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Mining for a Nicene Christian Ethical *Praxis* in Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses* and John Cassian's *Conferences*

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Interest in theological ethics has been on the rise in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Indeed, the late ethical theologian Stanley Grenz wrote that we have entered an "age of ethics" loosely articulated within a broader "post-modern" cultural and intellectual framework. This reemerging interest in ethics has been increasingly fueled by growing societal complexity and its attendant social issues, as well rapidly accelerating technological innovations which both enable and limit human freedom. In turn numerous categories and sub-categories of ethics have claimed their niche under the rubric of business ethics, medical ethics, legal ethics, environmental ethics, and so on. Ethics has become, Grenz notes, a type of "growth industry."[1]

In attempting to respond to ethical challenges amid the cultural milieu of post-modernism, Christian ethicists are pressed to articulate a renewed moral theology that is compelling while also remaining grounded in an appropriate *regula fide*. According to philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, "[M]odern moral utterance and practice can only be understood as a series of fragmented survivals from an older past."[2] Many of our ethical quandaries, MacIntyre contends, have traceable origins to earlier moral dilemmas that will remain insoluble until we understand them as problems with given historical lineages, including those rooted in human nature stretching back to antiquity. Since the Enlightenment, he argues, the concept of *telos*, the

1 Stanley J. Grenz, *The Moral Quest: Foundations of Christian Ethics* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1997), 206–07.

2 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 3rd ed (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 110–11.

pursuit of a defined moral end, has given way to forms of "emotive" philosophical ethics such as individualism, utilitarianism, and the idea that what is ethically good can only be adduced in the moment.[3] As Kantian ethics detached notions such as "rights," "justice," and "good" from a common source of ethical wisdom, McIntire argues that only tradition and *telos* can provide substantive meaning.[4]

Beyond the challenges of post-modernity, the question of what is proper ethical and moral behavior is further complicated by changing perspectives on the nature of humanity. With some scientific researchers suggesting that the rapidly advancing trajectory of technological progress is leading humans on a progressive course toward a new type of "biological perfection" through the enhancement and transformation of human physiology and a dramatically lengthened life span. Indeed, what will be the touchstone for ethical and moral decision making when our whole being, including our consciousness, is no longer recognized as divinely ordered but only materially ordered? If a biological reductionism is all that is left of our understanding of human nature, how then are we to cope with (let alone begin to define) the persistent problem of evil in society? Ethicist Richard Sherlock has questioned whether in our present age of stem cell research, mood altering drugs, and gene therapy, can we as confessing Christians count on guidance from "human nature" as it stands—defective, partial, and broken—without an interaction with and a transformation by God's grace?[5]

If meaningful ethics ought to be attached historically to interpretive forms of past moral and ethical discourse, can contemporary Christian ethicists appropriate anything that may inform or instruct ethical decision making (i.e., Christian moral

3 Ibid., 23–24.

4 Brad J. Kallenberg, "The Master Argument of MacIntyre's After Virtue," in Nancy Berger, Brad J. Kallenberg, and Mark Theissen Nation, eds, *Virtues and Practices in the Christian Tradition: Christian Ethics after MacIntyre* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 13.

5 Richard Sherlock, *Nature's End: The Theological Meaning of the New Genetics* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2010), 152–53.

praxis) from the Nicene Christian period (c. 313–450 CE)? This paper proposes to evaluate such prospects by examining the pedagogical methods and ethical praxis for living a Christian moral life derived from two influential patristic texts of the period: Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses* and John Cassian's *Conferences*.

The Context of the Nicene Period

The Nicene Age was the time of the great Christological debates, so it is no surprise that the principal focus of modern study concerning the period is often preoccupied with the great apologetic works that sought to define and explain what constituted the nature and person of Christ. Even the text of Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, the great symbol of the Christian faith thought of as the emblematic theological document of the period, makes no reference to what might be construed as guides to ethical and moral behavior.

However, a closer look at the totality of patristic literature suggests more. In his single-volume, comprehensive patrology, Hubertus Drobner identifies three principal features of Christian literature from the Nicene period. The first is that which bears on the Christological debates and the composition of associated creedal statements, particularly contra Arius (e.g., Athanasius' *On the Incarnation* or Gregory of Nazianzus' *Orations*).[6] Drobner's last two categories, however, more substantively relate to the study of "ethics," or what might be better described in the context of the period as discourses concerning the problems of moral discernment facing the typical Christian.

