

On the Concept of Order

Some twenty-five years ago I had read a book by Jean Cardinal Daniélou, *L'Être et le Temps chez Grégoire de Nysse* (E.J. Brill, 1970; in French only) which, I believe, was one of his last major works. By that time I had been studying Gregory of Nyssa approximately fifteen years and sought to learn more about his teaching, an interest which continues unabated to the present. Daniélou's book caught my attention because he lays out several concepts essential to an understanding of both Gregory's philosophy and theology. The nice part about *L'Être* is a fairly detailed examination of other key Greek words: *theoria*, *conspiration*, *elements*, *change*, *frontier*, *blindness*, *mortality*, *summit* and, of course, the famous *apokatastasis* or restoration of all things (in Christ). I liked the book so much that I made a photocopy and re-read it several years later; more recently I thumbed through it to refresh my memory about a particular term. The one that caught my fancy back then was *akolouthia* or sequence (I'll get into that shortly) which summed up much of what Gregory had to say. Please note: On the Gregory of Nyssa Home Page is an article entitled *Taxis and Akolouthia as Used by Gregory of Nyssa* under 'References.' That text presents an explanation of *akolouthia* (as well as several related terms) within the context of Gregory's works.

The term *akolouthia* is appealing by reason of its ability to reveal what you might call his method. Please note: virtually all Church Fathers lack a method as we've come to understand this term. It can be frustrating, even daunting, but if you stick with it, you get acclimatized to their style and can draw more from the text than you've expected. With time, this un-methodical approach allows for greater fluidity and interjection of personal reflections along with making it easier for the reader to identify with what the author is communicating. Discovery of this 'method,' in turn, provided a second key enabling me to grasp (albeit indirectly) the way Gregory approached Scripture, the foundation of his theology. It seems that he had brought the same method to a reading of Plato. Although it was difficult to appreciate even to myself, getting a handle of the way Gregory used *akolouthia* allowed his other concepts to unravel before my eyes which showed how he blended philosophy and theology. This, of course, required some intense reading of texts in the original Greek, no small task as I quickly discovered.

A good number of fruitful years reading Gregory followed, this time re-enforced with excellent secondary sources. If I hadn't focused for so long and intently upon the primary sources, I could have easily side-stepped that long apprenticeship in favor of books about Gregory of Nyssa. Despite their excellence, secondary sources could have taken the place of those countless hours of reading Gregory in the Greek original. It was tempting to go this route...why bother slugging through such difficult material, sometimes repetitious and boring, when someone else has done the leg work for you? Looking back reveals that one can never appreciate an author, especially one of such originality, unless you're willing to slog through all he has to say. It seems that I hit upon a happy balance between Gregory's own works and texts about him. However, throughout that fruitful period I had a vague, persistent feeling that something was missing but couldn't quite put my fingers on it. While in the process of later translating Gregory's Song Commentary,

a task that consumed a good six years, awareness of that lack not only persisted but grew stronger while simultaneously remaining vague. At the same time, *akolouthia* was invisibly present guiding me as a kind of daimon through the entire process.

After a few years of laying fallow with respect to Gregory of Nyssa—a time when I moved into the Syriac Fathers—I also decided to tackle the Dialogues of Plato, the source par excellence not only of Gregory's inspiration but of many Church Fathers. After overcoming some prejudice against Plato who seems to cast a pall over our Western culture, the connection jumped out at me. I should note that this prejudice is quite pervasive and permeates much of how we think about Plato though we may be unaware of it. It seems to stem from the fact that Plato is responsible for the divorce between invisible and visible reality, favoring the former over the latter. Nevertheless, this dissolved after a few weeks of retooling my Greek from the patristic to the classical mode. Here familiarity with a language can be a liability in that I had to re-learn a number of things with which I had been acquainted. Nevertheless, Gregory being a Greek-reading Christian author fueled my persistence. He was someone who read the Dialogues in his own language, albeit several centuries later. So I was confronted with two authors who were attempting to communicate subtle matters in a language especially designed for such a task. No small wonder that mis-perceptions, many of which stemmed from translations, found their way into subsequent authors and schools of thought which, in turn, affected our perceptions of Christian theology.

