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Author(s): Albert-Kees Geljon

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DIVINE INFINITY IN GREGORY OF NYSSA AND PHILO OF ALEXANDRIA

BY

ALBERT-KEES GELJON

ABSTRACT: The notion of divine infinity is important in Gregory of Nyssa's theology; it is even argued by Ekkehard Mühlenberg that Gregory was the first to ascribe infinity to God. In this article key texts on divine infinity in Gregory, taken from *Contra Eunomium*, *De Vita Moysis*, and *In Canticum Cantorum*, are discussed. It appears that Mühlenberg's interpretation has to be nuanced. Furthermore, dealing with divine infinity Gregory was able to link his thought with that of Philo of Alexandria. In the second part of this article, we discuss the question of God's infinity in Philo. Henri Guyot defends the thesis that Philo was the first to put forward the notion of divine infinity. Although Guyot's thesis can be criticised—Philo never calls God infinite—there are starting-points for this view in Philo.

In classical theology one of the attributes ascribed to God is infinity, for instance by Thomas Aquinas (*Summa Theologiae* 1 7 1) or Bonaventura (*De mysterio trinitatis* q.4 a.1 concl.1).¹ This is a startling contrast with the Greek philosophical tradition of Plato and Aristotle, in which infinity—seen as undetermined and imperfect—is never predicated of the highest being. The first who extensively deals with divine infinity is the Cappadocian theologian Gregory of Nyssa, and it is claimed by Ekkehard Mühlenberg that indeed Gregory was the 'inventor' of divine infinity. His thesis, however, can be nuanced. In this article we investigate the notion of infinity in Gregory and evaluate Mühlenberg's interpretation. We examine also the question of divine infinity in the Jewish exegete Philo of Alexandria, who exerted profound influence on the early Christian writers, including Gregory.² It is evident that Gregory was acquainted with Philo's writings.³ The question of

¹ See A. Antweiler, *Unendlich. Eine Untersuchung zur metaphysischen Wesenheit Gottes auf Grund der Mathematik, Philosophie, Theologie* (Freiburg i. Br. 1934) 133-153.

² See D.T. Runia, *Philo in Early Christian Literature* (Assen-Minneapolis 1993) 243-261.

³ See A.C. Geljon, *Philonic exegesis in Gregory of Nyssa's De Vita Moysis* (Providence 2002) 73-174.

divine infinity in Philo is a matter of dispute among modern scholars. Some discern a notion of divine infinity or at least an initial impulse to it in the Jewish exegete, others deny it vehemently. We begin with Gregory and discuss passages dealing with infinity taken from three important writings. In discussing these passages we will go into the interpretation of Mühlenberg and the criticism offered by W. Ullmann and Th. Böhm.⁴

1. DIVINE INFINITY IN THE WRITINGS OF GREGORY OF NYSSA

1.1 *Contra Eunomium*

Between 381 and 383 Gregory wrote his vast work *Contra Eunomium* (*CE*) as a refutation of Eunomius' *Apologia apologiae*. Eunomius' apology was directed against Gregory's brother Basil, but after his death Gregory took over his role in defending the Nicene faith. Eunomius, bishop of Cyzicus in about 360, was leader of the **neo-Arians**. The main point of difference between this movement and the Cappadocians concerns **God's essence**. Eunomius assumes a difference in essence between God the Father and God the Son. In his view God's essence (οὐσία) can fully be defined by the notion of **'unbegotten'** (ἀγέννητος, cf. Eunomius *Apologia* 7), but this term cannot be applied to the Son, who has a nature different from the Father (cf. *CE* 1.475).⁵ By his energy the Father begets the Son, who is less than the Father. Gregory quotes Eunomius' own words in *CE* 1.155: 'The account of his teachings consists of the highest and most real being (οὐσία), followed by a **second being**, superior to all other beings, while being after the first. Finally, there is a third being, ranked with neither of the others, but subordinate to the first as a cause, to the second as to an activity (ἐνέργεια).'⁶

Gregory, by contrast, defends the Nicene faith that God the Son has the same essence as God the Father. Eunomius' view that the Son is not similar to the Father implies that the divinity of the Son is denied, and so the

⁴ Regrettably, I was not able to see J.E. Hennessy, *The background, sources, and meaning of divine infinity in St. Gregory of Nyssa* (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Forham 1963), and B.C. Barmann, *A Christian debate of the fourth century: a critique of classical metaphysics* (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University 1966). Their interpretations are reported by R.S. Brightman, 'Apophatic theology and divine infinity in St. Gregory of Nyssa', *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 18 (1973) 97-114.

⁵ References are made to the edition of W. Jaeger (Leiden) 1960.

⁶ Translation A. Meredith, *Gregory of Nyssa, The early Church fathers* (London 1999) 29-30.

Son turns out to be a creature (cf. *CE* 2.15). In contrast to his opponent Gregory argues that God's very essence can not be described or defined by any human conception and is incomprehensible for man (*CE* 2.12).⁷

The first passage in which Gregory mentions God's infinity is *CE* 1.167-171, where he discusses Eunomius' statement that only God the Father is the highest and most proper being (1.151, 161, 163). Gregory himself denies that the Highest Being has superiority of power or of goodness, stating that the Only Begotten and the Holy Spirit are also perfect in goodness (167). 'Every good thing, in so far it has no element of the opposite in itself, has limitless good. The reason for this is that, in general, things may only be limited by their opposites—a truth verified in particular examples. Power is limited by the weakness that encompasses it, life by death, light by darkness and, in general, every good thing is restricted by its opposite (168). If, therefore, he (i.e. Eunomius) assumes that the nature of the Only Begotten and the Spirit can become worse, it is reasonable that he should predicate of them a reduced idea of goodness. If, however, the divine and changeless nature is incapable of deterioration—a fact our opponents grant—then clearly it will be unlimited in goodness. For limitlessness means the same as infinity (τὸ δὲ ἀόριστον τῷ ἀπειρῷ ταῦτόν ἐστιν). It is the height of stupidity to suppose that there can be any more or less where it is a question of 'limitlessness' or 'infinity'. For how could the notion of infinity be preserved, if one were to postulate 'more' or 'less' in it?' (169).⁸

In this passage Gregory uses infinity to refute Eunomius' view that the Son is inferior to the Father, arguing that there does not exist more or less in the divine trinity, because the divine is infinite. The limitlessness is based on God's goodness. Gregory postulates that things can only be limited by its opposite (light, for example, by darkness), and therefore good can only be limited by bad. Because God, who is absolute good, is incapable of deterioration he is without any limit.⁹ In his argumentation Gregory makes use

⁷ For God's incomprehensibility in Gregory, see W. Völker, *Fortschritt und Vollendung bei Philon von Alexandria* (Leipzig 1938) 36-38, Brightman *art. cit.* (n. 4), D. Carabine, *The unknown God. Negative theology in the Platonic tradition: Plato to Eriugena*, Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs 19 (Leuven-Grand Rapids 1995) 236-258, Th. Böhm, *Theoria Unendlichkeit Aufstieg. Philosophische Implikationen zu De vita Moysis von Gregor von Nyssa*, Supplements to *Vigiliae Christianae* 35 (Leiden 1996) 248-255.

⁸ Translation Meredith *op. cit.* (n. 6) 32.

⁹ For God as absolute good, see D.L. Balás, *Μερούσια Θεοῦ. Man's participation in God's perfections according to Saint Gregory of Nyssa*, *Studia Anselmiana* 55 (Rome 1966) 65-71.

of a common notion that is also acknowledged by his opponents, viz. **the divine cannot become worse.** Using this ὁμολογούμενον as a basis, he draws a conclusion—God is unlimited in goodness—to which Eunomius does not subscribe.

