

## On Anamnesis or Recollection

This document quickly follows on the heels of *On Happiness* and in many ways is a spin-off of that essay which, despite its relatively short length, took considerable time to finish. Like any writing project, sometimes it's difficult setting down ideas, especially true when you're trying to work out concepts that are difficult to express. You may know them well but articulating them is another matter, a real challenge. Actually more than concepts is involved, something akin to archetypes, which lay at the root of our very consciousness. Talking about them around can be even more tricky since they lay just below the surface. At one deep level I know they are related but as yet am unable to communicate this as successfully as I wish. Such is the reason for this essay and maybe another one (or two or more, who knows?) is required before actually accomplishing the task. However, I feel deep down that the subject of *anamnesis* is itself has a lot to say about all this, so let us begin without further ado.

To give this essay validity I include four short appendices grouped into two sets with two lists. The first set contains references to the concept of *anamnesis* (recollection) in the Dialogues of Plato. The second list under that heading contains references of the same word from the Commentary on the Song of Songs by St. Gregory of Nyssa. The second set has references to the concept of forgetfulness (no special word for it like *anamnesis* is noted there) in the Dialogues followed by some taken from Gregory's same work. I had published a translation of this Commentary in 1987, and reprints (on a CD) are available on the Gregory of Nyssa Home Page linked with this one. Since I have some familiarity with both authors (the latter, like most Fathers of the Church, drew heavily from Plato), I hope that these brief references might help flesh out the concept of recollection both from the classical point of view as well as that of the early Church.

Recently I finished *God Against the Gods* by Jonathan Kirsch followed by a re-read after approximately eighteen months of the *Closing of the Western Mind* by Charles Freeman. Both touch upon an issue indirectly formative not only to this essay but to earlier ones posted on this Home Page. I do not wish to borrow their material nor deal with the same subject matter, but both authors deal with an underlying issue which is pretty much left in the background. That issue centers around tensions which arose from the contact between Christianity and the dominant culture of the time, Hellenism. One reason why we haven't become aware of it is that we had been too closely bound to the sway of religion over our culture which took certain underlying premises for granted. That changed around the time of President Kennedy's assassination in 1963 when a decade or so of radicalism set in which brought under scrutiny virtually everything we had taken for granted. Although it had both positive and negative effects, now some thirty plus years out from the end of the Viet Nam War, we're in a position to compare that tumultuous time period with the one which had preceded it. I'd posit this earlier stage as extending back almost indefinitely in human history. Even though society has gone through more turbulent periods, prior to Kennedy's assassination culture in general enjoyed a deep-down unity immune to serious questioning. Although certain tendencies had been latent and were waiting centuries to erupt, they never made it to the surface. It is not my intent here to trace them, but suffice it to say that the dominance of religious values had acted as a brake to allow this questioning from going too far and really upsetting society.

As for the essential issue raised by Kirsch and Freeman (more explicitly the latter), the contact

between Christianity and Greco-Roman world was less than harmonious. Both had been in sporadic conflict—at best an uneasy truce—until the emperor Constantine came on the scene. Historians concede his reign as marking the turning point when Christianity moved from the defensive to the offensive. From then on it gained momentum and eventually permeated culture and politics from top to bottom. Even though some rapprochement existed between Hellenistic culture and Christianity, quite a few Christian leaders in the post-Constantine period remained hostile to the culture and philosophy Hellenism represented. One intriguing character stands out, the Roman Emperor Julian (a.k.a. the Apostate). He assumed the throne after Constantine and attempted to revive the old gods but was cut down in a decisive battle against the Persians. Obviously the Christians relished his demise. Polemics aside, it seems that Julian sensed that the philosophical background and culture of Greece-Rome was threatened not so much by the religion itself but the vehemence with which some of its proponents demonstrated. Thus on the popular level the gods were in risk of falling into oblivion with the onslaught of Christianity whose advocates showed just as much if not more violence towards ‘pagans’ as their former persecutors.

Julian is worth mentioning because he had been raised as a Christian and later abandoned the faith, recoiling in horror at the murderous behavior of Christian members of his imperial family in cahoots with Church leaders whom he expected were to set a positive example. He saw that the religion of his day or what we call paganism now was tolerant of all religions, Christianity included, and wished to extend this tolerance throughout the empire. Despite his unfortunate nickname (i.e., the Apostate), Julian is a kind of hero who grasped what was going on both with regard to the threat of barbarian invasions outside the empire and the Christian squabbles within. By reason of this unique perspective Julian makes us pause and consider where we might be headed today. Perhaps we need someone like Julian. Not so much a reverse-convert (whom some certainly would consider the anti-Christ) but one who has a larger vision. This vision consists in an appreciation of the positive impact ancient Greece and Rome had upon Western Civilization and how historical Christianity thwarted growth in its parent culture while claiming to be the heir and protector of that ancient culture. The political clout Constantine introduced into Christianity has continued down until quite recently. Thus the picture presented by Kirsch and Freeman is quite different than the one with which we’ve been raised: Christianity as victim and the Greco-Roman world (i.e., ‘paganism’) as victimizer. It comes into even starker light if you’re familiar with the authors of ancient Greek and Rome and the rich heritage they beget, very different from those in the Colosseum chanting death to Christians. So much for the direction I wish to head in this little essay. Admittedly these remarks don’t have direct bearing upon the subject of recollection (*anamnesis*), yet they represent larger trends which are influenced me to jot down these thoughts.

