

Physicality and Freedom

*Please note: this article was written in conjunction with a study of *On the Making of Man* by St. Gregory of Nyssa. It is posted on the Gregory of Nyssa Home Page, linked to this one, the *Lectio Divina* Home Page. I make reference to that text, using Gregory's treatise to support some of my insights laid out here.*

Multiple choice. That seems to be what we face every day, almost to an extreme, whether it be the supermarket, watching television or browsing the Internet. Options unthought of a generation ago overwhelm us to such a degree that they render us incapable of making a correct choice with a view to living well, even if it's as simple as picking out the right breakfast cereal. This bewildering amount of options can be equated with the idea of freedom which we value so highly, a point to be discussed shortly. Actually, these options tend to obscure the very meaning of freedom. Yet when we examine the various scenarios by which to play out our lives, we really don't have that many choices, just a limited number of options. These limits pertain to the circumstances in which we were born, the environment and choices we make as we go along through life. So when you look at people...and this includes folks who are generally successful...they face pretty much the same circumscribed amount of alternatives, only the quality is higher. That doesn't prevent them from flubbing up like the rest of us. Regardless of one's station in life, most folks are dissatisfied. Chiefly this stems from a tension between what life's circumstances require of us in the here-and-now and that which we would like to pursue if everything went our way. Obviously things don't go our way most of the time. The end result is a perception of being locked in with no where to go. At the same time, the options I just mentioned remain as numerous and flashy as ever which paradoxically make this imprisonment all the more confining.

At the root of this tension lies a multitude of ideas and projects we project into the future which have their roots in past experience. There's an inclination to equate the idea of multiple choice with the various paths of life available to us, and that in turn, can lead to a strange notion, namely, that we are entitled to these choices. By necessity the latter aren't as broad as the former but can be mistaken as such. In other words, we can end up with a distorted mental consumerism towards the path we've chosen (By the way, I never liked that word which is tossed about with little or no reflection. Imagine being identified as a consumer...one who consumes...or even more to the point, one who devours). Because today's multiple choice society offers countless alternatives, their accumulative effect impinges upon us directly and in a personal way. They empower us to crank out an equally number of countless thoughts and images. Over time they create a mental film—thin as a wafer yet durable as Teflon—inserted between ourselves and external reality. It consists of our mental lives, the plane on which we live, which turns out to be similarly thin. Superficial may be a more precise term, but it fails to capture the durability of that mental film. Unfortunately we consider this layer as a mediating, protective presence against the world, but in the final analysis it turns out to be a barrier against reality.

The only time we find rest from these images is during sleep, yet dreams turn out to be a continuation of our mental rummaging. Hence a film of ideas takes hold of our attention twenty-four hours a day, deceiving us by keeping us asleep, if you will, during waking hours. Not only does it appear indestructible but to conceive of life without it approximates suicide. Yet at the same time we get inklings now and then that some kind of reality may lie outside this film independent of our imaginative operation. This may be conceived as a dissatisfaction with how our lives are going, a fairly widespread phenomenon we acknowledge but fail to analyze properly. People would like to delve more deeply but have grown accustomed to short attention spans in part from dealing with the phenomenon of multiple choice. And so in this essay I'll be taking a look at one particular way to expand these inklings which holds the promise of making our thin, Teflon-like web more permeable. I don't think the web ever melts away, only in exceptional circumstances. Still, it's worth the effort...which as it turns out, requires no effort. More on that later.

While going about our business we follow a given track which is the result of choices made in the past. Some are given a lot of forethought while others are made on the spot or as circumstances demand. Over a period of time a combination of long term and short term decisions give rise to a form or pattern which evolves into our personal inheritance. While all this is developing, we tend to focus more upon dissimilarities rather than similarities between our path and those taken by other people. As a result, always we are on the lookout as how we stack up against them. Admittedly this is a process which fascinates us while at the same time it makes that mental web more impenetrable. We also sense it's a waste of time. Everyone else seems to enjoy greater freedom. Objectively we recognize the silliness of our view yet do nothing to stop it from captivating our attention. However, somewhere along the line we're bound to run into circumstances that constrict us in a way we hadn't even imagined. For example, an illness may confine us to bed for an extended period of time. While this imposes unwelcome limitations, it can free us up in ways we've never imagined nor would have chosen otherwise. The same applies to a more extreme case, of being thrown into solitary confinement. We've all heard stories about people who found freedom in harsh circumstances, a freedom they never imagined possible. Later when released from their bonds, paradoxically they find themselves less free. It seems that the faculty of choice had been taken away during their confinement or at least reduced to a minimum. Then after a period of painful adjustment to this constriction, an unexpected liberty makes its presence felt which otherwise would never have occurred. And so constriction can give rise to freedom which brings up the deeper issue as to what is freedom anyway. Once confinement has been effected, a person is stuck with something that is irreducible...the very bottom...which accompanies him through any and all circumstances.

