

Languages of Ascent: Gregory of Nyssa's and Augustine of Hippo's Exegeses of the Beatitudes

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CONTEMPORARY READERS, accustomed to associating the beatitudes with the field of ethics, may be startled when they pick up Gregory of Nyssa's or Augustine of Hippo's writings on the beatitudes. Gregory and Augustine both interpret the beatitudes as a mystical ascent.¹ Gregory of Nyssa thus begins his first homily on the beatitudes as follows: "Who then among those gathered here is such as to be a disciple of the Word and to go up with him from the low ground and away from the hollows of lowly thoughts to the spiritual mountain of sublime contemplation?"² Gregory seems to miss the ethical challenge of the beatitudes. In his homily, he presents the beatitudes as an invitation to ascend to "the spiritual mountain of sublime contemplation." Gregory even makes an allusion to Plato's cave:

¹ For an insightful theological discussion of Augustine's treatment of the beatitudes see Servais Pinckaers, OP, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. Mary Thomas Noble, OP (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1995).

² Homily 1, no. 77, in *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Beatitudes: An English Version with Commentary and Supporting Studies. Proceedings of the Eighth International Colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa* (Paderborn, 14–18 September 1998), ed. Hubertus R. Drobner and Albert Viciano (Boston: Brill, 2000). The numbers refer to the numbering from the critical edition preserved in the present English translation. The *Homilies on the Beatitudes* were translated by Stuart George Hall.

“[This mountain] rises above every shadow cast by the upstart hillocks of evil, and, illuminated on every side by the radiance of the true light, allows us in the clear air of truth to view from a place of vantage all that is invisible to those labouring in the hollow.”³ According to Gregory, the Sermon on the Mount invites the audience to make what appears to be a platonic ascent. What is going on here?

Turning to Augustine, the reader is at first put more at ease. Augustine does not focus on the beatitudes exclusively, but discusses them at the beginning of a larger commentary entitled, *On the Lord's Sermon on the Mount*. Perhaps this larger scope allows him to emphasize more the ethical dimension. Augustine begins his commentary, “If anyone piously and soberly considers the sermon which our Lord Jesus Christ preached on the mount, as we read it in the Gospel according to Matthew, I think he will find in it, as regards the highest morals, the perfect measure of the Christian life.”⁴ When Augustine, however, moves to speak of the beatitudes he eschews emphasizing the ethical and interprets them instead as the seven stages to attain wisdom itself, or as he also puts it, “the contemplation of truth.”⁵ To make matters more awkward for even the sympathetic interpreter, Augustine then illustrates a comparison among the seven stages of the beatitudes and the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit as listed in Isaiah 11:2–3 and the seven petitions of the Our Father. It would seem that we have here merely arbitrary and spiritualized biblical interpretation. Are Augustine and Gregory blind to the ethical significance of the beatitudes? On the other hand, is it possible that Augustine and Gregory offer a view of the beatitudes and contemplation—“in which the moral life is subsumed with the contemplation of truth”—that needs retrieval in contemporary theology?

I. Reading Patristic Biblical Exegesis: Pierre Hadot as Guide

Before we attempt to retrieve some of Augustine's and Gregory's insights into the beatitudes, we require a more concrete idea of

³ Homily 1, nos. 77–78.

⁴ *De Sermone Domini in Monte* Book 1, ch. 1. English translations are taken from *The Preaching of Augustine: “Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount,”* ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, trans. Francine Cardman (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973).

⁵ *De Sermon.* Book 1, ch. 3, no. 10.

what it is they are doing and why they do it in the way that they do. Pierre Hadot, who is Professor Emeritus of the History of Hellenistic and Roman Thought at the Collège de France, has a collection of essays entitled in the English translation, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, or simply *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, in the French original.⁶ Hadot writes largely about the nature of philosophy in antiquity, but his observations suggest a cultural and intellectual context for the reading of Gregory and Augustine.

From Hadot, we can discern two great overarching themes necessary to understand philosophy in antiquity: first, the priority of the oral context even in written discourses; second, the character of philosophy in antiquity as a set of spiritual exercises or, in other words, a way of life.

Let us first examine the way Hadot emphasizes the oral character of ancient philosophy. He writes, "I do want to stress the fact that written works in the period we study are never completely free of the constraints imposed by oral transmission."⁷ Hadot suggests that many modern interpreters of ancient texts both non-Christian and Christian misinterpret them because they expect a straightforward systematic argument. When modern interpreters fail to find this, they often judge the ancient works defective. Hadot responds, however, that the defect may not lie in the ancient works, but rather in the modern interpreters' assumptions: "This relationship between the written and the spoken word thus explains certain aspects of the works of antiquity. Quite often, the work proceeds by the association of ideas, without systematic rigor. The work retains the starts and stops, the hesitations, and the repetitions of spoken discourse. Or else, after re-reading what he has written, the author introduces a somewhat forced systematization by adding transitions, introductions, or conclusions to different parts of the work."⁸ Thus in confronting ancient texts, the interpreter must keep in mind the effects of the priority of the oral over the written.

⁶ Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1995). French original, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, 2nd Ed. (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1987).

⁷ Ibid., 61.

⁸ Ibid., 62.