As the first paragraph states, I had done a study on the word *akolouthia* (sequence), a document that has been posted for awhile. The Greek term for 'order' is different though related, the former being more concerned with the step-by-step nature of what's being examined or its inherent structure. Of course, each step combines with the one before which gives birth to a particular type of order, and for me Gregory had been a guide through this sequential process. The term 'order' is helpful to ruminate but it comes with several caveats. When we Westerners hear that word immediately comes to mind its opposite: a threat from without, often with the implication that our freedom is in jeopardy. Most commonly the concept of order carries social implications especially if you happen to be a lawyer. That leads to perhaps the most familiar perception: a legal term whose companion is 'law' which for us independently minded Westerners is restrictive in outlook. Of equal importance to the legal sphere is the use of order within all branches of science.

'Order' can also stand against the threat posed by the second law of thermodynamics, that nature is relentlessly running down like a clock with the final result being chaos. Here's a paradox of sorts. While we may recoil at law-in-the-legal sense, we have no reservations in applying this same term to nature, even to the point of being superstitious about it. We unquestioningly submit to the concept of laws as governing natural processes yet at the same time they remain immaterial and immovable. Even those who do not recognize God, these laws are assumed to be governing the universe; neither anyone nor anything can escape their all-encompassing clutch. In other words, metaphors from the legal realm are carried over to the natural one, consciously or otherwise. The result is that we can view the scientific endeavor (and

therefore nature itself) as a kind of extension of the legal one. No small wonder this perception makes nature more hostile than it really is. Along these lines, I recall a book—don't recall the author offhand, but it dealt with biological processes vis-a-vis Darwin—which proposed the possibility of thinking in terms of habits instead of laws. While I'm not qualified to discuss ramifications of this alternate meaning, it is intriguing and may tie in with some of the ideas presented here, that is, habit bespeaks a time prior to when that most paradoxical of terms 'law' became both enshrined and abhorred within our Western mentality.

A key concept pertaining to order centers around one Greek term in particular, kosmos. This proper noun derives from the verbal root kosmeo which is difficult to define succinctly. Basically, kosmeo suggests putting in order but with a view as to having that order appear neat or well organized. Thus an attractive appearance is essential to its meaning. A related term—and initially the one that set in motion my desire to jot down these notes—is diakosmeo. The reason stems from the preposition dia (through) which intimates a more thorough putting in order or adornment, if you will. While true, diakosmeo indicates a regulation of that order. In other words, this verb has a martial connotation, arranging in accord with rank as well as cataloging. The most obvious English noun derived from kosmeo is cosmos which pertains not simply to the universe but to the universe as a well-ordered whole. Thus we get an unmistakable insight that the Greek term leans heavily towards beauty...that which is 'cosmetic'...very different from our limited perceptions of law and therefore order.

The nice thing about kosmos and its derivatives as just presented are their firm rootedness in the natural world. Not only that, they directly appeal to our aesthetic sensibilities. Who doesn't enjoy beholding a lovely person, object of sight? Furthermore, kosmos-as-beauty found its highest expression in a polis or city state, a term synonymous for the ancient Greeks with human interaction. Therefore it was quite easy to see the beauty and order reflected first in the human person, second within the polis and third as these two being a reflection in miniature of that good-order in the larger scheme of things, namely, the cosmos. With this in mind we could say that a 'cosmetic' sense permeated the very small, the intermediate and finally the very large...a kind of unbroken chain of beauty. Such an insight was picked up and developed by the Stoics and held sway for many centuries. Nowadays this view appears antiquated in light of modern scientific and political developments, some of which have sinister (or potentially sinister) ramifications, chief among which is the constant threat of this order descending into a state of chaos. Nevertheless, the micro/macro image of kosmos instinctively appeals to our sensibilities as well as being an important point where the ancient Greek and Christian worlds cross-fertilized.