So if this is true—and we've all heard testimonies about freedom effected by involuntary constriction—is it possible to create a circumstance where our faculty of choice (and therefore our so-called freedom) can be curtailed? Even better, can the essence of this circumstance transmute into a permanent state or does it remain an occasional enjoyment of freedom? I don't advocate throwing ourselves into solitary confinement. That would be an utterly foolish gesture. There are saner ways available which help us not so much where to look but how to look, of how to implement this. We don't want a temporary solution but one that will take care of our existential longing for freedom once and for all. Although our the direction and nature of our yearning at this point remains unclear, it suffices to wake us up and get going...in short, to rattle that Teflon-like web we have woven over the years. The best part is that the 'way' is right under our noses. Already we are in what we want to get, so it's a matter of appreciating this.

The most obvious though little examined way to cultivate this desire for freedom is to focus upon that which is inescapable no matter where we go nor what we do, namely, the physical nature of our bodies. This is one of the last places we want to look because bodily functions are common and universal, even perceived as dirty, so that the thought of paying attention to them seems like a waste of time at best and a perversion at worst. After all, we're endowed with minds and should use them for nobler pursuits. It's an inescapable fact that each and everyone of us has a body whose functions are executed spontaneously without mental interference, very easy to behold. That in itself is amazing, a great source of hope as we'll see. The best part is that should we remain faithful to a close examination of these functions we discover a curious phenomenon, that there is no 'I' attached to them as commonly understood. This 'I' which we carry around concomitantly with our physical bodies turns out to be *the* burden, not the mistaken one of our physicality. Should we loose ourselves in attentiveness to the marvelous, spontaneous operations of just one of our bodies' myriad functions such as ingesting food and later return to our 'normal' state, we discover that we've been missing an important fact of life. Back in familiar territory or where the 'I' assails us with its constant demands, we see that for a brief span of time we had been relieved of a heavy burden. For a moment we had shed pre-occupation with ourselves while at the same time didn't change a single function of our physical bodies. They kept on going regardless of what thoughts we entertained. Here a reality very different from that the familiar 'I' has come to the fore, and it did so without us hardly noticing.

Such is the layout, the plan of action, which turns out to be no action at all. Better put, it consists in non-action, 'non' signifying an in-between state partaking of neither side while at the same time having a share in both. The preface 'non' is appropriate for what I'm attempting to describe because it is so intimate we have difficulty in nailing it down, at least in the beginning. In the context at hand, we have our physical bodies and our minds, the latter characterized by a hard-to-identify 'I.' As briefly noted in the last paragraph, we have trouble pinning down the transition from awareness of the former to the latter. The time gap between being aware of one and then the other is so short it escapes attention. That's why 'non' (as in non-action) seems an appropriate term. It becomes an acceptable term once we've gained practice at this attentiveness to our physicality; other than that 'non' remains meaningless.

Some readers may find the subject at hand mildly interesting, a kind of parlor game with which to amuse ourselves when bored. Certainly not. We're dealing with a matter of life and death. Life in that our corporeal nature is...well...life itself. Our imaginative faculty under the sway of the familiar 'I' is, if you will, illusory. Illusory when compared with the concrete reality of our physical nature and the enjoyment we derive of beholding it. Here's a reversal of what we hold dearly if there ever was one; in fact, some may call it a regression. Identification of such an important faculty with illusion, one which distinguishes us from the rest of creation, sounds outrageous. Not so if we keep firmly in mind the beneficial experience obtained by being attentive to our physicality. This doesn't mean sitting around all day watching our digestion or some other corporeal function but of cultivating what the ancient Greeks called theoria. This term is very different from 'theory,' for in the original sense it pertains more to our modern notions of contemplation. And so I apply theoria as attentiveness...a kind of non-action...to our physicality. Gregory of Nyssa is fond of this term as we shall see below.