In addition to the oral context, Hadot also emphasizes that philosophy in antiquity was a way of life. Rather than a set of doctrines or principles, philosophy sought to change its practitioners by means of a set of spiritual exercises. Although Hadot notes that the different philosophical schools, such as the Epicureans, the Stoics, and the Platonists, each had particular methods of the spiritual exercises, he argues that they all agreed that such exercises were necessary to cure humanity of its ailments. Hadot, in fact, describes St. Ignatius of Loyola's sixteenth-century spiritual exercises as "nothing but a Christian version of a Greco-Roman tradition"⁹ When writers in antiquity spoke of training, or *askesis*, they meant not "only" what we now call asceticism, but more broadly, as Hadot puts it, "the practice of spiritual exercises."¹⁰ The philosophical schools likewise shared a common conception of the problems of the human condition. Hadot writes, "In the view of all philosophical schools, mankind's principal cause of suffering, disorder, and unconsciousness were the passions: that is, unregulated desires and exaggerated fears."¹¹ The passions debilitate human beings; the spiritual exercises of the philosophers cure the sickness. Philosophy in antiquity shared a common conception of the end of philosophy as the healing of human passions and of spiritual exercises as the means to attain that end.

Beyond this general conception of the disease of the passions and the cure through spiritual exercises, Hadot shows that some schools clearly delineated these exercises in specific steps or stages. Neo-Platonism in particular expressed stages of spiritual progress. Hadot observes that, "The hierarchy of these stages is described in many Neoplatonic texts, serving in particular as the framework for Marinus' *Life of Proclus*. Porphyry, editor of Plotinus' *Enneads*, systematically arranged his master's work according to the stages of this spiritual progress. First, the soul was purified by its gradual detachment from the body; then came the knowledge of, and subsequent passing beyond, the sensible world; finally, the soul achieved conversion toward the Intellect and the One."¹² In this context, the neo-Platonic philosopher led his followers through

⁹ Ibid., 82.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 83.

¹² Ibid., 99–100.

specific stages in order to lead them to wisdom. To be a neo-Platonist thus meant more than merely holding neo-Platonic teachings; instead, to be a neo-Platonist meant that one submitted to a set of progressive spiritual exercises moving one away from the disturbance of the passions toward union with the One.

This view of philosophy as an ascent by stages also shapes the philosophical writings of antiquity. Hadot describes the philosophical author as foremost a spiritual director: "Above all, the work, even if it is apparently theoretical and systematic, is written not so much to inform the reader of a doctrinal content but to form him, to make him traverse a certain itinerary in the course of which he will make spiritual progress. This procedure is clear in the works of Plotinus and Augustine, in which all the detours, starts and stops, and digressions of the work are formative elements. One must always approach a philosophical work of antiquity with this idea of spiritual progress in mind."¹³ It is hardly surprising that this should be so. If philosophy was conceived in terms of making spiritual progress, then the writings of philosophy naturally would be aimed at aiding their readers in this endeavor.

Following Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria, Gregory and Augustine do not distinguish philosophy from theology in the way that became common later during scholastic theology. They instead view Christianity as the true philosophy. Gregory and Augustine thus develop their exegeses of the beatitudes from within this intellectual context in which there is a common understanding of the ends and means of philosophy. Moreover, we can say that the view of philosophy as spiritual exercises influenced Augustine and Gregory in two specific ways. First, it led them to view the beatitudes as ordered stages of spiritual exercises. The beatitudes differed from other philosophies because they had a better teacher, namely, the Word Incarnate. Nevertheless, the beatitudes shared with other philosophies the fact that they proffered stages of ascent. Second, the view of philosophy as spiritual exercises influenced the way in which Augustine and Gregory present their writings on the beatitudes. In line with the general conception of philosophical writing in antiquity, Augustine and Gregory offer their writings not as merely analytical endeavors, but as spiritual exercises designed to

¹³ Ibid., 64.

lead their readers through a path of spiritual progress. Augustine and Gregory act as only secondary philosophers to the true philosopher who is Christ.

We have thus found a significant clue to Augustine's and Gregory's exegeses of the beatitudes. For what is the one element that both authors take for granted and yet seems so strange to the modern biblical interpreter? It is precisely that both Augustine and Gregory assume that the beatitudes constitute an ordered progression of stages in contemplation. Yet, if neo-Platonic philosophy employed several stages in the attainment of perfection, then Augustine and Gregory could not but interpret the beatitudes as the stages by which Jesus leads his followers so that they might ascend to perfection. Once Augustine's and Gregory's intellectual context is depicted, then it is no surprise that this is exactly what each of them finds in the beatitudes. The fact that neither Augustine nor Gregory offer any defense for viewing the beatitudes as stages of an ascent shows how much they each take this view for granted. Gregory and Augustine share a certain formal commonality with respect to the ends and means of philosophy. Nevertheless, both Gregory and Augustine shift the character of the end in question as well as the means to attain that end. Gregory and Augustine thus take themes characteristic of philosophy in antiquity, but they recast these themes within the horizon offered by Christ's proclamation of the beatitudes. In this, they provide a different yet complementary reading of the beatitudes from that of modern commentators

Once we see the oral character of written works in antiquity, we are prepared to interpret one oddity of Augustine's commentary. The very comparisons among the seven beatitudes and the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit and, later, the seven petitions of the Our Father, that strike the modern reader as forced come easily in an oral context. The parallels of sevens present listeners to the oral discourse with exactly the association of ideas for which they would be looking. What is most significant about Hadot's argument is that it frees interpretation from the historical question of whether Augustine actually preached his commentary on the Lord's Sermon on the Mount. The oral background echoes throughout the written discourses of antiquity. The echo, moreover, resounds doubly in the works of Augustine.

II. The End of the Ascent

As we have seen, philosophy in antiquity shared a consensus regarding the ends and means of philosophy. This consensus was the context in which the Church fathers worked. Gregory and Augustine have much in common with pagan notion of the ends of philosophy. The philosophers in antiquity frequently identified perfection in terms of absence from passions.¹⁴ If philosophy in antiquity conceived of the end of philosophy as curing human beings of their illness from the passions, Augustine and Gregory clearly share this conception of the end when they interpret the beatitudes. Yet, Augustine and Gregory also depict the end in a uniquely Christian way.¹⁵ Through their reading of the beatitudes

¹⁴ For instance, Pierre Hadot argues that “spiritual perfection is also depicted as *apatheia*—the complete absence of passions—a Stoic concept taken up by Neoplatonism” (136).

