

Basil of Caesarea,
Gregory of Nyssa, and
the Transformation of
Divine Simplicity

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Introduction

THE UNIQUENESS OF BASIL AND GREGORY

Your desire for information, my right well-beloved and most deeply respected brother Amphilochius, I highly commend, and not less your industrious energy. I have been exceedingly delighted at the care and watchfulness shewn in the expression of your opinion that of all the terms concerning God in every mode of speech, not one ought to be left without exact investigation. You have turned to good account your reading of the exhortation of the Lord, “Everyone that asketh receiveth, and he that seeketh findeth.”¹

The “exact investigation” of theological language which the Cappadocian bishop, Basil of Caesarea, commends in this passage is the subject of this book. In the late fourth century, theological language and the related problem of what humans can and cannot know about God had become suddenly problematic. It is the purpose of this study to unpack the nature and significance of this problem and the peculiarities of the response to it given by Basil and his younger brother, Gregory, whom he appointed bishop of Nyssa.

The problem Basil and Gregory faced was reconciling the doctrine of divine simplicity with a coherent theological epistemology. Both parts of this require explanation. To say that God is simple is to deny that there is any composition in God whatsoever. This implies that there are no material parts that come together to constitute God. But it also implies that the apparently diverse attributes

¹ Basil of Caesarea, *Spir.* 1.1 (trans. Blomfield Jackson, NPNF 8, p. 2).

people customarily ascribe to God are not diverse after all: or at least not diverse in the way the properties of objects of our ordinary experience are diverse. More on this in a moment. For now I need to address the notion of theological epistemology, since this is not a term in common use.

By ‘theological epistemology’, I mean a domain of enquiry centred on the kind of reflexive question that arises when a believer asks, ‘What must my knowing be like if its “object” is God?’ Of particular interest are two questions. First, there is a question of which properties one ought to ascribe to God: is God just or merciful or both, eternal or temporal, immanent or transcendent or both, and so forth. Clearly, there is a potential for tension and contradiction among the various claims one wishes to make about God. Tensions of this sort, as we will see, fuelled many of the debates about divine simplicity. The second aspect of theological epistemology is the question of how these properties are to be ascribed to God. Perhaps I know what it means to attribute mercy to a human being. But what do I mean when I ascribe it to God? What am I assuming about the relation between God and God’s mercy? In the late ancient discussions we will be considering, this is simultaneously a metaphysical and a logical question. In metaphysical terms, we can ask the question in the following way. When we say that God is just, for instance, what are we presuming about the relation between God’s essence or nature (what it is to be God) and God’s justice? Is it the same as the relation between, say, Socrates’ justice and his human nature, or is there something fundamentally different involved in ascribing properties to God? Is God’s justice *identical* with God’s nature? In logical terms, we can ask it as a question about predication: in what logical category do we predicate the term ‘justice’ of God? Does it name a quality, or is it in the category of substance? If it names God’s essence, does it do so as a definition of God?

This second area of concern within theological epistemology links it to issues of general epistemology. For it will often be the case that the way in which one explains the logic of attribution of properties to God will be shaped by the standards one believes must be met for knowledge in any case. Ancient epistemology since Plato and Aristotle had been shaped by a concern with discovering the essences of things. That is, to know something meant to be able to

explain it: to state what makes it the kind of thing it is, in other words, its essence.² And to state this essence was to state the thing's definition. In other words, the definitions philosophers looked for were not primarily definitions of *words* but of *realities*, especially of natural 'kinds' such as humanity or of forms such as justice. Knowing such definitions was held to be basic to knowing at all: in order to know something as beautiful, in order reliably and consistently to identify instances of beauty, one must know the essence of beauty. This is the thesis known as the epistemological priority of definition.³

This thesis will haunt the present study, because if one holds that knowing something (as opposed to merely having true beliefs about it) requires one to know its essence, and one wishes to claim knowledge of God, then it is likely that one will be inclined to claim that the attributes one predicates of God name God's essence. In Chapter 4, I will argue that it is a modified version of the principle of the epistemological priority of definition which drives Eunomius' claim to know God's essence. Though it may be less obvious, I will argue in Chapter 2 that the same principle underlies Clement's negative theology—that is, his claim that we do not *know* God. For both, knowledge depends in some fundamental way on knowing essences. And this is where Basil and Gregory part ways with them: for the Cappadocian brothers, having reliable knowledge of something is not dependent upon knowing its essence. It will be the burden of Chapters 5 to 7 to unpack how they articulated a theological epistemology that did not include the epistemological priority of definition. As I discuss in the Conclusion, their dissociation of knowing God from this principle lies at the centre of their transformation of divine simplicity.