The chief bias against such theoria is a desire to concentrate on what makes us distinct from other people, and that means living on the imaginative level. In other words, the familiar old 'I.' We even live on this level when relaxing, reading the paper while eating, so by no means is this 'I' to be taken as negative. Instead, I'd call it deficient as it awaits fulfillment. We have an innate preference to engage our minds with something intellectual as opposed to watching the mechanism of eating: the intricate actions of using a fork to insert food into the mouth, chewing and then swallowing it, not to mention the almost infinite variations of taste. At first this appear utterly banal (even animals and worse, reptiles do the same thing), yet it requires two steps. First that we allow the temptation to read the paper fade away and second, that we allow our capacity for theoria to emerge. That means following the natural sequence a given physical act as it performs its duty. It doesn't involve entertaining specific thoughts and images about the chewing, etc, but remaining attentive to how one action rises and falls upon the other...in short their orderly progression. Difficult on one hand yet easy on the other. Difficult because we're reluctant to follow through with the requisite attention (it's a 'waste of time') and easy because everyone does it: not with effort but naturally. Here nobody stands out in the crowd. It's universal whether we're in a fancy restaurant or a chow line.

We can be sure of one thing: that being attentive to a bodily function such as eating has solid basis in reality. This function and a myriad like it represent the bottom line beyond which we cannot go. However, something tugs at us constantly to forsake this plane for that which is mental because we're so accustomed to consider the latter as superior. Intellectually one may assent to the value of the physical plane, but in the concrete it's tough dealing with the flow of mental images that unceasingly passes across the mind. The stream never stops and accompanies us wherever we go, unescapable, really. It can be so bothersome that want to throw in the towel. Thus it's a matter of understanding what is transpiring in order to continue favoring the physical level over the mental one despite the formidable stream of images which assault us. After all, we've come to believe--this is a chief characteristic of Western theology and philosophy--that the physical plane is secondary and has value only when placed at the service of our mental faculties. We've

ended up with the mistaken notion that thoughts and imaginings, by reason of their more subtle natures, are of a higher value. Not only are we ingrained to think this way, the very idea that we should abandon these subtle forms is equivalent to devaluing our lives, of living like animals. Such is one of the greatest fears we have in life. Fortunately practice proves this to be contrary. It's important to realize that attention to our corporeal bodies, by reason of their automatic functioning which goes on regardless of what mental images we entertain, valorizes our mental capacities in a way we could not have imagined previously. Again, I appeal to experience to discover if this is true. Appreciate the benefit of having been relieved of our mental imaginings which is not the same as being relieved of our capacity for thought. Immediately there arises greater clarity of thought. Not simply that but a certain parsimony as to thinking. That is to say, thoughts applied to what must be done right before us follow a stricter, more coherent order or sequence. No wandering here and there but the same attentiveness to our physicality applies to our mental endeavors. Such attentiveness vis-a-vis our physical nature appears severely limited but is not. During this time there dawns a second insight so quickly that it escapes awareness of temporality. What this, my body, happens to be doing right now is intuited as being connected with other people, places and things. The connection can't be explained but intuited and later is verified by person who've had the same experience.

It's commonly said that the beginning of philosophy is wonder and awe. Such is the case when paying attention to the automatic physical operations of our bodies which go along merrily without mental interference. The big problem is that we prefer to build mental castles in the sky (which, if we're honest, we do almost continuously). When we shift attention to these operations...and shifting is the key...we are struck with how wonderfully everything operates. Such attending is equivalent to letting things alone and observing in an impartial manner that all is working well; not only with us but with the world at large. If this is the case with our physicality, why not include everyone and everything else? Even if people are living on the mental plane, their bodies too are identical in their all functions to ours. The same applies to other living beings, animals, fish and reptiles, in other words, to all beings which aren't attached to the ground such as plants, etc. This special type of attending (theoria) in all its immediacy has a way of telling our mental and imaginative faculties, memory included, it's okay to do their thing. Go ahead and have all the thoughts and mental wanderings you may wish. Theoria valorizes them, something they don't expect. And by reason of this authority given to them, they don't know what to do. In their amazement, they fall silent...are suspended...and thereby come to participate in that attention with regard to our inescapable physical nature.

Here we hit upon something rarely if ever encountered, almost too good to be true. As I said above, everyone in one way or another wants to be set free from his or her mental wanderings, even the good and neutral ones. On occasion we look back on a given time when we entertained them and say longingly, what a waste of time and energy. This free-range rambling, I believe, is what makes us conscious of the passage of time and of wanting to do something else other than what we're doing. Give the mind authority to crank out whatever it wishes, and it doesn't know what to do. A state of affairs that's very strange, one we have never encountered. However, the source of that authority derives only from the primary attention or theoria with respect to our physicality. It, in turn, bestows a secondary authority to our imaginative faculty. In practice this is very easy to do and just as easy to slip away from. The good part is that we can do it constantly until it becomes a habit. The succession of attention and mental interference, which may at first seem like a hopeless struggle, becomes less tedious with time. Returning to attention (that is, to our physicality or the nature of things) has a way of getting the upper hand on mental activity. It does so by reason of being more real, if you will. After a while our minds get frustrated with that strange, new authorization, hasn't a clue what to do with it and fades away. Chances are that our mental wanderings won't disappear completely. We may wish that to be the case at the beginning, but this represents another occasion for us to say to our imaginative wanderings, Go ahead. I allow you to come up with the wildest scenario you dare. Suddenly, nothing.