An important contribution to the discussion about divine infinity was made by Ekkehard Mühlenberg, who has published a monograph on divine infinity in Gregory.¹⁰ This German scholar claims that Gregory was the **first thinker to attribute infinity to God and to conceive of infinity as expressing God's essence.** In Mühlenberg's view no Greek philosopher or theologian before Gregory mentions infinity as an attribute of God, because infinity was connected with imperfection and the material world. Moreover, infinity, according to Greek logic, implies unknowability, because only things that have boundaries are comprehensible. The mind cannot grasp limitless things.¹¹ Infinity of the highest principle entails that it is also unknown. In Mühlenberg's own plain words: 'Die negative Theologie, die Platon begründet hat, hat ein Gottesprädikat niemals aufgenommen: das Unendliche. Bei Gregor von Nyssa findet sich dieses Gottesprädikat zum ersten Male in der Geschichte des philosophischen und christlichen Denkens. Wenn wir das so ungeschützt behaupten, dann meinen wir damit, daß Gregor von Nyssa als erster Denker die Unendlichkeit Gottes gegen die platonisch-aristotelische Philosophie beweist und in die Theologiegeschichte einführt.'¹² 'Gott ist unendlich! Das ist eine Aussage, die die negative Theologie der älteren Väter nie gemacht hat.'¹³

In his study Mühlenberg analyses CE 1.167-171 extensively, seeing in the text an argument for **God's infinity based on his unchangeability.** He formulates a summary of Gregory's argumentation, based on a metaphysical and a logical premise:¹⁴

- I. Logical premise: the limit of goodness, power, or wisdom can only be determined by their opposites.
- II. Metaphysical premise: the divine nature is unchangeable.

¹⁰ E. Mühlenberg, *Die Unendlichkeit Gottes bei Gregor von Nyssa. Gregors Kritik am Gottesbegriff der klassischen Metaphysik*, Forschungen zur Kirchen- und Dogmengeschichte 16 (1966).

¹¹ Mühlenberg *op. cit.* (n. 10) 19, 26-28, 47, 50.

¹² Id. 26.

¹³ Id. 92.

¹⁴ Id. 119-122.

Gregory's line of argumentation is as follows:

- a. because God is unchangeable, there is no opposite to his being present in himself;
- b. because God is beyond opposites, he is absolutely good;
- c. because God cannot be limited, he is unlimited in goodness;
- d. unlimited is the same as infinity.

Another passage from CE interpreted by Mühlenberg is 1.236-237.¹⁵ Here Gregory also employs the notion of divine infinity based on God's goodness to disprove Eunomius, examining his adversary's words: 'each of the three Beings is simple and totally one' (231). The Cappadocian argues that the description of the supreme Being as simple is inconsistent with the rest of his system, because **the simplicity of the divine trinity does not admit more or less, as Eunomius assumes** (232). How can anyone perceive any differences of less and more in God? If he does so, he posits abundance or diminution in the matter of goodness, strength, wisdom, or of anything else that can be attributed to God. Hence, he does not escape the idea of composition (233). Nothing which possesses wisdom or power or any other good—not as an external gift but as rooted in its nature—can suffer diminution in it (234). **The good can be lessened only by the presence of evil.** Where nature is incapable of becoming worse, no limit of goodness can be conceived. The unlimited (τὸ ἄορίστον) considered in itself escapes any limit. How can one think that one infinity is more or less than another infinity? (236). Therefore, if **Eunomius** acknowledges that the supreme Being is simple and homogenous, let him admit that it is connected with simplicity and infinity.¹⁶ But if he divides the Beings from each other—the Only Begotten from the Father, and the Spirit from the Only Begotten—and speaks of more and less in them, he **makes the divine nature composite** (237).¹⁷

Mühlenberg regards this line of thought as the argument based on God's simplicity, making the following analysis of Gregory's line of thought:¹⁸

¹⁵ This passage is also discussed by L. Sweeney, *Divine infinity in Greek and Medieval thought* (New York 1992) 482-487.

¹⁶ Here Gregory makes also use of a common notion, cf. CE 1.169.

¹⁷ Making the summaries I consult the English translation by W. Moore – H.A. Wilson, *Select writings and letters of Gregory, bishop of Nyssa*, The Nicene and Post-Nicene fathers II.5 (1892, repr. 1988).

¹⁸ Mühlenberg *op. cit.* (n. 10) 122-126.

- I. Logical premise: the limit of something is determined by the presence of its opposite.
- II. Metaphysical premise: God's essence is simple.
 - a. if God is simple in himself, he is good by himself and not by participation in goodness;
 - b. because God is not composed of heterogeneous parts—he is simple—it is impossible that evil is present as his opposite;
 - c. God's goodness cannot be limited;
 - d. therefore God is unlimited good, i.e. he is infinite.

Mühlenberg's interpretation has been criticized by W. Ullmann and Th. Böhm. Ullmann explains that the two premises are on a different level, while it is not made clear how these two are linked. Furthermore, the connection with the polemic with Eunomius is unclear, since the trinity is not mentioned in the syllogisms.¹⁹ Böhm, following Ullmann's criticism, adds that in the analysed passages Gregory does not aim to make a syllogism in order to prove divine infinity, but to confute Eunomius, showing that there exists no more or less in the divine nature.²⁰ Ullmann sets also out the theological meaning of divine infinity in Gregory: it expresses how God transcends being and knowing of a creature. Ullmann argues that infinity has to be understood in the Aristotelian sense of potential infinity. Aristotle explains that adding terms in a series is potential unlimited (*Physica* 206a14-18). Against Ullmann Böhm states that potential infinity concerns that which is in a process of becoming, but Gregory's aim is to prove that there exist no more or less in the divine nature. Potential infinity is only possible if God is subject to becoming. In addition, Böhm rightly remarks that the notion of potential infinity does not help us to understand and interpret infinity in Gregory.²¹

In other passages Gregory brings the divine infinity to the fore in relationship with eternity. In *CE* 1.359-369 he discusses the eternity (ἀδιόρτης) of the Son, who does not have a beginning.²² The Cappadocian starts by

¹⁹ W. Ullmann, 'Der logische und der theologische Sinn des Unendlichkeitsbegriffs in der Gotteslehre Gregors von Nyssa', *Bijdragen* 48 (1987) 158-161.

²⁰ Böhm *op. cit.* (n. 7) 123-131.

²¹ *Id.* 131-134, 157-163.

²² For God's eternity in Gregory, see D.L. Balás, 'Eternity and time in Gregory of Nyssa's *Contra Eunomium*' in H. Dörrie, M. Altenburger, U. Schramm, *Gregor von Nyssa und die Philosophie*. Zweites Internationales Kolloquium über Gregor von Nyssa (Leiden 1976)

distinguishing between the world before creation (i.e. the divine nature) and the creation. The latter is perceived in the extension of ages (τὸ τῶν αἰῶνων διάστημα) but the world above creation, separated from any conception of extension, escapes all sequence of time, neither commencing at a beginning, nor ending at a limit. It is pre-existent to the ages (1.362-3). In § 364 Gregory writes: ‘Having traversed the ages and all that has been produced therein, our thought catches a glimpse of the divine nature, as of some immense ocean,²³ but when the imagination stretches onward to grasp it, it gives no sign in its own case of any beginning; so that one who after inquiring with curiosity into the ‘priority’ of the ages tries to mount to the source of all things will never be able to make a single calculation on which he may stand; that which he seeks will always be moving on before, and no basis will be offered him for the curiosity of thought.’²⁴ The divine and blessed cannot be measured by anything; it is not in time but time flows from it. Created things, by contrast, are confined within the fitting measures as within a boundary (1.365-6). The creative power has assigned to all created things their limits, and they remain within the bounds of creation. But the creative power itself has nothing circumscribing it, and escapes every striving to reach the limit of the infinite (1.367).²⁵

In this text infinity is placed in a context different from the two previous passages: it is not employed to refute more and less in the divine, but it is related to the eternity of the divine life. **The divine can be called infinite because it possesses no time-extension, having no beginning or end.** Gregory refers to God as transcending the ages (αἰῶνες; *CE* 1.362, cf. 2.528), which denote the temporality of all creation.²⁶ Creation is characterized by

128-155, and P. Plass, ‘Transcendent time and eternity in Gregory of Nyssa’, *Vigiliae Christianae* 34 (1980) 180-192.