² See the account of the interconnection of defining and explaining in Aristotle in David Charles, *Aristotle on Meaning and Essence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), esp. chs. 10 and 13.

³ For a discussion of the thesis in Plato's Socratic dialogues (with references to the rather extensive literature on this), see Thomas C. Brickhouse and Nicholas D. Smith, *Plato's Socrates* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 45–55. Brickhouse and Smith do not believe Socrates holds this thesis, at least as ascribed to him by many scholars.

These issues of what we predicate of God and what is the logic of its predication are the questions of theological epistemology. They are distinct from those addressed in modern philosophical literature on 'religious' epistemology.⁴ The central question in the latter is, 'Under what conditions is someone's holding of religious belief X justified?' 'Theological epistemology' is my label for the problem of the knowledge of God, that is the question of what can and cannot be known of God, considered in abstraction from the question of whether this knowledge is justified. 'Theological epistemology' names the attempt to articulate the logic of knowledge and attribution in the case of God, and not the attempt to justify the things known or attributed. Indeed, the authors we will discuss take for granted the value of certain terms, not simply for 'knowing' God in the abstract, but even for glorifying God in worship and prayer. In asking the kinds of difficult, perhaps obsessive questions they do about these terms, they are attempting not to provide a map of divine reality, a conceptual model into which to place the God of Christian scripture; they are rather trying, in however tentative a fashion, to classify Christian praise.

Divine simplicity poses a problem for theological epistemology, thus understood, because to think through the complex terrain of biblical and doxological language is to think discursively, reasoning bit by bit in a logical and temporal progression. But how can humans, who think in this way, come to know a simple God, who is not subject to any kind of progression or sequence? Theologians have responded to this problem in different ways. Some have denied that knowledge with any positive content can be had of a simple being: given our limited conceptual resources, we cannot attribute anything to God. This is the position of Clement of Alexandria, and while the great third-century Neoplatonist philosopher Plotinus lies outside the scope of this study, he is also representative of this kind of radical negative theology. Although Basil and especially Gregory have received considerable attention in relation to the development of apophatic or negative theology, it is clear that neither of them endorses anything nearly as stark as Clement's or Plotinus'

⁴ See Peter Forrest, 'The Epistemology of Religion', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2006 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2006/entries/religion-epistemology/>>.

apophaticism.⁵ The theology of Basil and Gregory abounds with positive statements about God; as we will see, some of these claims are even positive claims about the very nature of God.

Some theologians have taken the doctrine of divine simplicity to entail that every term one attributes to God names God's essence or substance, and that, metaphysically, God's essence and God's properties are in fact identical. I call the latter claim the 'identity thesis'. It is precisely the thesis that Basil and Gregory faced in the version articulated by Eunomius of Cyzicus, their principal doctrinal opponent. The identity thesis, in a vastly more sophisticated version, would be the interpretation of divine simplicity given by such theological authorities as Augustine⁶ and Aquinas.⁷ It has also become an almost universal presupposition of contemporary discussions of divine simplicity among philosophers of religion. Among them, it is taken as an analytic truth that if God is simple, God is identical with his properties; that is, the latter is taken as the meaning of the former.⁸ But this interpretation of the meaning of simplicity itself has a history.

⁵ See esp. Raoul Mortley, *From Word to Silence II: The Way of Negation, Christian and Greek* (Bonn: Hanstein, 1986), chs. 9–10.

⁶ For discussion, see Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), ch. 15; on the identity thesis, see esp. pp. 376ff.

⁷ For Aquinas's position, see *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 3. For discussion, see Christopher Hughes, *On a Complex Theory of a Simple God: An Investigation in Aquinas' Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).

