

To Whom Can God Speak?

Trinitarian Persons in Gregory of Nyssa and William Hasker

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Abstract: The theological works of Gregory of Nyssa have proved fertile ground for modern philosophers or theologians seeking to give a good account of the Trinity. Those eager to give a traditionally grounded account look to theological giants like Gregory for support. One relatively recent example of this is William Hasker's pro-Social account. While much of Hasker's work is laudable, this paper argues that his specific account of "person" is incompatible with at least one passage in Gregory.

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The analytic philosopher or theologian who seeks to give an account of the Trinity must walk a difficult line that both (a) demonstrates the logical coherence or consistency of the doctrine and (b) is sensitive to the doctrine as it is received from the tradition.¹ Because of his high status in the tradition and philosophical chops, Gregory of Nyssa is perhaps an especially good candidate for this kind of retrieval work. It is no surprise, then, that modern theologians have availed themselves of Gregory's work in service of their own.

One relatively recent example of this is William Hasker's *Metaphysics and the Tri-Personal God* (2013). Hasker walks well the line between the metaphysical and historical work required for a good account of the Trinity. Towards developing his "pro-Social" account, Hasker looks to Gregory for an ally. The potential problems

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with such a move have been discussed elsewhere.² This paper shall not attempt to reconstruct these debates nor speculate whether it is proper to call Gregory a “social Trinitarian,” in the modern sense of the term. This paper will, however, suggest an incompatibility between one passage in Gregory and Hasker’s understanding of divine persons that is critical to his “pro-Social” account.

The purpose of showing incompatibility with Hasker’s account, is not to place Gregory in any modern Trinitarian camp nor is it to deny that there are other passages in Gregory’s corpus that lend themselves to “social” readings. Instead, the purpose is to highlight an important strand in Gregory’s thought—and one that appears in his more careful, theological work—that is worth greater consideration when appealing to Gregory to construct modern accounts of the Trinity.

1. Hasker and the Pro-Social Account

Hasker is clear about the importance of pro-Nicene theology to the doctrine of the Trinity. He says that “construction of trinitarian doctrine should take as foundational the pro-Nicene theologians of the fourth century”, and that they “constitute for us an invaluable, indeed indispensable resource” (Hasker 2013, 168; 193). Of this group, Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine of Hippo receive the most attention, with Gregory becoming especially vital because of his perceived kinship with Hasker’s own account. To some degree, Hasker thinks that “the way the doctrine was understood by Gregory of Nyssa” provides warrant for the adoption of the pro-Social view (Hasker 2013, 193). He has, at least somewhat intentionally, tied his own account to Gregory’s. Any incompatibility between Hasker and Gregory on Trinity doctrine then would surely be a problem for Hasker, even if not entirely detrimental.

To avoid anachronism, Hasker prefers the label “pro-Social” rather than “social trinitarian.” A critical feature of a “pro-Social” account is that it thinks of the divine persons in a particular way. Hasker, for example, adopts Cornelius Plantinga Jr.’s understanding of divine persons as “distinct centers of knowledge, will, love, and action” (Hasker 2013, 22). It seems to me that the presence of these distinct centers are jointly sufficient conditions for the pro-Social account. An account of divine persons as distinct centers of love but not will or action, for instance, would not

² For example, see the extended discussions of this in: Sarah Coakley, ed., *Re-Thinking Gregory of Nyssa* (2003); Lucian Turcescu, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Concept of Divine Persons*, American Academy of Religion Academy Series (2005); Morwenna Ludlow, *Gregory of Nyssa: Ancient and (Post)Modern* (2007).

qualify as a pro-Social account.³ A pro-Social trinitarian is one committed to the view, explicitly or implicitly, that the divine persons are distinct centers of knowledge *and* will *and* love *and* action.