¹⁵ Alden Mosshammer argues that Gregory’s *Homilies on the Beatitudes* are much more Platonic—and less Christian—than his later (perhaps 15 years) *Homilies on the Song of Songs*. Mosshammer argues for a significant intellectual development in Gregory which moved from an individualistic and ahistorical account of salvation to a view of salvation as building up the Body of Christ to achieve the unity of all mankind. See Alden A. Mosshammer, “Gregory’s Intellectual Development: A Comparison of the *Homilies on the Beatitudes* with the *Homilies on the Song of Songs*,” in *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Beatitudes*, 359–88. Although Mosshammer may be correct that the later *Homilies on the Song of Songs* present a more corporate and more Christological view of salvation, in order to argue his case he risks overstating the limitations of the earlier *Homilies on the Beatitudes*. Several of the articles in the same collection show the uniquely Christian elements of the *Homilies on the Beatitudes*. Cf. Monique Alexandre’s argument that the spatial representations undergo a spiritualization in light of the language of Scripture, “Perspectives eschatologiques dans les *Homelies sur les beatitudes* de Gregoire de Nyse,” 257–92. Anthony Meredith, in commenting on the first homily, argues that Gregory’s presentation of the ascent is more Christian than Hellenic, more moral than ontological. See “Gregory of Nyssa, *De beatitudinibus*, Oratio I: ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven’ (Mt 5,3),” 93–110. Robert L. Wilken shows how Gregory takes the *eudaimonistic* Aristotelian background of the notion of beatitude/happiness and transforms it by placing the end in Christ. See “Gregory of Nyssa, *De beatitudinibus*, Oratio VIII: ‘Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven’ (Mt 5,10),” 243–56.

within the web of Christian belief and practice, Gregory and Augustine hold that the identity of the soul remains in the end—perfection no longer dissolves the individual into the One. Moreover, perfection now includes the elevation of human nature to become children of God. The uniquely Christian character of Augustine's and Gregory's exegeses again appears when they discuss the means of philosophical ascent. Furthermore, Augustine and Gregory differ from each other in the way they express the end of that ascent. Gregory sees the beatitudes as stages in the process of our deification; Augustine depicts the beatitudes as steps to the attainment of true wisdom.

Gregory defines beatitude, or blessedness, as "something which includes every concept of goodness, and from which nothing answering to good desire is missing."¹⁶ Although Gregory insists on the ineffable and incomprehensible nature of the divinity, he argues that we nonetheless agree that whatever the divinity is, it surely possesses beatitude. If beatitude belongs to God alone, then how can the Word speak of human beings attaining beatitude? Gregory recalls the teaching of the *imago Dei* to suggest we can call human beings blessed "in a secondary way" insofar as they participate "in the real blessedness."¹⁷ From its creation in the image of God, human nature is marked with the beauty of goodness. Sin has disfigured the image, but Gregory points out that "[the Word] who washes us came with his own water, living water 'welling up to eternal life' (Jn 4:10)."¹⁸ Gregory employs the image of a painter who uses certain physical features to compose physical beauty. He extends the image to the divine artist: "In just the same way the one who redraws our soul to make it resemble the only Blessed One will in his discourse outline each one of the things which draw us towards blessedness"¹⁹ Through each of the beatitudes, the Word Incarnate portrays another feature necessary to restore the beauty of the human soul. These features of human beatitude are simply the virtues. Drawing on a line from Plato's *Theaetetus*, Gregory considers "that the goal of the virtuous life is likeness to

¹⁶ Homily 1, nos. 79–80.

¹⁷ Ibid., no. 80.

¹⁸ Ibid., no. 81.

¹⁹ Ibid., no. 81.

the Divinity.”²⁰ Following this initial trajectory, Gregory presents the beatitudes as ordered steps in the ascent to deification or *theosis*.

Perfection, for Gregory, describes a divinized state free from passions. The Lord, however, does not demand complete absence of passion as the rule for human life. Gregory asks, “Who could get as far as that while still bound to flesh and blood?”²¹ Although we cannot yet be free from passion in this life, we should resist the downward movements of the passions. This resistance, according to Gregory, arises from the virtue of meekness, as in “blessed are the meek.” Imperfection here arises from the “flesh and blood” character of human existence. Here we come upon Gregory’s ambiguous view of the body, a view that requires addressing in this consideration of the end of the ascent according to Gregory. Peter Bouteneff argues that Gregory distinguishes between the *soma*—part of the true created human nature—and the *sarx*—the human body changed by sin. Once this distinction is recognized, Bouteneff concludes that according to Gregory “the human person, whom God conceived and created as good and in His own image, is essentially and naturally a psychosomatic unity.”²² That “flesh and blood” lead the soul downward only results from the experience of the body under sin.

Nonetheless, it remains that Gregory oftentimes expresses an ambiguity regarding bodily existence without explicitly referring to the *sarx/soma* distinction drawn by Bouteneff. This is a characteristic aspect of Gregory’s anthropology. In other writings, Gregory shows a profound ambiguity regarding the division of the humanity into different sexes. The present human condition is alien to the image of God as originally intended by the Creator.

To understand this alienation of the present human condition it is helpful to look outside the *Homilies on the Beatitudes* to Gregory’s work, *De Hominis Opificio*. In this work, which is the conclusion to St. Basil’s *Hexaemeron*, Gregory narrates the creation of humanity on the sixth day. He characterizes the human creature as the coincidence

²⁰ Ibid., no. 82, cf. *Theaetetus* 176b.

