed in order to develop human relationships, which in turn provide knowledge of the world. The idea that all humans share the components of the human body, such

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<sup>202</sup> *Op hom* 8.8; Wilson, 395.

as flesh, emphasizes the unification. Gregory pushes his concept of a shared body into the divine by uniting elements of the body with Christ's human body.

Although including both the visible and the invisible in his work on the body, Merleau-Ponty left space open for considerations of the visceral natures of the body. Drew Leder filled this space in his supplement to the work of Merleau-Ponty. Like the visible, the visceral cannot properly belong to the subject. It is still chiasmatically linked to the life of the visible, but its work is done underneath the surface, sustaining the external sense organs without conscious thought. Leder's supplement to Merleau-Ponty supersedes intellectual or physical capability by rooting the foundations of perception in the whole body. Gregory, too, has concerns for the visceral nature of the body. Beginning in his thoughts on creation, Gregory asserts that God's work endows life to humanity, not merely existence, emphasizing the sustaining work completed within the viscosity of the body. For Gregory, visceral organs show the ways in which God sustains life without assistance from humanity. This message is reemphasized in dialogue with Macrina, who affirms to Gregory the usefulness of visceral components such as blood and internal organs.

The ways the visceral sustains the body, without the necessity of conscious thought commanding the organs to perform, brings to light the ways in which the human body operates on its own accord. This is the basis of the habitual body outlined by Donn Welton who thinks critically about how the body is always engaged in perceptual interactions with the world. Welton suggests that although the body always perceives, the vastness of the world means that it is impossible for the body to perceive everything. This places limits on what the body is able to do, while still recognizing its skill in perception. Human limitation is a cornerstone in the theology of Gregory, spoken of most frequently in his understanding of *diastema*. The separation

of *diastemic* and *adiastemic* in Gregory's work speak to his hierarchical divide between God and humanity. This provides the backdrop for *epektasis*, the perpetual progress of human beings from limited lives to God's unlimited perfection. For both Welton and Gregory, this separation is partly due to the abuse of human passions. Donn Welton shows the ways in which passions prevent a person from perceiving everything, whereas for Gregory human passions limit access to perfection. Ultimately, Welton aids in providing clarity to Gregory's thoughts on perception, while still maintaining the limited nature of humanity that is vital to Gregory's theological anthropology.

Nyssa, Merleau-Ponty, Leder, and Welton all have in common an understanding of the body as an intricately linked system of perceptual senses that exist visibly and invisibly, externally and internally. The body is always perceiving and expressing, in both conscious and unconscious ways. Although this sort of capability seems infinite, the human being remains limited in their perception. However, the theme in common among all of these depictions of the body remains the ability for any human to have access to these perceptual abilities, regardless of mental or physical deficiencies. The body's chiasmatic connection allows for bodily deficiencies to be circumvented by transitioning the site of perception to a more functional sense. Similarly, because the body perceives in unconscious and habitual ways, there exists no minimum intellectual ability necessary for perception to take place. By examining Gregory's thought from the perspectives of Merleau-Ponty, Leder, and Welton, an argument has been made that Gregory of Nyssa's understanding of the body and the ways in which it communicates exists as an inclusive theological anthropology for individuals with disabilities.

### Chapter 3 Gregory of Nyssa and Disability Theory

So far, the thesis has shown that Gregory of Nyssa's theological anthropology can be more thoroughly discussed in unison with contemporary philosophical considerations of the human body. By considering Gregory alongside these phenomenologists with a focus on their openness to individuals with disabilities, an account has been created of the ways in which Gregory's theology is able to speak to a contemporary theology of disability. This chapter turns to the field of disability studies by focusing on two theorists who have significantly impacted the ways in which disability is approached, Tobin Siebers and Fiona Kumari Campbell. Tobin Siebers is famous for his theory of "disability aesthetics," which is meant to be a critical concept that seeks to emphasize the presence of disability within the tradition of aesthetic representation.<sup>203</sup> Aesthetic considerations of beauty also exist as a common motif within the theology of Gregory. Looking at Siebers through the lens of Gregory shows that perfection is unable to exist as a standard of beauty for humanity and is only able to be seen in God. Fiona Kumari Campbell combines her interests of disability studies and pedagogy to show the ways individuals with disabilities should be considered to have a privileged status as it relates to positions of instruction. For Campbell, the character qualities and disposition that are required for living in the world with disabilities transition nicely to what is required for an impactful instructor. This appeal for individuals with disabilities lends itself agreeably to Gregory of Nyssa's depiction of virtuous models, particularly seen in his relationship with his sister Macrina. A dialogue between Gregory and Campbell helps to show how an individual with disabilities exists as a model of virtue. This lesson will be revisited in the final chapter, which will apply Gregory of Nyssa's theological understanding of the human body to my work in the

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<sup>203</sup> Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 3.

field of developmental disabilities. This will show the ways in which Gregory's thought speaks to the current discussion of disability.

### **Disability Studies**

The in depth study of disability is still a relatively new phenomenon within the academy. After all, it took an extended amount of time for the condition of being labeled as "disabled" to be thought of as an oppression, instead of an uncomplicated description of someone else's body. Until fairly recently, the existence and interpretation of individuals with disabilities were most often thought of to be bad luck, which unfortunately worked to limit the person's ability to be fully incorporated into society. The turning point is difficult to pinpoint, but the approval of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) by bipartisan majorities in 1990 provided a level of protection for individuals with disabilities against discrimination in employment, public accommodations and transportation, and telecommunications.<sup>204</sup> Although the true benefits of the ADA are often contested, the bill ultimately worked to bring awareness of the plights of individuals with disabilities to the attention of the mainstream consciousness.

With The ADA was a reliance on a sociopolitical model of disability, which replaced a more medical/clinical approach to disability that had been prevalent since the 1960s.<sup>205</sup> Broadly, the medical model of disability seeks to focus on ways of medically assisting a person in order to better adapt them to society. Examples of this are performing surgeries, therapies, or developing tools that cover for bodily deficiencies. Although, at times, biomedical intervention is an appropriate way to enhance a person's quality of life, disability advocates who prescribe to a

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<sup>204</sup> Richard K. Scotch, "Models of Disability and the Americans with Disabilities Act" in *Disability: The Social, Political, and Ethical Debate*, eds. Robert M. Baird, Stuart E. Rosenbaum, and S. Kay Toombs, (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2009), 171.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

more social model of inclusion have criticized the medical model.<sup>206</sup> The social model provides a more complex view of disability and disability-related discrimination by focusing upon the relationship between an individual's impairment and the nature of the environment in which the specific individual must function.<sup>207</sup> The medical model creates an unintended social degradation of individuals with disabilities by being narrowly focused on biomedical solutions for disability, instead of a concern for practices that involve societal inclusionary practices.