One might wonder what it means for a divine person to be “distinct centers” of something. It is not specified, but Hasker does suggest that the way divine persons are distinct centers of knowledge, will, love, and action is similar to the way human persons are distinct centers of these. After all, a primary motivator for the pro-Social account is “the conviction...that the subject of all of the human experience of Jesus is the divine Logos, God the Son” (Hasker 2013, 193). Hasker adds that “all of the words and actions of Jesus were understood to be words and actions of God the Son, the second Person of the Trinity” (Hasker 2013, 194). For example, when Jesus prays to the Father, Hasker says, it is an example of the second person of the Trinity speaking to the first person of the Trinity. If this is indeed an example of the second persons of the Trinity speaking to the first person of the Trinity, then we have a good reason to think that at least two members of the Trinity are distinct centers of knowledge, will, and action.⁴

While there are different ways that an account can be “pro-Social,” Hasker’s “pro-Social” account is such because it claims that the three persons of the Trinity are distinct centers of knowledge, will, love, and action. On Hasker’s reading, Gregory of Nyssa is an example of a “pro-Social” thinker. But this needs more exploration.

2. Gregory Being Anti-Social

The aim of this section is *not* to provide a comprehensive account of Gregory’s view on divine persons nor chart him in modern Trinitarian terms.⁵ However, this section does closely examine one often neglected strand of thinking in Gregory’s Trinitarian thought. To do so, it gives close attention to one passage in *Contra Eunomium II* (CE II). CE II, like all of Gregory’s writings, has its own context and, unlike many of Gregory’s writings, has a polemical context—the rebuttal of Eunomian heresies. Yet,

³ In any case, these different centers are not easily isolated, though this is something I return to later.

⁴ Presumably, *love* follows these three, but a conversation alone may not suggest distinct centers of love.

⁵ For this reason, I do not examine other passages in Gregory that appear more “pro-Social” or are important for his view on the Trinity and divine persons, such as Letter 35. The importance of other passages have been explored elsewhere. This paper is restricted to this passage—a relatively neglected passage for Gregory’s Trinitarian views—in order to show a strand in Gregory’s thought relevant to the modern debate.

it is also among Gregory's most careful, philosophical treatments of the persons of the Trinity.

In the passage in question, Gregory responds to Eunomius' claim that God *speaks* (CE II, 100-102; GNO 195-104).⁶ He first responds by reiterating a central argument from *CE II*: speech about God is not univocal to speech about human persons. In this case, it is *speech itself* that is not univocal. Speech requires certain physical parts that God does not have, such as a windpipe, teeth, and a mouth. The word *spoke*, then, functions differently in the phrases "God spoke to Moses" and "Miriam spoke to Moses".

With this general point established, Gregory shifts to a second response. He considers divine speech prior to or apart from creation. Cases of this are more perplexing since "speaking cannot be effective unless it is directed to a listener. If therefore [Scripture] says that God spoke, we need an indication of the audience to which he spoke" (CE II, 103; GNO 206). Gregory implies that there is a difference between God's speech to his creation (e.g., to Moses) and God's speech prior to or apart from creation (e.g., in himself). For ease of reference, call the former *economic* speech and the latter *immanent* speech. An important difference between the two, suggests Gregory, is whether there is a listener. Referring to immanent speech, Gregory asks: to whom does God speak?

Gregory wonders how Eunomius might respond to this. Will he say that God speaks to *himself*? Surely not. Gregory muses, "Eunomius may of course say that it is a conversation with the Son" (CE II, 103; GNO 207). This hypothetical Eunomian response argues that the Father speaks *immanently* to the Son. Gregory has already denied that God speaks in the physical sense, but he acknowledges that speech could connote different things such as writing, gesturing, or even "eye glancing in a particular manner" (CE II, 104; GNO 208). He later adds that "in the case of God the verb 'say' does not of course connote voice and speech, but...indicates the intellectual notion in a manner more acceptable to our senses" (CE II, 109; GNO 227). Gregory understands speech in the divine sense to be more than strictly *speech*, but communication more broadly. So, *speech* in this text is more broad than simply talking to another—though it includes that, too.

Gregory proceeds to deny that the Father and Son speak to one another. He develops this argument:

- (1) Speech requires sufficient middle space between speaker and hearer.

