David Bradshaw (University of Kentucky)

Plato in the Cappadocian Fathers

In many ways, the work of the Cappadocian Fathers represents the finest fruit of the encounter between Christianity and Hellenism in late antiquity. Its exhibits a breadth and sense of creative freedom that would, for various reasons, rarely again be achieved within the Greek-speaking Christian world. It richness and fecundity were in large measure a result of the Cappadocians’ Janus-faced attitude toward pagan culture. On the one hand, they were beneficiaries of fine classical educations—including, in the case of Basil and Gregory Nazianzen, long periods of study in Athens—and they drew freely upon pagan models in matters of both philosophical content and literary style.¹ On the other hand, they were keenly aware that with Christianity something new had entered the world, and that their use of pagan learning would always be in some sense a foray into foreign territory—a matter of “acquiring the Egyptian wealth,” as Gregory of Nyssa put it, “for the adornment of the Church, the true tabernacle.”²

Their attitude toward Plato is of a piece with their attitude toward pagan culture in general. They occasionally mention him with respect, as Basil does twice in his famous address on the Christian use of pagan literature, To the Youth.³ And of course there are many unacknowledged borrowings that (as I will attempt to show) run pervasively throughout their work. But the Cappadocians’ evident appreciation for Plato does not prevent them from also being sharply critical. Gregory Nazianzen lists his errors succinctly: “the ideas of Plato, and the transmigrations and courses of our souls, and the recollections, and the unlovely loves passing through lovely bodies to the soul.”⁴ Basil and Gregory of Nyssa likewise attack various ideas found in Plato, such as the necessary uniqueness of the cosmos and the pre-existence and transmigration of souls.⁵ However, they do not mention Plato in doing so, and such views were sufficiently widespread that the Cappadocians probably did not associate them with Plato more than with a half dozen other possible sources—including, in the case of the pre-existence of the soul, their own master, Origen.

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¹ For details of their education see Rousseau 1994, 27–60 (Basil), McGuckin 2001, 35–83 (Gregory Nazianzen), and Silvas 2007, 1–15 (Gregory of Nyssa). We know little about the educational curriculum in Athens at this period, although it undoubtedly included wide reading in Plato; cf. Ruether 1969, 18–28 and Rist 1981, 182–85.
³ Basil, To the Youth 6.5 and 9.12. Both passages cite Plato approvingly for his teaching on the pursuit of virtue.
⁵ Basil, Hexaemeron 3.3, 8.2; Gregory of Nyssa, On the Making of Man 28.
I will not attempt here to catalog every instance of possible Platonic influence or Platonic criticism in the Cappadocians’ work, a task that has been adequately performed by others. Instead I will focus on what seem to me the most important thematic resonances between Plato and the Cappadocians, including the ways in which the Cappadocians, by adopting and reworking Platonic ideas, subtly transformed them. First a point of clarification: in speaking of an idea as Platonic, I do not mean to claim that it was held by Plato (a question that is notoriously difficult to settle), but only that it can be found fairly prominently within his work and seems to be presented there in a favorable light. Likewise, I do not mean to suggest that this idea could have reached the Cappadocians only directly via their reading of Plato. In general, in any case of apparent Platonic influence there are three possibilities: (1) it is a result of direct reading of Plato’s works, (2) it has been mediated by Platonically influenced authors (e.g., for the Cappadocians, Philo of Alexandria, the Greek Apologists, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, or Plotinus), or (3) it is a result of an independent line of thought. Although a few of the ideas mentioned here may belong in category (3), it is unlikely that many do so, if only because of their sophistication and complexity. That leaves (1) and (2). Unfortunately we generally cannot tell in which of these ways an idea might have reached the Cappadocians, except in those rare cases where the author mentions his source or there is some other telltale sign, such as a distinctive cast left upon the idea by an intermediary author. I will therefore speak broadly of apparent Platonic influence without attempting to identify whether it is direct or indirect, or even claiming with certainty that it is an actual case of influence rather than merely a convergence of ideas, although I believe that this is typically the case.

It will be helpful to begin by summarizing some of the major themes in Plato that would have been likely to appeal to the Cappadocians. Such a review will enable us to recognize not only points of influence, but also the ways in which the influence involved adaptation and revision.

Although one naturally thinks first here of Plato’s theology and theory of the soul, it is important to recognize that both of these are rooted in a certain understanding of human motivation. In Republic 6 Socrates posits that “every soul pursues the good and does whatever it does for its sake” (505d). A similar point is made in the Symposium, where Diotima observes that people love the good and want it to be theirs forever (206a). Taken alone such statements might seem to say merely that whatever a person seeks is seen by that person as in some sense good. However, both occur within a context that quickly turns to the Forms. In the Republic Socrates observes blithely (encountering no resistance) that the many good things, beautiful

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6 See Gronau 1908, Pinault 1925, Cherniss 1930, Courtonne 1934, and Daniélou 1953. Much can also be gleaned from the annotations to the Sources Chrétiennes editions of their works.

7 Translations of Plato are from Cooper 1997.
things, and so on, “we set down according to a single form of each, believing that there is but one, and calling it the being (οὐτιν) of each” (507b). From this point it is assumed that what all seek is ultimately—although perhaps unknown to them—the Form of the Good. The Symposium shifts the focus instead to beauty (τὸ καλόν), as Diotima observes that, because of their desire to possess the good forever, all seek in some way to “give birth in beauty” and thereby achieve a kind of immortality (206b–207a). This time the formal unity of the beautiful is introduced step by step, as the lover is envisioned as first recognizing that “the beauty of all bodies is one and the same,” then ascending similarly through the beauty of souls, activities, laws, ideas, and knowledge, to the vision of Beauty Itself (210b–211a).