The notion lying behind kosmeo is that of loveliness (as adornment on the outside) and bears a relationship with the more familiar philosophic concept of to kallon or 'beauty.' To kallon pertains to a reality on a higher level and has moral connotations. This term is one of the best to reveal the close connection between Plato and Gregory of Nyssa, for the latter often uses it to designate God. Some citations below clearly indicate this. And if we participate in God-as-Beauty we do so by an ordering...a diakosmeo...of our moral lives. Thus it appears that kosmeo represents the inner workings of to kallon in the sense of giving it structure. The result is that

this structure is both beautiful on the inside as well as on the outside.

Another Greek term clearly seen in the English is ethos which follows upon the heels of both. Ethos is a pattern of behavior characteristic of either an individual or a group. If applied to the latter, that is, members of a polis, all share in the larger cosmos and become an 'adornment' in the fullest sense. The term 'adornment' suggests endowing a wearer to make him or her more attractive. Thus ethos may be said to adorn God and make him known more fully. This is a far cry from some of the popular misperceptions we've inherited and are actually quite refreshing. It's a natural way of starting with the individual, working up to the common polis and then on to the universe or cosmos (kosmos). To sum up these terms we finally have suneitheia which fleshes them out, if you will. It too pertains to a habit, a way of life. However, the preposition sun(m)- or 'with' intimates that a person, polis and cosmos are working together towards a common end. Thus suneitheia recapitulates the sense of what I'm trying to expose through an examination of all these terms which started with diakosmeo.

These notations can have profound implications regarding the pursuit of the Christian life in the twenty-first century even though they are rooted in a time vastly different from the days when Plato and Gregory of Nyssa had flourished. They follow the general subject matter running through other articles posted on this Home Page, namely, philosophic inquiry as understood by the ancients (not so much by moderns). Not only that but they reveal how the early Christian tradition positively related to that larger one as something lived and not confined to the classroom. An added attraction to us moderns is that this approach avoids moralizing and the tendency to fall into a dogmatic way of presenting religion. You might call it philosophizing in the truest sense, an activity which seamlessly flows into 'theologizing.' Hence Gregory takes up the baton passed on by Plato and incorporates this philosopher's thought into much of his Christian teaching.

Assembling the citations below from Plato and Gregory of Nyssa might be called the easy part, that is, it was easy to go through their words with computer-related aids in order to find the appropriate passages. However, it's another thing to go through them with that careful attentive reading termed *lectio divina* where we're invited to adopt their content into our lives. Maybe that's why I found it enough for now to give a brief introduction, hoping that anyone desiring to practice philosophy/theology would adopt that approach. It's easier said than done, for the terms point to a common denominator: that one must live morally well and not be seduced by the passing nature of this world, beautiful as it may be. In a nutshell, that's the praxis which automatically leads to a conundrum. We're firmly rooted on the earth and at the same time long for something more comprehensive than run-of-the-mill dissatisfactions. They seem to boil down to a sense that we've been born for something better than we're experiencing now. An essential component of this dissatisfaction is that we're running up against not only physical limitations or even moral ones technically speaking. We realize both in ourselves and in others a deep-down form of alienation that must be overcome. Down the centuries several approaches have been developed and are still floating around today; they range from escape to denial often with a negative view of the human condition. Why they don't work and never will is because they fail

to appeal to our innate sense of beauty, that we are already 'adorned' with beauty and need to realize it. I wonder if anyone has come across a method which appeals to the attainment of beauty. Off hand I'd say no, but Plato, laying at the heart of Western Civilization, certainly does, hence his appeal. At the same time we're stuck with centuries of overlay: interpretations by lesser minds and those pushing their own personal agenda. Maybe this overlay is one reason why I've gone through the Dialogues as well as Gregory of Nyssa, trying to isolate key passages with which the reader may run and not simply read them for his or her amusement.