⁶ In text citations to Gregory's work are cited by title (CE II), along with the English pagination, followed by the pagination for the critical Greek text of Gregory's work, *Gregorii Nysseni Opera* (GNO). The English translations, and English page numbers, are from the Brill translation.

- (2) There is no middle space between Father and Son.
- (3) Therefore, the Father cannot speak to the Son.

To his opponents, Gregory wants to know what middle space, or medium, could possibly “separate the Son from the Father” (CE II, 104; GNO 210)? If there were a medium that made speech possible, that medium would have to be either created or uncreated. It cannot be uncreated since only the divine nature is uncreated, and cannot be created since this act of speech is said to occur prior to or apart from creation. He thus concludes:

Therefore of necessity the word of truth compels us to hold that there is nothing between the Father and the Son. But where no separation is conceived, close conjunction is surely acknowledged; and what is totally conjoined is not mediated by voice and speech. By ‘conjoined’ I mean that which is totally inseparable. (CE II, 105; GNO 214)

What precisely constitutes this medium is irrelevant, for Gregory denies such a thing is possible. The important point for our purposes is that Gregory denies the very possibility of immanent speech between the Father and the Son.

Gregory offers support for this denial. “The Divinity”, he says, “is not divided in its receptive activities” (CE II, 104; GNO 211). Human receptive activities include different senses—sound, smell, etc.—but these are only analogies of divine receptive activities. As in human persons, in God these activities are understood as that which allows for communication. Whatever those activities are, *they are not divisible*, further making immanent speech between Father and Son impossible.

Further, Gregory adds that “there is no *diaphora* in will between the Son and the Father” (CE II, 106; GNO 215). Difference and distinction are both legitimate translations for *diaphora*.⁷ Difference may not *necessarily* imply distinction, even if it is suggestive of it. For instance, the Father and the Son could have distinct wills but always will the same thing. Yet I understand Gregory as making the stronger claim and denying *distinction* in will. There are three reasons for this. First, because of the way Gregory has used the same or similar language elsewhere. Later in *CE II*, he says that there is no *diaphoras* between the *nature (ousia)* of the Father and the Son. This is suggestive of the strength the term can have in Gregory – there is no *diaphora* of will nor of nature in Father and Son. The second reason is the mirror analogy that

⁷ For more, see the helpful entries on *diaphora* and *diaphorus* in BDAG: Frederick W Danker, Walter Bauer, and William F Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (2000).

follows the quote. If Bill looks into a mirror and moves his hand, the image of Bill also moves a hand. But, in this case, there are not two separate Bills, each willing to move a hand. Gregory says of the mirror, “*in just the same way*” the Son, *the image of God*, is “disposed immediately and directly like the Father in every movement” (CE II, 106; GNO 215). The third reason is that Gregory says that the Son “has in himself the whole will of the Father” (CE II, 106; GNO 217). If the Son has the Father’s will *and also* a distinct will of his own, then Gregory would be committed to the Son having two wills *immanently*. It is more likely that Gregory, instead, means to deny any distinction in will between Father and Son.

Before considering the compatibility of this passage with Hasker’s “pro-Social” account, two observations are worth making. First, Gregory does distinguish between the divine *persons*. There is distinction even if there is no distance.⁸ Second, although in this passage Gregory refers mostly to Father and Son, he means this to apply to the Holy Spirit as well. He later adds, “the Holy Spirit does not need verbal instruction either, since he is in God” (CE II, 106; GNO 218). These observations are important to keep in mind even if they are ancillary to the argument of this paper.

3. Incompatibility

The stated purpose of this paper is to highlight an important strand in Gregory’s thought—and one that appears in his more careful, theological work—that is worth greater consideration when appealing to Gregory to construct modern accounts of the Trinity. By highlighting this strand, I do not mean to suggest that Gregory cannot be used to support a “pro-Social” account. But this passage must be reckoned with to do so. This final section shows why. It outlines three reasons to think this passage in CE II is incompatible with Hasker’s “pro-Social” account.