The first of these categories deals with various aspects of pastoral care in Nicene-era Christian communities, or what Drobner describes as writings which "encompass all practical expressions of the church's life, namely, missions, conversions, catechesis, proclamation, liturgy, sacraments, social care and many others."[7] The most copious of genre-specific literature in this category can

6 Hubertus Drobner, *The Fathers of the Church: A Comprehensive Introduction* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 189.

7 Ibid.

be found in the published homilies of the fathers. Craig Satterlee notes how such homilies, whether regarded as festal, catechetical, or expository, may still offer useful applications for preaching in the contemporary "post-Christendom" world.[8] While numerous examples of discourses on ethics and morality may be extracted from such material, its content is often unstructured or specific to a scriptural text or narrow theme (e.g., Chrysostom's *On Wealth and Poverty* or Basil's letters on asceticism), and certainly not "systematic" in a modern theological sense.

Finally, and perhaps more importantly for purposes of Christian ethical appropriation, the literature of the Nicene period was also characterized, according to Drobner, by "ascetic and monastic forces, as elements of an independent Christian way of life, integrated into the life of the community, on the one hand, or withdrawn from the same, on the other."[9] These "forces," which found their beginnings in the life of the Egyptian and Syrian deserts, in remote desolate places where was sought not only a retreat from civilization and the "external world," but rather, as one scholar of desert Christian theology noted, "the world they carried inside themselves—an ego-centeredness needing constant approval, driven by compulsive behavior, frantic in its effort to attend to a self-image that always required mending."[10] For participants in the growing fourth- and fifth-century monastic movement, such a "mending" of self-image entailed a tenacious struggle of renouncing sin and pursuing an ascending path toward spiritual perfection with the aid of counsel, the use of ascetic practices and, central to the entire process, the appropriate application of διακρίσεις—the acquired skill of spiritual discernment or discretion.

8 Craig A. Satterlee, "Patristic Principles for Post-Christendom Preaching: An Example of the History of Preaching in Service to the Church," *Currents in Theology and Mission* (August 1, 2008). Downloaded from *The Free Library* at http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Patristic principles for post-Christendom preaching: an example of ... a0182929965 (accessed November 09, 2012).

9 Drobner, 189.

10 Belden C. Lane, "Desert Catechesis: The Landscape and Theology of Early Christian Monasticism," *Anglican Theological Review* 75.3 (1993): 299.

The Theological Formation of Gregory of Nyssa and John Cassian

Although Gregory of Nyssa and John Cassian both lived during the later Nicene era, and many of their theological perspectives share common fundamentals, particularly the notion of continuous progress or spiritual perfection, each man came to his given hermeneutic location along very different paths. Gregory was born in the Roman province of Cappadocia (modern northeastern Turkey) c. 335, a full generation before Cassian. It appears he was influenced early in life by the Hellenized Christian ontology of the Catechetical School of Alexandria in Egypt, which was transmitted to Cappadocia through the missionary efforts of Gregory Thaumaturgus (the "Wonderworker") in the 250s. A disciple of Origen, Thaumaturgus' theology was grounded in a Christian ontology that borrowed concepts from Middle Platonism that can be traced back at least to the time of Origen's teacher, Clement of Alexandria (c. 150– c. 215 CE).[11]

As Everett Ferguson has pointed out, the most important aspect of Clement's ontology that would find its way into the writings of Gregory of Nyssa (and, as we discover, Cassian as well) was his articulation of perpetual progress along the path of virtue. In his *Stromata*, Clement describes "the soul which is ever improving in the knowledge of virtue and the growth of righteousness ... progressively stretching forth to the possession of impassibility until it attains to a perfect man."[12] Clement's student Origen (c. 185–c. 254 CE), while not articulating the matter in the same way as his teacher, alludes to a type of spiritual growth made in pursuit of divine wisdom. According to Jean Danielou and H. Musurillo, however, the matter would be left for Gregory of Nyssa to further develop through his *Life of Moses* as a calling to follow the Lord, "wherever He may lead," even "into the darkness and of [sic] the vision of God."[13] For Gregory, as well as Cassian, the pitfalls of

11 Anthony Meredith, SJ, *Gregory of Nyssa* (New York & London: Routledge, 1999), 2.

12 Cyril of Alexandria, *Stromata* VII. ii. 10, as quoted in Everett Ferguson, "God's Infinity and Man's Mutability: Perpetual Progress According to Gregory of Nyssa," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 18.1–2 (1973): 60.