What makes our conundrum real is death, that we all have to die, a fact virtually impossible to grasp no matter how much we rehearse for it. This knotted state of affairs leads to different solutions by different people. Roughly it be divided into two categories, those who by nature are active and those who are passive. Regardless, the terms under discussion are sufficiently flexible as to adaption. An active person might go out and restore beauty through political and social action whereas a passive person might focus more on doing something about it in himself or pondering beauty's manifestation. Regardless of which temperament, each of us has to function first within one's own self, our individual polis and tie all this int with the kosmos at large. It's helpful to keep in mind that for the ancient Greeks such a kosmos was limited; they had an abhorrence for that which was infinite. While modern science points to what appears the infinitely small and infinitely large, this ancient conception of the kosmos appears both quaint and out-dated. Then again, maybe not. Perhaps an awareness of the two gaping holes of infinity we face today—the microscopic and macroscopic—require a new sense of beauty. This may not be evident on the surface level but remains in the background influencing every decision we make.

By way of quick review, I present once more the list of terms already noted as found within the Dialogues of Plato and works of Gregory of Nyssa:

- diakosmeo
- beauty
- ethos (Plato only)
- suneitheia

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References to Diakosmeo in Plato

Critias

And they took all these products from the earth and from their proceeds they constructed their sanctuaries and their palaces, their harbors and their ship-sheds, and they improved the rest of their land according to the plan I will now describe. 115c

Laws

-They ought, of course, to have consolidated their army and kept it on a permanent footing; this would have ensured them their own freedom while they ruled over anybody else they liked. 687a

-Let us therefore summon God to attend the foundation of the state. May he hear our prayers, and having heard, come graciously and benevolently to help us settle (sundiakomeo) our state and its laws. 712b

-Next, in accordance with the natural arrangement of our legal code, will come the legal proceedings that arise out of all the occupations we have mentioned up until now. 853a

-But no matter how states or individuals think they can achieve the good, it is a conception of what the good is that should govern every man and hold sway in his soul, even if he is a little mistaken. If it does, every action done in accordance with it, and any part of a man's nature that becomes subject to such control, we have to call just and best for the entire life of mankind. 864a

Phaedo

One day I heard someone reading, as he said, from a book of Anaxagoras, and saying that it is mind that directs and is the cause of everything. I was delighted with this cause and it seemed to me good, in a way, that Mind should be the cause of all. I thought that if this were so, the directing Mind would direct everything and arrange each thing in the way that was best. 97b-c

Philebus

The only account that can do justice to the wonderful spectacle presented by the cosmic order of sun, moon, and stars and the revolution of the whole heaven, is that reason arranges it all, and I for my part would never waver in saying or believing it. 28e

Symposium

While others are pregnant in soul—because there surely are those who are even more pregnant in their souls than in their bodies, and these are pregnant with what is fitting for a soul to bear and bring to birth. And what is fitting? Wisdom and the rest of virtue which all poets beget as well as all the craftsmen who are said to be creative. But by far the greatest and most beautiful part of wisdom deals with the proper ordering of cities and households, and that is called moderation and justice. 209a

Phaedrus

-Now Zeus, the great commander in heaven, drives his winged chariot first in the procession, looking after everything and putting all things in order. 246e

-You must understand the nature of the soul, along the same lines; you must determine which kind of speech is appropriate to each kind of soul, prepare and arrange your speech accordingly, and offer a complex and elaborate speech to a complex soul and a simple speech to a simple one. 277c

Timaeus

-Moreover, as for wisdom, I'm sure you can see how much attention our way of life here has devoted to it, right from the beginning. In our study of the world order we have traced all our discoveries, including prophecy and health-restoring medicine, from those divine realities to human levels, and we have also acquired all the other related disciplines. This is in fact nothing less than the very same system of social order that the goddess first devised for you when she

founded your city. 24c

-So, as the model was itself an everlasting Living Thing, he set himself to bringing this universe to completion in such a way that it, too, would have that character to the extent that was possible. Now it was the Living Thing's nature to be eternal, but it isn't possible to bestow eternity fully upon anything that is begotten. And so he began to think of making a moving image of eternity: at the same time as he brought order to the universe, he would make an eternal image, moving according to number, of eternity remaining in unity. This number, of course, is what we now call time. 37d