⁸ As true of opponents of the doctrine (e.g. Alvin Plantinga) as of supporters (e.g. Barry Miller). Alvin Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980), 26–27 unpacks the doctrine thus: "God does indeed have a nature; but he is identical with it . . . We cannot distinguish [God] from his nature or his nature from his existence, or his existence from his other properties; he is the very same thing as his nature, existence, goodness, wisdom, power and the like." Barry Miller, *A Most Unlikely God: A Philosophical Enquiry* (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), 11: "What, then, is the doctrine of divine simplicity? Brief and most generally, it is the claim that in God there is no composition of any kind whatever . . . These are negative claims . . . Positively, however, the divine simplicity means that God is identical with his existence, nature, and his real properties (though not his Cambridge properties)." Cf. also the well-known defence by Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann: 'Absolute Simplicity', *Faith and Philosophy* 2 (1985): 353–82 at 356–7. There are exceptions: Joshua Hoffman and Gary S. Rosenkrantz defend a 'weaker' version of simplicity, one that does not link it with identity, but with God lacking spatial and temporal parts: *The Divine Attributes* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 59–68. They reject the identity thesis as "unacceptable" at 67–8.

Moreover, it is an interpretation that Basil and Gregory go to great lengths to oppose. They endorse the doctrine of divine simplicity. However, they rightly perceive that the identity interpretation of it, in the version they encounter in Eunomius' theology, conflicts with the inherent complexity of the knowledge of God, and if any theory does this, so much the worse for the theory. We must leave open the issue of how they would have responded to a version of the identity thesis, such as Augustine's or Aquinas', that allows for genuine complexity in religious language, where simplicity is compatible with ascribing terms to God that are not understood to be synonyms. That is, one must leave unanswered how they would respond to a theologian who holds the metaphysical thesis that God's essence and attributes are identical (which Basil and Gregory do not endorse) and who holds the logical thesis that divine attribute names are not synonyms for one another (which they do endorse).

My fundamental claim in this book is that Basil and Gregory transformed divine simplicity.⁹ They did so by articulating a version of the doctrine of divine simplicity that avoids the horns of total apophaticism and the identity thesis (as they encountered it in Eunomius), while still playing its by-then traditional role within the Christian tradition. It needed to serve as a way of sanctioning the attribution of *contradictory* properties to God. Put in positive terms, it needed to serve the function, which it had in a range of early Christian texts, of explicating the consistency of God. To say God is simple is to provide a sort of second-order rule for speaking about God.¹⁰ At the most basic, affirming divine simplicity means that if one says 'God is just' and 'God is merciful' one does not view God's justice and mercy as *parts* of God. But, additionally, it means that one should not take these attributes as contradicting one another—since only complex beings can have contradictory properties at the same time. If one claims divine

⁹ An initial sense of Gregory's use of the language of simplicity, together with references to instances, can be gleaned from the articles under *ἀπλότης* and *ἀπλοῦς* in Friedhelm Mann (ed.), *Lexicon Gregorianum: Wörterbuch zu den Schriften Gregors von Nyssa, Band I: ἀβαρής-ἄωρος* (Leiden, 1999), 458–61.

¹⁰ Cf. David Burrell's account of simplicity as a "formal feature" rather than just another divine attribute, perhaps most accessibly found in David Burrell, 'Distinguishing God from the World', in idem, *Faith and Freedom: An Interfaith Perspective* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 3–19.

simplicity, one cannot hold that there is any tension or struggle in God between justice and mercy. Rather, one must articulate the sense in which God is both, reject one or the other, or assign the contradictory attributes to distinct 'levels' of divine reality—the latter was at any rate an option *up until* the Cappadocians.

The doctrine of simplicity *as it was used in early Christian literature*, then, was not primarily a way of articulating God's aseity and immutability in the abstract. It was not discussed by patristic authors as a 'purely philosophical' concept easily separable from exegetical and doctrinal concerns. Rather, it entered into basic debates about who God is in light of revelation. These debates stand at the heart of the 'development' of Christian doctrine. Indeed, Rowan Williams has suggested that this concern with God's consistency is a unifying factor in the history of doctrinal development:

The meaning of 'God' as displayed in the history of Israel and the Church has to do with the historical realities of transformation or renewal of such scope that they only be ascribed to an agency free from the conditions of historical contingency, and one that challenges rather than endorses what claims to be the heights of moral and spiritual attainment. And it is out of this meaning of 'God' that there gradually develops the fully articulated doctrine of God characteristic of patristic and medieval theology: the unconditioned act of self-diffusion and self-sharing upon which all things depend—with the important corollary that this act is 'simple', it is what it is without the admixture of elements or constraints from beyond itself, and so is entirely at one with itself, consistent and faithful.¹¹