²¹ Homily 2, no. 96.

²² Cf. Peter C. Bouteneff, “Essential or Existential: The Problem of the Body in the Anthropology of St. Gregory of Nyssa,” in *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Beatitudes*, 409–19. Bouteneff addresses the question of the *Homilies on the Beatitudes* in the context of Gregory’s larger literary corpus.

of two extremes. Humans share a divine likeness characterized by the image of God; humans also share a likeness to beasts. This dual likeness is the lens through which the human creature is to be viewed. According to Gregory, this dual likeness was not part of the Creator's original plan. (This does not entail a temporal succession of thoughts to the Deity.) God created humans with a secondary likeness to beasts because He foreknew that humans would fall by turning away from the beautiful and the good.²³ The image of God includes the *nous* and *phronesis*; the image of beasts includes sexual differentiation and reproduction subject to the passions. The latter likeness was given to humans as a chastisement for their turning to material creatures. Yet, this same likeness to beasts is simultaneously the cause of the human tendency to turn toward the material. Roger Leys describes this as a destructive paradox since the present human condition is both the cause and the punishment for human sin.²⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, however, presents it as a fruitful paradox by drawing a comparison between this motif in Gregory and the kingship of Israel.²⁵ The kingship was at once a blessing and a punishment for Israel. The human likeness to beasts, which includes the passions, is likewise a blessing and a punishment. In support of von Balthasar's more positive interpretation of this feature as a non-destructive paradox, Gregory says that when the passions are guided by reason they can become forms of virtue.²⁶ If the soul is the mirror of the divine, the bodily nature of humans can become a mirror of the mirror and so share in the goodness. There is an undeniable ambiguity in Gregory's account of the human creature, but this ambiguity is consonant with the earthly experience of the passions as something often burdensome as in Romans 7:23, "I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind," or Wisdom of Solomon 9:15, "for a perishable body weighs down the soul, and this earthly tent burdens the thoughtful mind."

²³ *De Hominis Opificio* 17.4.

²⁴ Roger Leys, S.J., *L'image de Dieu chez saint Gregoire de Nyse; esquisse d'une doctrine* (Brussels: Edition universelle, 1951).

²⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought: An Essay on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa*, trans. Marc Sebanc (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995).

²⁶ *De Hominis Opificio* 18.5.

Returning to our consideration of the end of the ascent in the *Homilies on the Beatitudes*, the question of imperfection also arises when Gregory discusses “blessed are they that mourn.” He suggests that its deeper meaning is that human beings should have pity on themselves when they think of what they possessed in paradise compared to the state into which they have fallen.²⁷ He writes, “Instead of that sublime region and a life among the angels we have been condemned to share a home with the beasts of the earth, exchanging the angelic and painless for the way of life of cattle.”²⁸ This could appear as confirming Gregory’s profound ambiguity with respect to the embodied character of human existence. If we follow Gregory’s comments, however, it would appear that he is simply offering a standard interpretation of the vices. By leaving behind angelic freedom, we become enslaved to our passions. Gregory thus exhorts his audience: “Wrath is a harsh master, malice another like him, and hatred; the passion of pride is a mad and savage tyrant; and like one who takes his pleasure on brought-in slaves is the licentious fantasy which captivates our whole being to his passionate and sordid service. What excess of harshness does the tyranny of greed omit?”²⁹ In this passage, the prime analogate for passion is not a neutral desire, but a vicious desire. Passion comes to signify unruly passion; desire comes to signify tyrannical desire. If Gregory uses passions equivalently with vices, then it is hardly surprising that perfection requires that we set aside passions.

This passionless perfection is manifested in the beatitude “blessed are the peacemakers.” Gregory writes that the exemplary peacemaker is one “who brings to a peaceful concord the strife within himself of flesh and spirit, the civil war in his nature, when the law of the body which campaigns against the law of the mind is no longer effective, but is subjugated to the higher kingdom and becomes a servant of the divine commandments.”³⁰ Once passions come under the authority of the law of the mind, then they no longer act as passions—namely, those things that exercise tyranny over us. Gregory depicts the end of the way of the beatitudes as

²⁷ Homily 5, nos. 131–33.

²⁸ Ibid., no. 132.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., no. 160.

attaining this divine-like passionless state. This does not mean, however, that perfection lacks desire. As seen above, Gregory says that beatitude means that “nothing answering to good desire is missing.”³¹ Perfection merely lacks any unfulfilled good desires or good passions. Good desires remain—now perfected insofar as they now possess the good. The end of the Christian ascent excludes the human experience of the tyranny of the passions.

Despite sharing much in common with the ancient philosophers’ view of the end, Gregory casts the end in a distinctively Christian hue by emphasizing that the end of the beatitudes is to become a child of God. We can thus ask, is this end something that is natural to the human creature? Does Gregory present a uniquely Christian view of the end that preserves the gratuitous character of graced perfection? Vladimir Lossky criticizes Gregory’s location of the image of God in the *nous* on these very grounds. Lossky claims that the *nous* as image of God suggests a natural kinship (*sungeneia*) to the divine.³² For example, Plotinus, in the *Enneads*, described the *nous* as the icon, or image, of the One.³³ Lossky claims that the image of God should not be limited to the *nous*, but should include the human person.³⁴ The image as person, according to Lossky, moves away from suggesting there is something in human nature, in this case the *nous*, that is quasi-divine. Nevertheless, one may respond to Lossky that the natural kinship of the *nous* to the divine does not need to be rejected because of filial adoption, but rather must be transformed from its Greek philosophical context to a Christian one. Anthony Meredith argues that this is precisely what Gregory does in the homily on the first beatitude. In the Hellenic tradition, the notion of a kinship (*sungeneia*) to the divine “is the primal and indestructible condition of human life.” According to Gregory, however, “it is an ideal to be aimed at and at the same time a gift of God,

³¹ Homily 1, no. 80.