-This, of course, explains how these different kinds came to occupy different regions of space, even before the universe was set in order and constituted from them at its coming to be. Indeed, it is a fact that before this took place the four kinds all lacked proportion and measure, and at the time the ordering of the universe was undertaken, fire, water, earth and air initially possessed certain traces of what they are now. 53a

-Our makers fitted the mouth out with teeth, a tongue and lips in their current arrangement, to accommodate both what is necessary and what is best: they designed the mouth as the entry passage for what is necessary, and as the exit for what is best. 75d

References to Diakosmeo in Gregory of Nyssa

NB: references are to the critical edition begun under the direction Werner Jaeger and J.P. Migne's edition.

On Almsgiving

A fitting life is the mother of the poor, teacher of the rich, a pattern for the young, refuge for the aged, treasure for the needy, gate for the destitute and care to persons of every age who suffer misfortune. Just as the trumpet blast of vanity stirs persons to ambition and announces the distribution of prizes to those in wrestling school, so does almsgiving summon everyone. It shows generosity towards the afflicted and averts plagues while at the same time it dispenses relief. This is the highest of all praises, for it is associated with God, loved by goodness and manifests kinship with it. In this manner God himself shows that he is the source of all our virtue and kind deeds towards everyone. God set in order the earth, the beauty of the heavens, the well ordered change of hours, the sun's heat and the cold (He does not need these things) and works continuously for man's well being as an invisible provider, a timely sower and a wonderful irrigator. 100-101

Inscriptions on the Psalms

-I have heard that certain wise persons who have carefully examined our human nature say that man is a microcosm containing everything in the world at large. The order of the universe resembles a musical harmony of varied shapes and colors with a certain order and rhythm which is correct, proper and never dissonant, even if different parts differ greatly. 30-1

-The first true archetype is music, for harmony and concord adapts all things with respect to each other through an order, arrangement and system. The Maker of the universe works skillfully through his ineffable word of wisdom by those things which were always rooted in wisdom. If the entire world order is a kind of musical harmony whose artisan and creator is God

as the Apostle says (Heb 11.10), then man is a microcosm, an imitator of him who made the world. The divine plan for the world at large sees this image in what is small, for the part is indeed the same as the whole. Similarly, a piece of small, transparent stone reflects like a mirror the entire sun in the same way a small object reflects God's light. Thus I say that in the microcosm, man's nature, all the music of the universe is analogously seen in the whole through the particular inasmuch as the whole is contained by the particular. 32-3

Ecclesiastes

'That which is crooked cannot be made straight' [1.15], that is, anything perverted does not befit a creature adorned by God. Similarly, the Maker who fashioned everything for himself set aright with a ruler and measuring line the parts which contribute towards the whole by having each part carefully related to the others. If any part is not set aright by a measuring line, the harmony is certainly not distorted; rather, if each part is to be set aright, all should conform to the measuring line. And so, Ecclesiastes claims that nature perverted by evil cannot be disposed to right reason: 'Deficiency cannot be numbered' [1.15]. 303-4

Hexaemeron

Therefore what is begotten according to sequence is not by chance nor from its own power, for Moses declared that God's power is responsible. But the nature of fire is sharp and ever mobile, a fact evident from visible reality. The narrative suggests through this principle [beginning] by a sequence which historically conforms to Moses' description, 'And there was evening and there was morning' [Gen 1.4]. Who does not know that creation is twofold, one spiritual and the other perceptible, which the lawgiver presents at once? Moses does not refer to those things which the mind perceives, but he manifests them by visible reality to the senses which adorn them. 76d

Light takes precedence by reason of its mobility which follows closely upon the firmament's circuit, fire being the determining fact for this circular motion. A light nature is distinguished from a heavier one as we see with the distinction between earth and water. The nature arrayed below is light, subtle and sublime; all are not the same, for an interval of time is inserted which distinguishes between those properties held in common from those which are particular. 117d

On the Creation of Man

For he alone has worthily considered the creation of God who truly was created after God, and whose soul was fashioned in the image of Him Who created him,-Basil, our common father and teacher,-who by his own speculation made the sublime ordering of the universe generally intelligible, making the world as established by God in the true Wisdom known to those who by means of his understanding are led to such contemplation: but we, who fall short even of worthily admiring him, yet intend to add to the great writer's speculations that which is lacking in them, not so as to interpolate his work by insertion. 125c

References to Beauty in Plato

Cratylus 439d

S: Consider, Cratylus, a question that I for my part often dream about: Are we or aren't we to say that there is a beautiful itself, a good itself, and the same for each one of the things that are?