One finds the language of simplicity in a range of authors, from the mid-second century onward, who tried to sort out the coherence of the revealed picture(s) of God in Christian scripture. Simplicity enters discussions in which authors ask, 'If God is like *this*, can we say that God did *that*, as it is recorded?' The question then becomes: is there contradiction among the properties one wishes to attribute to God (assuming one wishes to ascribe properties to God)? We will see various answers to this question. For the second-century 'Valentinian' author Ptolemy, there is a contradiction between the activities of creating the world and authoring the Biblical Law, on one

¹¹ Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 21.

hand, and the absolute perfection that is characteristic of the first principle, on the other hand. But the first principle, being simple, cannot be internally discordant; consequently, the activities of creating and legislating must belong to a lower level of divine reality than the absolutely first principle. We will begin with Ptolemy because he so clearly shows the impact the doctrine of divine simplicity, with its attendant thesis of divine non-contradiction, had upon Christian exegetical discussions. For Aetius and Eunomius, there is a fundamental contradiction in saying that the simple divine essence is simultaneously without beginning or 'ingenerate' (*ἀγέννητος*) and begotten or 'generate' (*γεννητός*). These contradictory properties cannot both characterize a *simple* substance. Like Ptolemy, they relegate one of the contradictory terms to a lower level of divinity. According to Basil and especially Gregory, it is Eunomius who has subjected God to contradiction: in subordinating the Son to the Father, he has unwittingly mixed the divine goodness with its opposite. For Gregory, to say God is simple is to say that the divine goodness is unmixed with its one contradictory, evil. Basil and Gregory participate in this long tradition of speaking of simplicity in connection with the problem of divine consistency. And yet their response is unique.

Unfortunately, the peculiarities of Basil and Gregory's response to the problem of theological epistemology in the face of divine simplicity have not received sufficient scholarly attention. On one hand, many scholars have lingering Harnackian doubts about the validity of early Christian uses of Greek philosophy. Divine simplicity is an idea that early Christians appropriated from the philosophy of the day; without claiming to exhaust the issue, we will trace some of this influence throughout this book. For many theologians, this still constitutes an objection to divine simplicity, and historians of doctrine have often timidly avoided discussing simplicity, the better to elude criticisms of early Christian thought as a 'sell-out' to Greek philosophy. Fortunately, there is a growing consensus that the basic assumptions of this narrative are inadequate.¹² The opposition between a pure, 'biblical' Christian faith and a rationalistic Greek

¹² For searching criticism of the theory that theology 'fell' through its contact with Greek philosophy, see Paul L. Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

philosophy has been called into question by studies such as Michel Barnes's work on Gregory of Nyssa.¹³ Barnes has shown how a technical philosophical understanding of 'power' shaped Gregory of Nyssa's—and a range of other early Christians'—explication of the scriptural notion of the power of God, a site of controversy in his day. Moreover, recent work by Lewis Ayres has given the doctrine of divine simplicity a central role in the story of the development of Christian doctrine, in particular in the development of the kinds of self-conscious accounts of theological epistemology and language that will be our focus.¹⁴

On the other hand, before the recent work of Ayres and Barnes just mentioned, the few scholars who did attend to divine simplicity in early Christian authors as philosophically interesting tended to deny the coherence of the doctrine. The clearest example of this is the work of Christopher Stead. Stead discussed patristic notions of divine simplicity in a number of works.¹⁵ His work has influenced many aspects of this study. Part of Stead's contribution was to point out the fact that the idea of simplicity is not so simple after all. This is the case both owing to the difficulty of neatly distinguishing 'simple' from 'composite'¹⁶ and because the term simplicity and its synonyms are used by patristic authors with different meanings, but with no acknowledgement of this equivocation.¹⁷ The present study confirms these points generally—though in my discussion of the Cappadocians I argue that they precisely did acknowledge their disagreement with Eunomius on the meaning of simplicity. Accordingly, with Stead, I am suspicious of the argument, originating with

¹³ See, esp., *The Power of God: Δύναμις in Gregory of Nyssa's Trinitarian Theology* (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 2001).