13 Jean Danielou and Herbert Musurillo, *De Vita Moysis* (Leiden: Brill, 1964), 152, as quoted in George S. Bebis, "Gregory of Nyssa's 'De Vita Moysis': A Philosophical

our wounded nature and fallen humanity could only be addressed through *epectasis*, a term which Gregory borrows from St Paul (Phil 3:13) to refer to the soul's consistent movement forward, rejecting the sins of the past and open to receive God's future graces.[14]

The most pivotal period in Cassian's formation likely came during his decade of instruction in the monastic communities of the Egyptian desert. It was there in the late fourth century that desert monks were imbued with the Alexandrian tradition, and where "passages of Origen were memorized," particularly his scriptural commentaries, which were known for their ascetic overtones. It was here, Owen Chadwick speculates, sometime during Cassian's lengthy stay that he probably met Evagrius Ponticus, the leading Origenist scholar of monastic-based theology, or at the very least was exposed to his teachings and ascetic practices.[15]

A man of brilliant intellect, Evagrius was steeped in the study of the ascetic life, probing the meaning and praxis of *aksesis* ("discipline") as a method of restoring humanity to union with God lost after the fall of Adam. Integral to this process was the need to guard against evil and passions residing in the thoughts (*logismoi*). This type of spiritual warfare involved combat against demonic forces of evil representing what St Paul called the "principalities" of this world, "the cosmic powers over this present darkness ... the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph 6:12). It was within this tradition that Evagrius developed what some have called a profoundly "psychodynamic" approach to addressing problematic behaviors, whose diagnostic and therapeutic techniques include "vigilant self-awareness, interrogation and dissection of demonically inspired thoughts, narrating one's struggles to a wise elder, and writing down

and Theological Analysis," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 12.3 (1967): 369–93.

14 Jean Danielou, "Introduction," in Herbert Musurillo, tr. & ed., *From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa's Mystical Writings* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1979), 58. Note that Gregory refers to Paul's teaching in Philippians, where he states "Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining (ἐπεκτεινόμενος) forward (ἔμπροσθεν) to what lies ahead ..." (Phil 3:13 ESV). Note that *epectasis* is derived from a "straining" or "stretching" (ἐπεκτεινόμενος) forward toward God.

15 Owen Chadwick, *John Cassian* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 26.

particularly irksome temptations."[16] The response was rooted in a set of spiritual practices, especially prayer, designed to overcome unhealthy desires and anxieties through a mind (*nous*) set on God and neighbor.[17] John Cassian would appropriate and build upon Evagrius' framework of *aksesis*, transmitting Alexandrian notions of spiritual struggle to the West, where they were incorporated into the monastic communities he founded in Gaul and the later, groundbreaking *Rule of St Benedict*.[18]

Thus it is clear after assessing the sources of their theological influences that both Gregory of Nyssa and John Cassian, while living a generation apart and writing from opposite ends of the Roman Empire, share ontologies grounded in the Alexandrian Christian tradition, particularly the view of human progression toward perfection in Christ through the pursuit of virtue (ἀρετῆ). Yet while sharing this common vision of spiritual growth, each applied his own pedagogic method to convey it.

Gregory of Nyssa's Life of Moses*: Employing Biography and Scriptural Exegesis as Pedagogic Tools Advancing a Moral Ethic of the Christian Struggle toward Perfection*

On many levels, the *Life of Moses* is an exemplary work of patristic exegesis. Characterized by a reverent and exhortative narrative built from an allegorical framework of analysis, its emphasis on a contemplative ascent to perfection is clearly Alexandrian. The purpose of this short examination of the Exodus story is stated in the prologue as a means by which to offer instruction to a young inquirer concerning "the way to perfection"; a view toward pursuing a life of holiness that Gregory ties to Christ's exhortation in the Sermon on the Mount to "be perfect (τέλειοι), just as your Father in heaven is perfect

16 Columba Stewart, "Evagrius Ponticus and the Eastern Monastic Tradition on the Intellect and the Passions," *Modern Theology* 27.2 (2011): 264–66.