I had hesitation about formulating ideas about recollection because at first glance it appeared too general and vague but changed my mind when I delved deeper into Plato’s Dialogues. It quickly became apparent that *anamnesis* struck a cord because it lay at the heart of much what I was attempting to communicate through a series of essays. Initially I thought of moving onto the second of the third of the classical triad (beauty; the other two are truth and goodness) but decided to stop and examine what may lay behind them, namely, recollection. Putting them in the perspective of personal experience can be more difficult than remaining in an abstract, descriptive mood. The next step was to sort through the Dialogues and pull out passages pertinent to *anamnesis* after which I did the same with Gregory of Nyssa’s Song Commentary. After having familiarized myself with how Plato and Gregory of Nyssa employ *anamnesis*—one ‘pagan’ and the

other Christian or better, one a philosopher and the other a theologian—I was in a better position to launch out on my own and re-formulate the term.

A recent exploration of happiness (*eudaimonia*) brought the subject of recollection to the fore because that blessed state is free from the constraints of necessity and may be defined as such. Sounds like wishful thinking, almost unrealistic, but a closer look shows that it might be within our reach. Although I did not touch upon it in the previous essay, happiness isn't something we acquire in the sense of learning this or that. It is effected through the faculty of *anamnesis* which is unfamiliar if not alien to us moderns. Recollecting our innate happy condition presupposes that we're already in it and have no need to acquire it as we would acquire a possession or talent, a notion we pretty much take for granted as normal operating procedure. Happiness is part and parcel of our human constitution, hard as that may be to accept. Should we access this happiness via recollection, we would have all the other virtues. Perhaps not whole and complete as to their realization but whole in the sense that we allow them to work out of us instead of engaging in strenuous forms of discipline. So if the wisest among us both past and present claim that happiness and virtue are our birthright, how do we go about realizing it? First, the classical tradition puts *anamnesis* as the ground of both happiness and beauty as well as the good. But those unfamiliar with this tradition have to take statements about this on faith, the faith of earlier generations. I really don't think we can go wrong here because as just stated, *anamnesis* is part and parcel of our constitution. Part of the trouble in properly grasping the concept of *anamnesis* is that we moderns are forward-looking people and put a premium on such words as evolution, progress and advancement. They are taken so much for granted that we are barely aware of their impact. Even the prospect of an alternative is abhorrent which in the case at hand smacks of the past. Actually the word 'recollection,' often used for translating *anamnesis*, is inaccurate. Because this Greek word is difficult to translate, a quick look at its etymology might help. We have the root noun *mneme* (memory) to which is prefaced the preposition *ana* and takes the genitive, dative and accusative cases. *Ana* variously translates as on, upon, throughout, up, upwards as well as back, backwards. Thus the preposition embraces a lot more than a backward gesture as popularly understood. In a nutshell *ana* is more referential and quite dynamic. It's as though the process of recollection contains two gestures: first we are going back and second, moving in an upward (as well as an upon) direction. We thus have a turn which connotes ascending a height in order to get a more comprehensive view of reality.

The etymology of *anamnesis* confronts us with a phenomenon more comprehensive than delving into our isolated memories, for it embraces other persons and historical events. *Anamnesis* therefore bestows meaning upon life, making it an active force right smack within the present. It is far from some vague, abstract entity you usually associate with philosophy. Someone like Pierre Hadot has made a valuable contribute to revitalize the ancient philosophical tradition. His book, *What is Ancient Philosophy?* impacted me in the first read as well as the second (and admittedly, a third). Somehow Hadot recaptures the initial enthrallment I had when getting into the Classics around the second year of high school. He speaks in the manner of those wonderful teachers I had where ancient philosophy was a way of life, not an occupation. I might categorize this as a personal experience of *anamnesis*, for Hadot's book reaches into the past, makes you realize how wonderful that time was (I believe it was never fully asleep) and enables you to project it into the present in a revitalized form. Later when in college I and the rest of my fellow students who majored in the Classics strayed from that initial enchantment largely as presented by superb teachers by reason of pressures from the 'real world.' However, I was fortunate to be in a situation where the Classics led

to interest in the Church Fathers which, in turned, ended up as a kind of vocation that has continued to the present. After a good number of years this second career of sorts led to a rediscovery of the ancient world, chiefly Plato. The experience was a genuine coming-home. I had left it temporarily, not permanently, which might be taken as a type of *anamnesis*. The rather lengthy temporal interval disappeared in a flash, as though never it had existed. The two—classical authors the second time around and the Church Fathers—fed into each other marvelously. Of course, such an *anamnesis* involved no recall of particular pieces of the experience but acted like a form where you discover two elements as partaking simultaneously of the three elements of truth, beauty and goodness. Thus if my own experience of *anamnesis* evoked a sense of belonging which reached back to the dawn of my formal education, it just might have a direct relationship with happiness (*eudaimonia*). Obviously a larger reality is hand, not just having happy thoughts. The lesson I picked up from Hadot's book is that most of the talk about *anamnesis* and related terms aren't spoken from personal experience. They may have begun that way but were quickly abstracted, most likely by the disciples of a master who sought to put their own spin on his teaching. Thus the problem confronting those wishing to recover the original insights is working through several layers of interpretations. Such layering has become so part and parcel of education that rarely do people read primary sources, preferring instead secondary ones. Slogging through the primary sources may involve learning the language(s) in which they have been written which makes the task even more formidable. While ultimately rewarding, the price you pay getting there is high...high in that it slows your reading down considerably. Perhaps reading a text in a language other than your own...especially an ancient one...is akin to the monastic practice of *lectio divina*, literally sacred reading (I prefer to call it reading which is sacred), which resists a tendency of rushing through the text. Describing this phenomenon is a task unto itself and is distinct from what I wish to communicate in this essay. Nevertheless, *lectio divina* might be thought of a way of relating to our recollective faculty, a process taken for granted by earlier generations and lost upon the present one.