¹⁴ *Nicaea and its Legacy*, esp. chs. 11, 14, and 15.

¹⁵ Christopher Stead, *Divine Substance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 180–9; idem, 'Divine Simplicity as a Problem for Orthodoxy', in Rowan Williams (ed.), *The Making of Orthodoxy: Essays in honour of Henry Chadwick* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 255–69; idem, *Philosophy in Christian Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 120–35, esp. 130–5.

¹⁶ As argued in 'Divine Simplicity as a Problem', 257–9.

¹⁷ *Philosophy in Christian Antiquity*, 130: "the word *haplous*, 'simple', and its equivalents (*amerês*, *asunthetos*), are used in different contexts which really call for distinct definitions of the term; though the need for this, it seems, was not remarked."

Plato and common in patristic literature,¹⁸ that one can easily categorize objects into simple versus complex and infer that the former are immutable because they are not the latter. Surely this is question-begging.

Another of Stead's arguments against patristic notions of divine simplicity is a disjunction that is meant to show that simplicity is incompatible with the claims of Christian faith. While I reject this view, I agree with part of his analysis, so far as it goes. His basic claim is that a theologian can take one of two options: either (A) divine simplicity entails that God—or, in the technical language of the day, the divine substance or essence—is identical with each of God's attributes, or (B) the same doctrine entails that God is outside of all categories and therefore beyond all attributes. These options should be familiar enough by now: they are the identity thesis and radical apophaticism, respectively. Stead argues that neither option is theologically acceptable. While his arguments are not without problems, he has undoubtedly put his finger on the pressures the doctrine of simplicity places on theological epistemology. Moreover, the two versions of divine simplicity he opposes correspond to the versions I am arguing that the Cappadocians reject.

If one takes option (A), Stead argues, then one has a difficult time reconciling this belief with belief in what he calls "particular providence"¹⁹ and "prevenient grace".²⁰ You must deny the former because you cannot say God is identical with his action of, say, raising you to eternal bliss *and* with his action of damning your office mate to hellfire. And if one continues to maintain the identity thesis, arguing that these are the same actions from a general point of view, then one must deny God's prevenient grace. This is because if the difference between God's saving you and damning you-know-who is not a difference on God's part, then it is presumably a difference that you and so-and-so are responsible for, thereby placing the initiative for salvation and moral progress in human hands. But if one takes option (B), and develops a radically negative theology, then one

¹⁸ Stead rightly points to Gregory of Nazianzus, *Or.* 28.7 at 'Divine Simplicity as a Problem', 256.

¹⁹ 'Divine Simplicity as a Problem', 262.

²⁰ *Philosophy in Christian Antiquity*, 131.

has to relativize or deny the myriad positive titles given to God in scripture.

One might ask whether (A) and (B) necessarily have these consequences. Surely, one must at least say that the account of divine activities which Stead assumes, according to which God acts one way now, another way then, is anthropomorphism of the finest sort. Yet, even if we grant this account for the sake of argument, other problems remain. For instance, Eunomius of Cyzicus, whom we examine in Chapter 4, holds (A), but would not agree with Stead's portrayal of the consequences of the identity thesis. For Eunomius, from the fact that God's attributes (or, really, attribute) are identical it does not follow that God's activities are identical. However, Eunomius' claim depends crucially on his distinction between essence (*οὐσία*) and activities (*ἐνεργεῖαι*), a distinction that is difficult to maintain in as sharp a manner as he tries to do.²¹ If we are not prepared to accept such a distinction, does it follow that Stead is right about (A)? Not necessarily. Another way to make (A) work is to appeal to the fact that a single action can be rightly described in multiple ways, even when performed by a human being. In their well-known defence of divine simplicity, Stump and Kretzmann offer as an example the single activity of flipping a switch on a wall that could be accurately described as "turning on the light, walking the dog, frightening the prowler, etc".²²

This may turn out to be the correct response to Stead, but there are problems. In the case of the person turning on the light, we have reasons to believe that this action is identical with the action of frightening the prowler (these being merely descriptions of the effects or context of a single action whose singleness is empirically ascertainable). But even if we grant this, we seem to have no reason to believe that God's action of talking to Cain at time t_1 and God's action of producing a hailstorm in Egypt at t_2 , to use Stump and Kretzmann's examples of divine activities in scripture, constitute the same action *other than on the theory under review*. To be sure, they offered the 'turning on the light' example only in order to show that it is not

²¹ See, e.g., *Apol.* 22.

²² Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, 'Absolute Simplicity', 356.

unreasonable to believe that there can be multiple descriptions of a single act; they do not view this as a ‘proof’ of the unity of divine action. But what would we check in order to confirm whether God’s talking to Cain and his sending the hail are in fact the same? The problem with Stump and Kretzmann’s view is not simply that we have to presuppose divine simplicity in order to arrive at the identity of these actions, but that we have to hold a rather idiosyncratic version of divine simplicity. This is one that Eunomius, as we have seen, does not accept. And neither would the Cappadocians or Clement of Alexandria. So why should we believe that divine simplicity implies the identity of apparently distinct divine actions?²³

The important point is that, although there are ways of responding to Stead’s criticism of the identity thesis, these are unsatisfactory unless we are firmly committed to it on quite independent grounds and willing to countenance some possibly unacceptable consequences. One must either sever completely God’s activities from God’s simple essence (as in Eunomius) or appeal to an utterly mysterious unity, a theoretical entity for which we have no reasons other than the theory we are defending (as in Stump and Kretzmann). If we accept the identity thesis, we need to abandon or redescribe what Stead calls “particular providence” and “prevenient grace”.

As for (B), the view that divine simplicity entails a thoroughly negative theology, Stead is right that this is incompatible with positive, scriptural descriptions of God, but then again this is the purpose of the theory and so the objection scores at best a glancing blow. Clement of Alexandria, the representative of (B) whom we will study in Chapter 2, is at least consistent: he maintains that even though we use terms like ‘good’ for God, these concepts are merely placeholders, useful for keeping our minds focused, but without referential efficacy. We must await that chapter to see how this is compatible with a positive theology, indeed with the view of theology as a *science*, which Clement endorses. For now it certainly appears that the possibility of this positive science will be in spite of rather than because of divine simplicity.

²³ Gregory of Nyssa ridicules the identity thesis on precisely the grounds that it would make God’s action of creating identical with his essence, which he assumes is absurd to his opponents as well as himself: *Eun.* 2.31–3 (GNO 1: 236–7).

We are left, then, with a bleak picture. Stead seems to be right in his view that either of the two clearest versions of simplicity leaves us with no ability to make the claims that Christians wish to make about God. I largely accept his analysis so far, but it is flawed in that it reduces the options to two, when in fact the Cappadocians (here, Basil and Gregory of Nyssa) offer a different version of simplicity that escapes the problem, as stated by Stead, of being incompatible with ordinary religious discourse. The Cappadocians attempt to ‘save the appearances’ of religious language, especially its multiplicity and complexity, without evacuating simplicity of its content. Stead noted this attempt, but found it lacking: “the Cappadocians most opportunely, though unexpectedly, insist that the simplicity of the Godhead does not preclude a multiplicity of descriptions, *epinoiai*. These, however, were thought to relate to the energies and relationships of the Godhead, leaving his simple substance unaffected; a position which I have given reason to reject.”²⁴ By analysing the role of *epinoia* or ‘conceptualization’ in relation to Basil’s broader theological epistemology, I will suggest that Stead’s negative assessment rests upon a misunderstanding of the logical foundations of the ‘Cappadocian’ position. He makes the same mistake that many interpreters do: assuming that, for Basil and Gregory of Nyssa, *all* theological language is based on conceptualization (*epinoia*). To be sure, terms humans devise through *epinoia* only “relate to the energies and relationships of the Godhead”—if by this we mean that they either name ‘relative’ properties (properties we apply to God only when we place our ideas of God in relation to something), such as God’s not having a beginning or ‘ingeneracy’, or are derived from reflection upon God’s activities, such as his calling Israel out of slavery. But such terms form only one class of theological concepts. Despite their agnosticism about defining what it is to be God, Basil and Gregory do predicate a number of terms of the divine substance. These terms refer to God’s intrinsic properties, goodness, light, life, power, wisdom, and so forth. These properties, I will argue, must be understood differently from ideas and terms derived through conceptualization. They are not *identical* with God’s nature, but neither are they merely

²⁴ ‘Divine Simplicity as a Problem’, 267.

relative, extrinsic properties. Rather, they are *propria* of the divine nature.²⁵ Herein lies the uniqueness of Basil and Gregory's account of divine simplicity.

OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS

In order to highlight the distinctive features of Basil and Gregory, it is necessary to outline the options they faced. Chapter 1 focuses on the problem of contradiction among divine attributes and activities. Here, I situate Ptolemy's discussion of whether the activities attributed to God in scripture are contradictory within both second-century anti-Marcionite polemic and second-century Platonism. It is important to bear this discussion in mind when reading Basil and Gregory, for a crucial part of their response to Eunomius is to deny that there is any contradiction, indeed any difference at all, between the activities of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit.

The bulk of Chapter 2 turns to the negative theology of Clement. I first outline what Clement thinks it means to know something (in the strong sense of scientific knowledge) and then show how this breaks down in the case of God. I highlight Clement's indebtedness to a wide range of epistemological theories, and his use of the theological interpretation developing among Platonists at this time of the second part of Plato's *Parmenides*. Chapter 2 also spells out the way in which Origen picks up these themes, developing his doctrine of *epinoiai*, which Basil adapts by severing its connection with the distinction between a simple first principle, the 'Father', and a complex second principle, the 'Son'.

Chapter 3 provides background for Aetius' and Eunomius' theological epistemology. The first part discusses the history of the term 'ingenerate', as used by Christians from the second century onwards. This provides context for Aetius' and Eunomius' claim that this term uniquely names the divine essence. The second part examines Athanasius of Alexandria's argument concerning what divine simplicity

²⁵ I explain the concept and terminology of *propria* in the section labelled Note to the Reader.

implies for predicating terms of God. Athanasius argues that, if God is simple, such terms can only name the divine essence. This argument is isomorphic with that of Aetius and Eunomius on the same topic. It represents a crucial step in the construction of the identity thesis.

Chapter 4 turns directly to Aetius and Eunomius. Here I argue that the identity thesis fulfils not only what they take to be required for God to be simple, but also what is required for God to be *knowable*. Drawing on the work of Aetius, Eunomius extends it, making it an *epistemological* argument. He adopts the principle of the epistemological priority of definition, modifying it in such a way that it entails a stark alternative between knowing God's essence perfectly or not knowing God *at all*. Eunomius believes that he does know the essence of God, and that the content of this knowledge can be summarized with the single term 'ingenerate' (*ἀγέννητος*). Since God is simple, God is identical with God's ingeneracy. Neither Aetius nor Eunomius denies that Christians have a range of terms to use of God in addition to ingeneracy. However, Eunomius argues that each of these is synonymous with 'ingeneracy'. That is, identity in reference entails identity in sense. This lack of a clear distinction between the sense or meaning of theological terms and what they refer to or denote handicaps Eunomius' version of the identity thesis and helps make Basil and Gregory's response, with their emphasis on the non-synonymous nature of theological terms, attractive. It is often (rightly) asserted in modern philosophical discussions that the sense/reference distinction is necessary to an adequate version of the identity thesis: this allows us to say, for instance, that God's justice and God's mercy are identical without saying that justice and mercy mean the same thing.²⁶ In this sense, it is Basil and Gregory, rather than Eunomius, who are the allies of the identity thesis, since they provide grounds for believing that distinctions between concepts we have of God do not necessarily map onto real distinctions in God. It is an interesting question, but one outside the scope of this study, whether the more sophisticated version of the identity thesis can be made compatible with Basil and Gregory's theology, or

²⁶ See Stump and Kretzmann, 'Absolute Simplicity', 356–7; James Ross, 'Comments on "Absolute Simplicity"', *Faith and Philosophy* 2 (1985): 383–91 at 383–4.

whether, like Eunomius' version, it claims to provide more knowledge of the divine essence than is possible—whether these theologians (to borrow a phrase from songwriter John Prine) fail because they try.