²³ The comparison with an ocean occurs also in Gregory of Nazianzus *Oratio* 38.7, where Gregory states that the divine is limitless and difficult to grasp, and only this is comprehensible, namely that it is infinite. The date of this speech is unclear, Christmas 379 or 380? Mühlenberg argues for the latter, and concludes that with regard to the notion of divine infinity Gregory of Nazianzus is dependent on Gregory of Nyssa (Mühlenberg *op. cit.* (n. 10) 115-118). Gregory of Nazianzus refers also to God as limitless in *Oratio* 23.8, 23.11, 28.7.

²⁴ Translation Moore & Wilson *op. cit.* (n. 17) 69.

²⁵ Cf. *CE* 2.70 Uncreated nature is unlimited and only bounded by infinity; created nature is limited, and measured by time and space. The beatitude that is above the creature admits neither end nor beginning. See Sweeney *op. cit.* (n. 15) 487-493.

²⁶ Cf. *In Ecclesiasten homiliae* 440.3-7 (reference to Eccl. 3:11 καὶ γε σὺν τῶν αἰῶνα ἔδωκεν

διάστημα, which indicates the extension both in time and in space.²⁷ God has no διάστημα, and is referred to as ἀδιάστατος.²⁸ Created things are perceived in the ages, whereas God, having made the ages as a kind of receptacle for the creatures, is above them. He is called προαιώνιος (cf. CE 1.361, 384-385, 669, 690, 2.528, 544, 579, 3.7.6) and cannot be measured by time or by the ages (cf. CE 3.7.23). In § 364 the unending quest for God is pro- pounded: the human mind tries to grasp the divine nature, but what it seeks, moves always forward and is never reached. Gregory, basing the unending quest on God's infinity, elaborates this notion extensively in his later works *De Vita Moysis* and *In Canticum Canticorum*.

Regarding infinity as God's essence, Mühlenberg refers also to CE 1.574, which he translates as follows:

Weil er (scil. Gott) nichts hat, was er vor sich sieht, und bei keiner Grenze aufhört zu sein, sondern überall auch immer ist, überschreitet er den Begriff des Endes und den Gedanken des Anfangs durch die Unendlichkeit des Lebens und besitzt das Ewige, das bei jeder Präzisierung mitgehört werden muß.²⁹

Commenting on this passage, Mühlenberg writes: 'Gregor faßt hier in präziser Formulierung zusammen, daß die Unendlichkeit des göttlichen Lebens sein eigener Begriff für das göttliche Wesen ist.'³⁰ Gregory does not, however, speak here about God's essence; he only states that God is eternal, having neither beginning nor end. From this passage we can only conclude that Gregory regards God's eternity as the infinity of his life. All in

ἐν καρδίᾳ αὐτῶν) ὁ δὲ αἰὼν διαστηματικόν τι νόημα ὦν πᾶσαν δι' ἑαυτοῦ σημαίνει τὴν κτίσιν τὴν ἐν αὐτῷ γενομένην. See Balás *art. cit.* (n. 22) 152.

²⁷ Cf. *Eccl.* 4.12.14 'Creation is nothing but διάστημα'. For the notion of διάστημα in Gregory, see H.U. von Balthasar, *Présence et pensée. Essai sur la philosophie religieuse de Grégoire de Nyssé* (Paris 1942) 1-10, and B. Otis, 'Gregory of Nyssa and the Cappadocian conception of time', *Studia Patristica* 14 (1976) 327-357, esp. 343-353.

²⁸ Cf. CE 3.7.33 'The divine nature is ἀδιάστατος, and being ἀδιάστατος it has no limit; and what is limitless is infinite and is so called'.

²⁹ CE 1.574 οὐκ ἔχων ὃ τι πρὸ ἑαυτοῦ ἴδη οὐδὲ εἰς ὃ τι πέρας μεθ' ἑαυτὴν καταλήξει, ἀλλὰ πανταχόθεν ἐπίσης αἰεὶ ὦν καὶ τέλους ὄρον καὶ ἀρχῆς ἔνοιαν τῇ ἀπειρίᾳ τῆς ζῶης διαβαίνων πάση προσηγορίᾳ συνυπακούμενον ἔχει καὶ τὸ αἰδίον. Moore and Wilson *op. cit.* (n. 17) translate as follows: 'This is He, Who has nothing previous to Himself to behold, no end in which He shall cease. Whichever way we look, He is equally existing there for ever; He transcends the limit of any end, the idea of any beginning, by the infinitude of His life; whatever be His title, eternity must be implied with it'. (88).

³⁰ Mühlenberg *op. cit.* (n. 10) 113.

all, it seems that the reading of Gregory's text does not warrant the conclusion that Gregory conceives of infinity as God's essence.

At the end of the first book Gregory explains the terms 'unbegotten' and 'eternal'. Eternity of God's life means that he does not admit a time when he was not, or when he will be. Gregory compares the infinite nature (ἡ ἀόριστος φύσις) with a circle. In the same way as a circle does not have a starting-point or is interrupted by any end, the eternal life has neither a beginning nor an end. (1.667-668). In order to confirm God's eternity, Gregory quotes from various scriptural verses that are concerned with God's eternal and royal rule.³¹ These verses indicate that God is earlier than any beginning and exceeds any end. The infinity, continuity, and eternity of God's life is expressed by the terms 'unbegotten' (ἀγέννητος) and 'endless' (ἀτελεύτητος; 1.669).³² Here the same notions are brought forward as in 1.359-369: infinity, related to eternity, implies not having a beginning or an end.

According to Mühlenberg, Gregory introduces infinity, which contains unbegottenness, as the unifying notion of God ('einheitlicher Gottesbegriff'). Mühlenberg refers to CE 2.446-468 as a proof for his interpretation.³³ This text, in which Gregory discusses a passage from Basil's *Contra Eunomium* and Eunomius' attack on it, can be summarized as follows:

- 446 Citation from Basil's *Contra Eunomium* (I.7):
 'We call the God of the universe indestructible and unbegotten, using these names according to different points of view. For when we look to the ages that are past, finding that the life of God transcends every beginning, we call him unbegotten. But when we turn our thought to the ages that come, we call him indestructible who is infinite, limitless, and without end. As that which has no end of life is indestructible, so that which has no beginning is called unbegotten.'
- 447 Gregory turns to Eunomius' point of accusation.
- 448 Eunomius says that in Basil's view God is not indestructible by his nature.

³¹ Ex. 15:18 κύριος βασιλεύων τὸν αἰῶνα καὶ ἐπ' αἰῶνα καὶ ἔτι; Ps. 28:10 κύριος βασιλεὺς εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα; Ps. 73:12 ὁ θεὸς βασιλεὺς ἡμῶν πρὸ αἰῶνος; cf. CE 2.461, 3.6.64.

³² Infinity related to God's eternity also in CE 2.52, 2.459, 2.469, 2.512-513, 3.6.8 (reference to Is. 44:6), 3.6.67-71, 3.7.31-33.

³³ Mühlenberg *op. cit.* (n. 10) 114-115.

- 449 Gregory states that indestructibility belongs to God according to his nature.
- 450 Eunomius understands Basil as bestowing (πορίζω) indestructibility on God.
- 451 In the passage quoted Basil ascribes (προσαγορεύω) indestructibility to God. Does Eunomius mean that ascribing is the same as bestowing?
- 452 He who possesses something which another does not have *bestows*; he who designates by names what another has *ascribes*.
- 453 Basil's statement ascribes indestructibility to God, Eunomius charges him with bestowing indestructibility.
- 454 In fact Eunomius accuses himself, because he bestows indestructibility on God.
- 455 Quotation of Eunomius.
- 456 Basil says that what is beyond the ages in the divine essence is called by certain names.
- 457 Eunomius says that Basil divides the ages into two parts.
- 458 Basil only signifies God's eternity.
- 459 Human life is measured by past and future; this is applied to God. Neither the past excludes the idea of infinity, nor the future tells of a limit in the infinite life.
- 460 Scripture also signifies God's infinity by the same thought.
- 461 Citation of Ex. 15:18, Ps. 73:12 (cf. CE 1.669), Ps. 54:20.
- 462 Eunomius does not pay attention to Scripture, but says that Basil speaks of two lives: one without beginning and one without end, and so makes a separation in the idea of God.