Already in this fundamental line of thought there are present at least four elements that profoundly affected a wide range of subsequent thinkers, the Cappadocians among them. First is the reality of a transcendent principle (or principles), labeled in the Republic the Form of the Good and in the Symposium Beauty Itself. Second is the presence of this principle (or principles) within lesser beings, constituting them as good or beautiful, and thereby providing an intimation of their transcendent source. Third is the innate desire and affinity of the human soul for this transcendent source, a desire so deeply rooted that it motivates all that we do. And fourth is the possibility, in view of the foregoing, of ascending via the sensible world to a more direct apprehension of its source, an apprehension that will also be a satisfaction of our deepest longings.

One immediate question that arises within this context is whether the Form of the Good and Beauty Itself are the same. There are a few hints to that effect in the Republic, for Socrates mentions that the Good is “the cause of all that is correct and beautiful in anything” (508c), and later he seems to refer to “the beautiful and the good” as a single entity (531c). On the other hand, the types of pursuit envisioned by the two dialogues are sharply different. In the Republic this pursuit takes the form of the education of the Guardians, a long and carefully structured process that culminates—after successive stages of training in gymnastics, music, poetry, mathematics, and dialectic, followed by engagement in military and political affairs—in the vision of the Good (540a). In the Symposium, as has been mentioned, it takes the form of the ascent of the “ladder of love.” Although this ascent is not without its own kind of discipline, it is far more passionate, personal, and intuitive than the education of the Guardians. Whether the objects apprehended in two such different ways might ultimately be the same is a question that Plato leaves tantalizingly open. However that may be, both dialogues make it clear that, although the initial desire for the good and the beautiful is itself something good, training and guidance are needed for it to attain fruition.⁸

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⁸ Although this is more obvious in the Republic than the Symposium, even in the latter the “leader”—that is, Eros himself—has to lead aright (210a). The necessity that the soul love in the right way in order to “regrow its wings” is a major theme of the Charioteer speech in the Phaedrus.
A further important point is that for Plato the apprehension of the Good is not just the final satisfaction of desire, but the attainment of true knowledge. This is perhaps most obvious in the Myth of the Cave in the Republic, where one who has ascended from the cave sees both the intelligible realm and the Good (represented, respectively, by visible objects and the sun) (517b). Likewise in the Myth of the Sun a few pages earlier, the Form of the Good is the source of truth for the objects of knowledge and of the power to know in the soul (508d). Why should there be this connection between value, as represented by the Good, and knowledge? The Republic offers a sketchy answer in that the Form of the Good is the source of being as well as truth (509b), and plainly real knowledge must be of that which is (477a). In what sense the Good is the source of being, however, is left unclear. At least part of the answer may lie in an assumed connection between goodness and being: presumably being is something good, so that the Good, as the source of all that is good, must be the source of being as well.⁹

A somewhat fuller answer emerges in the discussion of the relationship between goodness and knowledge in the Phaedo. There Socrates recounts his youthful disappointment with Anaxagoras, who, after proclaiming that Mind (νοῦς) is the cause of all things, went on to give only materialistic explanations. Socrates argues that a truly adequate explanation must address not only the material preconditions for things to be as they are, but why it is best that they be so (97b–99d). To fulfill this desideratum is the goal of the Timaeus, a work devoted to explaining—in terms not less suggestive for being mythical—how the physical cosmos is ordered for the best. Whatever the details of this account, it is plain that for Plato knowledge can be attained only by seeing things in relation to the Good, which is both their ordering principle and the cause of their being.

The comprehensive role assigned to the Good naturally raises the question of the place of the Good within Plato’s theism. Without entering into all the complexities of this question, it is plain that the concepts of the Good and the Beautiful, however rich, were not sufficient to capture the active role that Plato attributed to the divine. For this purpose Plato instead invoked νοῦς, Mind or Reason. In a series of dialogues—beginning with the discussion of Anaxagoras in the Phaedo, continuing through the Sophist, Statesman, and Philebus, and culminating in the Timaeus—Plato argues that there must be a divine principle capable of actively ordering things for the best.¹⁰ He refers to this principle sometimes simply as νοῦς, sometimes more anthropomorphically as “the god,” the Demiurge, or Father. Precisely how these terms are

⁹ Alexander Mourelatos has observed (in a lecture I attended) how such a view appears to be reflected within ordinary language. We speak of an especially good beer as a real beer, an especially good catch as a real catch, and so on. Such statements suggest that our recognition of things as belonging to kinds is intrinsically evaluative. Since for Plato, to be is always to be a member of a kind (Kahn 1982), it is not hard to see why Plato regards being as in a sense deriving from the Good.
¹⁰ See Phaed. 97b–99d; Soph. 265b–266c; Stat. 268e–275a; Phil. 26e–31a; Tim. 27d–30c, 39e, 41a–d, 47e–48a. For a comprehensive study of this theme in Plato see Menn 1995.
to be understood is unclear, as Plato probably intends that it should be. As he famously remarks in the *Timaeus*, “to find the maker and father of this universe is hard enough, and even if I succeeded, to declare him to everyone is impossible” (28c)—words that Gregory Nazianzen would later cite with approval.¹¹ In general it seems that Plato sees the divine as shrouded in mystery in a way that he is loath to seek to penetrate. This is hardly surprising when we recall that for Plato real knowledge requires a personal transformation that culminates in seeing all things in light of the Good. Mystery is on such a view not exclusively an attribute of the divine, but simply that of reality itself as viewed from our own perspective as creatures largely driven by passion and appetite.

Despite such pious reticence, Plato does offer hints that raise some intriguing possibilities regarding the relationship between his two divine principles, the Good and νοῦς. He emphasizes that it is because the Demiurge is good that he creates the world, seeking to make it as good as possible (*Timaeus* 29e–30a). This in turn leads the Demiurge to take his model the Absolute Living Creature, which contains within itself all the “intelligible living creatures” (νοητὰ ζωὰ, 30c). Inasmuch as it serves as the model for the sensible world, the Living Creature plays here the role of the Forms in the middle dialogues. (This identification is confirmed later when the Forms, but not the Living Creature, are listed among the things that “existed even before the universe came to be,” 52d). But why is it regarded as a unity, and, in particular, as a living unity? The *Timaeus* does not explain further. Nor is there any explanation of why the Good—ostensibly the source of the Forms—is not mentioned, save perhaps indirectly in the reference to the goodness of the Demiurge.