17 Ibid., 268.

18 As Stewart notes, Evagrius' esoteric cosmology, which aligned too closely with that of Origen, later ran afoul of orthodox ecclesial authorities and was condemned at the Fifth Ecumenical Council of Constantinople in 553 along with the teachings of Origen. See ibid., 271.

(τέλειός)"(Mt 5:48).[19] In this case τέλειός is regarded as the state of having attained a final purpose or end. Indeed, it doesn't appear far afield from MacIntyre's twentieth-century reappropriation of the term as the purposeful end one seeks when pursuing a virtuous life.

However Gregory continues his prologue with his caution to the reader that the paradox of Christian perfection is that it is never fully achieved. Indeed, such a goal is *impossible*. For Gregory, the final, complete *telos* of our humanity will not be realized until our resurrection in Christ at the eschaton. But this does not imply that we should slow our efforts to live a more virtuous life:

> Although on the whole my argument has shown that what is sought for is unattainable . . . [w]e should show great diligence not to fall away from the perfection which is attainable, but to acquire as much as is possible: to that extent let us make progress within the realm of what we seek. For the perfection of human nature consists perhaps in its very growth in goodness.[20]

The entire text of the *Life of Moses*, also titled *On the Perfection of Virtue*, is built around this ontological thesis, and Gregory executes it with a persuasive literary simplicity. His narrative structure is simple but effective, which he distinguishes through the two main divisions of the work. First is the *historia* (ἱστορία), a paraphrased, event-based account of the Exodus story. Yet his purpose goes beyond a simple retelling. It is here where Gregory invites the reader to sort out not only the main characters and events in Moses' biography, but to also their significance for understanding the conflict between good and evil, as well as to begin to see the outlines of Moses' own path toward growth in the virtues ultimately leading to his encounter with God. While this section is principally factual (according to Gregory's reading of the text), occasions arise for subtle theological commentary. For instance, the account of Moses' separation from the people in order to be alone to pursue "a greater

19 Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, Abraham J. Malherbe & Everett Ferguson, tr. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1978), 6.

20 Ibid.

philosophy" appears to be understood by Gregory as a metaphor for the monastic journey into the desert in pursuit of God.

The second section of the *Life of Moses* comprises Gregory's allegorical exegesis and its close link to God's plan of salvation.[21] This is revealed throughout the narrative in the example of Moses' eternal growth as stages of development represented by three theophanies. The first is Moses' *apprehension of the Being of God*—the I AM—in the encounter at the Burning Bush. It is at this point in the story, as Verna Harrison points out, that Gregory's purpose is to show God's presence in his creation and "as the source of being in which all created things participate."[22] For Gregory, this new awareness is tantamount to the experience of God's grace:

> It seems to me that at the time the great Moses was instructed in the theophany he came to know that none of those things which are apprehended by sense perception and contemplated by the understanding really subsist, but that the transcendent essence and cause of the universe, on which everything depends, alone subsists.
>
> For even if the understanding looks upon any other existing things, reason observes in absolutely none of them the self-sufficiency by which they could exist without participating in true Being. On the other hand, that which is always the same, neither increasing or diminishing, immutable to all change whether to better or worse (for it is far removed from the inferior and it has no superior), standing in need of nothing else, alone desirable, participated in by all but not lessened by their participation—this is truly real Being. And the apprehension of it is the knowledge of truth.[23]

Moses' second theophany toward perfection is his ascent up Mount Sinai and his approach to the cloud of darkness as he

21 Giulio Maspero, "Economy," in *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, Lucas Francisco Mateo-Seco & Giulio Maspero, eds., Seth Cherney, tr. in *Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae*, Vol. 99, J. den Boeft, et al., eds. (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 541–42; see also, Giulio Maspero, "Theoria," in ibid., 738.

22 Verna E. F. Harrison, *Grace and Human Freedom According to St Gregory of Nyssa* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), 72.

23 Gregory of Nyssa, 38.

nears the peak. This stage marks Moses' transition from a state of knowing God through his creation to that of awareness of his total incomprehensibility represented in the "unknown" and "unseen" that is the darkness, a sense of divine knowing that has been described as Gregory's portrayal of a mystical awareness of God.[24] For Gregory, this second stage is not distinct from the first but remains intimately tied to it. Indeed both may be experienced at the same time.