Persevering in this attention to our physicality over time makes us undergo a change for the better which is evident the first time one tries it out. As I noted above, the first thing we notice is relief from the narrow though demanding confines of the 'I.' At the same time, we are not changing a single iota of our experience, only looking into what we may call our true nature. As a result of our attention, our bodies don't do strange or outlandish things. Their continuous functioning without the 'I's' interference is reassuring. At first glance this sounds like a mechanistic way of viewing reality inherited from science. Not so. While insights filtered down from that view has undergone substantial changes, they have remained the same in the sense that determinism stresses that we are helpless before cosmic, impersonal forces. Instead, attention to our physicality beholds the automatic goings-on of our bodies without being caught up in them. The scientifically formed mind is inclined to say no problem observing our physicality. After all, it's a mental operation which follows automatically upon observation. However, the observation under discussion is that of *theoria*, a trans-mental (hence the use of 'non' as I already noted) gesture. It stands disengaged from our mental and imaginative faculties which at first glances looks like an Aristotelian unmoved mover but is not. A lot of creative speculation has tried to see the relationship between the physical and mental, of bridging the gap between them. Some of this may be traced to Western culture's undeveloped appreciation of life's contemplative dimension and is therefore unable to resolve the issue satisfactorily. People of a contemplative bent were always in society but rarely acted as a vital force which is unfortunate.

The paradox of this inner gesture aimed at a perception of our physicality in order to see its rootedness in something more inclusive is so common and easy to do that it goes against our grain or the desire to come up with a complex solution where none is required. Also it neutralizes another inclination we have for what falls under the category of magical or supernatural. Certainly there's nothing supernatural as we behold our physicality operating on its own terms and at its own speed. But is that true? Perhaps our cultural training and inheritance has missed the mark somewhere along the line and has failed to identify the place where we get real meaning from life as well as enjoy its unfathomable mystery. This is not to depreciate the value of thought, imagination nor of memory (the last being the storehouse of the first two). Trends or outlooks on life which place a premium on mental activity are more susceptible of missing the mark, and that includes most of us. What I'm getting at here doesn't downplay the intellect. Instead, I'm concerned about how it burdens us by that uninterrupted flow of imaginings under the guise of an 'I' we wish to shake off. A lot of us walk around not so much with our bodies being a burden but our minds constantly getting in the way. That gets back to experimentation. Again, put attention upon our corporeality and behold the wondrous operations going on there. Then authorize our minds to run as freely as they wish which results in the unique paradox of them being suspended. The real fruit of this experimentation is joy at a new discovery. Not just this but the automatic way we start to live in accord with positive moral standards.

Those who've succeeded in this endeavor somehow stand out by reason of their not standing out. That is to say, they are living anonymously among us or better, on a plane universal to all living beings. The joy they get from their practice is quietly contagious. At first their joy which I've designated as a *theoria* of our common physicality sounds like it'd get boring after time; fascinating at first but boring by reason of being repetitious. But consider the alternative in which most of us are stuck. Our mental processes and imagination constantly go over the same material like a broken record. Nothing especially worth admiring there. The *theoria vis-a-vis* our corporeality is a way to obtain freedom from tyranny of the 'I' and is not imposed from without. Such freedom is the ability to function naturally...not with absence of thought but freedom from the undue grip of mental images. There is no need to expend energy on what makes us stand out in the crowd, just paying attention to that which is universal. Not infrequently our mental activity turns out to be based on a questionable reality whereas the latter is always reliable. It is right out there for everyone to experience and to enjoy, especially the automatic way physical bodies do their thing. An added feature to our corporeality is that each bodily function has a sequence which cannot be sped up.

Certainly we can eat more quickly and alter the pace of our other functions (i.e., through mental interference), but the natural pace of each function is a means to appreciate the passage of time which neither rushes by nor drags on endlessly.