³² Vladimir Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, ed. John H. Erickson and Thomas E. Bird (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985), 125–40.

³³ *Enneads*, Book 5, tract. 1, no. 7.

³⁴ Yet, one may point out that even the notion of person indicates something peculiar to the human creature that makes possible reception into the divine life.

conceived of as a reward.”³⁵ Contra Lossky’s criticism, the gratuity of grace can be preserved whether one locates the image of God in the *nous* or the person. Gregory, for instance, depicts perfection in greater terms than merely the perfection of the image of God. When he comments on the sixth beatitude, Gregory writes that the pure of heart will see God since they will have cleansed the image of God within themselves. Gregory, however, does not stop there. Following the order of the beatitudes, he then considers the seventh beatitude which declares blessed the peacemakers for they will be called children of God. Gregory says that with the seventh beatitude we have now moved into the Holy of Holies: “If seeing God had nothing to surpass it in goodness, then surely to become a son of God is beyond all felicity.”³⁶ When Gregory describes our filial adoption, he in no way indicates a natural kinship of our *nous* with the divine nature. Instead, Gregory insists on the utter dissimilarity between the divine and human natures: “Man, reckoned as of no worth among beings, mere dust, grass, and vanity, is deemed to belong, adopted into the status of son by the God of the universe.”³⁷ Moreover, Gregory emphasizes the fully gratuitous character of this divine filiation: “If you make peace, [the Word] says, you will be crowned with the reward of adoption as a son. In my opinion the very work for which he promises such a great reward is itself another gift.”³⁸ Here we have a cycle of God’s gifts—or a cycle of grace—in which to be a peacemaker is itself a gift which then receives as a reward the gift of divine adoption. This shows that Gregory does not conceive of the perfection of life in simply neo-Platonic terms. Although human beings lack any natural kinship with the divine, they do receive a kinship by grace when they are adopted as children of God.

How then does Augustine describe the end of the ascent of the beatitudes? He also focuses on becoming free from the harmful effects of the passions. We noted earlier that the ancient philosophical schools agreed that disordered passions were the main problem plaguing human beings. Augustine clearly follows this dominant line of thought when he interprets the seventh beatitude

³⁵ Anthony Meredith, “Gregory of Nyssa, *De beatitudinibus*, Oratio I,” 99.

³⁶ Homily 7, no. 149.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, no. 151.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, nos. 151–52.

regarding the peacemakers. He describes the peacemakers as those "in whom everything is now in order and no emotion is in rebellion against reason, but everything obeys the spirit of man."³⁹ The peacemakers typify a return to original justice in which reason orders the passions and emotions. The peace here is primarily internal peace. When the disciples reach this internal peace from the passions, then they have achieved the perfection of human life.

Augustine shows his view of the end of the ascent when he depicts the kingdom of heaven. He describes the kingdom of heaven in terms quite different from modern interpreters of the beatitudes. According to Augustine, "The kingdom of heaven . . . is the perfect and highest wisdom of the rational soul."⁴⁰ Later he writes that the peacemakers "become a kingdom of God in which everything is so ordered that what is distinctive and superior in man rules without resistance those other elements which are common to us and the beasts."⁴¹ This strongly echoes Plato's *Republic* in which the *polis* is an image of the individual soul and vice versa. For Augustine, the individual Christian soul rightly ordered is the *polis* of the kingdom of God.⁴²

In contrast to Gregory, Augustine does not distinguish between the renewal of the image of God and divine filiation. Augustine writes, "to the peacemakers the likeness of God is given, as to those perfectly wise and formed to the image of God through the regeneration of the renewed man: 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.'"⁴³ In this early work on the Sermon on the Mount, Augustine thinks such perfection is possible in this life: "And these things can be fulfilled in this life, just as we believe

³⁹ *De Serm.* Book 1, ch. 4, no. 11.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, Book 1, ch. 4, no. 12.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, Book 1, ch. 2, no. 9.

⁴² It would be interesting to see whether this view is revised or refined in the *City of God*. This interpretation of the kingdom of God in philosophical terms continues after Augustine. As Hadot writes, "It is with Evagrius, however, that we can see most clearly just how closely Christian *apatheia* can be linked to philosophical concepts. In Evagrius' *Praktikos*, we find the following definition: 'The Kingdom of Heaven is *apatheia* of the soul along with true knowledge of existing things'" (Hadot, 136). Evagrius lived during the sixth century.

⁴³ *De Serm.* Book 1, ch. 4, no. 12.

them to have been fulfilled in the apostles . . . ”⁴⁴ Later in his life, in his *Retractions*, Augustine clarifies how this statement should be interpreted: “not that we suppose that there was in the apostles while they were still living here [on earth] no desire of the flesh in opposition to the spirit, but that this can be achieved here to the extent that the apostles achieved it.”⁴⁵ Limiting ourselves to Augustine’s *Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount* and his later *Retractions*, we can say that the end for Augustine shows much in common with the general conception of the end in philosophy of antiquity. The ancient philosophers generally agreed as well that the perfection of wisdom was incapable in this life. As Hadot observes, “Philosophy thus took on the form of an exercise of thought, will, and the totality of one’s being, the goal of which was to achieve a state practically inaccessible to mankind: wisdom.”⁴⁶ If anything, in the early work of Augustine’s *Commentary*, Augustine exhibits more confidence than the philosophers that perfection of wisdom was possible in this life.