Although the ADA was hardly the beginning of the social model of disability or the academic study of disability theory, its use of social methodology marked a turn towards public awareness and inclusive dispositions. As the ADA worked to bring disability into the public consciousness, the social method simultaneously worked to create more academic interest for the study of disabilities from an array of academic disciplines. In short, disability studies seeks to understand the meaning, significance, and nature of disability. Unlike other methodological lenses, which are more or less permanent for a person's life, disability has the potential to impact everyone at any given moment in life, in both direct and indirect ways. The broad nature of what can be classified as a disability means that most people will experience some impairment in their lifetime. Eloquenty summarized by Tobin Siebers, "The disabled body exists as a symbol of the trauma of modern life and a call to discover a more inclusive and realistic conception of culture, one that recognizes the fragility as well as the violence of human existence."<sup>208</sup>

### **Tobin Siebers Disability Aesthetics**

Gregory's understanding of human finitude in light of an almighty God casts all of humanity through a lens of limitation. Although bound to finitude, humanity still has the ability

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

<sup>208</sup> Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics*, 103.

to catch glimpses of divine beauty due to its existence as the *imago Dei*. Thus, an account must be made for beauty existing in human limitations of the body and mind. Present in Gregory's hierarchical understanding of the relationship between God and humanity is the perception that perfection cannot provide the only standard for beauty. This is also a central argument to the disability theorist Tobin Siebers' 2010 monograph *Disability Aesthetics*.

In this work, Siebers strives to look through the lens of human disability as a way of asking what constitutes beauty. For Siebers, the human body exists as both the subject and object of aesthetic production, but all bodies are not created equal when it comes to aesthetic response.<sup>209</sup> To look at the concept of aesthetics through the lens of disability means to reject the representation of a healthy body as a definer of harmony, integrity, beauty, etc. In short, aesthetics studies the way that bodies make other bodies feel.<sup>210</sup> Moreover, aesthetics stresses that feelings that are created from bodies are generated involuntarily, as if they are representative of a form of unconscious communication between bodies.<sup>211</sup> Siebers refers to this as a "contagious possession of one body by another."<sup>212</sup> He writes,

Whether the effect is beauty and pleasure, ugliness or pain, or sublimity and terror, the emotional impact of the body on another is experienced as an assault on autonomy and a testament to the power of otherness. Aesthetics is the human science most concerned with invitations to think and feel otherwise about our own influence, interests, and imagination.<sup>213</sup>

Siebers argues that the body's role as communicator is at all times depicting positive and negative emotions of acceptance or rejection. Although this leaves open the possibility of

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<sup>209</sup> Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics*, 1.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*

undesirable bodily communications, this also leaves the body open to perceive and express beauty.

For Siebers, the exclusion of perfection from within beauty is a vital part of social justice. To narrowly think of beauty as consisting of perfection is to risk subjecting anyone or anything not seen as perfect to “disqualification.” Disqualification, as a symbolic process, removes individuals from the ranks of quality human beings, putting them at risk of unequal treatment.<sup>214</sup> Siebers attests that individuals with disabilities are often considered as non-quality human beings, a qualification that goes unnoticed despite being a ramification of the most serious and characteristic injustices of our day.<sup>215</sup> To think of beauty, without the inclusion of imperfections, is to justify discrimination, marginalization, and an unwillingness to learn or mature from interactions with individuals with disabilities. Disqualification is justified through the accusation of mental or physical inferiority based on aesthetic principles.<sup>216</sup>

Bodily communication is therefore subjected to acceptances and rejections from the bodies it comes into contact with. In communication, senses revolt against aspects of some bodies, and are drawn to aspects of others.<sup>217</sup> This occurrence shows the ways in which human fragility takes place within human interactions. Aspects of a person viewed as weak by one person can be appealing to another. Thus, human fragility has the capacity to be aesthetically pleasing. Fragility is constituent of human beauty. This becomes the lens from which Siebers suggests beauty is to be seen. Disability aesthetics embraces beauty that seems, by traditional standards, to be broken by contending that human fragility does not make human bodies less beautiful, but more so. Disability has the ability to enlarge the vision of human variation and

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid., 3.

difference, ultimately putting forward a perspective that tests presuppositions dear to the subject of aesthetics.<sup>218</sup> This has to do with the understanding that communicative responses to bodies are involuntary, reacting to instinctive feelings of being drawn to or revolted by fragile bodies.

### **Gregory of Nyssa's Disability Aesthetics**

The significance of aesthetics to human life is an idea not lost on Gregory of Nyssa. Significant for Gregory's notion of what is beautiful is the inclusiveness that he attaches to it. Because of Gregory's consideration of the limitations of humanity, his understanding of beauty is able to overcome typical societal restrictions and live inside a more all-encompassing otherness. Natalie Carnes puts it this way, "Gregory of Nyssa claims more for beauty. He invokes a beauty that itself resists oppression, hunger, and suffering...The way Gregory locates the beauty in which beautiful objects, actions, and people participate positions beauty to challenge assimilation to cruelty and sloth."<sup>219</sup> Gregory's understanding of beauty, like his theological language, is formed through the difficulties of human reality.<sup>220</sup> This is not to say the difficulties of human life are in themselves beautiful, or that beauty exists apart from objects that evoke ugliness or revulsion. Instead, Gregory's understanding of the relationship between humanity and aesthetics is a matter of perception. How does a person posture themselves in order to perceive beauty correctly? For Gregory, this means asking the Holy Spirit to assist the individual in guidance.<sup>221</sup> The influence of objects typically deemed as contradictory to beauty has the opportunity to be overcome in *epektasis*, ultimately reshaping humanity's ability to perceive.

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<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

<sup>219</sup> Natalie Carnes, *Beauty: A Theological Engagement with Gregory of Nyssa*, xiii.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid., xiv.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

One clear example of Gregory's juxtaposition between negative objects and beauty is his descriptions of the self as wounded. Carnes describes Gregory's approach to the human self as wounded by saying, "For Gregory, woundedness primarily describes, not the self that fails to see Christ, but the self that *does* see Christ."<sup>222</sup> Within the canon of Gregory, writing on the process of being wounded and healed is primarily found in the *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, and shares strong theological themes with the process of *epektasis*. Gregory writes,

For Paul too, who bore the mark of such blows, similarly exulted in wounds of this sort when he said "I bear on my body the marks of Christ (Gal. 6:17), displaying that weakness in every vice by which the power that belongs to Christ is brought to perfection in virtue. By these words, then, he shows us that the wound too is an admirable thing. It occasions the stripping off of the Bride's veil, so that the soul's beauty is revealed once her covering no longer obscures it."<sup>223</sup>

A member of the Trinity being responsible for wounding is a common motif within Gregory's *Homilies on the Song of Songs*.<sup>224</sup> In the above passage, Paul associates his wounds with the wounds of Christ, thus making the marks admirable. Through the connection with Christ, the wound retains its connections to love, but the wound association with beauty is made more explicit.<sup>225</sup> When shared with Christ, the wound is beautiful and disclosive of beauty.<sup>226</sup> In this text, the wound is portrayed as beautiful. It then is the catalyst for the Bride to remove her veil, allowing for her own beauty to be more visible, and removing the obstacle for her to be able to more clearly perceive the beauty around her. Gregory, through Paul, is arguing that human beings need to first be wounded in order to more aptly see beauty.