Although I am fond of the direct approach of focusing upon our physicality in order to discover the most essential component of human nature, I was unable to find an adequate form of spirituality to back it up. The only exception seemed to be Zen. That discipline has some familiarity in the West and strictly speaking is not affiliated with what we'd call a religious tradition. The closest approximation would be Gospel Christianity which holds out the promise of an immediate experience of God's presence. However, that brand can get caught up with repeating the same message ad infinitum which, in turn, forms mental imagery as hard to dispel as any out there on the market. Then we have mainstream Christianity based on the same simple principles as its Pentecostal counterpart, only over time it became overloaded with considerable theological and philosophical speculation. For many people it became removed from everyday life, the place where it's supposed to be practiced. I also got the impression the despite whatever 'flavor' of Christianity one chooses, there's a perception that God is remote, somewhere up there. Despite the best efforts of various traditions to interpret Scripture both to console and inspire, there remains a fairly sharp distinction (to use St. Augustine's phraseology) between the city of man and the city of God. Who knows...maybe this is the way it should be, though something in the human spirit refuses this distinction and seeks a solution even if we don't know exactly where and how to look.

Even notable witnesses testify to the fact of God's remoteness, and a contemporary one that has made news recently is Mother Teresa. Her posthumous writings testify to prolonged states of spiritual darkness and emptiness. Their publication was an overnight success, for Teresa's interior struggles found echo in a surprising amount of people. To verify the truth of this phenomenon, I asked several superiors of contemplative religious orders, all of whom claimed that many of their members as well as lay associates suffer one form or another of spiritual darkness. So it seems that plenty of people are out there suffering quietly as they go along in life while they remain dedicated to their work and the improvement of society. Many are heroic at this endeavor, no question about it. At the end of the day I came away unsatisfied that the issue of so-called spiritual darkness hasn't been addressed more fully except as an acknowledged phenomenon. And so we have what appears to be a whole bunch of people living quiet lives without much recourse to support. This issue can be related to perceiving spirituality as an exercise, especially among religious and monastic orders. In times past their schedules were organized to a high degree. Some of this mentality has spilled over to the parish level where most people have their first contact with formal religion. Even though times have changed, the mentality of meditation-as-exercise persists. Adequate substitutes are yet to be found, so it seems.

Although not competent to offer advice in such matters, I was motivated in part by reports of spiritual darkness to write this essay, looking not within a tradition other than my own but one closer to home. What I wanted was some type of theological foundation (the earlier the better in the history of Christianity) which held out the promise of practical application. The reason for preferring this early period, around the fourth century? It was a time when many basic theological insights were developed. You could call with some justification that the fourth century was a golden age. Thinkers of that time borrowed from their Hellenistic culture, notably Greek philosophy, Plato being chief among their sources. This might sound familiar to students of Church history but was quite bold for its time and stands out as a model for us in the 21st century. With this in mind I decided to re-visit an author of that period with whom I'm familiar, Gregory of Nyssa. At first glance he seemed not the best choice because of his speculative bent and difficult Greek style. In fact, many scholars consider Gregory to be among the most demanding to read among the Church Fathers. His choice of words is subtle, ideally suited to convey what's transpiring within the human soul. Another selling point was that Gregory wrote in an era well before the emergence of a sense of individuality, of what it means to be a person as we understand it

today. In light of this, the spiritual darkness recently made famous by Mother Teresa seems to have gotten off the ground pretty much when John of the Cross flourished and was taken up by later authors or when the sense of self started to take shape. And so despite the antiquity of Gregory's time and culture, I wanted to see if he might have something to say about the human condition.

The best place to look was *On the Making of Man* where I hoped to find some ideas on the human condition that had practical ramifications. This text, despite its difficulty and complex style (not to mention the late 19th century English translation), held out the promise of containing some philosophical and theological support for that attention to our bodily functions and the equally concrete goings-on of reality about us. At the same time I realized that I might be reading my own interpretations into Gregory let alone with regard to the larger scale of the Christian tradition. Despite this hesitancy, I went ahead and read the text in the original Greek while inserting transliterated English for key terms and phrases. This brought me on quite an exciting project which forced me to pay close attention to *Hom Op* (from now on I'll use this abbreviation common among scholars; *Hom Op* stands for *De Opificio Hominis*, the Latin title) sentence by sentence, phrase by phrase, word by word. In other words, I was hit with a series of continuous twists and turns, delightful despite the complexity. Gregory's masterful use of prepositions mirrors the intricate workings of our minds with an immediacy that escapes normal perception and full comprehension. That's why any translation of theological Greek proves inadequate. Towards the end of my transliterating project I got the impression that Gregory was trying to get a handle on that which is essentially formless. The Hellenistic world had a penchant for form (*morphe*) and found anything that did not partake of form and therefore beauty, to be abhorrent. Part of the reason might be that in earlier times people were forced to protect their precious achievements more vigorously against chaos and destruction lurking at their doorsteps. While firmly rooted within this Hellenistic preference for *morphe*, through his use of prepositions I get the impression that Gregory was on to something quite unique. His chief motive was to expound the fairly new Christian tradition which, in turn, was immersed in the Greco-Roman culture. If, for example, Gregory were to speak outright about that which is formless, he would have been misunderstood or condemned...or both. However, there are many instances where Gregory speaks boldly about that which is not formless per se but which transcends *morphe*. The acceptable term for this is apophatic or negative theology that attempts to describe God by negation, to speak of God only in absolutely certain terms and to avoid superficiality. In Orthodox Christianity, apophatic theology is based on the assumption that God's essence is unknowable and on the recognition that human language is inadequate to describe God.