The first reason for incompatibility is Gregory’s primary argument that there is insufficient separation between Father and Son for speech *immanently*. There is an assumption being made here: distinct centers of knowledge, will, and action *would be able to communicate with each other* if communication were otherwise possible. Clearly, God can communicate. God communicates with Moses, for example. The way Gregory speaks of speech, he seems to understand it as (i) an *action*, (ii) a *willed* action, and (iii) involving some sort of *knowledge* in the non-technical sense. Given Gregory’s use of speech and that communication is otherwise possible for God, what else could hinder communication between Father and Son if not lack of distinction

⁸ It is beyond the scope of the paper to consider the nature of this distinction, as there are different kinds of distinctions one might apply to the divine persons.

in these centers? Similarly, Gregory denies any division in God's receptive centers, or those things that allow for speech. If God lacks the kind of physical, sensory receptacles typically required for speech, then knowledge, will, and action are among the best candidates for receptive activities for a divine being. For Hasker, it is the actions of Jesus, like speaking to the Father, that drive pro-Social conclusions. Similarly, Gregory's denial of similar actions, like the Son speaking to the Father, drive anti-Social implications.

The second reason for this incompatibility is more direct. I argued above that Gregory explicitly denies any distinction in will between Father and Son. Yet even if my translation of *diaphora* is wrong and *difference* is the better translation, there are still reasons to think he denied a distinction in will. First, the argument against divine speech as well as the denial of difference are each at least *suggestive* of this conclusion. Second, he made similar suggestive statements elsewhere. Earlier in *CE II*, when Eunomius denies the distinction between begotten and unbegotten in God, Gregory responds that "it must follow that the Father is deemed the same as the Son" (*CE II*, 68; *GNO* 38). This implies that the only distinction for Gregory in the divine persons are the relations, which implies that the divine persons are not distinct centers of knowledge, will, love, or action.

If Gregory denies a distinction in will between the divine persons, then it follows that his account of divine persons is incompatible with the pro-Social account. Yet, I want to briefly consider whether Gregory's view is compatible with the other three centers when isolated—knowledge or love or action. The case of action is straightforward: for Gregory will and action are inseparable. "In the case of the divine Nature", he says, "there is no difference between will and act" (*CE II*, 109; *GNO* 228). Since *will* and *action* are inseparably linked in God, a denial of distinction in will entails a denial of distinction in action as well. The case of love is more ambiguous. Love is often characterized as an act of will, and so distinct centers of love would require distinct wills. It is reasonable to infer that Gregory denies that the divine persons are distinct centers of love, but love might be understood differently, especially with respect to God.⁹ In the case of knowledge, it may be that Gregory's position is compatible with the divine persons being distinct centers of knowledge. But the denial of distinction in will and action is enough to show incompatibility with Hasker's "pro-Social" account. In any case, the logic of this

⁹ If not distinct centers of love, can the divine persons love one another? There are good reasons to think that the divine persons *do* love one another, but the logic of this passage does at least push against this conclusion. At the very least we can say that, for Gregory, insofar as the divine persons love one another, they love one another in a qualified sense: that is, not in the way human persons love one another.

passage does seem to imply that the divine persons are not distinct centers of knowledge, but I do not defend this conclusion here.

For these reasons, the best conclusion to draw is that this strand in Gregory's thought is incompatible with Hasker's "pro-Social" account. However, there is at least one possible objection to this conclusion found in Hasker. In defending the "pro-Social" view, Hasker points to the words and actions of Jesus Christ. He says of Gregory:

Indeed, Gregory freely and without hesitation or embarrassment attributes to the Son all manner of personal functions and activities: he has marked out the heavens . . . and directs all that is in motion, but he also was born among us, healed sufferings by his touch . . . and so on and on. Anyone who, in the face of this, refuses to admit that Gregory affirmed the full personhood of the Son has a steep mountain to climb. (Hasker 2013, 33)

As quoted earlier, Hasker himself claims that "all of the words and actions of Jesus were understood to be words and actions of God the Son, the second Person of the Trinity" (Hasker 2013, 194).