C: I think we are, Socrates.

S: Let's not investigate whether a particular face or something of that sort is beautiful then, or whether all such things seem to be flowing, but let's ask this instead: Are we to say that the beautiful itself is always such as it is?

C: Absolutely.

S: But if it is always passing away, can we correctly say of it first that it is this, and then that it is such and such? Or, at the very instant we are speaking, isn't it inevitably and immediately becoming a different thing and altering and no longer being as it was?

C: It is.

Euthydemus 300e-301a

Why Socrates, have you ever yet seen a beautiful thing?, asked Dionysodorus.

Yes indeed, Dionysodorus, I said, and many of them.

And where they differ from the beautiful, he asked, or where they are the same as the beautiful?

This put me in a terrible fix which I thought I deserved for my grumbling. All the same I answered that they were different from the beautiful itself.

Phaedo

65e: Do we say that there is such a thing as the Just itself or not?

We do say so, by Zeus.

And the Beautiful and the Good?

Of course.

And have you ever seen any of these things with your eyes?

In no way, he said.

Or have you ever grasped them with any of your bodily senses? I am speaking of all things such as Size, Health, Strength and, in a word, the reality of all other things that each of them essentially is. Is what is most true in them contemplated through the body or is this the position: whoever of us prepares himself best and most accurately to grasp that thing itself which he is investigating will come closest to the knowledge of it?

Of course.

Then he will do this most perfectly who approaches the object with thought alone, without associating any sight with his thought, or dragging in any sense perception with his reasoning, but who, using pure thought alone, tries to track down each reality pure and by itself, freeing himself as far as possible from eyes and ears, and in a word, from the whole body.

75cd: Therefore, if we had this knowledge, we knew before birth and immediately after not only the Equal but the Greater and the Smaller and all such things, for our present argument is no more about the Equal than about the Beautiful itself, the Good itself, the Just, the Pious and, as I say, about all those things to which we can attach the word 'itself,' both when we are putting questions and answering them. So we must have acquired knowledge of them all before we were born.

100b: I am going to try to show you the kind of cause with which I have concerned myself. I

turn back to those oft-mentioned things and proceed from them. I assume the existence of a Beautiful, itself by itself, of a Good and a Great and all the rest. If you grant me these and agree that they exist, I hope to show you the cause as a result, and to find the soul to be immortal.

114c: Simmias, as I believe, is in doubt and fear that the soul, though it is more divine and beautiful than the body, yet predeceases it, being a kind of harmony. 91.d

Those who have purified themselves sufficiently by philosophy live in the future altogether without a body; they make their way to even more beautiful dwelling places which it is hard to describe clearly.

Parmenides

131a: 'Is it your view that, as you say, there are certain forms from which these other things by getting a share of them, derive their names—as, for instance, they come to be like by getting a share of likeness, large by getting a share of largeness, and just and beautiful by getting a share of justice and beauty?' 'It certainly is,' Socrates replied.

134c: Surely you would say that if in fact there is knowledge—a kind itself—it is much more precise than is knowledge that belongs to us. And the same goes for beauty and all others. 134.c

Philebus

64e: But now we notice that the force of the good has taken refuge in an alliance with the nature of the beautiful. For measure and proportion manifest themselves in all areas as beauty and virtue.

65a: If we cannot capture the good in one form, we will have to take hold of it in a conjunction of three: beauty, proportion and truth. Let us affirm that these should by right be treated as a unity and be held responsible for what is in the mixture, for its goodness is what makes the mixture itself a good one.