The final three chapters (5 to 7) detail the response of Basil and Gregory of Nyssa. The purpose of the book, again, is to highlight the distinctiveness of their account of divine simplicity and theological epistemology. This is a key reason why I have not extended my account to include the other so-called 'Cappadocian' theologian, Gregory of Nazianzus. There are undeniable connections among the three Cappadocians. But part of what I want to claim is that Gregory of Nyssa's theology is best read first of all as a defence of Basil. The same cannot be said with as great a specificity of Gregory Nazianzen: though he opposed Eunomius, he did not write a *Contra Eunomium* to defend Basil. Including a discussion of his (admittedly theologically rich) account of simplicity and the knowledge of God would take us too far afield from the peculiarities of Basil's position, which deserves more attention than it has received.²⁷

I begin in Chapter 5 with what we might call Basil's negative doctrine of simplicity: that is, his doctrine of what simplicity does *not* imply. Significantly, it does not imply that language used of God is predicated of the divine essence. For Eunomius, a theological claim either names the divine essence or is fictitious; Basil denies this. Basil draws a number of distinctions among theological terms, each of which resists the reduction of theological language to claims about God's essence. Chapter 6 has two parts. The first continues the examination of Basil's negative doctrine of simplicity with a discussion of his famous account of 'conceptualization' (*ἐπινοια*). This account constitutes a firm rebuttal of two key Eunomian theses: (1) that, since true names name essences, difference in names signals difference in essences; and (2) that 'ingenerate' is a good candidate for an essential name of God. For Basil, it is merely a term humans have devised by reflecting on more basic concepts of God, a product of conceptualization and not a realist portrait of God. The second

²⁷ Fortunately, there is now an excellent study of Nazianzen by Christopher A. Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God: In Your Light We Shall See Light* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

part of Chapter 6 turns to Basil's account of the terms that do in some sense name the divine substance, that contribute to the 'formula of essence' (*λόγος της οὐσίας*) which the Father and Son share. These terms (e.g. light, life, power, goodness) receive extensive treatment in Gregory of Nyssa, to whom I turn in Chapter 7. Gregory defends and clarifies Basil's negative doctrine of simplicity, including the defence of conceptualization. But Gregory expands on Basil by developing an account of the 'goods', that is, God's power, wisdom, life, goodness, and so forth, according to which these attributes are inter-entailing in the way the virtues reciprocally entail one another. This means that God's justice and wisdom, for instance, necessarily go together. This reciprocity or inter-entailment of the divine goods is important: it implies that God is so far from having just one essential attribute that, precisely because God is simple and unmixed with his opposite, God necessarily has multiple attributes. For Gregory (and, it seems, Basil before him), the goods are inherent in the divine nature without being identical with it. They are *propria* of that nature.

One might ask how much it helps, in responding to radical apophaticism and the identity thesis, to appeal to the notion of *propria* in explicating the relation of essential divine attributes to the divine nature. I suggest that this move is laudable not only as a subtle and unique response to late ancient debates, but also because of its implications for the broader problem of the knowledge of God. Basil and Gregory's account of this has what I take to be the virtue of simultaneously affirming the absolute reliability of human knowledge of God (since knowledge of *propria* is not 'partial' in the sense of knowing a 'part') and the necessary limitation of that knowledge (since knowing *propria* is different from knowing essential definitions). This account transformed theological epistemology to such an extent that even subsequent proponents of the identity thesis maintain a similar dialectic of knowing and unknowing.

We began with Basil's approval of what might appear to us as tedious, even obsessive concern with theological language. For Basil, this concern reflects an appropriate response to Jesus' admonition to seek in the hopes of finding. We can now add that, with their account of the simultaneous reliability and incompleteness of theological language, Basil and Gregory can explain why seeking will lead to

finding. The relation between finding and seeking in theology is utterly non-instrumental. Where true goodness is the object of our search, Gregory says, “to find it is to seek it for ever. For it is not one thing to seek, and another to find, but the reward of seeking is the actual seeking.”²⁸ Without the reliability of theological language, the seeking would not be finding; without its incompleteness, the finding would not be seeking. As it is, they are identical. The doctrine of the perpetual progress into God for which Gregory’s eschatology has become famous in modern scholarship is not so much a quaint addition to his thought as a necessary corollary of his and Basil’s understanding of the nature of human knowledge of God.

²⁸ *Hom. 7 in Eccl.* (GNO 5: 400.21–401.2; trans. Stuart George Hall, *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on Ecclesiastes* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1993), 118).