Mühlenberg's interpretation of this passage can be questioned, because God's infinity as a unifying conception of God cannot be discerned so clearly as Mühlenberg thinks. He states that in Gregory the notion of unbegottenness is surpassed by infinity, which is, regarded as eternity, a positive notion, while unbegottenness is negative. Gregory, however, goes mainly into Eunomius' reproach that Basil divides the ages into two parts—past and future—and so makes a separation in the idea of God. Gregory replies that past and future of human life, even though it is incorrect to do so, are applied to God, because human intellect can measure the eternal by a past and a future only (457-462). He does not postulate infinity as a unifying conception of God. It is also worth noting that in the passage quoted from Basil's *Contra Eunomium* Basil refers to God as limitless and infinite (ἄόριστος . . . ἄπειρος). Wishing to maintain his main thesis, Mühlenberg emphasizes the difference between the two authors: Basil does not see God's essence expressed in infinity, as Gregory does.

1.2 *De vita Moysis*

At the end of his life, after 390, Gregory wrote his treatise *De Vita Moysis* (*VM*), in which he shows how Moses' life is an example to be imitated for the virtuous life.³⁴ Living according to virtue consists in the unending quest for God. The seeking is unending because God is without any limit. At two places Gregory discusses and argues for God's infinity.³⁵ In the Introduction he explains that perfection of all things that are measured by sense-perception is marked off by definite limits. Every quantitative measure is surrounded by its proper boundaries. Perfection of the number ten, for instance, consists in having both a beginning and an end. By contrast, perfection in virtue does not have any limit; this is taught by the divine apostle Paul, who was always running on the path of virtue, and never stopped stretching himself to things that lie before him (Phil. 3:13). Next, Gregory argues that no good has a boundary in its own nature, but is bounded by the presence of its opposite, as life is bounded by death, and light by darkness.³⁶ Because the divine nature is the Good and does not admit of any opposite, God is infinite and without a limit (I.5-7).³⁷

In this *praefatio* Gregory refers to Phil. 3:13, in which Paul says that he is always stretching himself to things before him. In Gregory's interpretation this verse indicates that **the human desire to see God never ends, because of God's infinity.** Human beings can grasp or see limited things only, not what does not have limits. The unending quest for God is the core of Gregory's mysticism, and Paul's saying in Phil 3:13 plays a key role in *VM* (*VM* II.225, 242).³⁸ The French scholar Jean Daniélou considers **this process of stretching oneself or ἐπέκτασις as most characteristic of Gregory's mystical theology.**³⁹ Later on in the treatise, Gregory uses the same line of argumentation based on God's goodness in the context of an exegesis of Ex. 33,

³⁴ J. Daniélou, 'La chronologie des oeuvres de Grégoire de Nysse', *Studia Patristica* 7 (1966) 159-169, esp. 168-169.

³⁵ The passages are discussed by Böhm *op. cit.* (n. 7) 137-149.

³⁶ Gregory gives the same examples in *CE* 1.168.

³⁷ References are made to the edition of J. Daniélou, *Sources Chrétiennes* 1 (Paris 1968³).

³⁸ See for Gregory's mysticism, A. Louth, *The origins of the Christian mystical tradition. From Plato to Denys* (Oxford 1981) 80-97, B.E. Daley, "'Bright darkness" and Christian transformation: Gregory of Nyssa on the dynamics of mystical union', *Studia Philonica Annual* 8 (1996) 83-98.

³⁹ See his monograph *Platonisme et théologie mystique. Doctrine spirituelle de saint Grégoire de Nysse* (Paris 1944, 1954²).

where it is written that Moses asks God to manifest himself (II. 236-239).⁴⁰ God answers, however, that Moses cannot see his face, for no man can see God's face and live (Ex. 33:20). This text, Gregory explains, shows that the divine nature is infinite by its own nature, not surrounded by a limit. Gregory's argumentation can be summarized as follows:

1. What has a limit ends somewhere, and is surrounded by something that is different in nature.
2. What surrounds is much larger than what is surrounded.
Gregory illustrates this by some examples: fish are surrounded by water, and birds by air; the water is the limit for that which swims, and the air for that which flies.
3. The divine nature is beautiful/good, and what is outside the beautiful/good is evil in nature.

On the basis of these assumptions Gregory makes a *reductio ad absurdum* in order to prove God's infinity: if the beautiful/good (i.e. God) has a limit, it must be surrounded by something different in nature (i.e. evil), and is ruled by it. This is absurd. Therefore, Gregory concludes that the comprehension of the infinite nature cannot be thought (οὐκ ἄρα περίληψίς τις τῆς ἄορίστου φύσεως νομισθήσεται). Starting from God's infinity, he concludes that the ascent of the soul to God is unending (II.238).⁴¹ The soul longs for God but its desire is never satiated because the object of its desire is without end. The ascent to God is illustrated by the figure of Moses, who never stops ascending but always finds a step higher than the one he had attained (II.227). Moses' desire to see God is recorded in Ex. 33. His longing is, however, never fulfilled, as Gregory explains: 'this truly is the vision of God: never to be satisfied in the desire to see him. But one must always, by looking at what he can see, rekindle his desire to see more. Thus, no limit would interrupt growth in the ascent to God, since no limit to the Good can be found nor is the increasing of desire for the Good brought to an end because it is satisfied' (II.239).⁴²

⁴⁰ Discussed by Sweeney *op. cit.* (n. 15) 499-501.

⁴¹ See E. Ferguson, 'God's infinity and man's mutability: perpetual progress according to Gregory of Nyssa', *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 18 (1973) 59-78.

⁴² Translation A.J. Malherbe – E. Ferguson, *Gregory of Nyssa The Life of Moses*, The classics of Western Spirituality (New York 1978) 116.

1.3 *In Canticum Canticorum*

In the same period in which Gregory wrote *VM*, he also composed his homilies on the Song of Songs (*In Canticum Canticorum (Cant.)*),⁴³ which have the same theme as *VM*, namely the unending ascent of the soul to God. In *VM* Moses functions as example of the soul which ascends to God, while in *Cant.* the bride is the example. Like in *VM*, Phil. 3:13, indicating the unending ascent, is an important verse.⁴⁴

In the fifth homily Gregory argues for God's infinity using the same argumentation as in *VM* and in *CE*: God's goodness does not admit of any evil.⁴⁵ Gregory states that the blessed and eternal nature is not surrounded by a boundary. Nothing can be conceived round it, neither, for example, time, nor place, nor colour. Every good that it is conceived to have extends to the limitless and the infinite. For where evil has no place, the good is without limit. Both good and evil do exist in the changeable nature, because of free will, which can choose between good and evil. The consequent evil becomes the limit of the good. By contrast, the simple, pure, uniform, immutable and unchangeable nature, remaining always the same, possesses the good without limit because it does not admit of any communion with evil (157.14-158.12). By participation in transcendent nature, the human soul always grows, never ending its ascent. The word in the Song leads the soul up to the heights by the ascents of perfection, saying 'Arise, come' (*Cant.* 157-159; *Cant.* 2:13).

The same notion of the unending growth of the soul in the good combined with God's (i.e. the good's) infinity occurs in the sixth homily.⁴⁶ Gregory begins this homily by setting out a hierarchy of being.⁴⁷ He makes a distinction between the sensible and material nature on the one hand, and the intelligible and immaterial on the other. The former is wholly surrounded by limits, whereas the latter is limitless and infinite. Every material nature is limited in magnitude, form, appearance, and shape. No one

⁴³ For the date of *Cant.*, see F. Dünzl, 'Gregor von Nyssa's Homilien zum Canticum auf dem Hintergrund seiner Vita Moysis', *Vigiliae Christianae* 44 (1990) 371-381, and Id. *Braut und Bräutigam. Die Auslegung des Canticum durch Gregor von Nyssa* (Tübingen 1993) 30-33.