Moses' third theophany is of crucial importance for one's self-awareness in growth toward perfection: that it is an eternal, a never-ending process:

> [Moses] shone with glory. And although lifted up through such lofty experiences, he is still unsatisfied in his desire for more. He still thirsts for that with which he constantly filled himself to capacity, and he asks to attain as if he had never partaken, beseeching God to appear to him, not according to his capacity to partake, but according to God's true being.[25]

Just as Moses' life story demonstrates that the path to perfection is challenging, life-long, and arduous, so too is our struggle to "stretch forward" and ascend to a higher knowledge and wisdom flowing from God's ineffable being, what Gregory considered an act of God's grace. That path to perfection, he says, inevitably and intimately engages us in the practice of religious virtue.[26] If we take this to mean, as Gregory does, that this ascent up the mountain toward divine knowledge exemplifies our quest for right living, then "the majority of people scarcely reach its base."[27]

Through Gregory's skillful allegorical presentation of virtuous behavior, the *Life of Moses* serves as both a primer to the Exodus story but more importantly as *a training manual by example of the pursuit of a virtuous life*. It would be left for others like John Cassian, however, to more deeply probe the complexities of the human psyche in the quest to confront specific problems of sinful behavior.

24 Harrison, 76–77.
25 Gregory of Nyssa, 104.
26 Ibid., 78.
27 Ibid.

John Cassian's Conferences *as a Guide to Understanding the Application of Disclosure and Proper Discernment for Ethical Decision-making*

If Gregory's *Life of Moses* can be seen as an effective "macro" overview of God's call to a virtuous life, then John Cassian's lengthy *Conferences* is a more focused, "micro" exposition of the specific spiritual "tools" employed in the identification, disclosure, and renunciation of sin through ascetic practices, spiritual warfare, and the continual striving toward spiritual perfection. Considered one of the longest single works in Christian antiquity, it is broken down into a series of twenty-four "conferences," or fictive dialogues between a monastic elder and a novice.

The *Conferences* is organized by three sections, each containing a set of dialogues which purportedly took place at three different monastic communities near Alexandria.[28] Although ordered neither chronologically nor by subject, each *Conference* addresses one of two chief goals: either exhorting the novice toward greater purity with divine help or providing careful counsel in the use of discretion when navigating confrontations with temptations and vices.[29] Cassian copiously references and quotes scripture throughout the work.

At least four outstanding characteristics of the *Conferences* can be identified that pertain to the study and practice of ethical and moral decision making in the context of the Nicene Christian period:

(1) The elder/novice relationship

This is also used in narrative structuring by Gregory in the *Life of Moses*. A defining feature of Egyptian coenobitic monastic life, the master/disciple relationship was understood by Cassian as vital for instruction in spiritual perfection. For example, in *Conference* II. XI. 6–7, he recounts the instruction of an Abbot named Moses, who states:

> ... [F]ollowing in the footsteps of elders, we shall presume neither to do anything new nor to come to any decisions

28 Boniface Ramsay, "Introduction" to *The Conferences*, 7–8.
29 Ibid., 12.

> based on our own judgment, but we shall proceed in all things just as their tradition and upright life informs us. 7. Whoever has been thoroughly instructed in this manner will not only attain the perfect ordering of discretion, but will also remain absolutely safe from all snares of the enemy. For by no other vice does the devil draw and lead a monk to so sudden a death as when he persuades him to neglect the counsel of the elders and to trust in his own judgment and his own understanding.[30]

Those experienced in spiritual combat, the renunciation of sin, and pursuit of virtues leading toward spiritual perfection are to be revered for their profound knowledge, experience, and wisdom. As Cassian notes, these teachers are the living bearers of a tradition of ascetic practice that came before them, a form of "tried and true" praxis that served the purpose of moving souls toward greater virtue. It is not that they themselves have attained perfection, which can never happen, but that they are experienced fighters in combat against the vices. Here then, the self and individual judgment must surrender to the wisdom founded upon the experience of others. As Goodrich points out, Cassian schematized this structure of monastic training in his *Institutes*, where he stresses the importance of the novice's relationship to the elder.[31]

(2) Spiritual warfare as acknowledgment of our sinful nature in the face of demonic forces

While the acknowledgment of humanity's fallen nature is referenced frequently in the *Conferences*, so too is the role played by specific demons and diabolical entities, especially as they manifest sin in one's thoughts. This is as evident in Cassian as it was with the Egyptian monastics. These evil forces, extant before the foundation of the temporal world,[32] consistently attempt to deceive the gullible

30 Cassian, *The Conferences*, II. XI. 6–7, 93.

31 Richard J. Goodrich, *Contextualizing Cassian: Aristocrats, Asceticism, and Reformation in Fifth-Century Gaul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 47.