One can of course simply shrug off these perplexing details. If an answer is available that makes them fall into place, however, it surely should be assigned at least prima facie plausibility. The answer widely favored in antiquity was that (a) the Demiurge and the Living Creature represent two aspects—the active and the archetypal—of a single divine reality, which can be known equally as God, the Beautiful, or the Good, and (b) the Living Creature is *living* because it is simply a reification of the contents of the divine mind. This is the form of theism characteristic of Middle Platonism.¹² Such a reading obviously draws Plato quite close to the outlook of Christian authors such as the Cappadocians, and the fact that it had already achieved wide currency among pagan readers would have made it all the more appealing.

Finally let us note the implications that Plato draws from these various interlocking themes for his view of human nature. Plato is, of course, a dualist as regards the soul and body, one who believes that the soul both pre-exists its current bodily existence and survives for all eternity. He defends this position, or aspects of it, at

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¹² For the development of this theology in antiquity see Dillon 1996 24–29, 91–96, 126–29, 137–39, 157–61, etc. and Kenney 1991 passim, and for a contemporary defense of this way of reading the *Timaeus* see Perl 1998.
length in the *Phaedo* and more briefly in the *Republic, Phaedrus,* and *Laws.* ¹³ Not all of his arguments are of equal value, and those in the *Phaedo,* in particular, are often best seen as gambits within a larger rhetorical strategy. Still, it is plain that for Plato the soul has a fundamental affinity for reality, and above all for the Good (a point already noted above in connection with the Myth of the Sun), and that this is particularly true of the soul’s rational part, τὸ λογιστικόν. The Charioteer Myth in the *Phaedrus* makes particularly vivid Plato’s conviction that the soul’s present state, imprisoned in the body and beset by unruly passions and appetites, is in some sense a fall from its true home among the gods.

It is not surprising that the Church Fathers generally had little use for Plato’s belief in the pre-existence of the soul (a view which, as I have mentioned, by the time of the Cappadocians was particularly associated with Origen). More surprising is that they also had little use for his arguments for immortality. The reason was that they thought it important that immortality be recognized as a gift from God rather than a natural attribute of the soul. ¹⁴ Even so, they readily endorsed Plato’s teaching regarding the soul’s innate affinity for the Good—that is, as they saw it, for God—a view that they not unnaturally associated with the biblical teaching that man is made in the image of God. ¹⁵ In this connection they also found two other recurrent Platonic themes of great interest. One was the need for purification from bodily attachments, passions, and desires in order for the soul to realize its true end. ¹⁶ This idea found particular resonance within the monastic movement, for purification from the baser passions and desires is of course a central aim of the monastic life. Another was Plato’s teaching (often neglected within modern scholarship) that the goal of human life is assimilation to God, ὡμοίωσις θεῷ. ¹⁷ Although for Plato such assimilation is primarily to be achieved through the pursuit of wisdom and virtue, Christians tended to see it within a broader context that included repentance, prayer, worship, charity to the poor, and participation in the sacraments. ¹⁸

In these respects, as in so many others, Plato provided a vocabulary and a basic framework that Christian authors found both sufficiently insightful and sufficiently

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14 See, e.g., Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 5–6 and Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 2.34, with further references and discussion in Wolfson 1956. (However, in *Tim.* 41a–b, Plato speaks of the continued existence of even the gods as due to the divine will, so the difference here should not be exaggerated.)
15 For example, Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.4.3, 37a, 38.4; Clement, *Stromata* 5.14; Origen, *On First Principles* 3.6.1, 4.4.10, *Commentary on John* 2.3; Athanasius, *Against the Heathen* 2; Orations against the Arians 2.78. Although Plato does not call the soul an “image” of God, the *First Alcibiades* (which was assumed in antiquity to be by Plato) does say that the rational part of the soul “resembles” (ἔοικεν) God (133c).
16 For example, *Phaed.* 66b–67a, 80d–84b; *Rep.* 9.588b–590c; *Phaedr.* 253d–256e.
17 See *Apology* 40e–41d; *Phaedo* 81a; *Symp.* 212a; *Republic* 6.500c–d; *Theaet.* 176a–c; *Tim.* 47b–c, 90a–d, and *Laws* 4.715e–717a, with discussion in Sedley 1999 and Annas 1999, 52–71.
18 Major studies on this subject include Gross 1938, Merki 1952, and Russell 2004.
flexible to serve their purposes. No doubt few, if any, ever consciously formulated the
goal of constructing a systematic Platonic philosophy. But while pursuing their own
(generally theological) agendas, they found Plato’s thought an invaluable resource.

Let us turn now to the Cappadocians. One of the most influential works of St. Basil is
the Long Rules devoted to the monastic life. Here we find him articulating a view of
human motivation similar to that of Plato, although now placed within a Christian
context. Near the beginning of the treatise Basil’s anonymous interlocutor poses
the question, “Speak to us first, therefore, of the love of God; for we have heard
that we must love Him, but we would learn how this may be rightly accomplished.”
Basil replies:

The love of God is not something that is taught, for we do not learn from another to rejoice in
the light or to desire life, nor has anyone taught us to love our parents or nurses. In the same way
and even to a far greater degree it is true that instruction in divine law is not from without, but,
simultaneously with the formation of the creature—man, I mean—a kind of rational force is im-
planted in us like a seed, which, by an inherent tendency, impels us toward love. This germ is
then received into account in the school of God’s commandments, where it is wont to be care-
fully cultivated and skillfully nurtured and thus, by the grace of God, brought to its full
perfection.