Apophatic theology has enjoyed a prominent position down the centuries and chiefly is associated what we're fond of calling mysticism. No problem there. However, I'm interested in looking at practical and immediate applications, the reason why I have honed in upon our physicality. At first glance it appears the last place to look, being so...well...physical and therefore distant from Gregory's talk about God's unknowability. As I said earlier, the difficulty lies not so much with physicality but with our mental wanderings which get in the way of seeing the immediate connection between our physical nature and the source from which it came. We all have an innate curiosity as to our origins, and the approach suggested here is, I believe, a good a way as any to check it out. The means for doing this is (to borrow a favorite Gregorian term) by cultivating our innate capacity for *theoria*, of a simple beholding of their functions. Human bodies as well as other bodies, animate and inanimate, have mass and are subject to growth and decay, another way of stating their temporal natures. They have to work around within this context which involves moving in, around, through, over, beside and upon it.

In brief, we must use prepositions to show their activities (obviously this applies to everything else in the physical world). Here's where the genius of Gregory of Nyssa comes into play, *Hom Op* being a prime example. His use of prepositions is not an abstract demonstration of how we comport ourselves vis-a-vis that which is unknowable, let along that which is knowable. I get the impression that Gregory is interested in the operations of the human mind which, I believe, many scholars haven't attended to. If we pay

attention to the prepositions in Hom Op as a guide for watching our minds in operation, we come away with a new appreciation of how they attempt to encircle mystery or the unknowable. And as said so often here, we effect this encircling not by wildly grasping what we don't know but by bringing to bear the power of theoria to our physical natures. As a sidebar, briefly I refer to the concluding chapter (30) of Hom Op which gives a detailed examination of 'the construction of our bodies from a medical point of view.' Gregory inserts this as a kind of appendix. After having gone through a detailed examination of the human person as made in God's image and likeness, he wants to speak of how our physical nature is constructed. For sure, Gregory is not following what I am spelling out here in my own terms. Still, I find it interesting that he, a spiritual master, would want to delve so deeply into physical matters. Personally I found this concluding chapter a nice correlation to my thesis.

There's another feature, perhaps the most significant one, in Hom Op which can tie in with how I use theoria vis-a-vis our physicality. That is called Gregory's 'double creation theory' spelled out chiefly in Chapter Sixteen. I insert sections 8-12 here (the Christian Classics Ethereal Library text), allowing Gregory to speak for himself. Please note: I left the transliterated Greek terms within the excerpts, that document being posted on the Gregory of Nyssa Home Page:

8. Thus the creation [kata + skeue] of our nature is in a sense twofold: one made like to [pros] God, one divided according to this distinction [dia + phora]: for something like this the passage darkly conveys [ainissomai: to speak in riddles] by its arrangement [sun + taxis], where it first says, 'God created man, in the image of God created He him,' and then, adding to what has been said, 'male and female created He them,'-a thing which is alien from our conceptions [noeo, verb] of [peri] God.

9. I think that by these words Holy Scripture conveys [para + didomai: to hand over] to us a great and lofty doctrine [dogma]; and the doctrine is this. While two natures-the Divine and incorporeal nature, and the irrational life of brutes-are separated from each other as extremes [kata to akrotaton], human nature is the mean [mesos] between them: for in the compound nature [sug + krima: body formed by combination] of man we may behold [theoreo] a part of each of the natures I have mentioned,-of the Divine, the rational [logikos] and intelligent [dia + noetikos] element, which does not admit the distinction [dia + phora] of [kata] male and female; of the irrational [a + logos], our bodily form [kata + skeue] and structure [dia + plasis: a fashioning, creation], divided into male and female: for each of these elements is certainly to be found in all that partakes [meta + echo] of human life. That the intellectual element [to noeron], however, precedes [pro + tereo: to be before, in advance] the other, we learn as from one who gives in order [taxis] an account of the making of man [anthropogonia: origin of man]; and we learn also that his community [koinonia] and kindred [sug + geneia] with [pros] the irrational is for man a provision for reproduction [epi + gennematikos: produced later]. For he says first that 'God created man in the image of God' (showing by these words, as the Apostle says, that in such a being there is no male or female): then he adds the peculiar attributes [idioma] of human nature, 'male and female created He them.'