Gregory and Augustine share much in common with the ancient conception of the end of philosophy. Augustine clearly depicts the perfection of human life in terms of the subjection of the passions to reason and to the attainment of true wisdom. Wisdom is attained through the renewal of our likeness to God when we become children of God. Gregory shares these conceptions. Gregory, however, articulates more clearly the uniquely Christian character of the end by distinguishing the image of God which allows us to see God and the even greater gift of sharing in the divine nature through our adoption as children of God.

III. The Ordered Means of Perfection

We observed above that philosophy in antiquity was not so much a collection of doctrines, but instead a way of life. The various philosophical schools shared the conception that the way of life

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ *Retractions* Book 1, ch. 19, no. 3.

⁴⁶ Hadot, 265. “Real wisdom does not merely cause us to know: it makes us ‘be’ in a different way. Both the grandeur and the paradox of ancient philosophy are that it was, at one and the same time, conscious of the fact that wisdom is inaccessible, and convinced of the necessity of pursuing spiritual progress” (265).

proper to philosophy was engaging in spiritual exercises. Particularly in neo-Platonism, these exercises took the form of specific stages of ascent. This conception of the means of philosophy as stages of spiritual exercises form the milieu out of which Gregory and Augustine work.

Both Augustine and Gregory present the beatitudes as specific steps in an ordered ascent. Gregory writes in the beginning of his sermon on the second beatitude, "I think that the arrangement of the beatitudes is like a series of rungs, and it makes it possible for the mind to ascend by climbing from one to another."⁴⁷ For example, those who have learned poverty of spirit from the first beatitude will move easily to obtain the meekness of the second beatitude. When Gregory turns to the third beatitude, "Blessed are they that mourn," he reminds his audience that the journey through humility and meekness has not completed the ascent. He writes, "We have not yet climbed the high part of the mountain, but are still down in the foothills of ideas, even though we have already journeyed past two ridges, as we were led up the beatitudes to blessed poverty and to that gentleness [or meekness] which is above it. After these the Word leads us towards higher places and points us by the beatitudes to a third successive high point."⁴⁸ When he comes to the fourth beatitude, Gregory writes that the Word leads us by the hand up "toward the upper parts of the ladder of the beatitudes."⁴⁹ The Word acts as the spiritual director *par excellence*. Gregory simply leads his audience along the ascent outlined by Jesus Christ.⁵⁰

Following standard neo-Platonic belief and practice and the witness of Sacred Scripture, Gregory begins by agreeing that no human being can truly become like God. As Gregory expresses it, "that which is passionless and undefiled totally eludes imitation by

⁴⁷ Homily 2, no. 90.

⁴⁸ Homily 3, nos. 98, 99.

⁴⁹ Homily 4, no. 110.

⁵⁰ Cf. Pope John Paul II, "In the end, Jesus does not merely speak the beatitudes. He lives the beatitudes. He is the beatitudes. Looking at him you will see what it means to be poor in spirit, gentle and merciful, to mourn, to care for what is right, to be pure in heart, to make peace, to be persecuted. This is why he has the right to say, 'Come, follow me!' He does not say simply, 'Do what I say.' He says, 'Come, follow me!'" Papal Homily to Youth on Mount of Beatitudes, March 24, 2000.

human beings. It is quite impossible for the existence which is subject to passion to be assimilated to the nature which admits no passions.”⁵¹ Yet, as we have observed, the goal of the virtuous life is the likeness of God. The way out of this dilemma, according to Gregory, is to follow the Word’s guidance in the blessing associated with the “poor in spirit.” The poverty of spirit indicates the voluntary humility expressed above all in the Incarnation of the Word. Gregory quotes Philippians 2, “Have this mind in you which is in Christ Jesus, who though he existed in the form of God reckoned it not a prize to be equal with God, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave.” Gregory leads his audience through a spiritual exercise to attain humility: “You see the standard of his willing poverty: Life tastes death, the Judge is brought to trial, the King of all the supernatural host does not fend off the hands of his executioners. ‘Let the standard of your humility,’ he says, ‘observe this model.’”⁵² Although Gregory believes that the passionless perfection of God exceeds human ability, he thinks we can imitate God by imitating the humility of the Word. In this instance, Gregory takes a thoroughly Platonic theme and recasts it in a thoroughly Christian light. The means of the ascent becomes meditation on the descent of the Word of God.⁵³

Having found a way forward in the Incarnation, Gregory presents the eight beatitudes as steps in becoming like God. As already

⁵¹ Homily 1, no. 82.

⁵² *Ibid.*, no. 84.

⁵³ Gregory frequently employs the example of the image covered with rust and dirt so that it is unable to reflect the divine. Gregory speaks of this in terms of the deformation of the image. Humans in sin do maintain the image of God insofar as they still have an intellect and free will. In the state of sin, however, the free will only becomes the occasion for the destruction of the image. Humans exercise their freedom by turning away from the good and the beautiful and so make themselves less of an image. Human free will was given as a divine likeness but now it is the means for the corruption of that likeness. There are clearly in Gregory echoes of Plotinus who also employed the imagery of cleansing the rust off the image of the soul. As Danielou argues, however, there is also a fundamental shift between the two thinkers. For Plotinus, the cleansing of the soul is the work of the soul itself. For Gregory, the cleansing is the work of God. Living in the Eastern tradition, as well as before the Pelagian controversy, Gregory does not always carefully articulate the priority of grace in the healing of the image.