32 Cassian goes into great depth discussing the scripturally-based origin of demonic forces as well as their nature in the eighth *Conference* titled "On the Principalities."

by masking the presence of vices that obstruct one's attempt to lead a virtuous life and thereby veer Christians to ungodly behaviors that take them off the path toward perfection. Here the reality of evil is not merely viewed in a broad, distant, philosophically vague way but is rather made highly personal. Admittedly, the aspect of demonic involvement in the lives of persons in ancient and mediaeval Christianity is likely one of the least credible features of desert spirituality for many in a rationalist, post-Enlightenment culture.[33] Yet this understanding provided a critical framework for those attempting to identify the foundation of aberrant and unhealthy behaviors.

Here again, for Cassian the role of spiritual elder is important in the process of the novice's acknowledgment and disclosure of sin. While this appears to initially serve a cathartic type of function, its true significance lies in helping to set the novice on a course of spiritual healing through a conscious renunciation of sin and the employment of ascetic techniques in helping to form a more virtuous life.

(3) The use of proper discretion (διακρίσεις or discretio)

A critical methodological component in the practice of spiritual warfare for Cassian and the desert fathers is the use of a proper discretion in the progress toward perfection. As Antony Rich notes, for Cassian *discretio* is the supreme virtue, one which "touches every aspect of a monk's inner and outer life ... [and] repeatedly stresses its superiority and necessity for developing and governing *virtutes* and practical insights."[34] Discretion is not only important for ascertaining distorted thoughts, it is just as essential in governing our response to them, such as avoiding extreme reactions (e.g., excessive fasting as a means to combat gluttony, unreasonably long prayer vigils that deprive us of needed sleep, etc.).[35] Thus discretion plays a vital role for Cassian as a means by which to understand human limitations.

33 This observation comes with a juxtaposing reality that demonic possession maintains an allure in pop culture (books, movies, etc.) as well as via the practices of certain cult groups.

34 Antony Rich, *Discernment in the Desert Fathers: διακρίσεις in the Life and Thought of Early Egyptian Monasticism* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2007), 120.

35 See Cassian, Conferences, II. XIII. 1–2, 101–02.

Cassian effectively uses the metaphor of a watchful fisherman to describe how we can be mindful of the thoughts we choose to "catch" as they swirl through our minds:

> Therefore, the person who keeps constant watch over the purity of the inner man must seek out places that do not draw his mind to the distraction of cultivating them . . . thus scattering his thoughts at large, as it were, and, by all sorts of things, utterly diverting the aim of his mind and that most delicate focus on his goal. 2. These cannot be provided for or seen by anyone, however careful or watchful, who has not kept his body and mind constantly enclosed within the confines of four walls. Thus, attentive and unmoving, like a clever fisherman looking out for his food with apostolic skill, he may catch the swarms of thoughts swimming about in the calmest depths of his heart and, like someone gazing intently into the depths from a jutting promontory, may with wise discretion judge which fish he should draw to himself with his saving hook and which ones he should let go and reject because they are wicked and harmful.[36] (Italics mine)

But true discretion cannot be obtained without a humble heart, patience, and as always, wise direction:

> it is a dangerous presumption to claim to understand the nature of anything hastily, *before the matter has been thoroughly discussed and its characteristics have been analyzed*, and to make a guess founded on one's own inexpertise rather than to offer an opinion based on the condition and qualities of the practice itself or on the experience of other people. (Italics mine)

(4) The application of ascesis

As a means of defense against evil thoughts, the pursuit of virtuous living is an important but ongoing struggle in the monastic project that requires rigorous, directed mental and spiritual focus. Through a repeated redirection of the thoughts the mind is set aright on the proper path toward perfection. The concept of repetition or "habituation" in the monastic praxis is important here:

36 Ibid., XXIV. III. 1–2.

> The mind … is understood as … always changeable and as manifoldly changeable. … Because of its nature, then, it can never stand idle but, unless it has some foresight into where it will move and what will preoccupy it, it will inevitably run about and fly everywhere due to its own changeableness until, having become accustomed to lengthy practice and constant habituation … it gains experience and learns with what things to equip its memory, to what purpose it should direct its unceasing flights, and why it should acquire the power to remain fixed in one place. Thus it will be able to drive out the opposing suggestions of the enemy by which it is distracted and to remain in the state and condition that it desires.[37]

This ongoing need to fight adverse thoughts and passions through *a conscious redirecting of the mind* sounds uncannily similar to approach of modern cognitive behavioral therapy, whose stated goals (*skopos*) for clients, outlined on the Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies website, include:

- Distinguish between thoughts and feelings.
- Become aware of the ways in which thoughts can influence feelings in ways that sometimes are not helpful.
- Learn about thoughts that seem to occur automatically, without even realizing how they may affect emotions.
- Evaluate critically whether these "automatic" thoughts and assumptions are accurate, or perhaps biased.
- Develop the skills to notice, interrupt, and correct these biased thoughts independently.[38]

For ancient Christian counselors such as Cassian and the desert fathers, the skills used to "interrupt and correct bias thoughts" would likely include constant prayer, fasting, and other forms of *ascesis* intended to change our thoughts, only with an end (*telos*)

37 Ibid., VII. IV. 1–2, 249–50.

38 See the Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies website at http://www.abct.org/Public/?m=mPublic&fa=WhatIsCBTpublic [Accessed on November 11, 2012].

anticipating a greater union with God. Finally, Cassian also expresses the need to remain humble in the fight for virtue, keeping in mind that "we cannot conquer such great enemies by our own strength but only with the support of God's help, and that every day we must attribute to him the sum of our victory."[39]

Conclusions

As Anglican historian and theologian Alistair McGrath has noted, appropriation of the theology of the church fathers for the purpose of contemporary life applications is often limited by its use of the language of classical philosophy as well as its antique cultural context revealed in its inquiries.[40] Others may caution that any modern-day appropriation of the fathers for contemporary analysis threatens an anachronistic reading of such works. Worse yet, when ancient patristic reflections become suffused with post-modern contextual meanings and twenty-first century culture, they may become susceptible to dilution or distortion in pursuit of a specific agenda.

Nevertheless we remain in a period of crisis in ethical discourse. As we live in an era where rapid change threatens to outpace our ability adequately to assess the ethical implications of innovation, what might we appropriate from the past that might help us construct reasonable alternatives grounded in a Christian understanding of what is morally acceptable behavior? Can methods for discussing and evaluating proper ethical conduct as practiced in the Nicene Christian period—here represented in select writings of Gregory of Nyssa and John Cassian—provide fruitful direction?

Some contemporary scholars appear to believe so. In addition to MacIntyre's re-appropriation of virtue as a touchstone for ethical decision making, even evangelical Protestant theologians who were

39 Cassian, *Conferences*, V. XV. 2. Note that this statement contrasts with other statements by Cassian's in the Thirteenth *Conference* concerning pursuing virtue by human effort, landing him with the label, particularly in the Christian West, of "semi-pelagianism."

40 Alistair McGrath, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 25–26.

once reticent to engage readings from the patristic era are now more willing to do so. Scholars such as Timothy George, Thomas Oden, and D. H. Williams have confirmed their importance and relevance for contemporary discussion.[41] Orthodox patristic scholar John Chryssavigis notes how the Egyptian monastic tradition still instructs us that seeking a close relationship with God can powerfully transform our lives and keep us alert not merely to our own spiritual trials, but to the trials and needs of others in our communities. He also believes that practices such as frequent prayer keep us focused on addressing the brokenness and flaws of a fallen world as opposed to a preoccupation with the "things" of that world.[42]

More specific examples of appropriation for contemporary ethical praxis may be drawn from the works of Gregory and Cassian discussed in this paper. The pedagogic use of storytelling frameworks grounded in biographical, experiential, and scripturally-based themes that reflect on one's personal struggles with ethical choices and the moral dimensions of life can still be instructive, as can be found in the modern era through the writing of Christian figures such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Thomas Merton, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, and others who have weathered trials or have otherwise experienced their own unique theophanies that brought them closer to God. It remains problematic, however, how far such techniques go in reaching those other than dedicated Christians.