One way of better grasping *anamnesis* is to consider a modern parallel, albeit the two are very different. Today's culture places a premium upon videography where little is left to the imagination. This term concerns the process of making films. However, I use videography in the literal sense, seeing + writing or the mental production of images minus the labor of memorization. We prefer film makers to do the work for us which stands in stark contrast to our forebears. As for movies, two recent releases illustrate this point, Troy and The Passion of The Christ, both dealing with narratives deeply embedded in our Western consciousness. While they trying to be as accurate and graphic as possible (especially the latter), depiction of the subject matter revealed the interpretation of those who produced the films, something you wouldn't pick up so strongly in oral or written expressions. These texts, however, were never meant to be depicted...visualized...yet they were presented as such to audiences. The people weren't audiences in the literal sense of the word, people who assembled in order to hear the text read, but people gathered to visualize moving images. For example, if we could transport someone from a thousand years ago into a movie theater to see The Passion, probably this person would be repelled...not at the grisly details but that it left no room for his or her imagination. In other words, these texts and other similar classical, religious ones were meant to be heard, not visualized. Our time traveler would feel pity that someone else had to fabricate the pictures instead of we ourselves formulating them through our imagination. The old oral tradition came with a price, however. Both the presenter and audience were locked into a fixed form which could not be altered except for minor alterations or embellishments here and there. This focus upon listening to texts prevalent since the dawn of

human history disappeared so quickly that we're barely conscious of the fact. It's as though that culture had never existed, and we marvel at how people could have been so deprived. It seems that if the prime way of presenting reality though (moving) pictures, you end up with a loss of self in the negative sense and get carried away by their vividness without having a chance to reflect upon their meaning. Such are the modern ways forgetfulness have crept into our culture, and they show no signs of being replaced. Perhaps it's too early to determine the ultimate outcome (after all the whole process began with movie pictures in the early twentieth century), but the effects upon behavior and culture were amazingly swift. 'A picture is worth a thousand words.' Perhaps not.

I believe this emphasis upon videography is alarming, more so than at first sight, and we need to be aware of its impact. Apart from Hollywood and video games, the constant flow of images influences our perceptions of history in the larger sense of knowing who we are as a culture and society. If we're exposed to one image after another, especially the moving variety, quickly we end up like those prisoners in Plato's cave chained to the wall and doomed to watch the stream of images without escaping our bonds and ascending into the sunlight. Plato puts the responsibility of showing these image on the puppeteers behind the wall and above the prisoners. He doesn't elaborate on their role which makes you wonder what they do when not showing images. Interestingly, Plato calls a puppeteer *thaumatopoios*, literally a maker of wonders. I doubt they go in and out of the cave, for the person who manages to escape returns only with the intent of freeing his former captives. I suspect the puppeteers (let's call them videographers) have seen the light but only from way down deep in the cave. Unlike the chained captives, they can turn their heads upwards but prefer to remain in this strange intermediate realm of half-knowledge, half-truth.

People who struggle with the spiritual life are up against a real battle with these puppeteers or modern day videographers. Such good folks are inevitably exposed to a genuine struggle with images and must make a deliberate decision, almost on a daily basis, of saying no by tuning out the media. Still, the influence goes deep and militates against our innate desire to reflect, to think deeply. People lack the tools to combat videography and don't find much help through official outlets of spirituality, i.e., churches. Representatives of official religion are sincere and seek to preserve their respective Christian traditions. However, they too have become puppeteers at the service of their respective traditions insofar as they hand down what they received in an unreflective fashion. After all, that training had been in place for generations. Maybe here lies in part the fascination with the concept of *anamnesis*. It's both at the heart of what we are as Westerners while on the other hand it remains *terra incognita*. Unfortunately, the latter has dominated, yet if anyone speaks as *anamnesis* in terms of a spiritual discipline, ears automatically perk up. It's as though people had known about this reality all along and were waiting for it to be awakened within them.

I have already discussed the opposite of *anamnesis*, forgetfulness, so let's see if it can be of service in our spiritual quest. I say 'spiritual' though I am more inclined to 'philosophical' in the ancient sense, not the type associated with universities. A quick reminder as to the etymology of *anamnesis*...we have the preposition *ana* (on, upon, upwards, back) prefaced to the root word, 'memory.' Thus we are engaged in a process of dealing with memory as that which is conditioned by these prepositions. We don't just 'have' memory (everyone will agree to that) but have memory as *ana*. It's as though we're invited to do a threefold leap: up-on-back with regard to the root of our self-awareness and take refuge there. This may sound a bit contrived or a fanciful exercise in semantics, but it's an attempt to see if *anamnesis* has validity...if it really works...not just take it on the testimony of

authorities like Plato and Gregory of Nyssa whose passages are cited below. No small wonder that anyone with a smattering of Greek realizes the subtlety of prepositions in that language with an infinite number of nuances. What kind of inner gesture is signified by the preposition *ana*? Are we just trying to improve our capacity for recalling past events or our ability to memorize a whole bunch of facts and thus dazzle our friends? That might belong to *mneme* (memory) proper, but it is of no interest for us here. We want to '*ana*' this *mneme*, not alter it but expand its full potential. Actually we're wrestling with a little known faculty which is easily confused with our memory commonly perceived. Bring up the subject of *anamnesis*...almost always you get an enthusiastic response as though *anamnesis* awoke in him or her a hidden treasure. Full appreciation is far from complete, but the immediate joyful response shows that something must be there, at least partially manifested and not a figment of wishful thinking.