10. What, then, do we learn from [dia] this? Let no one, I pray, be indignant if I bring from far an argument [logos] to bear upon the present subject [noema: perception, thought]. God is in His own nature all that which our mind can conceive of [kata' ennoian lambaino; noun means conception, thought] good;-rather, transcending [epi + teino: to stretch upon] all good that we can conceive [noeo] or comprehend [kata + lambano]. He creates man for no other reason than that He is good; and being such, and having this as His reason for entering [hormao: to push on, set in motion] upon [pros] the creation [demiourgia: workmanship, handicraft] of our nature, He would not exhibit the power [dunamis] of His goodness in an imperfect form [hemiteles: half-finished], giving our nature some one of the things at His disposal [pros + iemi: to let come to], and grudging it a share [meta + ousia] in another: but the perfect form [to teleion eidos] of goodness is here to be seen by His both bringing [para + ago] man into being from nothing, and fully supplying [apergazomai: to finish off, complete] him with all good gifts: but since the list [kata + logos] of individual good gifts is a long one, it is out of the question to apprehend [dia + lambano] it numerically. The language [logos] of Scripture therefore expresses it concisely by a comprehensive phrase,

in saying that man was made ‘in the image of God’: for this is the same as to say that He made human nature participant [meta + echo] in all good; for if the Deity is the fulness [pleroma] of good, and this is His image, then the image finds its resemblance [homoiotēs] to [pros] the Archetype [archetupos] in being filled with all good.

11. Thus there is in us the principle [idea: outward appearance, kind, sort] of all excellence [kalon: beauty, adjective], all virtue and wisdom, and every higher thing [pros to kreitton or better] that we conceive [noeo]: but pre-eminent among all is the fact that we are free from necessity [anagke] and not in bondage to any natural power [dunasteia], but have decision [gnome: means of knowing, mind] in our own power [autexousios] as [pros] we please; for virtue is a voluntary thing, subject to no dominion [adespotos]: that which is the result of compulsion and force cannot be virtue.

12. Now as the image bears in all points the semblance [charakter] of the archetypal excellence [kallos], if it had not a difference [dia + phora] in some respect, being absolutely without divergence [a + para + llaktos: unchanging] it would no longer be a likeness, but will in that case manifestly be absolutely identical with the Prototype. What difference then do we discern between the Divine and that which has been made like to the Divine [pros to theion]? We find it in the fact that the former is uncreated [a + ktistos: adverb], while the latter has its being [hupo + istemi: to stand under] from [dia] creation: and this distinction [dia + phora] of property [idiotes] brings with it a train [akolouthia] of other properties; for it is very certainly acknowledged [sun + homologeo] that the uncreated nature is also immutable [a + treptos], and always remains the same, while the created nature cannot exist [sun + istemi] without change [alloiosis]; for its very passage [para + odos] from non-existence to existence [ek tou me ontos eis to einai] is a certain motion and change of the non-existent transmuted by [kata] the Divine purpose [boulema: counsel] into being.

It is not my intention to go into details about this passage, that’s a task for Op Hom itself. I just wanted to give the key section where Gregory speaks about the ‘double creation.’ Since I spoke of the value of prepositions, it’s easy to tell by the inserts how subtly they communicate what he has to say. The divine image in which we are created (i.e., the ‘first’ creation) is that of ‘man’ which comes before the ‘second,’ the distinction between male and female. This latter is intended primarily for the reproduction of the human race. I center on a point pertinent to the subject matter of this essay. ‘Human nature is the mean between them’ or between the divine aspect of our human nature and the ‘irrational’ (alogos) one. The former is intellectual (to noeron) making us ‘not in bondage to any natural power.’ Furthermore, our divine image is like God except that it is created as opposed to the divine itself being uncreated. I was struck by the word mesos (mean, middle) which is the intersection where the divine and ‘irrational’ meet...a kind of neutral space inferred from that particle ‘non’ noted earlier. So here we have a place, so to speak, where the created and uncreated make contact. Our physical bodies fall into the former category and go about their business automatically with or without mental interference. Better to say that our minds deal with our physicality only on occasion, for example, when we feel pain or are hungry. Other than that, no real or vital contact goes on. We’re too caught up with our imagination and thought processes which falsely we identify as ‘the intellectual element’ and by reason of this identification are prone to consider reflection as theoria as belonging to what is ‘intellectual’ or abstract. In fact, living constantly on the plane of thoughts and imagination should be identified more properly as ‘intellectual,’ a charge often leveled against someone fond of scholarly pursuits. It turns out that most of us are ‘intellectual.’