The commandments of Scripture are for Basil a kind of “school” that directs our in-
nate love of beauty and goodness, and our innate sense of gratitude for the goods we
have received, toward their proper end. It is not hard to recognize here echoes of Pla-
to’s supposition of the innate human desire for the good, coupled with his emphasis
upon how that desire must be cultivated and directed in order to achieve its proper
end.

In line with the Christian identification of God with the Good, Basil goes on to
find in all beings an innate orientation toward God:

Men are by nature ... desirous of the beautiful. But that which is truly beautiful and desirable is
the good. Now, the good is God, and since all creatures desire good, therefore, all creatures de-
sire God.

Basil here compresses the Good of the Republic and the Beautiful of the Symposium
into a single highest object of desire, which he further identifies as God. One is re-
minded of Augustine’s famous declaration in the Confessions, “Thou hast made us
for Thyself and our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee.” Basil, however,

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19 This work in its current form may reflect hands other than Basil’s, although it is undoubtedly
based on his teaching; see Rousseau 1994, 354–59.
21 Ibid., 908b–c.
22 Ibid. 912a; trans. Wagner, 235.
gives this idea a cosmic rather than personal cast: *all* creatures desire the good, and therefore all desire God. Although such a cosmic teleology is more commonly associated with Aristotle than with Plato, the very universality of the Form of the Good implies that all things, insofar as they seek that which is good in some sense, also seek (often unknowingly) the Good Itself. This is a legitimately Platonic insight that Aristotle brought to central prominence, and Basil here merely articulates the common understanding of it shared in his time by the Platonic and Aristotelian traditions.²⁴

It was Basil’s younger brother, Gregory of Nyssa, who offered the Cappadocians’ most thorough adaptation of these themes. Chapters 10–11 of Gregory’s early work *On Virginity* (c. 371) constitute a virtual reprise of the Ladder of Love passage in the *Symposium*. Gregory begins by observing the great difficulty of describing the divine beauty to one who has not experienced it. The capacity to understand depends not so much on the words employed as on the moral and spiritual state of the hearer:

On the one hand, if someone has purified the eye of his heart so that he can to some degree behold that which is promised by the Lord in the Beatitudes, he will condemn all human utterance as powerless to represent that which he has apprehended. On the other hand if someone who is still immersed in material passions has covered over the visual faculty of his soul with a passionate disposition as with a kind of film, all force of expression will be wasted upon him; for it is all one whether you understate or whether you magnify wondrous things to those who have no power of perceiving them.²⁵

There is here the typically Platonic association of the capacity to understand with moral transformation, and particularly with purification from the passions. Gregory, however, gives this point a distinctively Christian twist by reference to the Beatitude, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matt. 5:8). For Gregory, only purity of heart enables one to see God to the extent that it is possible in this life. As we will see below, such vision is possible precisely because man is made in the image of God, so that purifying the heart reveals the divine image within.²⁶

After expanding upon the ineffability of the divine beauty and the extent to which it exceeds our powers of thought and imagination, Gregory concludes, “it is necessary, therefore, owing to this weakness of the thinking faculty, to lead it through sensible perceptions toward the Unseen.”²⁷ The ineffability of God thus becomes the

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²⁴ The desire of at least all living things for the good is prominent in the *Symposium*, where it is seen as expressed through the impulse for reproduction (207a–d), a passage echoed in Aristotle, *De Anima* 2.4.415b3–7. For discussion of the place of God in Aristotle’s teleology see Kahn 1985, Menn 1992, and Bradshaw 2004, 26–27, 38–39, and for some examples of the persistence of a theocentric teleology within later philosophy see Bradshaw 2004, 64–67 (Numenius and Alcinous), 71–72 (Alexander of Aphrodisias), 81–84 (Plotinus).
²⁶ See Gregory’s *Homilies on the Beatitudes* 6, discussed below.
motive for a kind of intelligible ascent similar to that in the Symposium, although Gregory seems to have in mind a more active role for human guidance than does Plato. He also differs from Plato in giving no particular role to ἔρως, and indeed in urging that “passionate longings after what is seeming” must be set aside. In this respect his approach resembles that of Plotinus, who had already offered his own adaptation of the Ladder of Love in a way that quietly ignored the role given by Plato to sexual attraction.²⁸ This is not to say that Gregory urges the simple extinction of the passions and appetites; on the contrary, we are not to “lock up the appetitive power idle and motionless within us,” but to purify it from the baser desires and lead it upward to “that height which sense can never reach.”²⁹ So, for example, indignation and anger “must be as watch-dogs to be roused only against attacking sins,” the love of gain must be directed toward gaining the kingdom of God, and so on.³⁰ As for concrete steps directing how this is to be done, “each may gather in abundance for himself commandments towards this end out of either Covenant in the divinely inspired writing; the Prophets and the Law are full of them, as are also the Gospels and the traditions of the Apostles.”³¹ In other words, the entirety of the Christian life, rightly understood, is devoted toward such a transformation.

It is noteworthy that Gregory also endorses, at least briefly, much of the terminology associated with the theory of Forms. One who has purified the eye of his soul, he says, “having set aside the matter that is subordinate to the Form (ἰδέα) of Beauty, will use that which he sees like a stepping stool for the contemplation of the Intelligible Beauty, by participation (μετουσία) in which other things become and are called beautiful.”³² Gregory also refers to God as the Prototype (πρωτότυπος) of beauty, and describes Him in terms plainly drawn from Platonic descriptions of the Forms.³³ It is rare to find a patristic author saying so directly that all things participate in God (as opposed to, say, the divine power or energy), much less referring to God as a Form. Clement of Alexandria had argued that because God has no limit (πέρας) He is “without form or name,” and in later works we find Gregory himself