I'd say that such enthusiasm is indicative of one's 'true nature' even though that phrase smacks of a modern interpretation. I prefer to stick with the tried and true classical expression, that is, once a person gets familiar with the word *anamnesis*, it can be better perceived as an essential ingredient for inquiry into the nature of one's soul or *psuche*. The attractiveness of *anamnesis* is that cuts across religions/denominational lines. It gets down to what people want most...and I use that word not in the derogatory sense...which means actually doing philosophy, of loving wisdom. Such is what Hadot's book is all about. The beauty about inquiring into one's *psuche* is that it isn't religious strictly speaking but a trait common to a lover of wisdom...a philo-sopher...which is just as innate as *anamnesis*. It falls in line with the traditional Christian sequence of first engaging in philosophy followed by theology, not the other way around. And so it seems that memory-as-*anamnesis* approximates the definition *psuche*.

Practically speaking, we must make sure to have grasped the distinction between *mneme* and *anamnesis* because delving into one's memory is fraught with difficulties. We run the risk of comparing the latter with self-psychoanalysis, a dangerous enterprise. While guidance from professionals is helpful in deal with haunting memories from the past, trying to get at one's *anamnesis* belongs to an order different than recalling events, traumatic or otherwise. Again, keep in mind the little preposition *ana* of *anamnesis*, a fact I can't stress enough, the three-fold leaping up-back-upon with respect to our recollective faculty. In other words, this gesture consists of getting behind or beyond the source of our thoughts which becomes encrusted with memories and thus ends up by being identified with *anamnesis*. What motivates our search is a desire to leave behind the normal (if not banal) flow of our everyday thoughts, many of which are fed into us by that ever-present videography of the entertainment/media industry. Thus awareness of our innate *anamnesis*...that something deeper might lay behind our *mneme*...is a first step, a necessary withdrawal as signified by the preposition *ana*. Since we are so familiar with the arena of videography, this withdrawal is unfamiliar; hence the reason for caution of equating it with self-psychoanalysis. Success in effecting this gesture doesn't mean we have to entertain ideas of perfect mental health or be free from idiosyncracies, even if they border upon neuroses. After all, our destination is '*ana*' or getting above the fray of what we're used to calling memory and the thoughts that constantly flow from it. 'Going *ana*' is not entirely like one of those prisoners escaping from Plato's cave where the puppeteers/videographers are hard at work keeping us chained and preventing us from turning our heads to the light. Thus we have the first and most important step, withdrawing from that which may be called *kata* or below (the opposite of *ana*) or where we usually function.

I believe the value of this enterprise of accessing our faculty of *anamnesis* is that it is a venerable foundation of Christian teaching about prayer or better, contemplation, while at the same time refreshingly new. Old in that its roots lay at the heart of the West's philosophical and cultural tradition. New in the sense that most people are both unaware yet very much open to it. We're familiar with various methods, all of which are more or less based upon the scriptural injunction, 'pray always.' As for this phrase bantered about in spiritual circles, the Greek preposition *dia* translates as through. *Pantos* is genitive for all, resulting in the literal translation as 'through all.' Often the phrase is associated with the Jesus Prayer popular in Orthodox circles where a person continuously recites the sacred name of Jesus or more traditionally, 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.' However, I believe *diapantos* is more inclusive than such verbal or mental utterances, valuable as they may be. It's an attentiveness in a relaxed mode, a way of seeing all things permeated by the divine minus that mental strain we can associate with 'pray always.'

The gesture of recollection doesn't quite seem to be on the same par with prayer or meditation. Perhaps it'd be more appropriate to say that *anamnesis* is that nucleus around which these practices gravitate and from which they spring. As most of us understand it, prayer/meditation is done at special times and in special places both in private and communally. Thus a dichotomy exists between doing prayer and then fitting it into our busy lives. But as for recollection (not a practice strictly speaking), it pervaded older cultures because many members were illiterate and relied upon oral tradition for ordering their lives. It was in this type of culture where virtually all scripture had sprung and had been transmitted, even when literacy became more common and people had access to written documents. In those societies life, work, family and worship were easy to integrate and no one questioned this inter-penetration. It was simply a given. However, that was then and this is now. 'Now' is marked not so much by literacy but by videography, the parade of images, as discussed earlier. In this post-oral and almost post-literate society I'm more concerned with seeing if the term *anamnesis* allows us to step outside this strange situation we've created or more accurately, how we have allowed ourselves to be taken in without questioning it. In our efforts at juggling several compartmentalized areas of life (work, family, recreation, worship, etc.) we must bring varying degrees of attention to each. Not all are expected to be the same; rather, there's a hierarchy for each and every one of us, depending on our situation. Obviously there are times for being prayerful and times when our attention must be turned to its complete opposite...attending a child's soccer game, for example, and being involved with his or her actions on the field. Trying to combine these two would be subjecting ourselves to undue strain, even mental torture, which is uncalled for.

Thus the beauty of *anamnesis* lies in its fluidity which allows us to adapt to life's situations. Part of it stems from the fact that it requires no specific technique; we're given the term couched in rambling dialogues (as with Plato) and like a puzzle, left to our own resources to solve it. Furthermore, we're confronted with a state of affairs really hard to track down, a bit disconcerting to the modern mind which prefers a time and place for everything. Here again I avoid categorizing *anamnesis* not as prayer per se but that-to-which prayer tends. From this viewpoint the various modes of prayer may be grouped under one umbrella instead of singling out one as better than the other. That is to say, they are grouped according to what they share, namely, emphasis upon the need to some kind of recollecting. Another beauty of *anamnesis* is that it precludes positing 'us' situated over against 'God,' that is, it avoids making the divinity an object. In this way it gets around awkward phraseologies trying to express the presence of God, divination and other expressions associated