shown, poverty of spirit imitates the poverty of the Word Incarnate. The second beatitude declares blessed the meek. Gregory describes meekness as “a slow and reluctant attitude towards such natural [downward] inclinations.”⁵⁴ Since impulses and disordered passions are unavoidable while we live in the body, meekness tempers their ill effects. Next is “Blessed are they who mourn.” This is the sense of loss that comes from the realization that human beings once possessed paradise, but have since lost that happiness. If people did not suffer hunger pangs, then they would have no desire to eat. This leads naturally to the fourth beatitude, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after justice.” Gregory sees this beatitude as a reminder first that only virtue will satisfy and second that the Lord himself is the true justice proposed to his hearers. The next four beatitudes speak directly of the different stages of deification. “Blessed are the merciful” calls us to be divinized, as it were, since Scripture clearly associates mercy with God. “Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God” raises the question of how can we see God. Gregory answers that we can only see God through the image of God in our souls. A pure heart thus constitutes an adequate mirror through which to see God. As we have already seen, the seventh beatitude, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God,” goes even further. Gregory says that to become sons of God is to enter the Holy of Holies. In the eighth beatitude, the Christian then reaches perfection in persecution, “Blessed are they that suffer persecution for justice’s sake.” Gregory here states that the human creature cannot attain this perfection on its own. It would be perhaps quite impossible to prefer the invisible

Nevertheless, such priority is never challenged. Danielou argues that although Gregory uses the Plotinian image of cleansing the rust off the image of God, Gregory Christianizes the image because we are now passive recipients of God’s cleansing activity. See Jean Danielou, *Platonisme et théologie mystique. Essai sur la doctrine spirituelle de saint Grégoire de Nysse* (Paris: Aubier, 1944), 227. Alden Mosshammer, arguing the opposite case, says that in the homily on the sixth beatitude, the human being is the agent of the cleansing of the image, God being quite passive. This argument seems merely to be based on some of Gregory’s exhortations to climb up Jacob’s ladder of virtue. But exhortations to virtue need not entail the exclusion of divine agency. See Mosshammer, “Gregory’s Intellectual Development,” 374–75.

⁵⁴ Homily 2, no. 94.

Good to the visible pleasant things of this life “unless his Lord worked with him who has been ‘called on purpose.’”⁵⁵ The living Word “gets inside the one who has genuinely accepted the faith, and splits the things which have become wrongly bonded, and cuts through the chains of habit.”⁵⁶ Gregory states clearly and explicitly the necessity and the priority of grace.

The means of the ascent through the beatitudes, as outlined by Gregory, comes largely in two stages. The first four beatitudes lead the disciple through a contemplation of truth about the human condition and a progressive detachment from things of this world until one reaches the hunger and thirst for the perfection available in the Word. The next four beatitudes describe the way that the Word leads the disciple to perfection through progressive steps of becoming like God. This deification bears its ultimate fruit in the total preference for divine things shown by the disciple willingly suffering persecution for the sake of Christ.⁵⁷

As does Gregory, Augustine also presents the beatitudes as ordered stages in an ascent. After commenting on each of the eight beatitudes, Augustine writes, “the very number of the statements ought to be carefully considered.”⁵⁸ “Number” here possesses two meanings: first, how many statements there are and, second, the order of the statements. Although Augustine recognizes eight beatitudes, he views the eighth beatitude as a summary of the perfection of all the beatitudes.⁵⁹ This strategy allows Augustine to take the eight beatitudes minus one in order to obtain the desired number seven. The seven beatitudes thus depict seven stages in the ascent to perfection. More than simply offering a way to connect

⁵⁵ Homily 8, no. 166.

⁵⁶ Homily 8, no. 167.

⁵⁷ Gregory actually rewords the eighth beatitude. The superscription at the beginning reads, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of justice, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” When Gregory first quotes the beatitude in the homily itself he changes “for the sake of justice” to “for my sake”. Gregory inserts “Christ” for “justice.” As Robert Wilken shows, Gregory can do this easily since in his homily on the fourth beatitude he has already identified justice with the person of Christ. Wilken, “Gregory of Nyssa, *De beatitudinibus*, Oratio VIII,” 250.

⁵⁸ *De Serm.* Book 1, ch. 3, no. 10.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, Book 1, ch. 4, no. 10.

the perfection of the number seven and the perfection available through the beatitudes, the phrase “the number of the statements” refers to the specific order of the beatitudes. Even in our contemporary usage, “to number” items in a set means to recognize their specific order. The seven beatitudes, according to Augustine, are carefully ordered beginning with the humility of the poor in spirit and ending with interior rest of the peacemakers.

Augustine discerns in the seven beatitudes a carefully ordered ascent to wisdom. Augustine, as did Gregory, sees “poor in spirit” as a recommendation of humility. He writes, “Blessedness would begin from nothing else than this if it is to attain to the highest wisdom.”⁶⁰ Then follows both meekness in submitting to the authority of the Scriptures and sorrow in mourning the loss of the highest good. The mind next requires the thirst for justice in order “to tear itself away from those things to which it is bound by harmful delight.”⁶¹ The commendation of mercy in order to receive mercy reveals the need to receive instruction from others who are stronger. Augustine then describes the sixth stage, which is the purity of heart, where “the soul is now (as a result of the right conscience of good deeds) in a condition to contemplate that highest good which can be discerned only by the pure and tranquil intellect.”⁶² The next beatitude concerns the peacemakers. Here Augustine shows that the beatitudes together aim at attaining wisdom. He writes, “The seventh and last stage is wisdom itself, that is, the contemplation of truth, which makes the whole man peaceful and which causes him to take on the likeness of God.”⁶³ Augustine leads his audience up the seven stages of the beatitudes in order to achieve wisdom itself.

The seven beatitudes then are compared to the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit as listed in Isaiah 11:2–3. Once Augustine makes this connection we see the seven gifts have been informing his exegesis of the beatitudes all along. Once the order of the seven gifts is reversed, the exact same seven steps of the ascent appear: fear of God, piety, knowledge, fortitude, counsel, understanding, and wisdom.

⁶⁰ Ibid., Book 1, ch. 1, no. 3.