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²⁸ See Plotinus, Enneads 1.6, particularly 1.6.8. The annotations to the Aubineau edition of Gregory’s On Virginity note numerous verbal parallels to both Plato and Plotinus.
³⁰ Ibid., 18.3, ed. Aubineau, 470; trans. NPNF vol. 5, 363. See also the more elaborate treatment of this subject in On the Soul and Resurrection PG 46.48c – 68a, 88c – 93c (= NPNF vol. 5, 438 – 43, 449 – 50), with discussion in Williams 1993 and Sorabji 2000, 391 – 93
³¹ Ibid., 12.1, ed. Aubineau, 398; trans. NPNF vol. 5, 357.
³³ “That which does not have its being beautiful from another, nor is such only at some time or in some respect, but is beautiful from and through and in itself, always being and never becoming beautiful, nor is there any time when it will not be beautiful, but always the same, above all addition and augmentation, unreceptive of any change or alteration,” ibid., 11.5, ed. Aubineau, 394 – 96; trans. NPNF vol. 5, 356.
adopting a similar view.³⁴ It is plain that even in *On Virginity* Gregory does not wish to identify God with a Form, as if He were one among others; the identification is rather with the Good and the Beautiful, understood as the transcendent source of all form. In his later works Gregory more typically identifies divine perfections such as beauty as “energies” (ἐνέργεια), and it was this terminology, rather than the more strictly Platonic language of participation, that became definitive for the later tradition.³⁵

Besides the identification of God as the Good there remains the other strand in Plato’s thought about the divine, the identification of God as νοῦς. As we saw earlier, on the Middle Platonist reading these are different but complementary ways of describing the First Principle. The fact that Plato presents them in various ways within different works, never offering a single comprehensive synthesis, is from this standpoint simply a reflection of the need for multiple descriptions in order to come to anything like an adequate concept of God. By the same token, it is a way of pointing to the inadequacy of each description when taken alone. The mere fact that the Cappadocians describe God as νοῦς is not in itself a sign of Platonic influence, for the description is obvious enough for anyone who thinks of God in personal terms, and has in any case Scriptural warrant.³⁶ However, there does seem to be a legitimately Platonic dimension to the reserve with which they treat this and all other descriptions of God. They explicitly thematize a point that remains largely implicit (although it is certainly present) in Plato—that is, the inadequacy of human concepts and language in attempting to portray the divine, and the need for multiple descriptions in order to come to anything like an adequate presentation of the truth.

To take one example among many, we find Gregory Nazianzen reflecting upon the multiplicity of the ways that God is described in Scripture, mind (νοῦς) among them:

> Are not Spirit, and Fire, and Light, and Love, and Wisdom, and Righteousness, and Mind, and Reason (λόγος), and the like, the names of the First Nature? What then? Can you conceive of Spirit apart from motion and diffusion, or of Fire apart from fuel and upward motion and its proper color and form? ... And you conceive of God as Mind, but which? That which is in something other than itself, and whose thoughts are movements, whether they are kept silently or uttered? ... Thus our mind labors to transcend corporeal things, and to consort with naked incorporeals, as long as it considers with its own weakness the things that are beyond its power. For


³⁵ One exception is *Life of Moses* 2.25, where Gregory speaks of the participation (μετουσία) of all things in God, the real Being (τὸ ὑστερόν ὄν). See discussion in Balas 1966, 100 – 120, and for the development of the terminology of *energeia* see Bradshaw 2004 passim.

³⁶ “Who has known the mind (νοῦς) of the Lord?” (Isaiah 40:13, LXX), quoted twice by St. Paul (Rom. 11:34, 1 Cor. 2:16). Admittedly this presents God as possessing mind rather than simply being mind, but given divine simplicity the latter also follows.
every rational nature longs for God and for the First Cause, but is unable to grasp Him, for the
goal I have mentioned.³⁷

It might seem here that the description of God as νοῦς is simply one among others, the main point being that each must be properly purified in order not to be misleading. However, the identification of God as νοῦς does have a special status for the Cappadocians, one deriving not so much from natural theology as from their understanding of the divine image in man. After describing the errors into which one can be led by using corporeal concepts to think about God, Gregory continues:

What God is in nature and essence, no man ever yet has discovered or can discover. Whether it will ever be discovered is a question which he who will may examine and decide. In my opinion it will be discovered when that within us which is godlike and divine, I mean our mind and reason, shall have mingled with its like, and the image shall have ascended to the Archetype, of which it has now the desire. And this seems to me to be the meaning of that great dictum, “we shall know then even as we are known” (1 Cor. 13:12).³⁸

It is our own identity as νοῦς which gives us the capacity, not so much to understand God conceptually, as to come to know Him personally, to “know even as we are known.”³⁹ This in turn is possible because our νοῦς is an image of the divine νοῦς, to which we can come to be conformed as our Archetype.

Gregory of Nyssa develops a similar understanding of the relationship between human and divine νοῦς, but within the context of a systematic philosophical psychology. His On the Soul and Resurrection defines the soul in quasi-Platonic fashion as “a substance that is created, living, and intellectual, transmitting from itself to an organized and sentient body the power of living and of grasping objects of sense.”⁴⁰ Although this definition might seem to make the soul’s powers of sensation and organic activity intrinsic to it, Gregory goes on to argue that the passions, at least, are “accretions from without,” since they are alien to God in whose image the soul is made.⁴¹ Elsewhere he states more comprehensively that “since the soul finds its perfection in that which is intellectual and rational, everything that is not so may indeed share the name of soul, but is not really soul, but a certain vital energy associated