with theology and spirituality. The concept of *anamnesis* can be especially helpful for people trying to update the general tenor of familiar religious expressions in light of influence coming either from psychology or Eastern thought. Although I'm not competent to pass judgment on this matter, stepping outside one's culture and bringing back what one finds there is subject to pitfalls. One of the biggest obstacles, albeit hidden, is that terminology from another culture makes you overlook the hard inner work that's required, of putting yourself in the footsteps of that culture. Words and expressions from these alien environments don't quite jibe with our experience; they give the sense of having been added on minus the hard work that's required. One such inconsistency is that Western culture is built around the notion of personhood or the better, the individual, whereas Eastern ones lack this. This contrast is much deeper than at first glance and lies at the heart of the difference between the two despite tendencies to gloss them over, even glamorizing the latter. Then we have traditional Western terminology, much of which in the context of spirituality is full of exhortations to bear suffering and humiliation. This heritage exerts a lot more influence than at first glance. You get an inkling of it when confronted with a spiritual text, especially of the post-patristic variety. The expressions lean more toward the legal and methodological, an automatic turn-off. Most people would be ashamed to admit it, but they've been raised in a religious environment which puts a premium upon guilt and little exposure to prayer as a way of quieting one's mind to be in the presence of God. This little digression is intended to show the need for taking a long, close look at the roots of our Western heritage minus the prejudices, and *anamnesis* is simply one suggested take-off point both due to its unfamiliarity as well as its universal appeal once understood properly.

Perhaps we can get better insight into the basis of our Western heritage by examining the etymological roots of key words as we've done with *anamnesis*. If this term pertinent to memory implies a relationship to it as both 'up' and 'back' (the two meanings of *ana*), let's see if we can describe our position with respect to our recollective faculty first as being 'up' and secondly as being 'back.' Being 'up' intimates a high vantage point from which you can look down, almost like reading a map or taking in a view from on top of a mountain. From this position, really a mental gesture, the whole range of our memory is laid out before us. 'Behind' might refer to a position prior to all the rest which makes us human, chief among which is our *psuche* which differs from *anamnesis* itself. While *anamnesis* is vital, it remains subordinate to our total spiritual makeup; better to say that it is the first among a series of hierarchies, all of which play a role not unlike a physical organ. After all, it is a faculty whereas *psuche* is not, the latter being an entity of faculties. Perhaps *ana* as up/back points to the dynamic character of *psuche*, that is, representing a specific gesture required to keep us aware of our spiritual nature. *Ana*, especially as back, allows us to look both from where we had come and to where we are going with respect to the normal ebb and flow of life. Thus *anamnesis* is true knowledge...true compared to where we had come from and which absorbed so much of our attention. I'd liken it to a little niche we can call all our own. We take refuge there from the ups and downs of life. Yet *anamnesis* is more than a sanctuary. Yes, it requires withdrawal but withdrawal to get a handle on our lives with the intent of returning and improving it. Although problems will emerge, always we have the option of withdrawing, of getting 'back' and 'up' with respect to our recollective faculty.

Such is a brief outline of the dynamics of *anamnesis* which alternates between withdrawal and activity not only in an individual person but in the larger context of society. The passages from the Dialogue below reveal much of this twofold-dynamism. There is, however, another general movement not contradictory to *anamnesis* but complementary to it. If we look further down the list



we find passages from Gregory of Nyssa centered around the Greek word *epektasis* (*epekteino* is the verb). *Epektasis* may be defined as a stretching forward, a reaching out towards something before us in space or in time. Gregory is celebrated for making this term a hallmark of his spirituality (like all Church Fathers he borrowed heavily from Plato), having lifted the idea from St. Paul: 'I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus' [Phil 3.14]. Actually, *epektasis* seems to be an exclusively Pauline term, quite rich in its own right, and related to forgetfulness as the verse reveals: 'forgetting what lies behind.' Gregory backs up this verse with another (it lacks the actual noun *epektasis* or the verb but implies it), 'And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another' [2 Cor 3.18]. Gregory's insights are sophisticated and are built on a concept especially appealing to us moderns (i.e., progress). The reason for this is that they are founded on concepts from Greek philosophy such as *anamnesis*.

Embedded within *epektasis* is a form of the preposition *epi* (on, upon). It's attached to the root-verb is *teino* (to stretch, to strain). Thus we end up with a stretching-upon as if to signify an attempt to overtake a goal (as the one mentioned in the Phil 3.14 quote above). *Epektasis* may be taken as a movement in the direction opposite to *anamnesis*. However, as pointed out, *ana* doesn't necessarily mean a clear-cut return to our recollective faculty for it's implies a continuous ascent, a going 'up' not unlike the preposition *epi*. How do we reconcile the two different terms? Since *epektasis* is a theological construct more proper to St. Paul, it seems headed in a direction other than the philosophically based *anamnesis*. Practically speaking, I'm wondering if a person practicing *anamnesis* can practice *epektasis* (or visa versa). I can't answer this definitively being neither a theologian nor a philosopher, just someone interested in where all this might be headed...hopefully in the right direction. Nevertheless, my long-standing interest in the writings of Gregory of Nyssa had been followed-up by a more recent stake in the practice of philosophy as articulated by Plato/Socrates. The concept of *epektasis* has engaged my attention for many years, so now I wish to see if it has any bearing related to *anamnesis*. In light of my early love for the classics, I could say that my current renewed interest in them after some thirty plus years of patristics has a lot to do with a rediscovery of this term and others like it. Thus I find myself having been schooled in two approaches as signified by the terms *anamnesis* and *epektasis*. Personally, the verdict is still out. More familiarity with the reality signified by the former is certainly required.