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<sup>222</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>223</sup> *Cant*, GNO VI, 385.

<sup>224</sup> In homily four, God the Father acts as a wounding archer, and in homily twelve, God the Spirit is a wounding staff or rod.

<sup>225</sup> Natalie Carnes, *Beauty*, 208-209.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid., 209.

Gregory is creating a countercultural argument against the typical standards of aesthetics. Although the notion of perfection as a standard of beauty is certainly present within the theology of Gregory, it is only applicable to the divine beauty that is found in God. This means that perfection cannot be a standard for beauty within creation. Instead, it is necessary to include the wounded body, or the body that is less than what society deems as typical, as part of the standard for what is considered aesthetic. It is through this disabling body that the human is able to know God's beauty and strive toward it. To know God's beauty is to be wounded.

### **Fiona Kumari Campbell and the Standard for Pedagogical Models**

The ability to perceive aesthetics requires the person to reorient their perception of beauty to include human limitation. Gregory attests that this allows humanity to see glimpses of the divine. This stands beside another aspect of Gregory's theology of *epektasis*: that time spent with virtuous models positively impacts a person's perpetual progress towards God's perfection. However, what is the criterion for someone to be considered a virtuous model? Societal interpretations of perfection and virtue will influence a person's understanding of virtuous models to a certain degree, but this too should be challenged. In the same way that perfection does not provide the only standard for beauty, perfection does not provide the only standard for virtue. This creates space for individuals with physical or mental disabilities to exist as virtuous models. The claim for inclusion of disabilities into a person's pedagogical models does not end with mere equality; it extends to argue that, as it relates to instructing, disabled bodies are entitled to a privileged status.

The idea that the living of disablement imbued in the disabled teaching body shapes pedagogical performances is the thesis of the seventh chapter in Fiona Kumari Campbell's

*Contours of Ableism*.<sup>227</sup> Campbell looks at disability through the lens of pedagogy as a way of arguing that disability status is not merely a personal, and therefore private, issue.<sup>228</sup> Rather, there is a “necessity for the disabled teaching body to be present within classroom settings in order for students to fully grasp the complex distilling of disability and the differences that different bodies make to the learning enterprise.”<sup>229</sup> Campbell argues that the disabled body, in its performance of disability, invokes a process of self-emptying, or a sort of interior *kenosis*, on the part of the disabled instructor.<sup>230</sup> By self-emptying, she is referring to a radical disclosure of disablement that occurs through the imparting of bodily gesture, mental presence, differential reference points, and passionate emphasis during moments when a disabled body is teaching.<sup>231</sup> These aspects of self-emptying are not entirely absent in a nondisabled body, but the level of vulnerability that is necessitated is more difficult to unearth in a body that is not considered “other.”

Campbell’s rendering of the disabled body through a pedagogical lens ultimately works to advance standard notions of interpersonal learning experiences. She offers the example of a class taught by a disabled professor. Although initially postured as a diverse class learning from a singular professor with disabilities, Campbell argues that a person with disabilities being afforded a privileged status through their own subconscious self-emptying transcends the barriers of the classroom. This establishes that individuals with physical or intellectual disabilities not only have the same capacity to teach as everyone else, but also are more inclined to portray wisdom that is rooted in a self-emptying vulnerability.

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<sup>227</sup> Fiona Kumari Campbell, *Contours of Ableism: The Production of Disability and Abledness*, (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 115.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*

## Gregory of Nyssa and the Standard for Pedagogical Models

Fiona Kumari Campbell's exploration of the ways disability impacts pedagogy casts new light on Gregory of Nyssa's concept of virtuous models. Gregory's theology maintains the importance of body for conveying virtues interpersonally. When one body learns and matures from the virtue of another body, *epektasis* and the perpetual progress toward a virtuous life become more easily achieved. Although Gregory leaves space for the qualifications of "more" and "less" virtuous bodies, his understanding of the natural hierarchy that exists between God and humanity suggests that although a person can be virtuous, they still exists within the confinement of limitations that is indicative of creation. Because of this, Campbell's understanding of the disabled body affording a privileged status as it relates to informing and educating can be seen in Gregory's depictions of virtuous models.

The understanding that a disabled body exists as a model of virtue within the theology of Gregory is most evidently portrayed in his depictions of Macrina.<sup>232</sup> Gregory considered Macrina to have achieved the highest peak of human virtue. Yet, a significant portion of the writings that focus on her virtue take place near the end of her life where she is depicted as frail and weak. Gregory uses her frailty as a rhetorical device to signify wisdom, a sort of agony that exists as the framework for a pure perception that can only come from struggle. As her suffering reaches its climax and she is near death, she continues to use her body to positively influence the other bodies around her as she reflects on the body of the Bridegroom. Gregory writes of Macrina,

The day was almost over and the sun was beginning to set, but the zeal in her did not decline. Indeed, as she neared her end and saw the beauty of the Bridegroom more clearly, she rushed with greater impulse toward the One she desired, no longer speaking

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<sup>232</sup> The most in depth portrayals of Macrina take place in *On the Soul and Resurrection* and the *Life of Macrina*. At the beginning of the hagiography Gregory writes, "At that time, you suggested that a history of her good deeds ought to be written because you thought such a life should not be lost sight of in time and, that having raised herself to the highest peak of human virtue through philosophy, she should not be passed over in silence and her life rendered ineffective," *Macr*, GNO VIII, i., 317.

to those of us who were present, but to that very One whom she looked with steadfast eyes.<sup>233</sup>

In suffering and illness, as she did in life, Macrina manifests the reflection of divine perfection in her bodily life. Macrina's life shows the self-emptying nature that exists in Gregory's depiction of virtuous models, a self-emptying that exists as a greater reality to those with physical or mental disabilities. Even amidst the illness that took her life, Macrina exists as a virtuous model, further suggesting that the ability to be a virtuous model exists without the necessity to any mental or physical precedent of skill or ability. Instead, the ability to exhibit virtue and aid others in their *epektasis* is rooted in the Holy Spirit. Gregory writes, "In all of this, she went on as if inspired by the power of the Holy Spirit, explaining it all clearly and logically. Her speech flowed with complete ease, just as a stream of water goes down a hill without obstruction."<sup>234</sup> Despite physical limitations and severe ailment, Macrina remained able to eloquently communicate her virtue through the power of the Holy Spirit. This further suggests that even disabilities that work to severely limit communication can be overcome in order to convey the inner life of the virtuous model.

