

NON-BEING AND EVIL IN GREGORY OF NYSSA

BY

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“No evil exists in its own substance (κατ’ ἴδιαν ὑπόστασιν) lying outside the faculty of free choice (ἔξω προαιρέσεως κείμενον).”¹ So says Gregory of Nyssa in the *De Virginitate*, his earliest work.² This statement Gregory repeats, almost verbatim, in works of every period of his career, whenever he discusses the origin and nature of evil.³ The idea that evil has no reality of its own had become a commonplace both in the Greek philosophical literature of Gregory’s time and in Christian teaching.⁴ Gregory knew such a doctrine, if from no other source, then from his brother Basil, who describes evil as “not a living essence (οὐχὶ οὐσία ζῶσα), but a disposition of the soul opposed to virtue, resulting through a falling away from the good.” Basil adds, however, “that evil certainly exists, no one living in the world will deny.”⁵

Basil’s juxtaposition of these two statements points to the difficulty that confronts early Christian writers in trying to reconcile the reality of sin with the omnipotence and benevolence of God. If evil has no substance in the structure of things, then it is difficult to understand how it can be said so confidently to “exist”. Gregory of Nyssa faces this problem more resolutely than his predecessors. Not satisfied with exempting God from responsibility for evil, Gregory wishes to show how evil is not only an absence of the good but a peculiar kind of absence that does in fact “exist” in dependence on the powers of the created will. As he puts it in the homilies on the Beatitudes (PG 44, 1256B), “evil takes subsistence as soon as we choose it, coming into being at the very moment of choice, for by itself in its own hypostasis outside of prohaeresis evil is nowhere to be found existing.”

Gregory does not systematically explore all of the implications of such statements, nor does he anywhere present a comprehensive summary of his teaching as a whole. Nevertheless, the several components of Gregory’s understanding of the nature of evil do constitute a more coherent and more philosophically interesting set of teachings than his

commentators—or even, perhaps, Gregory himself—seem to have recognized. For Gregory, evil is not simply the absence of the good, but the not-being of the good—a form of non-being that the created will causes to “exist” as the absence of the good. All created reality is subject to constant motion and change because, according to Gregory, creation itself is a change and a motion from non-being toward being. Created goodness, especially the goodness in which God calls upon created intelligence to participate, is a positive motion, a potentially unlimited course towards the inexhaustible being of the divine nature. Evil is the failure of created intelligence to respond to this vocation for motion in the good. Evil is therefore a motion of created intelligence in withdrawal from the being of God, a course towards non-subsistence. As a motion of withdrawal, the course of evil is not unlimited, but must end in the death of the created will that is its progenitor and, perhaps, in the “death” of created intelligence as a whole. It is only because Christ has entered into and transformed the non-being towards which evil moves that created intelligence has been saved from its suicidal course. With this set of teachings Gregory both explains how evil does in fact exist as a thing outside of God and makes the philosophical definition of evil as absence a vehicle for the expression of a Christian understanding of sin and grace.

Evil as non-being

Gregory begins from Basil’s position that evil does not proceed from God and therefore has no existence of its own, but is defined by the absence of the good. In the *De Virginitate*, he uses the analogy of darkness produced by the voluntary closure of the eye or by the negligent failure to build windows into a house. The darkness is not the responsibility of the sun. It is an absence of light resulting from the failure of sight. Even so, Gregory says, evil arose when the first men chose to withdraw from the good.⁶ In the commentary on the inscriptions to the Psalms (GNO V, 63,1-6), he goes farther. Evil is not only a withdrawal from the good, but a fall into non-being. Commenting on the phrase (Psalm 107, 40) “nothingness (ἔξουδένωσις) was poured out on their princes,” Gregory says that to be in evil is not properly (κυρίως) to be, because there is no evil in itself—the nonsubsistence of the good is the genesis of evil. As we say wine when poured into water is “watered” or iron when smelted “fired”, so whoever falls into the