When comparing the two terms just noted they seem to point in two different directions symbolized by the two arrows in the outline below. They create a kind of *aporia* or puzzlement (by the way, it's a good condition in which to be, akin to humility). You know what each signifies but can't quite put them together. *Anamnesis* essentially points backwards whereas *epektasis* points forward with our *psuche* in the center, if you will:

<-ANAMNESIS (Psuche) EPEKTASIS->

Which way are we to go? When in a situation marked by *aporia* or a suspension of judgment, recourse to a spacial example is helpful, hence the simple outline. Let's put in another way. Take two people at the North Pole, the very geographic center of being on top of the world. Here north doesn't exist because we're already north or as much as humanly possible. Even east and west are drastically minimized, so the only real direction is south or away from the pole. One person heads south to the left and the other does the same in the opposite direction. At this early stage the two

lateral directions of east and west start don't assume real shape despite the fact that two people are walking away from each other. But as they grow further apart their sense of east and west starts to take on meaning. Let's say it commences as soon as they disappear over the horizon from the North Pole or loose sight of each other over this horizon. Getting back to my own experience, having taken one route southwards (*epektasis*) relative to *psuche* I've discovered that it gives rise to the presence of the other route—equally southwards—which is *anamnesis*. They both travel in the same direction ('away from' *psuche* isn't accurate, for you can't loose your *psuche*) and if we press this image far enough, both travelers meet each other at the South Pole. This destination isn't in sight and won't be for a long time but is assumed by reason of having departed from the North Pole.

I'd say that choosing either direction headed south is acceptable, for if you're faithful you will complete your journey and ultimately meet the other traveler who is going in a direction opposite to yours. Although the concept of *epektasis* was quite a thrilling adventure for many years, rediscovered of *anamnesis* showed that in some ways it had been deficient. Maybe that's not the right way to put it because it suggests having made a mistake. Better to think of it as a foundation or something preparatory for a new discovery. Now I favor the latter simply due to its greater philosophical weight. The former seems to lack this plus it connotes tension which describes much of St. Paul's character, the person from whom Gregory of Nyssa had lifted that term. *Psuche's* dual nature as described by these two opposing (in the sense of balancing) terms going off in different directions may be descriptive of it...us...being made in God's image and likeness. Developing that is another story; here not being the place, but that's a place we may voyage later on. Still, some quick observations relative to theology may be in order here towards the end of the essay. The two Greek terms found in the Septuagint translation are *eikon* and *homoiosis*. The former is static, something definitely an inalienable part of our constitution, whereas the latter is dynamic and subject to varying degrees of fidelity to its nature...and that nature is the unchangeable character of *eikon*. *Homoiosis* is truest to its nature when recollecting *eikon* and being faithful to that memory but memory as *anamnesis*. In a nutshell, we're more *eikon*-like or God-like when we recollect the nature of our *psuche* which, in turn, makes us like (*homoiosis*) it.

A slow read of the Dialogues provided an important impulse for exploring the idea of *anamnesis* as well as *epektasis* much in the spirit of *lectio divina*. The Dialogues do produce an effect not unlike scriptural *lectio divina* because you're forced to slow down your reading of the text and ponder, especially true when wrestling with the Greek text. I've come to quickly favor this mode which I had carried over from scripture and patristics, not unlike those Christian authors of old to whom the exact same vocabulary was very familiar. I couldn't help but wonder what they were thinking in light of the relatively new emergence of Christianity, of how they could apply this material to their religion. At the same time reading the Dialogues—and I'd apply this to virtually all ancient texts of note—gave birth to an insight which was not quite conscious yet lurking in the background. To make a comparison between these texts and Scripture/patristics is inevitable. It's helpful to keep in mind that documents of the patristic era are relatively close in time to the New Testament. At the time of their formulation the insights they contain were quite fresh and novel but have grown old with time. They had become overlaid with endless theological encrustations which distanced the living text from people who might be inclined to read them. There are a lot of approaches to maintain the vitality of the Christian message. Many will be attracted to proclamation, biblical and theological reflection. My personal concern is more to the sidelines, if you will, the ambivalence we've inherited towards the Greco-Roman tradition. Most authors of the early Christian era were seeking to defend their religion

and set it up as superior to the traditional gods and goddesses, really, no problem. Thus their writings are tinged with a polemical slant which despite their profundity and timelessness, is a bit out of step for us inhabitants of the twenty-first century. Maybe that's where Vatican II missed the boat. It wonderfully restated much of what earlier centuries said about theology and the Church. However, when you look back at the documents as I had done recently with an appreciation of their up-to-date language, they lack that philosophical punch, as it were, which needs to be asserted to make the documents palatable. Naturally I'm aware that I am reading too much into the documents but speak thus to stress a main theme of this little essay. In sum, it appears that most people have no problem with the Christian thing despite criticism of the institutional church; they're willing to accept it hook, line and sinker. Instead, I've found instead a desire to learn how to think, to ponder over the Christian mysteries. People want to philosophize in the ancient sense of this term as presented earlier. That may never read the headlines but remains, I believe, a major challenge.

Let's conclude with that image of being up at the North Pole. Which direction south would you like to pick? The choice is yours. This simple essay has outlined the two and favors *anamnesis* as a better description of one's true nature which I call the psuche and have concluded by putting this term in theological perspective, *eikon* and *homoiosis*. Along the way I threw in Gregory of Nyssa's interpretation of St. Paul's *epektasis*. The content of each term requires lengthy study simply because we're dealing with rich and challenging issues. The possibility exists of expanding upon them, but we'll wait to see. That's why I inserted the list of references below, to help you make up your mind. The choice may depend upon your temperament, that is, whether you're philosophically or theologically inclined. The real issue as I have argued is favoring the former over the latter...not to its detriment but to its enhancement. I think an underlying pattern recorded by history is that we start off with philosophy and move on to theology. This sequence gives rise to a sense that the former is somehow inferior to the latter whereas for the ancients and patristic writers that distinction hadn't entered their minds. Such unity between two disciplines is a goal I'd like to see not attained but recovered and recovered by actually sitting down to access our *anamnesis*.