The virtuous model ultimately exists as a performative body that guides other observing bodies in both conscious and unconscious ways. Through this description a clear account can be made for the virtuous model taking on a pedagogical role. Any relationship where one person is providing counsel or instruction to another carries with it obvious power dynamics, where the one instructing can be seen categorically more important than the one learning. However, the final sections of the *Life of Macrina* show a woman who Gregory refers to as having reached the highest level of moral and virtuous life, teaching from her example of a virtuous life. To borrow

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<sup>233</sup> *Macr*, GNO VIII. i., Callahan, 179-180.

<sup>234</sup> *Macr*, GNO VIII. i., Callahan, 176.

from Fiona Kumari Campbell, the ability for Macrina and virtuous models similar to her to strive so far in their *epektasis* is due, in part, to the self-emptying necessity to their lives in bodies with disability. That is, the same imparting of bodily gesture, mental presence, differential reference points, and passionate emphasis that exists for teachers with disabilities in a modern classroom setting becomes a part of basic human interactions that guide and influence *epektasis*. In his most famous example of virtuous models, Gregory depicts Macrina being limited by an exceedingly worsening illness, which in turn allows the reader to see the ways disabled bodies have the aptitude to depict reflections of divine virtue, ultimately bringing us closer to God through *epektasis*.

## **Conclusion**

The work of disability theorists work to create a more robust depiction of disability as a means of educating and ultimately creating a more integrated society. Although disability theory was not a part of the considerations Gregory of Nyssa wrote with, his theology of the body remains inclusive to these individuals. This can first be seen, with the help of Tobin Siebers, by considering Gregory's understanding of beauty. Siebers shows the ways in which standards of beauty must be defined without the inclusion of perfection. By not removing perfection, society works to disqualify individuals whose bodily life consists of perceived imperfections. Gregory, too, emphasizes an all-encompassing inclusiveness for beauty. For Gregory, the human being is, at all times, wounded. These wounds are significant for the way they link individuals with the rest of humanity, as well as their shared nature with Christ, who was wounded. These wounds, that are both mental and physical, allow human beings to see beauty more clearly. Through the blending of Siebers and Gregory, fragility becomes indicative of human beauty. This is not to say that perfection is not featured as a standard of beauty within the theology of Gregory.

However, it is only applicable to God, who exists as a perfect model of divine beauty, hierarchically above a flawed and fragile humanity. Gregory works to show that although there is still beauty within the fragility of humanity, it exists as an insipid reflection of God's perfect beauty.

Following the approach of the social model of disability, Fiona Kumari Campbell reminds her audience that her disability exists as a public issue. This means the inclusion of individuals with disabilities does not rely on mere equality, but extends to adopting a willingness to learn from these individuals. Campbell asserts that disability affords an individual a privileged status as it relates to the instruction of non-disabled persons. With disability comes a self-emptying nature as a result of existing in a world where the individual person is predominantly "other." This self-emptying, which shares traits with the theological understanding of *kenosis*, allows for a person to engage in pedagogical tasks free of typical apprehensions and reservations that would typically restrict a non-disabled person. The portrayal of a flawed body instructing virtuous lessons to a non-disabled audience is seen within the writing of Gregory in his depiction of his sister Macrina. Gregory depicts Macrina existing as an impeccable model of virtue, even though her body and mind are beginning to fail her. The account of his sister as she dies shows a true example of the self-emptying nature that is present in disability.

The hierarchical divide that is present within Gregory's theological anthropology, with a perfect God on top of a flawed humanity, works to unify humanity. It is a divide that places all human beings on the same sort of equal plane of fragility. Accepting humanity as entirely separate from perfection forces reconsideration for the ways in which society engages with individuals with disabilities. This recognition creates space to say that humanity exists as flawed individuals, no different than the other individuals with whom they share life. This is seen in the

study of aesthetics, where the realization that different objects evoke responses of revulsion or attraction shows the ways human fragility is indicative of beauty. Showing that everything and everyone can be seen as flawed and blemished depending on the assessor calls for new considerations to be made about who is most qualified to fill the role of virtuous archetypes. Individuals with disabilities therefore hold a preferential option to become virtuous instructors and models for society due to the perceived fragility in their lives. Individuals with disabilities have the capacity to operate as an ideal example of virtuous living despite a fragile bodily existence, to a society of flawed and fragile human beings. Gregory's theology of *epektasis* and its call for individuals to learn from the models of virtue in their lives translates to a call for non-disabled people to look to develop relationships with and look for spiritual guidance from individuals with disability.

Chapter 4  
A Modern Example of *Epektasis*

Conversations surrounding vocational positions attached to the field of social services are often reduced to cliché deductions. These occupations generally involve frequent communication, if not close interpersonal relationships, with populations that are considered “difficult,” “challenging,” “problematic,” or “demanding.” These occupations, in turn, are spoken to be “rewarding,” “gratifying,” and “fulfilling.” Although both sides of assumptions have varying levels of truth to them, anyone who serves in a field that falls under the umbrella of social services would be quick to suggest that the personal growth that takes place as a result of their profession is difficult to comprehend or eloquently explain. This sentiment is indicative of my experience working with individuals with developmental disabilities. As with any relationship, the communication that takes place between me and the individuals I work with is formative. I mature and grow from each interaction and apply the experience and knowledge gained in both intentional and unintentional ways. I have worked in the field of developmental disabilities for nearly five years. I have alternated between the roles of Direct Support Professional, who works as an aid in the homes and living areas of individuals, and Case Manager, who authors and implements plans to support individuals in their daily lives. In my short career, I have worked with a variety of individuals with a plethora of different abilities and medical diagnoses. Just as in my relationships with classmates and new acquaintances, my personality connects in more natural ways with certain individuals I work with than others. However, the depth of the connection shares no link with the communicative ability or behavioral disposition of the individual. Instead, my experience in the field has revealed a type

of comradery that is able to exist between two human beings who share very little in terms of commonality, or even communication. It is with this, that I turn to the story of Brooke.<sup>235</sup>

## **Brooke**

Brooke is a 50 year old woman with developmental disabilities. Throughout the majority of her life she has had qualifiers attached to her identity such as “high-functioning” and “independent.” Brooke has lived in a variety of different housing contexts: at home with her parents, in an apartment with a boyfriend, an intentional community, and most recently, a group home with two other female roommates. She used to be able to move independently in the community, using public transportation to navigate throughout the city. This allowed her to do errands like visit the bank and pull her own money out of an ATM machine and make trips to the grocery store and buy specific food items that she wanted. She was described as immeasurably gregarious and social, particularly loving conversations with new people.