⁶¹ Ibid., Book 1, ch. 3, no. 10.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

As was the case with Gregory, Augustine describes God as the agent of the human ascent of the beatitudes. As we saw previously, ancient writings often reflect the priority of oral discourse by making associations between ideas and numbers that strike the modern reader as whimsical at best. Augustine thus linked the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit to the seven beatitudes, an apt association in an oral culture. In a subsequent instance, Augustine associates the eight beatitudes to the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost fifty days after Christ's resurrection. The eighth beatitude comes after the prior seven beatitudes. Once Augustine observes that seven times seven plus one equals fifty, he has established an association between the beatitudes and Pentecost. This association, however, does more than manifest Augustine's gift with employing numbers in oral discourses. It shows that the Christian can only ascend the beatitudes with the help of God. Augustine thus writes of the beatitudes in the passive voice in order to show that the Holy Spirit acts as the agent in the ascent. He connects the action of the Holy Spirit to each beatitude: "On that day the Holy Spirit was sent, by whom we are led into the kingdom of heaven and in whom we accept our inheritance and are comforted and fed; we follow him to mercy, and we are purified and made peaceful by him. Thus perfected, we endure all the troubles brought on us for the sake of justice and truth."⁶⁴ This connection of the beatitudes with Pentecost emphasizes the uniquely Christian character of the ascent. Although neo-Platonists depicted and practiced a similar ascent through stages of contemplation, they viewed the human mind or soul as the agent of the ascent. Augustine decisively shifts the focus of the ascent to the active role of the Holy Spirit. As the language of the previous citation shows, it is not, strictly speaking, the Christian who achieves peace, but the Christian who is made peaceful by the Holy Spirit. In other words, it is not the Christian who achieves wisdom, but the Christian who is made wise by the Holy Spirit.

We have seen how Gregory and Augustine share much in common with the view of the end and the means of philosophy in antiquity. To quote Hadot once more, "During [the Roman and Hellenistic eras], philosophy was a *way of life*." When Hadot says that philosophy was a way of life, he does not mean that it was only

⁶⁴ Ibid., Book 1, ch. 4, no. 12.

ethical. "Rather, it means that philosophy was a mode of existing-in-the-world, which had to be practiced at each instant, and the goal of which was to transform the whole of the individual's life."⁶⁵ This total transformation of the individual includes contemporary understanding of ethics, but goes beyond it. Once this goal of ancient philosophy is articulated, then it is obvious why many fathers saw Christianity as a philosophy since the Gospel also sought to transform the whole of the individual's life. Life now would be lived "in Christ" as St. Paul teaches. Conversely, there was little to fear in importing the web of beliefs and practices from other philosophies since they also aimed at a similar end of the total transformation of the person. The beatitudes pronounced by Christ provided a modified means of ascent and a modified end. The elements shared, however, allowed Augustine and Gregory to see in the beatitudes a plan for the total transformation of disciples into children of God. This transformative aspect can complement well the current emphases of exegesis of the beatitudes.

IV. Conclusion

What can we learn from Augustine's and Gregory's exegeses? Augustine and Gregory's exegeses offer a complementary approach to the current trends to interpret the beatitudes (and much else of Jesus' teaching) in exclusively political and moral terms. Biblical exegetes have recovered the political and eschatological emphasis of the beatitudes. This emphasis, however, need not be viewed in opposition to the mystical aspect of the beatitudes. The beatitudes as spiritual ascent and the beatitudes as political, eschatological challenge are not mutually exclusive interpretations. What is the basis of the apparent opposition between a personal, mystical transformation on the one hand, and a political, eschatological transformation on the other? It would appear that the fact that we see the political in contrast to the mystical stems at least in part from the dominance of Max Weber's opposition between an ethic of responsibility and an ethic of ultimate ends.⁶⁶ Such an opposition, however, is not inherent in the beatitudes. Moreover, we can ask

⁶⁵ Hadot, 265.

⁶⁶ Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," in *Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 118–28.

whether the political thrust of the beatitudes already offsets the privatization of religion articulated by Weber. If so, then a fissure has appeared in the distinction between the personal and the social, between the mystical and the political. As long as we recognize that the contemplative does not exclude the moral and vice versa, then Augustine's and Gregory's reading of the beatitudes as an ascent restores the full power of the beatitudes.

The moral life here depicted is not the life of the autonomous individual, but instead the moral life of a creature of God. The moral life demands the contemplative assent since reflection on the moral life leads the person to see that nothing in this life will truly satisfy the God-given desire for happiness. Man therefore seeks union with God beyond what is capable through the veil of this present creation. Christ's announcement of the beatitudes declares that this kingdom is an everlasting kingdom in which the most unlikely suspects—indeed all human beings—have blessing, or beatitude, pronounced upon them as the community of His kingdom. Happiness is not compulsory, but the Divine Teacher sets forth an invitation to happiness as the true form of the moral life, one that ends with the enjoyment of God as his children.

Familiar with the neo-Platonic stages of spiritual progress, Augustine and Gregory could not but interpret the beatitudes as stages of spiritual progress. Hadot has helped to illustrate the what and how of the ascent in philosophy in antiquity. It was not simply intellectual in terms of reaching higher theorems or greater speculative powers, but it was above all the transformation of the soul in order to be able to see greater things. If moral transformation forms the basis of the neo-Platonic ascent, then it appears much more natural to interpret the beatitudes as steps in an ascent. Contemporary concerns about a merely intellectual ascent can be set aside since it would have been unimaginable in antiquity that the philosophical ascent could be merely intellectual. By recovering Gregory's and Augustine's exegeses of the beatitudes, we can offer contemporary theology a vision for integrating moral and political transformation and spiritual ascent. N V