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Select references to memory/recollection or anamnesis from the Dialogues of Plato

Theaetetus

-We may look upon it (a block of wax in our souls), then, as a gift of Memory, the mother of the Muses. We make impressions upon this of everything, we wish to remember among the things we have seen or heard or thought of ourselves; we hold the wax under our perceptions and thoughts and take a stamp from them, in the way in which we take the imprints of signet rings. Whatever is impressed upon the wax we remember and know as long as the image remains in the wax; whatever is obliterated or cannot be impressed we forget and do not know. 191d

-In some men the wax in the soul is deep and abundant, smooth and worked to the proper consistency; and when the things that come through the senses are imprinted upon this 'heart' of the soul—as Homer calls it, hinting at the likeness to the wax<sup>1</sup>—the signs that are made in it are lasting, because they are clear and have sufficient depth. Men with such souls learn easily and remember what they learn; they do not get the signs out of line with the perceptions, but judge truly. 194c-d

Phaedo

-Such also is the case if that theory is true that you are accustomed to mention frequently, that for us learning is no other than recollection. According to this, we must at some previous time have learned what we now recollect. This is possible only if our soul existed somewhere before it took on this human shape. So according to this theory too, the soul is likely to be something immortal. 72.e

-Do we also agree that when knowledge comes to mind in this way, it is recollection? What way do I mean? Like this: when a man sees or hears or in some other way perceives one thing and not only knows that thing but also thinks of another thing of which the knowledge is not the same but different, are we not right to say that he recollects the second thing that comes into his mind? 73.c

-In all these cases the recollection can be occasioned by things that are similar, but it can also be occasioned by things that are dissimilar? It can. When the recollection is caused by similar things, must one not of necessity also experience this: to consider whether the similarity to that which one recollects is deficient in any respect or complete? One must. 74a

-It was seen to be possible for someone to see or hear or other wise perceive something, and by this to be put in mind of something else which he had forgotten and which is related to it by similarity or difference. One of two things follows as I say: either we were born with the knowledge of it, and all of us know it throughout life, or those who later, we say, are learning, are only recollecting, and learning would be recollection. 76a

-The theory of recollection and learning, however, was based on an assumption worthy of acceptance, for our soul was said to exist also before it came into the body, just as the reality does that is of the kind that we qualify by the words 'which truly is,' and I convinced myself that I was quite correct to accept it. 92d

Philebus

-S: And do we not hold that recollection differs from memory?

P: Perhaps.

S: Does not their difference lie in this?

P: In what?

S: Do we not call it 'recollection' when the soul recalls as much as possible by itself, without the aid of the body, what she had once experienced together with the body? Or how would you put it?

P: I quite agree.

S: But on the other hand, when, after the loss of memory of either a perception or again a piece of knowledge, the soul calls up this memory for itself, we also call all these events recollection. 34b

-If memory and perceptions concur with other impressions at a particular occasion, then they seem to me to inscribe words in our soul, as it were. And if what is written is true, then we form a true judgment and a true account of the matter. But if what our scribe writes is false, then the result will be the opposite of truth. 39a

Phaedrus

-But not every soul is easily reminded of the reality there by what it finds here—not souls that got only a brief glance at the reality there, not souls who had such bad luck when they fell down here that they were twisted by bad company into lives of injustice so that they forgot the sacred objects they had seen before. Only a few remain whose memory is good enough; and they are startled when they see an image of what they saw up there. Then they are beside themselves, and their experience is beyond their comprehension because they cannot fully grasp what it is that they are seeing. 250a-b

-It (writing) will introduce forgetfulness into the soul of those who learn it: they will not practice using their memory because they will put their trust in writing, which is external and depends on signs that belong to others, instead of trying to remember from the inside, completely on their own. You have not discovered a potion for remembering, but for reminding; you provide your students with the appearance of wisdom, not with its reality. 275a

Meno

-As the soul is immortal, has been born often and has seen all things here and in the underworld, there is nothing which it has not learned; so it is in no way surprising that it can recollect the things it knew before, both about virtue and other things. As the whole of nature is akin, and the soul has learned everything, nothing prevents a man, after recalling one thing only—a process men call learning—discovering everything else for himself, if he is brave and does not tire of the search, for searching and learning are, as a whole, recollection. 81c

-So let us speak about virtue also, since we do not know either what it is or what qualities it possesses, and let us investigate whether it is teachable or not by means of a hypothesis, and say this: Among the things existing in the soul, of what sort is virtue, that it should be teachable or not? First, if it is another sort than knowledge, is it teachable or not, or, as we were just saying, recollectable? 87b

-For true opinions, as long as they remain, are a fine thing and all they do is good, but they are not willing to remain long, and they escape from a man's mind, so that they are not worth much until one ties them down by (giving) an account of the reason why. And that, Meno, my friend, is recollection, as we previously agreed. After they are tied down, in the first place they become knowledge, and then they remain in place. That is why knowledge is prized higher than correct opinion, and knowledge differs from correct opinion in being tied down. 98a

Select references concerning memory/recollection or *anamnesis* from the Commentary on the Song of Songs by St. Gregory of Nyssa

-The good which is superior to the one already attained holds the attention of those participating in it while not allowing them to look at the past; by enjoying what is more worthy, their memory of inferior things is blotted out. 174