Two years before I met Brooke, staff began noticing changes in her behavior that were well beyond what they had become accustomed to expecting from her. Brooke began exhibiting aggression that manifested itself through intense screaming, physical and environmental violence, and making false accusations against staff. The dynamics of her group home quickly shifted, as it was not prepared to handle Brooke’s increasingly unsafe behavior. Her support team quickly made the decision to move her to a facility that was better equipped to keep her safe until an official diagnoses could be made and a plan could be implemented.

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<sup>235</sup> In this context, “Brooke” exists as a pseudonym. All personal details of the individual presented in the thesis have been omitted, edited, or fabricated as a way of preventing any personal information from being gleaned from the text. My experiences with Brooke did not take place as a part of any sort of study attached to my MTS degree. Instead, I am drawing upon my work experience retrospectively and anecdotally as a way of building practical context and support for the main idea of the thesis.

Brooke's existence at the behavioral facility was far more austere than she had become accustomed to experiencing in the various living situations she had throughout her life. Designed specifically for the management of large scale behaviors, she stayed the entirety of her days in an isolated room which included padding to keep her safe. In the times when her self-injurious behavior became exceptionally severe, the facility's staff implemented different restraints that worked to prevent her limbs from inflicting harm on herself. The staff from Brooke's group home continued to visit her daily, attempting to help the team at the behavioral facility best serve Brooke. With each visit, they noticed a continued decline in her personality and reasoning ability. The behaviors increased in both quantity and duration, and her favorite people, who had long been able to calm her down through presence and conversation, began to lose their ability to speak to her sensibilities. Through all this, Brooke was subjected to an assortment of medical examinations that attempted to pinpoint the specific cause of her severe behavioral change.

The process of diagnoses for individuals with developmental disabilities can be daunting, particularly when communication is hindered by ability or behavioral challenges. Often times these individuals do not have the capacity to articulate the specifics of what they are experiencing. They are unable to give precise guidance to their bodily involvement by saying, for example, that they are having sharp pains in their stomach or ringing in their ears. Often an ailment is communicated by behaviorally lashing out at those who are closest to them. Bodily actions such as screaming or pinching are often meant to be communicative. The commonly held understanding of behavioral intervention compounded the difficulty in Brooke's case. With each continued day of aggression, those around her contended that the behaviors had to be the consequence of some negative health experience. If followed, this logic assumes that the diagnoses and treatment of the infirmity will ultimately lead to a decrease in behavior.

Eventually, a diagnosis came: Frontotemporal deterioration, or FTD. FTD is characterized by progressive neuronal loss that takes place in the frontal and/or temporal lobes. Individuals with FTD frequently experience extreme shifts in their behavior, including issues with anger, perception, memory, expressive and receptive language, etc. The frontal lobe is the location in which the brain modifies constraints on basic reflexive behaviors.<sup>236</sup> It has a crucial role in higher mental functions such as motivation, planning, social behavior, and speech production.<sup>237</sup> Thus, deterioration in behavior and personality in a previously behaviorally stable person is indicative of FTD. In one case study, the conclusion that was reached read as follows: “Treatment of such patients is ambiguous and failures can be expected.”<sup>238</sup>

The diagnosis of FTD essentially meant that there was little that the medical community could do to alleviate Brooke’s behaviors. It was therefore necessary to shift the conversation from the ways in which the behaviors could be alleviated to a more nuanced approach to keeping Brooke safe. Crucial to this discussion was where she would live. Although the facility where she had been staying was best equipped to prevent the physical and environmental damage caused by her actions, it was still an institution, lacking any semblance of a home. Her support staff decided that they would attempt to bring her back to the group home where she had spent her previous fifteen years. Although this move risked severely changing the dynamics of the group home, her staff felt like it was the best decision to allow her to return to her home. This involved moving her bedroom to an area of the house away from her roommates and spending a large sum of money on revamping the areas she would live in to better keep her safe. The house

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<sup>236</sup> Elvir Becirovic, S. Kunic, Rusmir Softic, and Zikrija Dostovic, “I Will Kill You Tomorrow: Orbital Frontal Lobe Personality Case,” in *European Psychiatry* vol. 30, Supplement 1, abstracts of the 23<sup>rd</sup> European Congress of Psychiatry, 1529.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid.

also doubled the amount of staff that was in the house at one time in order to accommodate a resident who was considered to be in a “crisis situation.”

However, Brooke’s crisis existed without a resolution; it was her new reality and the reality of the staff. The specifics of Brooke’s behaviors are difficult to describe because they changed frequently. Some days she would simply move about her living area and scream, yelling at the staff about the different things she did not like about them. Other days she would refuse to wear clothes, urinating and defecating on the floor. When staff came near her to offer food or clean up a mess, she would often attack them. These attacks featured a mixture of hitting with fists, kicking, and biting. Additional money in the group home’s budget was allocated for protective equipment like gloves and arm sleeves that could not be bitten through. When she first arrived home she still had, what staff referred to as, “good days.” On a good day, she would move about the rest of the house, sitting with others in the kitchen or family room. She would talk about her life and the people she knew. She would tell funny stories and say things to make people laugh. Occasionally, she would become agitated during these times when staff did not expect it. When this happened, staff had to move quickly in order to keep her roommates safe, since her previous good mood had allowed her to be in much closer proximity to them. When in a good mood, Brooke made no reference to moments when she was agitated. It was as if she shared no commonality with the woman who earlier in the day had been screaming at the staff. The staff that was fortunate enough to be working on a good day would garner a bit of celebrity from the other staff who wanted to hear the stories of their interactions with a happy Brooke.

As time progressed good days began to happen less frequently. She also began experiencing negative health ramifications due to her behaviors. The constant straining of her muscles in anger caused damage to her internal organs that required surgery to repair. Because

medication options were limited, surgery for Brooke required a well-planned process spanning over the course of several days. Staff and hospital security generally worked together to keep her as safe as possible during her hospital stay. At times, restraints needed to be used. There always exists the possibility that the type of internal injury that was sustained will reoccur due to the sustained behavior and physical straining.