⁴⁴ See 39.13-20, 119.16, 174.14-16, 245.15-17, 326.19, 352.8-10, 366.15. References are made to the edition of H. Langerbeck (Leiden 1986).

⁴⁵ See Dünzl *op. cit.* (n. 43) 105-106.

⁴⁶ See Dünzl *op. cit.* (n. 43) 111-114.

⁴⁷ Cf. *CE* 1.270-272, 359-366, 3.666-68. For the hierarchy of being in Gregory, see Balás *op. cit.* (n. 9) 23-52.

can grasp matter outside these dimensions. By contrast, the intelligible and immaterial nature is not subject to any boundary. The intelligible nature, in its turn, is subdivided into uncreated (God) and created nature (soul). Uncreated nature is always what it is, remaining the same. The created and immaterial nature (soul) participates in transcendent Being. By its growth in good things, it changes for the better, so that no limit can be discerned, nor is its growth for the better circumscribed by any boundary. Its present state in the good is the beginning of a more advanced stage; this is confirmed by the words of the apostle: by stretching out to things that lie before him, he forgets what has already been attained (*Cant.* 173-174; Phil. 3:13). Commenting on *Cant.* 3:1 ('By night on my bed I sought him whom my soul loved'), he explains that 'night' means the contemplation of invisible things, referring to Moses, who was in the darkness where God was (*Ex.* 20:21) and God made the darkness his secret place round him (*Cant.* 181.4-8; Ps. 17:12). Gregory interprets the darkness as the incomprehensibility of God's essence.⁴⁸ The bride, surrounded by the divine night, searches him who is hidden in the darkness (*Cant.* 181.13-14). The saying of the bride: 'I called him, but he did not hear me' means that the beloved is unnameable. How, Gregory asks, can he who is above every name (Phil. 2:9) be discovered by a name?⁴⁹ The soul understands that there is no limit to his splendour, glory, and holiness (*Cant.* 182.1-4; Ps. 144:3-5).⁵⁰

1.4 Summary and evaluation

From the foregoing discussion of key texts of Gregory, we can draw some general conclusions and make an evaluation. Regarding Gregory's terminology we observe that, where he deals with the subject of infinity, he mostly uses both ἄπειρος and ἄοριστος. ἄπειρος means 'without limit' (πέρας = limit), and ἄοριστος means 'without limit or determination' (ὄρος = limit or determination). He himself remarks that both terms mean the same (*CE* 1.169). A few times he employs ἀπερίγραπτος (= without circumscription), and combines it with ἄοριστος (*Cant.* 370.5, *CE* 1.300).

In the first book of *CE*, Gregory uses the notion of divine infinity in the polemic with Eunomius, who assumes a difference in essence between God the Father and God the Son, postulating that the Son is less than the

⁴⁸ Same interpretation in *VM* II.163-165.

⁴⁹ Reference to Phil. 2:9 regarding the unnameability of God also in *CE* 1.683, 2.587, 3.9.41.

⁵⁰ Cf. for the use of Ps. 144:3-5, *CE* 3.1.103-104.

Father. By attributing infinity to God, Gregory shows that there exists neither a hierarchy of beings (οὐσίαι) nor a more and a less in the divine nature. The great point of difference is that Eunomius regards God the Father as one οὐσία and God the Son as another οὐσία. Divine attributes, like simple, are only applied to God the Father. Because the Son forms a οὐσία different from the Father, he can be inferior. Gregory sees the divine trinity, consisting of three persons, as one οὐσία, which is as a whole simple and infinite. Therefore, although both theologians have the same assumptions—the divine is simple, the divine is immutable—they draw different conclusions.

Gregory bases his argumentation on the following three assumptions:

1. God is absolute goodness.
2. Things can only be limited by their opposites.
3. Goodness cannot be limited by its opposite, i.e. evil.

On the basis of these assumptions, Gregory concludes that God is infinite in goodness, and that his nature is infinite. The transition from the infinity of God's goodness to the infinity of his nature is not made clear. In his discussion Gregory hardly refers to biblical verses to prove God's infinity, but sometimes he refers to Ps. 144:3-5 'there is no limit in his splendour' (*CE* 3.1.103-104, *Cant.* 182.1-4). The absent of biblical verses is not unexpected, because infinity is not predicated of God in the Bible.⁵¹ To confirm God's eternity Gregory quotes Ex. 15:18, Ps. 28:10, Ps. 73:12 (*CE* 1.669, 2.461, 3.6.64).

The argument for God's infinity in *VM* and *Cant.* is along the same lines as in *CE*: God, being the absolute good, does not admit of any opposite, and since he can only be limited by his opposite, he does not have any limit. In *VM* Gregory uses the same examples as in *CE*: life is limited by death, and light by darkness (*CE*. 1.168, *VM* I.5). There is, however, a difference between *CE* on the one hand, and *Cant.* and *VM* on the other. In the former work, Gregory uses God's infinity for polemical purposes in order to refute Eunomius' doctrine. The context of God's infinity in *VM* and *Cant.* is spiritual, formed by an exposition of the unending quest of the soul for God. Gregory argues that the soul's quest for God is unending because God himself does not have any limits. What does not have boundaries cannot be

⁵¹ According to Antweiler *op. cit.* (n. 1) 123, the Bible testifies to God's 'Überlegenheit', which we call infinity. 'Diese Unendlichkeit als ausschließliche "Eigenschaft" Gottes ist im alten wie im Neuen Bund ausgesprochen'.

grasped or seen. For Gregory the unending desire for God is expressed by Paul in Phil. 3:13, which plays a key role in both *VM* and *Cant*.

In Gregory's thought on divine infinity, we can discern four aspects, which cohere with each other:

1. **God is infinite in his goodness,** because his goodness does not admit of its opposite (i.e. evil). This aspect comes mostly up in *CE* 1.167-171 and 236-237. Without further explanation Gregory goes from the infinity of God's goodness to the infinity of his nature.
2. **God is beyond time.** Having neither beginning nor end, God is continuous and eternal. Gregory compares the infinite nature with a circle, which has no beginning or end. God does not have, like creatures, temporal intervals—past, present, future—which involve extension. But God is *ἀδιάστατος*, which means that he does not have extension. Creation can be measured by time, but God cannot be measured. This aspect is brought forward in the texts discussing the eternity of God's life.
3. **God is beyond space.** He has no spatial extension so that it is impossible to go through him; he is *ἀδιεξίτητος*. Gregory has the same in mind as Aristotle, who mentions as a feature of infinity that it is impossible to pass through it from side to side (*Physica* 204a). Gregory sees a great **gap** between the creator and the created nature. Creation is characterized by having *διάστημα*, i.e. extension (both temporal and spatial), whereas God is above extension.
4. **On the basis of God's infinity, Gregory argues that God is incomprehensible,** because only things that have a limit can be intellectually grasped. This can be called the epistemological aspect of divine infinity. A consequence is that the quest for the knowledge of God is also unending. It is prominent in *VM*, where Gregory relates it to Moses' life, explained as the unending quest for God. The human striving to know and see God is a dynamic process that never ends; it is always moving forward. God's infinity is a negative attribute of God, part of an apophatic theology. **In his mystical treatises Gregory links these two forms of infinity—God's infinity and the soul's unending quest for God—with each other.**

Mühlenberg's interpretation can be questioned at some points. He distinguishes two arguments for divine infinity, one based on God's unchangeability (*CE* 1.167-171), and one based on God's simplicity (*CE* 1.236-237). Gregory, however, uses in both passages the same line of argumentation, which is based on the assumption that **God, who is absolutely good, is**

incapable of evil. This argumentation recurs in *VM* and *Cant.* What is more, as Böhmer rightly remarks, it is not Gregory's aim to prove divine infinity, but to disprove Eunomius' view that there is a more or less in the divine nature.