Of course, Hasker is correct that Gregory would not hesitate to ascribe unique actions and functions to Jesus Christ. Furthermore, he is right that "Gregory affirmed the full personhood of the Son." The issue at hand, however, is what is implied by the Son's personhood or what we ought to infer from the actions of the incarnate Christ. Gregory, for example, clearly points to a difference in God's action in creation and God's actions apart from creation. The words and actions of Jesus that Hasker names are *economic* actions—works *in creation*. Hasker agrees that the economic-immanent distinction is important to pro-Nicene theology, but fails to see its relevance to the current discussion about divine persons (Hasker 2013, 194). The passage from CE II demonstrates the relevance to the current discussion. Gregory deems certain actions of Jesus—namely, speaking to the Father—as possible *economically* but not *immanently*. There is *diaphora* in will economically, but not immanently. Whatever is to be said about the merits of this distinction, for Gregory the economic actions of the Son simply do not entail an immanent distinction of will or action between Father and Son.¹⁰ Assuming Hasker means the pro-Social account

¹⁰ Of course, this distinction has proved relatively controversial in modern theology. Karl Rahner's now famous (or infamous) "Rahner's Rule" is that "the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity" and *vice versa*. The use of the distinction here is not to suggest that Gregory, like some modern theologians, extends this distinction to all Trinitarian discourse nor is it to suggest even that this is a good distinction. But it is to suggest that something like this distinction is necessary to understand

to apply to God prior to or apart from creation and not just God as he acts in creation, examples of *economic* distinctions in action or will between Father and Son will not be enough to make his case. Instead, he would need an example of an action one of the divine persons performs *immanently* that the other persons do not.

Hasker might find such an example in the divine processions or the Father's begetting the Son. In begetting the Son, the Father performs an action of a certain kind that the Son does not, and perhaps even a *willed* action.¹¹ However, it is difficult to see how these examples bear on action or will in the normal sense of the terms, or as Hasker has used them. The Father begets the Son *eternally* and without any volitional decision or alternative option. The examples Hasker uses above are certainly of a much different *kind* of willed action than the processions or begetting. Yet, even if processions or begetting *were* such examples, it still does not entail that Gregory finds them to entail the relevant distinctions. He has still denied *diaphora* in will, which could be understood as either distinction or difference. If understood as distinction, it is explicitly incompatible with the pro-Social account. If understood as difference, the wills *might* be distinct but the Father and Son always will the same thing. Yet, begetting, in this understanding, would require distinction *and* difference since Father begets Son but Son does not beget Father. This means that in Gregory's understanding, the processions and begetting do not require distinction or difference in the divine will.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that a passage in Gregory of Nyssa from *CE II* is incompatible with Hasker's pro-Social account. If it is correct, it of course does *not* follow that the pro-Social account is wrong. It could be Gregory who is wrong, or he could be "pro-Social" in some other ways. The incompatibility does suggest, however, that modern theologians need to take this strand in Gregory's thought seriously. Other texts, like *Letter 35*, are indeed important for a fuller picture of Gregory's Trinitarian thought and view of divine persons. But if Gregory is "pro-Social," he is "pro-Social" in his own way and not always in the ways that modern interpreters think he is. If Gregory

this strand of Gregory's thought. For more on "Rahner's Rule," see: Dennis W. Jowers, "A Test of Karl Rahner's Axiom, 'The Economic Trinity Is the Immanent Trinity and Vice Versa' (2006).

¹¹ Thanks to Richard Swinburne for pointing out that Aquinas thought that the processions *were* an act of will, as in *Summa Theologica* (ST) I.27.3 and I.27.4. While this is true, it is true in some qualified way. Aquinas continued to maintain that "the intellect and will are not distinct in God" (ST I.27.3, reply to objection 3). Whatever Aquinas means by the processions being an act of the will, it cannot be of such a sort that it requires the Father and Son to have distinct wills.

is, as in Hasker's estimation, one of the strongest lines of defense for the presence of the pro-Social account in the pro-Nicene tradition, this line of defense is worth reexamining.

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