Brooke's relationship with staff is fairly universal. At times, she will choose one specific staff member that is on a shift and treat them as an ally. This means Brooke will seek solace in this one person and will tell them the different ways she perceives the other staff have mistreated her. These relationships are very short-term, as she quickly turns on the staff she has favored. Although these times are short-lived, it remains difficult not to be totally invested in these brief moments of comfort. Despite her diagnoses of FTD, Brooke has a phenomenal memory as it relates to the staff. She uses this knowledge as a way of making her verbal assaults more personalized. She will frequently reference family members of staff, particularly their children, the types of cars they drive, or physical characteristics of their appearance. For example, the two most frequent insults she directs towards me involve my status as a student, or the fact that I often ride a bike to work. These translate to directions, "Go back to school!" and also more malicious requests, "I hope you die on your bike."

My relationship with Brooke is vastly different than any other relationship I have ever had in both my professional and personal lives. We have shared virtually no moments that would be interpreted as blissful or happy. Each time we interact with one another it is filled with a sort of vitriol that is difficult to describe. Simply put, she has almost no happy moments in her day to day existence, and the lens in which she views me is filled constantly with a strange mix of anger, hatred, and what could best be described as fear. There is nothing I can do with my tone,

body language, speech, etc., that can keep this from happening. For example, she has frequently told me that I am yelling at her. I first feared that she must have overheard me in other rooms, speaking enthusiastically to her roommates. So, for several weeks I was conscious to never be heard speaking in the house unless I was talking directly to her. In talking directly to her, I used a tone that would classify as a whisper. Yet she still attested that I was yelling. Similarly, she made accusations that I had been pinching her. I thought deeply for days, thinking of all of the different ways my physical interactions with her (helping her change clothes, cleaning her soiled briefs, etc.) could be interpreted as a feeling similar to a pinch, and could think of nothing. The best conclusion I could reach is that in her mindset, everything I do to her is violent. The concept of “best intentions” is unable to be present in this relationship. I have tried everything I could possibly think of in order to garner a lasting positive relationship with Brooke, as have the other staff, and nothing has come close to working.

The field of developmental disabilities is robust. The specifics of each diagnosis differs vastly. Because of this, the experience from one support staff to another both share commonalities and fluctuate greatly depending on who it is they work with. For some, the medical fragility of their individuals makes it so that aspects of their health are of the most important concern. For others, it is their behavioral needs. Although I have worked with a large sample of people, I have always felt a stronger pull towards individuals who have high behaviors. Truthfully, part of the reason for this is that, usually, with large behaviors come large personalities. It has been my experience that a person, who is inclined to frequent outbursts, is also usually very funny and sociable when they are not upset. To put it simply, I have found my best relationships with individuals with developmental disabilities have come when a person with behaviors is in a good mood.

This was the thought process I took into my first interactions with Brooke. I thought that our relationship would take time, similar to my working relationships in other group homes. However, within a few weeks I realized that this rapport would work differently than anything I had ever encountered before. The comprehension that no amount of trust could ever be developed, no matter the effort or time spent with her was difficult for me to grasp. However, what ultimately revealed itself was something much more unique than anything I had ever experienced in the field. Brooke's aversion to any sort of human relationship has forced me to examine the ways in which I communicate with others. When the niceties in a relationship are completely one-sided, the temptation is to assume that the person who is putting forth the majority of the effort is left isolated in aspects of relational bonding. But this could not be further from the truth with Brooke. Despite her near constant behaviors and abhorrence to interactions with others, I frequently find myself learning new and beautiful things about the world and myself every day that I spend time with her.

The first learning experience that transpired involved the realization that communication functioned in a more broad sense than I had ever imagined. In the past, I have worked closely with individuals who have been deemed "non-verbal," causing me to learn the vast ability human beings have to communicate and develop relationships without ever uttering a word, but Brooke is different. Brooke talks to me and has the ability to express what she wants. The challenge does not rest in sifting through an apophysis of speech, but rather involves a more detailed comprehension of the manner of her personality. Typical communicative cues are habitual. The words we speak are often repeated versions of a similar message we have already stated. Similarly, I have found in my experience when communicating with a non-verbal individual with developmental disabilities, there too exists a habitual nature in dialogue. I often find a phrase,

action, or voice that results in a signifier of happiness and frequently return to variations of what causes the portrayed happiness in my interpersonal interactions with the individual.

Put simply, interactions with Brooke work differently because there is nothing that works to cause this sense of happiness or affirmation. There is no possibility of meeting in the sort of middle ground of contentment that exists in the majority of other interactions. Brooke speaks, but it is virtually always in an aggressive tone. In a lot of ways she is immensely more challenging to communicate with than any person I have ever known that is described as “non-verbal.” Even when given specific food or personal items she has requested, Brooke oftentimes screams at the person following her instructions. Although each of us face unfortunate interactions that involve a person’s discontent, the sustained aggression makes these interactions unique to my relationship with Brooke.

A major part of our correspondence, therefore, takes place through bodily cues. If she lingers around close to me, I know to offer up food or drink. If she hits herself in the head, I can tell that she wants to be left alone. If she attacks the bathroom door, it could mean that she wants to attempt to use the bathroom or have her brief changed. It is in thinking about this bodily communication that I have been most reminded about the ways in which human interaction becomes about showing and preserving dignity. I have spent many hours thinking as I work with Brooke about what dignity looks like in this context. Does a person who lives her life in a constant state of anger have dignity? How do my actions and interactions help to maintain or harm her dignity? At the surface level, the answer would have to be no. Brooke is almost always in tattered clothes due to ripping them daily. Her hair is disheveled and sometimes matted due to her refusal to bathe. Because it is rare that she finishes a meal without throwing her dish and utensils, she is often sticky from the day’s food and drink. This is not to mention the way her

aggression causes her to interact with her bodily waste. But this understanding of dignity is, in a sense, a social construct, one that is perpetuated by society's interpretation of how human life is supposed to exist without the limitations of fragility.

One of the more significant barriers on establishing a sense of dignity within an interpersonal communication is the prevailing cultural perspective on autonomy. An ideal, which G.J. Agich refers to as the "mainstream" model of autonomy, features attributes and values of self-reliance, personal preference, and a self-assertion that implies a strong level of independence.<sup>239</sup> The level of disability that Brooke experiences falls far outside this understanding of dignity. This impacts the way individuals come to think of her relationship with staff. For example, when her siblings visit, they often bring the staff special treats, or gifts, an action that no other family members of any other resident in the home does. This only started after Brooke's autonomy decreased to the point where her family recognized her as a "burden" on those who are paid to work with her. Often times, when staff from other houses hear of the behavioral situation at our home, they express abhorrence that the organization would force us to work in these types of conditions. They ask if the staff at Brooke's home are better compensated due to the circumstances. This suggests that my role as a caregiver is only necessary up to a certain point of responsibility, a line that Brooke has crossed by losing an invented standard of dignity and autonomy.