It seems that Mühlenberg interprets Gregory in such a way that infinity expresses God's essence, when he, for instance, writes: 'Es (sc. das Unendliche) ist dasjenige, was nicht zu Ende gedacht werden kann. Diesen 'Begriff' macht er zum Wesenprädikat für Gott.'⁵² Interpreting *CE* 2.446-469 he argues that infinity is 'ein einheitlicher Gottesbegriff', which exceeds Eunomius' unbegotten.⁵³ But his interpretation stands in sharp contrast with Gregory's theology regarding the definition of God's essence. In *CE* 2.529 he clearly states that he does not define any negative attribute as God's essence. In his view God's essence is totally unknown to the human mind and cannot be expressed by any term. The only thing the human intellect can know about God is that he exists. All attributes applied to God are human inventions and do not designate how God really is. The notion of infinity is certainly important for Gregory, but must be seen as part of his apophatic theology, in which God is approached in a negative way: he is incomprehensible, invisible, unseen, unnameable, and Gregory also employs the terms infinite and limitless to indicate the divine Being. He does not, however, argue that infinity expresses God's essence or is a unifying idea of God. In *CE* 3.1.105 Gregory puts infinity on a par with other negative attributes. Infinity expresses and emphasizes strongly God's transcendence: being endless, he is beyond time and space. Creatures, being finite, are not able to encompass and to comprehend the infinite nature of God.

2. THE QUESTION OF DIVINE INFINITY IN PHILO OF ALEXANDRIA

1. The thesis of Henri Guyot

Having dealt with divine infinity in Gregory, we now turn to Philo. As we already pointed out, divine infinity in Philo is a matter of dispute and we begin with the interpretation of Henri Guyot. This French scholar wrote a thesis about divine infinity in Greek philosophy from Philo until Plotinus, published in 1906.⁵⁴ In this study he defends the view, contrary to Mühlenberg's conviction, that Philo was the first to put forward the notion

⁵² Mühlenberg *op. cit.* (n. 10) 202.

⁵³ *Id.* 115.

⁵⁴ H. Guyot, *L'infinité divine depuis Philon le Juif jusque à Plotin*, Thèse (Paris 1906).

of God's infinity. He argues that the Jewish exegete develops the idea of divine infinity and indetermination on the basis of God's unnameability and incomprehensibility in Jewish thought.⁵⁵ The Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle consider the first principle to be determinable, because perfection is linked with determination, not with indetermination.⁵⁶ **The Jew Philo was the first to regard the highest principle as infinite. But Guyot himself concedes that Philo does not use the word 'infinite' for God.**⁵⁷ Philo does, however, clearly express that God is without qualities (*ἀποιος*), and Guyot argues that being without qualities implies being without limit and determination. Because Philo conceives only of qualities that are limited, this entails that God is without limit.⁵⁸ **Further, because God is incomprehensible and unnameable, he cannot be determined.** God's perfection is also beyond every determination and limit; this can be seen, Guyot argues, in *De Cherubim* 86, where Philo writes that God's nature is most perfect: 'rather, he himself is the summit, end, and limit of happiness'.⁵⁹ On the basis of Philo's statement that God is most perfect, Guyot concludes that for Philo God is infinite. The divine infinity is referred to as 'perfection infinie'.⁶⁰

If God is infinite, Guyot reasons further, it is necessary that intermediaries exist in order to establish the relation between God and the created world. Philo calls them powers, and they represent God's activities in the world. Since a direct connection between the imperfect world and God, who is infinitely perfect, is impossible, the powers join God and the world with each other.⁶¹ The power of the infinite God has no other limit than that which is called matter, which is also infinite and without qualities. Guyot concludes: 'Un Infini nouveau et négatif tendait ainsi à se former au regard et en conséquence de l'Infini positif et divin.'⁶²

It seems that Guyot's study on Philo's key role in the development of the notion of God's infinity remained largely unnoticed by Philonic scholars. Two years after Guyot Émile Bréhier published his important study on the philosophical and religious ideas of Philo. He does not discuss the notion of

⁵⁵ Guyot *op. cit.* (n. 54) 35-42.

⁵⁶ Id. 1, 20, 31-32.

⁵⁷ Id. 55 'Sans doute le nom ne s'y rencontre pas (..) Mais la chose s'y trouve.'

⁵⁸ Id. 50.

⁵⁹ Id. 50-55.

⁶⁰ Id. 51.

⁶¹ Id. 64-65.

⁶² Id. 81.

divine infinity, but he does refer very briefly to Guyot's interpretation of ἄπειρος. The view that this word implies being without limitation and limit has to be rejected. With a reference to Drummond, Bréhier argues that ποίον in Philo has the Stoic meaning of what is characteristic of the body. By predicating ἄπειρος of God, Philo wishes to show that God does not have anything comparable with the human body.⁶³

In his voluminous work on Philo, the great American scholar Wolfson pays no attention to the notion of God's infinity. Although he devotes a chapter to the divine properties, he does not refer to the limitlessness of God.⁶⁴ He argues that the attributes predicated of God by Philo, like ἀγένητος, ἀκατάληπτος, ἀόρατος, ἀπερίγραφος, 'do not tell us anything about the essence of God, for this, according to him, must remain unknown.'⁶⁵ In Wolfson's view all these properties can be reduced to one property, namely that of action. He identifies God's properties with his powers. With regard to the divine names, Wolfson concludes that they 'are nothing but designations of these properties or powers of God.'⁶⁶

It is clear that Guyot's view is strongly opposed to that of Mühlenberg, who sees Gregory of Nyssa as the thinker who introduced the idea of divine infinity. In his study, Mühlenberg criticizes Guyot's interpretation, mainly discussing *De Cherubim* 86, the text about God's perfection. Mühlenberg argues that this text is within the limits of Platonic thought, because Philo wishes to say that God is the measure of all things. Mühlenberg concludes that it is impossible to argue on the basis of God's perfection that he is infinite.⁶⁷ Furthermore, the fact that God is not subject to the boundaries of time does not entail that he is limitless. 'Philo dringt nicht weiter zum Gedanken einer zeitlichen Unendlichkeit Gottes vor.'⁶⁸

Guyot's interpretation of Philo is in fact not very convincing. It does not seem possible to conclude, as Guyot does, that, because God is presented as ἄπειρος, he is without determination and limit. Wolfson has shown that by ποιότης Philo means an accident which is present in a corporeal object.⁶⁹

⁶³ É. Bréhier, *Les idées philosophiques et religieuses de Philon d'Alexandrie* (Paris 1908) 72.

⁶⁴ H.A. Wolfson, *Philo: foundations of religious philosophy in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, 2 vols. (Cambridge MA 1947) 2.126-138.

⁶⁵ Id. 2.133.

⁶⁶ Id. 2.135.

⁶⁷ Mühlenberg *op. cit.* (n. 10) 60-61.

⁶⁸ Id. 62.

⁶⁹ Wolfson *op. cit.* (n. 64) 2.102-107.

When Philo says of God that he is ἄπλοος, he refers to God's incorporeality and to the fact that God is not like a man. In *Legum Allegoriae* 1.36, commenting on 'he breathed into' (Gen. 2:7), Philo declares that it is a folly to think that God makes use of organs such as mouth or nostrils; for God is without qualities altogether, not only without the form of a man. In another passage (*Legum allegoriae* 3.36) he asks the mind why it has wrong opinions, such as that God, being without quality, has a quality, like the graven images, or that the imperishable is perishable, like the molten images. Philo's use of the term ἄπλοος does not warrant the conclusion that being without qualities means being without determination and limit. Further, Mühlenberg's criticism of Guyot's reading of *De Cherubim* 86 is justified: **the assumption that God is most perfect does not imply that he is infinite.**

2.2 Philonic texts relating to divine infinity

Although Guyot's argumentation is not convincing, there are in Philo starting-points for the notion of divine infinity. We now discuss some passages in which an impulse to divine infinity comes up. We begin with the treatise *De opificio mundi*, in which Philo offers an exegesis of the creation-account in Genesis. In Philo's interpretation Moses makes a sharp contrast between God, the invisible maker of the world, and the created, visible world, which is subject to becoming. In what follows Philo writes: 'So to what is invisible and intelligible he assigned eternity (ἀδιότης) as being akin and related to it, whereas on what is sense-perceptible he ascribed the appropriate name becoming' (12).⁷⁰ Whitaker translates ἀδιότης as 'the infinite and undefinable', but this translation is quite mistaken.⁷¹ **In Philo ἀίδιος means 'everlasting', and does not connote any form of timelessness or infinite existence.**⁷²

Following Plato (*Timaeus* 29e) Philo postulates that the world has been made because of the goodness of God, the Father and Maker of all (21). Being good, God wishes to give his benefits to creation. Philo writes that God determines to confer unrestricted and rich benefits upon that nature which apart from divine gift could not obtain any good. 'But he does not

⁷⁰ Translation D.T. Runia, *Philo of Alexandria. On the creation of the Cosmos according to Moses*. Introduction, Translation and Commentary (Leiden 2001) 49.