³⁹ Despite the reference in this passage to knowing God’s “essence or nature,” Gregory very probably has in mind not something like the knowledge of an Aristotelian definition, but the intimate personal knowledge spoken of in Scripture as face to face vision. Elsewhere he denies that the divine nature can be known to any creature, including the angels and the blessed, although he recognizes that the full extent of the knowledge possessed by these groups is unknown to us (Orations 2.76, 6.22, 28.3–4, 38.7).
⁴⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, On the Soul and Resurrection PG 46.29b; trans. NPNF vol. 5, 433.
⁴¹ Ibid., 57c; trans. NPNF vol. 5, 441.
with the appellation of soul.”⁴² Gregory holds that our body in its present state was created by God in prevision of the Fall, and that otherwise we would have had bodies of a perfect (and, presumably, fully rational) nature.⁴³ This view bears an obvious affinity to Plato’s understanding of the soul as consisting in its essence in the rational soul, to which the passions and appetites have been added as a foreign accretion.⁴⁴ Gregory also echoes Plato (or whoever was the author of Alcibiades I) in speaking of the soul as using the body as an “instrument,” and he emphasizes that the manner in which the soul is joined to the body is inscrutable.⁴⁵

Not surprisingly, then, Gregory regards the rational soul as the aspect of humanity that is most decisively made in the image of God.⁴⁶ This leads him to ask whether, given that the Deity and the mind of man are both νοῦς, one must conclude that they are identical. In reply he offers a careful description of the relationship between image and original:

That which is “made in the image” necessarily possesses a likeness to its archetype in every respect: it resembles its archetype in being intellectual, immaterial, unbound by any weight, and in eluding any measurement of its dimensions. Yet as regards its own peculiar nature it is something different from that other; indeed, it would be no longer an image if it were altogether identical. But where we have A in that uncreated prototype we have a in the image. It is just as in a minute particle of glass, when it happens to face the light, the complete disc of the sun is often to be seen, not represented thereon in proportion to its proper size, but so far as the minuteness of the particle admits of its being represented at all.⁴⁷

Gregory’s attempt to clarify the relationship of image and original here is reminiscent of similar discussions in Plato.⁴⁸ Crucially, however, for Gregory the image of God in man is not static, but dynamic. Because God is the Good, in one who turns away from the good the divine image is obscured, and perhaps finally lost.⁴⁹ Indeed, in the broadest sense the divine image is not simply the possession of νοῦς—although that is its central aspect—but the participation in all that is good, including not only rationality but also self-determination and free will.⁵⁰

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⁴² Gregory of Nyssa, On the Making of Man 15.2 PG 44.176d–177a; trans. NPNF vol. 5, 403; cf. ibid., 14.2.
⁴³ Ibid., 2.2, 16.8–9, 17.2–5, 22.4, 30.30. Gregory’s precise views on this subject are far from clear and have provoked considerable discussion; see Ladner 1958 and Behr 1999, with the works there cited.
⁴⁴ See Plato, Rep. 10.611b–612a, Tim. 41c–42e, 69c–e; cf. the simplicity of the soul at Phaedo 79b–80b.
⁴⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, On the Making of Man 8.8, 12.6–8, 15.3; cf. (Ps.–?) Plato, Alc. 1 129b–130c. This is not to say, however, that Gregory would agree with the author of Alcibiades I that “the soul is the man” (130c), for Gregory sees the body as integral to human identity.
⁴⁶ See Gregory of Nyssa, On the Soul and Resurrection PG 46.41a–c, 57a.
⁴⁷ Ibid., 41c; trans. NPNF vol. 5, 436–37.
⁴⁸ See Plato, Cratylus 432a–d, Sophist 240a–b.
⁵⁰ Ibid., 16.10; cf. Great Catechism 5. In yet another sense, Gregory holds that the image of God is not manifest in any single human being alone, but in “the whole plenitude (πλήρωμα) of humanity” (On
Gregory deploys his understanding of the likeness between human and divine υονς in a number of different ways. One is in his argument for the Trinitarian nature of God in the Great Catechism. Having argued for the existence of God based on the “skillful and wise economy of the universe,” Gregory next adds that “not even by those who are external to our doctrine is the Deity held to be without Logos (ἄλογον)—a Logos that must in piety be deemed, not transitory like our own speech, but eternal, substantial, and living.” He then argues that this Logos is neither wholly different from, nor wholly the same as, the one of whom He is the Logos, invoking for this purpose an analogy with the human mind:

As in our own case we say that the word is from the mind, and no more entirely the same as the mind than altogether other than it—for in virtue of being from it, it is something else and not it, whereas in virtue of its bringing the mind in evidence it can no longer be considered as something other than it, but as one in nature although different as a subject—so, too, the Word of God, in virtue of its subsisting by itself is distinct from Him from whom it has its subsistence, and yet by exhibiting in itself those qualities which are recognized in God, it is the same in nature with Him who is recognizable by the same distinctive marks.

The key point here for our purposes is the freedom with which Gregory draws an analogy between God and the human mind. More specifically, it is God the Father who stands in the place of υος, whereas the Son and the Holy Spirit are, respectively, the λόγος which manifests the υος and the πνεύμα by which that λόγος is accompanied. Yet we should also note that Gregory signals repeatedly the limitations of this analogy. He does so partly by emphasizing the differences between the human and divine case (such as the self-subsistence of the Logos), and partly by stating that the entire discussion is undertaken “anagogically” (ἀναγωγικῶς), in order to lead the mind upward from “the things concerning us” to the divine. In other words, it is not so much a matter of analogical reasoning as an attempt to awaken, within the very partial image of the divine present within us, a realization of its divine source. Gregory Nazianzen states the same analogy more succinctly while also voicing the same sense of critical distance. The distinctive features of the three Persons, he says, “correspond to mind, word, and spirit in us, insofar as intelligible things can be likened to those that are sensible, and great things to those that are small, since no image (εἰκών) ever fully penetrates to the truth.”