The way in which society works causes individuals to understand a person's worth through what they are able to do, rather than celebrating them as being. A person's worth is often judged according to his or her capacity to produce, or be useful. S. Kay Toombs highlights this societal understanding by writing, "when we say to our children, 'you can *be* anything you want

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<sup>239</sup> G.J. Agich, "Chronic Illness and Freedom," in *Chronic Illness: From Experience to Policy*, ed. S.K. Toombs, D. Barnard, and R.A. Carson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 133-136.

to be,' what we mean is that you can achieve worth by *doing*.”<sup>240</sup> Like many other individuals with disabilities, Brooke’s dignity and worth cannot be gleaned from her completion of tasks. Brooke’s worth also cannot be summarized by her ability to be kind or have positive interactions, because those do not exist. Because of her disability, and the ways in which her brain continuously causes her to exist in an agitated state, she comes nowhere near typical societal markers of “success.”

My relationship with Brooke has shown me the ways in which a group home creates space to exist outside of this sort of societal structure that creates limits on dependence. The staff at Brooke’s home work to do every single task necessary for her to live. Staff provide meals and snacks, even to the point of feeding Brooke if her behavior escalated to a point where she cannot safely feed herself. Staff do laundry, and aid in taking her medicine. There is no task that is required of Brooke. Yet, this does not limit her worth as a person in any way. Instead, Brooke’s personhood begins and ends in her existence. She has worth because she is. There are steps staff must take to insure that her personhood is authenticated. Staff always attempt to give her space to express herself or give an opinion, even if this almost never results in a constructive conversation. Because Brooke’s disposition often prompts negative responses, it is often easier to talk to another person about her, keeping Brooke in the dark about things that are impacting her life. Although it is often more difficult, staff must always attempt to speak directly to Brooke about actions that they are taking, such as cleaning her room. These examples can be seen as common sense when thinking about typical interactions, but these are often difficult to

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<sup>240</sup> S. Kay Toombs, “Living and Dying with Dignity: Reflections on Lived Experience” in *Disability: The Social, Political, and Ethical Debate*, eds. Robert M. Baird, Stuart E. Rosenbaum, and S. Kay Toombs, (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2009), 341.

implement to a person as aggressive as Brooke. Yet, they remain vastly important for the ways they work to include Brooke in the celebration of her being, albeit when she is unable to “do.”

## Chapter 5

### Conclusion

The setting of the group home, with the emphasis on being rather than doing, becomes a perfect backdrop for a modern application of *epektasis*. Brooke and I exist in a relationship that is mutually benefitting, in a way that disregards the capital of doing for one of being.<sup>241</sup> Brooke benefits by me being in her life for the ways in which I support her. This transaction does feature doing, through the physical tasks I do to help her and the physical ways I keep her safe. However, I also am important to Brooke from the perspective of being. I am a constant source of companionship to Brooke, and I give her a person to communicate with. I act as an advocate for her when family or medical personnel come into the home. Although she frequently exerts aggression towards me, due to her inability to leave the house or maintain relationships I have become one of the closest people to her. Similarly, despite the constant hostility, my time spent with Brooke has caused me to grow quite fond of her. I think of her frequently on my days off, and I often ask about her when I receive calls from work about other things. I have learned a great deal about the ways in which relationships function despite a lack of affirmation, as well as the way love can grow for a person who is unable to express it back. This positive impact that Brooke has had on me stretches far outside of a cliché feeling that people often use to express when they interact with someone who is “less fortunate” than themselves. The type of feeling that suggests a relationship with a person “makes me appreciate what I have.” Although Brooke’s life does make me feel this way, my admiration for her is far deeper than this. It is one that causes me to see all other aspects of my life in a different light.

The reason for this, I think, is best articulated with the help of Gregory of Nyssa. The Christian life is called to a radically different understanding of dependence. That is, rather than

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<sup>241</sup> S. Kay Toombs, “Living and Dying with Dignity: Reflections on Lived Experience,” 342.

pursuing the standard goal of autonomy that society often demands, Christians are instead called to lives that are relational.<sup>242</sup> This sort of interpersonal connection is often seen through relationality and service, both prominent themes of Gregory's theology. Through the lens of the Christian faith, the types of relationality and service exhibited to Brooke takes on a connotation of developing the highest moral qualities of character. Service is not a matter of being taken advantage of, but rather being given the opportunity to imitate a Christ-like sacrifice. Similarly, Brooke's lifestyle takes on a different light. Within Christianity, the physical and mental anguish that Brooke is experiencing is not considered contradictory to the human experience. Instead, pain and suffering are considered a part of human life, as exhibited by the life of Christ. Both relationality and creating space for suffering in the human experience exist as crucial factors within Gregory's notion of *epektasis*. These virtues that are shared between Brooke and I are exercised through our relationship, and relate to a way of being in the world that is not dependent on mental attributes or abilities. By lacking even the common ground of affirming speech, Brooke and I are able to exist outside of society's standard criteria of successful relationships and instead exist in a world of spiritual growth through shared virtue. Society would turn its head away from the type of suffering present in Brooke's disability. *Epektasis* maintains that this type of affliction is a part of spiritual growth.

### **Nyssen Fragility within Virtue and Beauty**

It is with this in mind that I return to thinking about my relationship with Brooke and the ways in which she exists as an example of beauty and a model of virtue. Brooke's body is fragile. Her behaviors and aggression make it so that she often misses meals and rarely sleeps. Because of this, she is significantly underweight and constantly looks exhausted. The reality of

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<sup>242</sup> Ibid., 345.

human finitude is constant when I am in her presence. Yet, this is a finitude that pushes beyond a fear of death. Brooke's life exists as a reminder that the fragility of humanity does not always mean the end of life, but rather points to the long-term suffering through it. It is within this constant reminding of human fragility where Brooke reveals the most about beauty and virtue.

The most obvious question that is raised is how someone with whom I am unable to maintain an agreeable conversation shares attributes of beauty and virtue. The answer to this can be seen in Gregory's divide between perfection as it is portrayed in God and strived for by humanity in *epektasis*. Perfection cannot be a human standard because human beings are not perfect. The same way that Tobin Siebers argues that perfection cannot provide the only standard for beauty, perfect relational communication cannot provide the only relational standards. Instead, perfection is a constant progress. In his treatise *De Perfectione*, written towards the end of his life, Gregory writes, "For this is truly perfection: never to stop growing towards what is better and never placing any limit on perfection."<sup>243</sup> Because perfection exists, not as an ideal, but as progress in *epektasis*, communication with Brooke is not limited, allowing for her virtue to be shared. It is through Brooke's fragility, and the fragility of God's perfection, that virtue can be shared.