⁷¹ F.H. Colson – G.H. Whitaker, *Philo in ten volumes (and two supplementary volumes)*, with an English translation, Loeb Classical Library, 12 vols. (London 1929-62) 1.11.

⁷² See Runia *op. cit.* (n. 70) 112.

confer his blessings (χάριτες) in proportion to the seize of his powers of beneficence—for these are indeed without limit and infinitely great (ἀπερίγραφοι γὰρ αὐταὶ γε καὶ ἀτελεύτητοι)—but rather in proportion to the capacities of those who receive them.⁷³ The fact is that what comes into existence is unable to accommodate those benefits to the extent that God is able to confer them, since God's powers are overwhelming, whereas the recipient is too weak to sustain the size of them and would collapse, were it not that he measured them accordingly, dispensing with fine tuning to each thing its allotted portion.' (23).⁷⁴

In this last paragraph the notion of adaptation and measurement of the divine blessings comes to the fore.⁷⁵ It means that God's blessings (χάριτες) are too great to be received by man without measurement and restriction. Therefore God adapts and measures out his gifts to the capacity of human beings. If he did not, they would be break down. This principle has both an ontological aspect, which can be seen here, and an epistemological aspect, which occurs clearly in *De specialibus legibus* 1.32-50. The notion is lucidly expressed in 1.43, where God says: 'I graciously bestow what is in accordance with the recipient' (χαρίζομαι δ' ἐγὼ τὰ οἰκεία τῷ ληψομένῳ). It should be mentioned that Philo calls God's blessings ἀπερίγραφος, which means uncircumscribed/without circumscription, i.e. being without limit. In *De praemiis et poenis* 85 Philo refers to αἰὼν with both ἀπερίγραφος and ἀόριστος. Runia considers the referring to God's blessings as limitless an indication that Philo is prepared to ascribe infinity to God.⁷⁶

In one text Philo refers also to God as uncircumscribed. In *De Sacrificiis Abelis et Caini* 59 he interprets three measures of meal (Gen. 18:6) as God and his two highest powers, sovereignty and goodness. They are not measured—for God is uncircumscribed, and his powers are also uncircumscribed—but they are the measures of all things. Goodness is the measure of all good things, sovereignty of its subjects, and God himself of all corporeal and incorporeal things.

⁷³ Cf. *Quis rerum divinarum heres* 31, where God's benefits are also called ἀπερίγραφοι: αἰ σοὶ χάριτες καὶ ἀπερίγραφοι καὶ ὅρον ἢ τελευτὴν οὐκ ἔχουσαι. Here is ἀπερίγραφος explained as having no beginning or end.

⁷⁴ Translation Runia *op. cit.* (n. 70) 51.

⁷⁵ See Runia, *Philo of Alexandria and the Timaeus of Plato*, *Philosophia Antiqua* 44 (Leiden 1986) 137-138, and *id. op. cit.* (n. 70) 146-147.

⁷⁶ Runia *op. cit.* (n. 70) 146.

We remarked already that the principle of measurement has an epistemological application: God adapts the manifestation of himself and his powers to the capacity of the receivers, who do not acquire full knowledge of God. Philo draws the consequence that God is incomprehensible, as appears clearly from *Spec.* 1.32-50.⁷⁷ He begins with the statement that the father and ruler of all is hard to fathom and hard to comprehend (cf. Plato *Timaeus* 28c). Nevertheless, the quest for God should not be abandoned. In the search for God Philo distinguishes two main questions: whether the divine exists, and what it is in its essence. The first question can be solved easily, but the second is difficult and perhaps impossible. Both questions should be examined (32). We can gain knowledge of God's existence on the basis of the creation, in the same way as we can gain knowledge of the sculptor on the basis of the sculpture (33-35). God's essence is difficult to catch and to grasp, but the search for it should be undertaken. For nothing is better than the search for the true God, even if the discovery of him is beyond human capacity (36). We do not have a clear vision of God as he really is, but we should not relinquish the quest, because the search even without finding God is valuable in itself (40). Philo illustrates the search for God with the story in Ex. 33, where Moses asks God to manifest himself (41; Ex. 33:13). In Philo's exegesis God answers: 'I praise your desire, but the request cannot fitly be granted to any that are brought into creation. I freely bestow what is in accordance with the recipient; for not all that I can give with ease is within man's power to take, and therefore to him that is worthy of my grace I extend all the boons which he is capable of receiving. But the apprehension of me is something more than human nature, yea even the whole heaven and universe will be able to contain.' (43-44).⁷⁸ Thereupon Moses asks God to see his glory, explaining God's glory as God's powers (45; Ex. 33:18). God replies that his powers are incomprehensible in their essence, but they do present an impression of their activities. They supply quality and shape to things that are without quality and shape (47). God urges

⁷⁷ For God's incomprehensibility in Philo, see Wolfson *op. cit.* (n. 64) 2.94-164, S. Lilla, 'La theologia negativa dal pensiero classico a quello patristico bizantino', *Helicon* 22-27 (1982-87) 211-279, esp. 229-279, L.A. Montes-Peral, *Akateleptos theos: der unfassbare Gott, Arbeiten zur Literatur und Geschichte des hellenistischen Judentums* 16 (Leiden 1987) 148-161, and Carabine *op. cit.* (n. 7) 191-222. For *Spec.* 1.32-50, see Runia 'The beginnings of the end: Philo of Alexandria and Hellenistic theology', in D. Frede - A. Laks (Ed.) *Traditions of theology. Studies in Hellenistic theology, its background and aftermath.* Philosophia Antiqua 84 (Leiden 2002) 281-316, esp. 299-302.

⁷⁸ Translation Colson *op. cit.* (n. 71) 7.123, 125.

Moses not to hope to apprehend him or his powers in their essence (49). Philo ends his exegesis of Ex. 33 by remarking that Moses, having heard God's answer, did not stop his longing for God, but kept the desire for the invisible aflame (50).

In this text Philo describes the longing for knowledge of God's essence as unending because God's essence is beyond human understanding. Although the goal of the quest is unreachable, the seeking in itself is a joy. Philo presents God as being too great to be received in full by human beings, and therefore God gives what the receiver is able to get, adapting his power to the capacity of human beings. If God manifested himself, man would collapse from an overdose of God's Being.⁷⁹ This greatness of being is the cause for the incomprehensibility of God in his essence for the human mind, which can only know that God exists, not what he is. It is clear that God's transcendence is strongly emphasized: He transcends human knowledge and human description.

God's transcendence is expressed, among other things, by the words 'enclosing, not enclosed' (περιέχων, οὐ περιεχόμενος). These words indicate that God nowhere occupies a spatial place, but Philo explains that God is a place. In *Legum allegoriae* 1.44 Philo expounds that the whole world would not be a place fit for God, because God, being his own place, is filled by himself and is sufficient for himself. He fills and encloses all other things, but he himself is enclosed by nothing else, since he is one and he himself is the whole. W.R. Schoedel argues that Philo's emphasis on God's transcendence, more than in the Greek tradition, provides a context in which the connection of infinity with the divine can arise.⁸⁰ In *De somniis* 1.62-64 Philo comments Gen. 28:11 'He (= Jacob) met a place' and explains that place has a threefold meaning: (1) a space filled by material form, (2) the space of the divine word, (3) **God himself is a place, since he encloses all things, but he is enclosed by nothing, and because he is a place of refuge for all.** That which is enclosed differs from what encloses it, and the divine, enclosed by nothing, is necessarily its own place.