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the Making of Man 16.17). By this he would seem to mean the totality of the human race taken collectively, rather than something like the Form of Man; cf. discussion in Zachhuber 2000, 155–160.  
51 Gregory of Nyssa, Great Catechism 1, ed. Winling 2000, 144; trans. NPNF vol. 5, 474–75.  
52 Ibid., ed. Winling, 150–52; trans. NPNF vol. 5, 476.  
53 Gregory is careful not to say “by which that λόγος is uttered,” since in the case of the deity there is no physical process accompanying speech; cf. Great Catechism 2.  
55 Gregory Nazianzen, Orations 23.11, PG 35 1161c–1164a (my trans.).
Returning again to Gregory of Nyssa, another context in which he draws upon the identification of God as νοῦς is his discussion of matter. Gregory is in this respect the inheritor of a long tradition going back to the Timaeus. There Plato famously argues that individual material entities are not “this” but only “such,” and that they are best understood as images of the Forms that come to be within the Receptacle of Becoming (49c–53b). Later Platonists such as Alcinous, Plotinus, and Porphyry developed on this basis a view of the sensible individual as a composite (ἄθροισμα) or congress (σύνοδος) of perceptible qualities, presumably (although they were not always clear about this) one that comes to be within an imperceptible substratum that corresponds to the Receptacle.\(^56\) Origen was plainly aware of this view, but he also considers another possibility on which matter consists in nothing but qualities. The latter, he observes, would have the advantage of making even plainer than the former that all is created by God.\(^57\) Although Origen ultimately decides in favor of a substratum, Basil in the Hexaemeron adopts the more radical view. Taking earth as a paradigm for all material entities, he writes: “take away black, cold, weight, density, the qualities which concern taste, and any other qualities that we see in it, and that which underlies them will be nothing.”\(^58\)

Gregory clearly had an interest in this subject, for on three separate occasions he puts forward the view that sensible bodies are nothing but a combination of qualities. What is most interesting, however, is that he further sees the qualities as thoughts (λόγοι) or concepts (νοήματα) within the mind of God. For him this is crucial to understanding how the material creation can come to be from the immaterial and unlimited Creator. As he writes in On the Soul and Resurrection:

The corporeal creation is thought of in terms of properties that have nothing in common with the divine, and it presents this great difficulty to Reason—namely, that Reason cannot see how the visible comes out of the invisible, the hard and resistant out of the intangible, the limited out of the unlimited ... But we can say this much on the subject: that not one of those things which we attribute to body is itself body, neither figure, nor color, nor weight, nor extension, nor quantity, not any other of the things classed as qualities. Each of these is a thought (λόγος), but their combination and union with each other becomes a body. So, since the qualities which complete the body are grasped by the mind and not by sense perception, and the divine is intelligent (νοερός), what trouble is it for the intelligible (νοητός) to fashion the concepts (νοήματα) whose mutual combination (συνδρομή) produces corporeal nature for us?\(^59\)

\(^{56}\) See Alcinous, A Handbook of Platonism 4.7 (and cf. 8 on the Receptacle); Plotinus, Enneads 2.4.11–12, 6.3.8–10; Porphyry, Isagoge 2 (ed. Busse 1887, 7.19–27). The use of the term ἄθροισμα in this context is probably drawn from Theaetetus 157b–c.

\(^{57}\) See Origen, On First Principles 4.6.7–8.

\(^{58}\) Basil, Hexaemeron 1.8, ed. Giet 1968, 120–122; trans. NPNF vol. 8, 56. (Admittedly, this passage is also reminiscent of Aristotle, Metaphysics 7.3, but there is little reason to think that the Cappadocians read the Metaphysics.)

Although there is plainly some affinity between Gregory’s view here and the Middle Platonic view of the Forms as thoughts in the mind of God, Gregory is speaking not of the Forms but of sensible qualities. The closest analogue to his position would in fact seem to lie much later in the history of philosophy, with Berkeleyan idealism. Gregory, however, is not seeking to eliminate matter systematically from his ontology so as to leave only minds and their thoughts, for he regularly presupposes the reality of material bodies. Indeed, even in the passage quoted he speaks of God as “fashioning” (κατεργάσασθαι), rather than merely thinking, the thoughts that constitute material bodies. This would seem to introduce a certain degree of autonomous reality into that which is made, so as to underscore that God does not merely “think” material objects, but creates them. Gregory is also quite traditional in emphasizing (just before the passage quoted) that creation takes place by a deliberate act of the divine will.

In general, the Cappadocians freely drew on the Platonic descriptions of God as the Good (or the Beautiful) and as νοῦς, while remaining wary of their limitations—the first, in that it might seem to present God as a Form or fundamentally like the Forms, the second in that it might seem to present God as like the human mind. Both descriptions are for the Cappadocians only “images” that aim to illuminate that which remains fundamentally a mystery. Their recommendation for approaching this mystery lay not in ever closer and more minute philosophical analysis, but in the transformation that can only be achieved by entering into (as Basil called it) the “school” of the divine commandments.

It is in this light that one must understand the last of the major Platonic themes we will examine, that of ὁμοίωσις θεῶ or deification. The connection emerges in a famous passage of Gregory Nazianzen describing the mystery of God:

In Himself [God] sums up and contains all being, having neither beginning nor end, like some great sea of being, limitless and unbounded, transcending all conception of time and nature, only adumbrated by the mind, and that very dimly and scantily—not from the things directly concerning Him, but from the things around Him; one image (φαντασίας) being got from one source and another from another, and combined into some sort of presentation of the truth, which escapes us when we have caught it, and takes to flight when we have conceived it, blazing forth upon our master-part [i.e., the mind], even when that is cleansed, as the lightning flash which will not stay its course does upon our sight. This is, I think, in order by that part of it which we can comprehend to draw us to itself … and by that part of it which we cannot comprehend to move our wonder, and as an object of wonder to become more an object of desire, and being desired to purify, and by purifying to make us like God (θεοειδὲς ἐργάζηται). With those who have thus become like Himself, He—to use a bold expression—holds converse as

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61 Creation occurs by “the impulse of divine choice,” ἡ ὀρμή τῆς θείας προαιρέσεως (On the Soul and Resurrection 46.124b; NPNF vol. 5, 458); cf. further texts and discussion in Bradshaw 2011.
with intimates, God being united with and known by gods, and that perhaps to the same extent as He already knows those who are known by Him.\textsuperscript{62} For Gregory it is because God is unlimited, “like some great sea of being,” that only by the play of images can anything like an adequate conception of Him be formed. The tension between that of Him which is known and that which is unknown is essential to the movement forward: “by that part of it which we can comprehend to draw us to itself … and by that part of it which we cannot comprehend to move our wonder ….” Wonder, in turn, leads to desire, which leads to purification, which leads finally to deification. Part of this sequence echoes a theme we saw earlier in connection with Gregory of Nyssa’s \textit{On Virginity}, the association of the purification of the passions and appetites with the recovery of one’s true identity. Even so, it is surprising that it is by the growth of the \textit{desire} for God that one is purified—for, after all, the desire for God is innate to human nature. Evidently such desire becomes particularly effective, and ultimately deifying, as it is spurred by wonder and the eagerness to learn more.