Cassian's more intense, directive, dialogic approach to the pursuit of virtue and combating vice may also have practical contemporary applications. Indeed, he has been aptly described as one whose perspectives are an "attractive balance of vivid narration and penetrating insight, not least into human psychology."[43] The issue becomes, as Phillip Turner points out, how to "locate and access"

41 See D. H. Williams, *Evangelicals and Tradition: The Formative Influence of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 34–45, 129.

42 John Chryssavgis, "The Desert and the World: Learning from the Desert Fathers and Mothers," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 53.1–4 (2008): 144, 146–47.

43 A. M. C. Casiday, *Tradition and Theology in St John Cassian* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1

the wisdom of the desert fathers as compiled in Cassian's work.[44] In a way that runs contrary to contemporary pop psychology genres designed principally for self-affirmation and self-actualization, it is important to remember that a central feature of Cassian's methodology for making moral choices is that we ought to *put no hope in the will, intellect, and self-knowledge alone.* Rather, according to his framework of "eternal progress," the "end" (*telos*) " ... is the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven; but the goal or *skopos* is purity of heart, without which it is impossible for anyone to reach that end." Sanctification through Christ is essential if we are to make progress addressing sin and evil.

The key aspect of Cassian's model of spiritual direction and *ascesis* that remains as vital to assessing ethical behavior in the twenty-first century as it was during the fifth is the way in which we use *discretion* (διακρίσεις or *discretio*) to navigate the complex and often perilous choices and dilemmas with which we are presented almost every day. Perhaps it is no accident that the modern doctor/patient relationship in psychiatric practice bears some resemblance to the elder/novice Christian spiritual relationship developed in early Christian Egypt. The challenge persists, however, whether we can relinquish our dependence on the natural world as our exclusive locus of higher knowledge and come to accept that moral and ethical decisions without a goal (*skopos*) and end (*telos*) that is tied to the pursuit of sanctification is both useful and necessary.

44 Turner, Philip. "John Cassian and the Desert Fathers: Sources for Christian Spirituality?" *Doctores Ecclesiae* 13.4 (2004): 467.

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Divine Incarnation through the Virtues: The Central Soteriological Role of Maximos the Confessor's Aretology[1]

Joshua Salés

> God made the human for incorruption
> and to be an image of his own eternity.
> —Wisdom 2:23

Introduction

"For the Word of God [who is] also God wills always and in all things to actualize the mystery of his embodiment," reads one of Maximos the Confessor's most celebrated phrases.[2] It is not without a sense of profound irony that this statement has not received anything resembling decorous elucidation. Moreover, of all the staggering insights the Confessor contributed to the history of Christian thought, the capacity for God to be incarnated in virtuous humans[3] is both one of the most crucial, albeit puzzling, fundaments of his theological system and almost incontrovertibly the most overlooked. It is the burden of this essay to take a first step to reclaim the central

1 The word "aretology" has different definitions and is often confused with an aretalogy, which describes the miraculous deeds of a god or hero. An aretology in this context particularly, however, as defined by the Webster dictionary is "That part of moral philosophy which treats of virtue, its nature, and the means to attain to it." This is, more or less, what I write about in this essay.

2 Βούλεται γὰρ ἀεὶ καὶ ἐν πᾶσιν ὁ τοῦ Θεοῦ Λόγος καὶ Θεὸς τῆς αὐτοῦ ἐνσωματώσεως ἐνεργεῖσθαι τὸ μυστήριον. *Ambiguum* 7.22 (henceforth *Amb.*). [PG 91.1084D] (The divisions and text are based on Fr Maximos of Simonopetra's [aka Nicholas Constas] forthcoming edition of the *Ambigua* under the title *Maximos the Confessor, On Difficulties in the Church Fathers. The Ambigua.* Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library Vols. 28 and 29 [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014]. The PG numbering is offered for ease of reference. All translations are mine unless noted otherwise.)

3 This idea is found in numerous of his writings, especially in *Ambigua to Thomas*, prol. 2; *Ambigua to John*, 7.21–22; 10.2, 4, 9, 27, 35, 41, 85, 119; 48.6, etc.