-These words counsel us not to abstain from good teachings but by flying over the fields of divinely inspired words, we are to gather something from each one for the creation of wisdom. We mold within ourselves a honeycomb, so to speak, storing up in our hearts this labor of love as in a hive. The various doctrines create in our memory storehouses like the different cells in wax which are unable to be destroyed. 269

-The soul is not always led by the Word to what is higher by means of honey and milk but after having been compared to the scent of frankincense, the garden becomes an image of paradise. It is not loosely guarded as with our first parents, but protected from every side by recollection of the bridegroom's command. 280

-If the text exhorts Habakkuk [cf. Hab 2.2] to inscribe his vision on a tablet, we could call the tablet purity of heart on which our memories have inscribed the divine visions. 413

-The guiding faculty of the soul must be engraved with the clear, pure memory of the divine words and be made clear by conspicuous letters. Indeed, sapphire is included to praise the bridegroom's belly alone with the tablet whose gleam resembles the sky. This image counsels us to be attentive to

heavenly matters, the place of our treasure [Mt 6.21]. By not growing weary in keeping the divine precepts, the vision of our divine hope refreshes our soul's eyes. 415

And what is offered to the judge is not subject to bribery as when anything offered to the judge is not subject to bribery as when it is lamented that there is no remembrance of God in death [Ps 6.6] (For how can those condemned to wailing and grinding of teeth be happy when remembering God?). In another place the prophet says that remembrance of God produces gladness [Ps 77.3]. 464

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### Select references to Forgetfulness, Dialogues of Plato

#### Letters, III

-To God it would be enjoining something contrary to nature, since the divine has its seat far removed from pleasure and pain; and as for man, pleasure and pain more often do harm, by breeding stupidity, forgetfulness, folly, and insolence in his soul. 315c

#### Republic

-And what if he could retain nothing what he learned, because he was full of forgetfulness? Could he fail to be empty of knowledge?

-How could he? 486c

-They traveled to the Plain of Forgetfulness in burning, choking, terrible heat, for it was empty of trees and earthy vegetation. And there, beside the River of Unheeding, whose water no vessel can hold, they camped, for night was coming on. All of them had to drink a certain measure of this water, but those who weren't saved by reason drank more than that, and as each of them drank, he forgot everything and went to sleep. 621a

### Select references to forgetfulness, Commentary on the Song of Songs by St. Gregory of Nyssa

-The cause of their love is the scent of the perfume to which they eternally run; they stretch out to what is in front, forgetting what is behind. 'We shall run after you toward the scent of your perfumes' [1.4]. 39

-A harbor is a welcome safe refuge for sailors and a calm haven after their sufferings at sea. Here they forget the sea's evils while they recuperate and find relief from their long labors. There is no fear of shipwreck, nor anxiety about the ocean's deep, nor danger of pirates, nor tumults of the wind, nor the sea swelling up from the deep because of the wind. Those who were tempest-tossed are now far from all such dangers in the haven of calm water. 80-1

-Having thus become a flower, the soul is not injured by thorny temptations in her transformation into lily; she forgets the people and house of her father and looks to her true Father. Therefore she is named sister of the son, having been introduced by the Spirit of adoption into this relationship and released from fellowship with the daughters of that false father. 115-6

-The Apostle's words are thus verified: stretching out to what lies before is related to forgetfulness of earlier accomplishments [Phil 3.13]. The good which is superior to the one already attained holds the attention of those participating in it while not allowing them to look at the past; by enjoying what is more worthy, their memory of inferior things is blotted out. 174

-When the great Apostle Paul gave an account to the Corinthians of his lofty vision, he doubted his

human nature, that is, whether he was in the body or in the spirit. He testifies, 'I consider myself not to have reached [the goal], but I stretch forward to what lies in front of me, forgetting what went before me' [Phil 3.13]. It is clear that Paul alone knew what laid beyond that third heaven (for Moses himself did not speak of it in his cosmogony). After hearing the unutterable mysteries of paradise, Paul still continued to move higher and did not cease to ascend. 245

-Sleep brings about forgetfulness of anxieties; it calms fears, softens rage, slackens the tension from bitter experiences and makes one unaware of evils. Therefore we have learned from the bride that she has risen higher and boasts, 'I sleep but my heart is awake.' 312

-Such a soul never ceases to stretch forth to what lies before, going out from her present stage to what lies ahead. Anything great and marvelous always seems inferior in comparison to what succeeds it since what the bride has found seems more beautiful than her earlier discoveries. Thus Paul died each day [1Cor 15.13] because at all times he partook of a new life, being dead to the past and forgetful of previous things. 366

Select references to *epektasis*, Commentary on the Song of Songs by St. Gregory of Nyssa

-The cause of their love is the scent of the perfume to which they eternally run; they stretch out to what is in front, forgetting what is behind. 39

-Every word signifying these conceptions (of the divine nature) is like a point lacking extension since it cannot show what is present in the mind. Thus every thought of ours falls short of the comprehension of God. 87

-How she leaps and bounds toward what lies before her and does not turn back! And still she thirsts. 119

-The Apostle's words are thus verified: the stretching out to what lies before is related to forgetfulness of earlier accomplishments [cf. Phil 3.13]. The good which is superior to the one already attained holds the attention of those participating in it while not allowing them to look at the past. 174

-The unbounded, incomprehensible divinity remains beyond all understanding. 246

-The bride does not remain here; she does not reach out to what is loftier nor does the text tell about her ascent; rather, from the bride's own mouth are the emissions of pomegranates and gardens of spices. 291

-It does not know as it ought...nor does the soul estimate itself to have comprehended but runs to what lies beyond, stretching forward to what is before [cf. Phil 3.13]. 352

-Such a soul never ceases to stretch forth to what lies before, going out from her present stage to what lies ahead. 366

1.Iliad ii.851, xvi.554.