Finally, we discuss some passages from *De Posteritate Caini*, in which we

⁷⁹ For the notion of the overdose of Being, see Runia *art. cit.* (n. 77) 304.

⁸⁰ See W.R. Schoedel, 'Enclosing, not enclosed: the early Christian doctrine of God', in: W.R. Schoedel – R.L. Wilken (Eds.) *Early Christian literature and the classical intellectual tradition* (Paris 1979) 75-86, esp. 75-76. He refers to Aristotle, who in his discussion of infinity, reports the view that the unlimited encloses (περιέχειν) and governs all (*Physica* 203b12, cf. Anaximenes fr. B2).

find the same notions as in the works already discussed. In § 14-16 Philo explains Ex. 20:21, where Moses is said to enter the darkness where God is. Moses enters into the impenetrable and unformed thoughts on the Existent, because the cause is neither in darkness nor in any place at all, but beyond place and time. He has placed all created things under his control, and is enclosed by nothing, but transcends all (14). When the God-loving soul searches for the essence of the Existent, it makes a search of that which is beyond form and beyond sight. From this quest a very great good originates, namely to comprehend that God is incomprehensible and to see that he is invisible (15). By his request to God to manifest himself (Ex. 33:13) Moses shows very clearly that no created being can know God's essence (16).

The principle of measurement is brought up in § 143-145. Philo expounds that God does not utter his words according to the greatness of his own perfection, but to the capacity of those who will profit. If God wished to display his own richness, even the entire land and the entire sea, turned into dry land, would not contain it. Therefore God stops bestowing his first blessings, but the receivers are sated. He stores them up for the future and gives others. For what has come into being is never without God's blessings—otherwise it would have perished—but it is not able to bear their full and abundant torrent.

In § 174, Philo, explaining Gen. 4:25, sets out that Seth differs from Abel. Abel leaves the mortal life and goes to a better nature, whereas Seth, being seed from human virtue, will never relinquish the race of man, but will obtain enlargement in it. He will obtain it in the righteous Noah, the tenth descendant from Adam; in the faithful Abraham, another tenth, and in Moses, the seventh descendant from Abraham (172-173). In § 174 Philo writes: 'Look at the advance for the better made by the soul that has an insatiable desire for beautiful things, and the uncircumscribed wealth of God, which has given as starting-points to others the goals reached by those before them. For the limit of the knowledge attained by Seth became the starting-point of righteous Noah; Abraham begins his education in the perfection of Noah; and Moses' training begins at the highest point of Abraham's wisdom.' (174).

In these passages we recognize notions already known from the previous texts: God transcends human knowledge: his essence is unknown. Therefore, the longing for God is unending but the quest should not be abandoned. Because of the overwhelming power of God's Being, God measures his blessings in proportion to the receivers.

3. CONCLUSION

Gregory of Nyssa gives the notion of divine infinity an important place in his doctrine of God. It is part of his apophatic theology, in which God's transcendence is strongly emphasized. Gregory employs divine infinity, mainly in *CE*, to disprove Eunomius' view that there is more or less in the divine trinity. **The more important function is that it forms a base for the unending quest of the soul for the incomprehensible God.** Mühlengbergs interpretation—infinity expresses God's essence—has to be rejected, because according to Gregory God's essence cannot be expressed by any denomination. Gregory is the first thinker who argues elaborately for divine infinity, but the notion appear also in other Cappadocian fathers. Furthermore, he was able to link his thought with that of Philo. Although Guyot's argumentation is not convincing, we can discern starting-points for the notion of divine infinity in Philo's writings.

Philo describes God's blessings and his gifts as everlasting and without circumscription. Being without circumscription implies being infinite, and in *Praem.* 85 Philo predicates both *ἀόριστος* and *ἀπερίγραφος* of *αἰών*. In one text Philo even refers to God as *ἀπερίγραφος*. We recognize here an impulse to the notion of divine infinity. We saw that Gregory also refers to God as *ἀπερίγραπτος*, combining it with *ἀόριστος*. God's blessings and his powers are too great for human beings to receive fully and without measurement. For this reason God, bestowing his gifts on men, adapts them to the capacity of those who receive them. We call this the principle of measurement: God measures out his powers, otherwise human beings would collapse under the overdose of God's being. By this Philo indicates the great gap between God and man, emphasizing God's transcendence. Some scholars do indeed refer to God as infinite in Philo, but it should be noted that this is an extrapolation. Philo himself never calls God infinite.⁸¹

The principle of measurement has an epistemological application: God does not manifest himself totally because of the weakness of humankind. He adapts his manifestation to the capacity of the receivers, who are not able

⁸¹ See Völker *op. cit.* (n. 7) 283-284: 'Nur die Tatsache von Gottes Existenz (das ὄν) sei dem Geschöpf faßbar. Das entspricht dem abstrakt gefaßten philonischen Gottesbegriff, der zwischen dem Endlichen und Unendlichen eine tiefe Kluft aufreißt.', and E. Zeller, *Die Philosophie der Griechen in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung*, III.2 (Leipzig 19034) 400: 'es (= Philo's System) ruht bestimmter auf demselben dualistischen Gegensatz Gottes und der Welt, des Unendlichen und des Endlichen'. Zeller derives God's infinity from his perfection.

to know God's essence. The quest for knowledge of God is thus unending, but should not be given up, because it is valuable in itself. We saw that in Gregory the unending seeking for God is based on the infinity of the divine nature. In *VM* he frequently emphasizes that the desire of the soul to see God is insatiable (II.230, 232, 235, 239). Philo, too, calls the desire of the soul for beautiful things insatiable (*Post.* 174). Both Philo and Gregory explain the story of Moses from Ex. 33 as the unending seeking of the soul for God. In *VM* II.239 Gregory urges that one should always rekindle the desire to see God. This can be regarded as an echo of Philo's remark that Moses keeps the desire to see God aflame (*Spec.* 1.50). Gregory presents the ascent of the soul to see God as a climbing from step to step. The step one has reached functions as a starting-point for further advance (*VM* I.227, cf. *Cant.* 173-174). This recalls Philo's passage in *Post.* 174, where he describes the state of knowledge attained by Seth as a starting-point for Abraham's perfection. Both Philo and Gregory interpret the darkness in which Moses enters (Ex. 20:21) as the incomprehensibility of God within the context of negative theology: God is invisible, unnameable, and incomprehensible (*VM* 163-165, *Cant.* 181; *Post.* 14).⁸²

One aspect of infinity is being beyond space and time. Philo explains that God does not occupy spatial place, but encloses all things (*Somm.* 1.62-64, *Post.* 14). Being beyond space goes together with being beyond time, and Philo explains that God is not in any place, but beyond place and time (*Post.* 14).

We can end with the observation that in Philo several aspects of divine infinity can be found, with which Gregory was able to link up. Given Gregory's thorough reading of Philo's writings, it is highly probable that he was indeed inspired by Philo. But Gregory will always be the first thinker in the Judaeo-Christian tradition to argue extensively for God's infinity as part of his apophatic theology.

Gazellestraat 138
3523 SZ Utrecht

⁸² See I. Gobry, 'La ténèbre (γνόφος): l'héritage alexandrin de Saint Grégoire de Nysse', *Diotima: Revue de recherche philosophique* 19 (1991) 79-82, A. Meredith, 'Licht und Finsternis bei Origenes und Gregor von Nyssa', in: T. Kobusch – B. Mojsisch (Eds.) *Platon in der abendländischen Geistesgeschichte* (Darmstadt 1997) 48-59, and Geljon *op. cit.* (n. 3) 128-134.