We can again turn to the other Gregory (of Nyssa) for a fuller explication of these themes. The sixth of his \textit{Homilies on the Beatitudes} deals with the verse, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matt. 5:8). Gregory first explains that Scripture uses “to see” synonymously with “to have” or “to share in,” so that “the man who sees God possesses in this act of seeing all there is of the things that are good.”\textsuperscript{63} Yet Scripture also teaches that God cannot be seen, for “no man has seen God at any time” (John 1:18). The Beatitude thus raises the question of how becoming pure in heart could make possible that which otherwise is impossible. As so often, Gregory turns for an answer to his understanding of man as made in the image of God. Citing the verse, “the kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:21), he explains:

\begin{quote}
I think that in this short saying the Word expresses some such counsel as this: there is in you, human beings, a desire to contemplate the true Good. But when you hear that the divine majesty is exalted above the heavens, that its glory is inexpressible, its beauty ineffable, and its nature inaccessible, do not despair of beholding what you desire. It is indeed within your reach; you have within yourselves the standard by which to apprehend the divine. For He who made you did at the same time endow your nature with this wonderful quality. For God imprinted on it the likeness of the glories of His own nature, as if molding the form of carving into wax. But the evil that has been poured all around the nature bearing the divine image has rendered useless to you this wonderful thing that lies hidden under vile coverings. If, therefore, you wash off by a good life the filth that has been stuck on your heart like plaster, the divine beauty (τὸ θεοειδές κάλλος) will again shine forth in you … Hence, if a man who is pure of heart sees himself, he sees in himself what he desires; and thus he becomes blessed, because when he looks at his own purity, he sees the archetype in the image.\textsuperscript{64}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{64} \textit{Ibid.}, ed. Callahan, 142 – 143; trans. Graef, 148 – 149.
The divine image within plays here two roles, as object of contemplation and as that which enables the contemplation. In being cleansed of the evil that encompasses it the divine image is set free to perform its innate function, that of manifesting its divine archetype. Although Gregory does not here use the term, to “see God” in this sense is effectively to be deified, for it is to achieve a state in which the very core of one’s being consists in the manifestation of the divine beauty.

To speak of contemplating the divine beauty within can perhaps have a somewhat narcissistic ring. The rest of the homily makes plain that what Gregory has in mind is, on the contrary, a life centered on others, for it is only in this way that purity of heart can be realized. Gregory’s teaching on this point is worth quoting at length, for it clarifies how what Basil called the “school of God’s commandments” works to purify and redirect the soul’s innate desire for the good:

Now how you can become pure, you may learn through almost the whole teaching of the Gospel. You need only peruse the precepts one by one to find clearly what it is that purifies the heart. For one can divide wickedness under two headings, the one connected with works, the other with thoughts. The former, that is, the iniquity that shows itself in works, He has punished through the Old Law. Now, however, He has given the Law regarding the other form of sin, which punishes not so much the evil deed itself, as guards against even the beginning of it. For to remove evil from the very choice of the will is to free life perfectly from bad works ... The disease of wrath is present everywhere all through life, so He begins the cure from what is most prominent, and first lays down the law to refrain from anger. “You have learned,” He says, from the Old Law, “thou shalt not kill.” Learn now to keep your soul from wrath against your neighbor ... He then passes on to the healing of the sins committed for the sake of pleasure, and, by His commandment, frees the heart from the vile desire of adultery. Thus you will find in what follows how the Lord corrects them all one by one, opposing by His Law each of the forms of evil.⁶⁵

In obeying such commandments one’s attention is on God first, and then one’s neighbor—or, to put it another way, it is on God as He is known in and through obedience to the commandments which enjoin love for the neighbor. The contemplation of the divine beauty within is thus not so much an act of focused attention, as a pervasive awareness of God as the motive and ground of one’s own action.⁶⁶

Much more could be said about the Cappadocians’ adaptation of Platonic themes.⁶⁷ But already we have enough to recognize the fundamental character of this adaptation, as well as the revision that invariably accompanied it. One way to tie together the various themes we have examined is that the view of life held by the Cappadocians is iconic; that is, it sees the beauty and goodness of this world as images or “icons” of the divine beauty, and it understands human destiny similarly in terms of the realization of the divine image. Such a view of life is capacious, in that it allows for a broad recognition and proper ordering of the immense variety of

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⁶⁶ See further Bradshaw 2004, 172–177.
⁶⁷ I have discussed further aspects of the Cappadocians’ adaptation of Plato in Bradshaw 2006a and 2006b.
goods within human life. At the same time it has a certain humility, in that it sees God as a mystery and theoretical discourse about the divine as fundamentally a matter of the play of images. (This is not to say that such discourse is not important, of course, but only that it has to be conducted with one eye continually upon the limitations of our own position.) Its goal is not to attain a comprehensive theoretical vision, but to motivate and help enable the personal transformation that is necessary for an actual experience of the divine.

Much the same could be said of Plato’s own philosophy. Indeed, Plato is perhaps the most capacious and the most modest of all philosophers, and it is for this reason that the Cappadocians found in him a reliable ally and guide.