It’s difficult getting a proper handle on all this, let alone the Hom Op excerpt with the Greek inserts. The advantage is you’re forced to slow down and move away from the familiar, habitual plane of mental activity. So much so that it requires frequent recourse to theoria as I’ve outlined in order to appreciate what Gregory is driving at. Part of this delightful dilemma is due to our created nature which bears contact...mesos (mean, middle)...with the divine. They are two aspects which make us human yet are divided to such an extent that we’re unaware of this division, and that division I put in terms of physicality and our capacity for theoria which beholds it. What gets in the way, of course, is the continuous stream of

thoughts and images our minds produce, the domain of the 'I.' Only by reading a text like Hom Op can we get insight to become more aware of this false division and take the appropriate steps to remedy it.

A quick observation about a New Testament passage which injects a more specific Christian religious element, Phil 3.20-1: 'But our commonwealth is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body by the power which enables him even to subject all things to himself.' The word for 'commonwealth' is politeuma which contains the idea of citizenship proper to an ancient Greek polis or city-state where every (male) citizen has a right to speak freely as well as to vote. It is the place of one's residence and identification. In the original sense, a polis was quite small by today's standards, a place where everybody knew everyone else. The same term is applied to the heavenly Jerusalem as found in the Book of Revelation. This is important to keep in mind, not a large, sprawling urban area as nowadays, but a space where everyone's voice counted. Also a polis in the theological sense can intimate that the heavenly population will be relatively small. In the heavenly polis dwells Jesus Christ who has a 'glorious body' unlike our 'lowly' one. Nevertheless, a body (soma) is a body which means having the same form or morphe. Jesus Christ will make our body 'like' his, the term being summorphon, having the same (sum/sun: or with-the-morphe) the form.

What does this 'with-ness' consist of which takes place in the future? The key lies in the verb 'will change' or metaschematizo (to change the figure of) which has as its object 'our lowly soma' (literally, our body of humility). Our human soma...and by this I have in mind the activities of our physicality...does not alter the morphe proper to it. As stated often in this essay, our soma keeps on performing its functions automatically minus our mental interference. We could apply our true residence (politeuma) as the agent which observes this physicality while allowing it to run merrily along. As for the temporal gap ('he will change'), we could say it is sufficiently removed in the future from the manifestation of our physicality. The preposition meta (after) signifies this which is prefixed to the verb schematizo, to assume a certain form. In other words, when we behold...do theoria...our physicality we are endowing it with a certain form. And this occurs after (meta) our beholding, to put it in temporal terms, inadequate as this may be.

In conclusion, such a text as On the Making of Man is helpful for a better understanding of our human constitution in light of the early Christian tradition. A modern reader may find the description removed from our notion of a person, but that's okay. After all, we are dealing with a text of the fourth century before the notion of personhood was developed fully. That difference can be advantageous because it enables us to step outside contemporary culture and read a document which nicely blends philosophic and religious thought. Nevertheless, it's up to each reader to see if what Gregory has to say resonates by implementing it. I recommend being attentive to his 'double creation' insight by practicing theoria at any time or in any situation. See if this duality (not in the modern sense of a split or division) really works. By that I mean being made in God's image and likeness on one hand while on the other, from that vantage point beholding the marvels of our physicality. This is best done when in a quiet spot with minimum distractions, for only then can the false division between our physicality and our so-called true or mental lives can be realized. Just by recognizing this difference is a huge first step which is bound to be followed by others. These latter will apply to our interaction with people around us, the hardest part, simply because most people are ignorant of what's going on. Still that's reason enough to give courage. Even after acclimatizing ourselves to beholding our physicality and rejoicing in it inevitably we will revert to living on the mental plane, and this may occur as frequently as several times each minute! This is no reason to desist but to keep on going because we are conditioned to act contrary to theoria and do not find much assistance. That's why a deep faith in the theoria of our physicality needs cultivation. It comes down to life or death, reality or falsehood.