The beauty seen in Brooke, like the beauty described in Gregory, is not exclusively noetic. It extends beyond the intellect into the human body. Brooke's body is both the same and different than my own. It has the same general shape, and the same internal structure supporting its life. Yet her disability, and the self-injurious behavior she inflicts on herself, have made her look unwell. Observing a body in this way affords the opportunity to think critically about bodily understandings that are often taken for granted. It acts as a reminder that interactive bodily skills,

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<sup>243</sup> *Perf*, Woods and Callahan, 122.

which most often seem habitual and unremarkable, are a gift. They are a beautiful aspect of creation that is instilled in the human body in order for relationships to form and the divide between humanity and God to be diminished. The instability of a disabled body acts as an extreme example of the instability of all bodies.<sup>244</sup> It is not just that all bodies have the capacity to become disabled as a result of illness or accident, but that, for all, the pieces of a person's genetic makeup are held together in contingent ways.<sup>245</sup>

The strand that holds together bodies with identified disabilities, and bodies who are held together in contingent ways, is participation. Within the canon of Gregory, participation was portrayed as happening in two ways, vertically, between humanity and God, and horizontally, among humanity. Horizontal participation, for Gregory, is the sharing of humanity in the one common human nature.<sup>246</sup> It is important to note that this nature is unstable because the virtue and character of human beings are always changing. Similar to the body's fragility, human nature is also fragile, albeit shared. This participation in shared nature creates space for a disabled person to fill a pedagogical role, and exist as a model of virtue, by making the growing task of *epektasis* a relational endeavor. Recognizing the shared human nature removes the potential of "othering" a disabled person, looking to learn from their medical diagnoses instead of their virtues.

The body that puts an individual with disabilities at risk of being viewed as the other works to show the Nyssen divide between God and humanity. Society sees the bodies of individuals with disabilities as portraying imperfection in a way that is more obvious than the

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<sup>244</sup> Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick, "Touch, Ethics and Disability" in *Disability/Postmodernity: Embodying Disability Theory*, eds. Mairian Corker and Tom Shakespeare (New York: Continuum, 2002), 72.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid.

<sup>246</sup> David L. Balas, "Participation" in *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, eds. Lucas Francisco Mateo-Seco and Guilio Maspero, Trans. Seth Cherney (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2010), 586.

bodies of a non-disabled person. Thinking about this in light of Gregory's theology brings out an obvious tension. To Gregory, God exists as a form of perfection that is inaccessible and incomprehensible to human beings. Gregory also affirms that human beings exist as the *imago Dei*, a disposition that in some way allows for similarities between God and humanity. The existence of disability pushes individuals to ask what about God allows for humanity to exist as the *imago Dei*, while also being disabled. For Brooke, as for all of us, the absence of perfection in life is a crucial element of who she is. A sudden transition into perceived perfection, be it a complete medical cure or an absence of disability, remains unimaginable for it would make Brooke into a different person. The hope of transformation that exists for Brooke, as for all of us, should not be a hope of intellectual or physical advancement, but rather the type of spiritual advancement that is found in human relationships.<sup>247</sup>

The notion of fragility exists as a key concept of standard theological accounts of disability. Often, the nature of God is described as being perfect, with varying levels of delicateness that allow for God to be open to the suffering and imperfections humanity experiences. This depicts God as meeting humanity in its struggle, and existing as a part of human suffering. However, when Gregory considers the nature of God, he explicitly states the opposite. God instead exists as hierarchically separate from humanity. Yet his depiction of the body, coupled with the benefits of virtuous models in *epektasis*, raises the question of what counts as perfection to Gregory of Nyssa? The answer to this is within his portrayal of Macrina. As previously shown, Gregory considers Macrina to be his quintessential model of a virtuous life. Gregory also describes Macrina as having fragility in poor health, teaching from the bed on which she would later die. Although Gregory asserts the hierarchical divide, he also accounts for

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<sup>247</sup> Frances Young, *God's Presence: A Contemporary Recapitulation of Early Christianity*, (Cambridge, University Press, 2013), 107.

a fragile human being existing as a mirror of God. This thought shapes my relationship with Brooke, who simultaneously impacts my own *epektasis* by the way she enhances the reality of my human fragility.

If Gregory asserts that anyone within a fragile humanity can mirror God in their existence as *imago Dei*, and their role as a model of virtue, does this mean that God has fragility? If so, does flawed humanity exist as a direct mirror of perfection, or is it that human fragility is, in fact, a part of perfection? These questions are difficult to answer without imposing a specific reading upon Gregory, but there remain small deductions that can be made, the most meaningful of which is Christological. In their depictions of Christ, the Church fathers, including Gregory, often portrayed Christ with the wounds on his hands, feet, and sides.<sup>248</sup> Christ simultaneously exists as perfection and fragility, as evidenced by his death and resurrection. A person's experience in life, undoubtedly flawed and wounded, shapes their being and in turn works to shape others through *epektasis*. Gregory's depiction of the body's role in *epektasis* works to show that human weakness is disclosive of God, and human relationship is the medium in which to address fragility. By accepting human fragility as a reality and not a thing in which to overcome individuals, in turn, become more fully themselves.

The application of Gregory of Nyssa's theology of *epektasis* to modern concerns of disabilities acts as a sort of *theologia perennis*, a parallel to the diversely used *philosophia perennis*.<sup>249</sup> In this vein, Gregory's application exists outside of the typical dissection of historical theology and transcends the limitations imposed on it by time. The perennial nature of

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<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

<sup>249</sup> Ilaria Ramelli, "Theologia Perennis: Commentary on God's Presence," *Syndicate Theology*, May 2, 2016, accessed May 22, 2016, <https://syndicatetheology.com/commentary/6308/>. Here, Ilaria Ramelli is using *theologia perennis* to talk about the methodological approach of Frances Young in her book, *God's Presence: A Contemporary Recapitulation of Early Christianity*, (Cambridge, University Press, 2013).

Gregory's theology holds a deeper focus in light of relationality with an individual with disabilities. My relationship with Brooke opens up Gregory's canon to a new strand of accessibility and potential for application. In this sense, a relationship with an individual with disabilities affords me a privileged access to the deepest truths of Christianity.<sup>250</sup> It is possible to understand the theology of *epektasis* and how relationships with virtuous models aids in perpetual progress towards God without such a relationship. However, living in constant relationship with the self-emptying nature indicative of disabilities allows for the beauty of this patristic message to come to life.

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<sup>250</sup> Frances Young, *God's Presence*, 404.

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