St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Gregory of Nyssa: On the Knowledge of God
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In the book of Exodus, Moses desired to see God’s glory, and God responded “you cannot see my face, for no one can see me and live.” St. Gregory of Nyssa points out that “Scripture does not indicate that this causes the death of those who look, for how would the face of life ever be the cause of death to those who approach it? On the contrary, the Divine is by its nature life-giving.” Gregory is correct, there are passages in the Scriptures that do indicate that seeing God does not cause death. For example, Jacob in the book of Genesis, and Manoah and his wife in the book of Judges, all claim to have “seen God” and lived. Gregory interprets the statement “for no one can see [God] and live” as referring to the relationship between humans and their knowledge of God. Gregory taught that the nature of God is beyond human understanding. Gregory’s view can be contrasted with the position of St. Thomas Aquinas, who taught that humans can develop a partial understanding of the nature of God.

There are both similarities and differences between Thomas Aquinas and Gregory of Nyssa in their treatment of our knowledge of God. Some of their differences stem in part from a

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3 Genesis 32:31.
5 Gregory of Nyssa, Life of Moses, 115 (“You cannot see my face, for man cannot see me and live . . . . how would the face of life ever be the cause of death. . . . On the contrary, the Divine is by its nature life giving. . . . the characteristic of the divine nature is to transcend all characteristics. Therefore, he who thinks God is something to be known does not have life, because he has turned from true Being to what he considers by sense perception to have being. True Being is true life. This Being is inaccessible to knowledge.” Emphasis in the original.).
univocal versus an analogical understanding of language. Some of their similarities include their thoughts on the incorporeality of God, and whether God has any boundaries.

**St. Thomas Aquinas on Created Intellects and the Essence of God**

St. Thomas Aquinas asked “whether any created intellect can see the essence of God?” In working to resolve this question, he stated: “Since everything is knowable according as it is actual, God, Who is pure act without any admixture of potentiality, is in Himself supremely knowable. But what is supremely knowable in itself, may not be knowable to a particular intellect, on account of the excess of the intelligible object above the intellect.” In other words, everything actual (and therefore real) is knowable. Since God is pure act (and therefore real and present), He is therefore fully knowable. But since our finite intellects are on such a lower level when compared to God, we cannot supremely know (i.e., fully comprehend) God. God, the ultimate and perfect intellect, supremely knows Himself, but created finite intellects cannot supremely know Him. The finite cannot fully grasp the infinite.

Thomas goes on to further observe:

The ultimate beatitude of man consists in the use of his highest function, which is the operation of his intellect; if we suppose that the created intellect could never see God, it would either never attain to beatitude, or its beatitude would consist in something else beside God; which is opposed to faith. For the ultimate perfection of the rational creature is to be found in that which is the principle of its being; since a thing is perfect so far as it attains to its principle. Further the same opinion is also against reason. For there resides in every man a natural desire to know the cause of any effect which he sees; and thence arises wonder in men. But if the intellect of

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7 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1, q. 12, a. 1.
the rational creature could not reach so far as to the first cause of things, the natural desire would remain void.  

In other words, humans are meant to fully use their highest function, which is their intellect. To ‘fully use the intellect’ is to know God, since we know by both faith and reason that a human’s ultimate perfected end is God. For example, we know this because all of creation, including human beings, are grounded in God and are sustained by God. Furthermore, by reason we know that within humans there is the natural desire to know and understand the things around them, to understand how things came about. But this natural desire would never be fulfilled if a created intellect was incapable of seeing the essence of God, because it would therefore be incapable of knowing the Unmoved Mover and the Uncaused Cause of all things.

St. Gregory of Nyssa on Knowledge of God

St. Gregory of Nyssa observed that the knowledge of God is beyond the capability of a created intellect. Gregory wrote that as

the intelligence . . . keeps on penetrating deeper . . . it gains access to the invisible and the incomprehensible, and there it sees God. . . . this is the seeing that consists in not seeing, because that which is sought transcends all knowledge. . . . Knowledge of the divine essence is unattainable not only by men but also by every intelligent creature. . . . What is divine is beyond all knowledge and comprehension.

St. Thomas Aquinas would agree with Gregory that a created intellect cannot fully comprehend God and that God cannot be exhaustively known. Thomas explained that a created

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8 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 12, a. 1.
10 Aquinas, *A Shorter Summa*, I, q. 2, a. 3 (pp. 60–61).
(and therefore finite) intellect cannot perfectly know God, because God is infinite.\textsuperscript{12} However, Thomas (as touched upon above) disagreed with Gregory’s proposition that knowledge of God is beyond the capability of a created intellect.\textsuperscript{13} Thomas determined that “it must be absolutely granted that the blessed see the essence of God.”\textsuperscript{14} Thomas held that a created intellect could understand and have knowledge of God \textit{to a degree}. Some knowledge of God \textit{is} possible, even if perfect and exhaustive knowledge of God is impossible.\textsuperscript{15}

\textbf{Univocal vs. Analogical}

Part of the difference between the viewpoints of St. Thomas and St. Gregory stems from the difference between the univocal sense and the analogical sense with regard to describing God in a positive manner (describing what God \textit{is}, as opposed to describing what God is not). For example, saying that ‘God is Truth’ is to describe God in a positive manner. Gregory used some strong language to condemn the idea that a human intellect could understand and describe God in a positive manner. He stated that “every concept which comes from some comprehensible image by an approximate understanding and by guessing at the divine nature constitutes an idol of God and does not proclaim God.”\textsuperscript{16} Gregory denied that we can have positive knowledge of God because he assumed the univocal stance. That is, Gregory wrote with the understanding that words or phrases have the exact same meaning when applied to creation (e.g., humans) as when

\textsuperscript{12} Aquinas, \textit{Summa Theologiae}, I, q. 12, a. 7.
\textsuperscript{13} Aquinas, \textit{Summa Theologiae}, I, q. 12, a. 1.
\textsuperscript{14} Aquinas, \textit{Summa Theologiae}, I, q. 12, a. 1.
\textsuperscript{15} Aquinas, \textit{Summa Theologiae}, I, q. 12, a. 13 (“we know Him more fully according as many and more excellent of His effects are demonstrated to us, and according as we attribute to Him some things known by divine revelation, to which natural reason cannot reach, as, for instance, that God is Three and One.”).
\textsuperscript{16} Gregory of Nyssa, \textit{Life of Moses}, 96.
they are used to describe God. This is shown by Gregory’s statement that the “first things which must be known about God[,] namely, that none of those things known by human comprehension is to be ascribed to him.” Certainly what we see as beauty (or truth, goodness, etc.) here in this world pales in comparison to God who is perfect Beauty (and perfect Truth, and perfect Goodness, etc.).

Thomas agreed with Gregory that human ideas and language will always fail to fully describe God. Thomas stated that “no name belongs to God in the same sense that it belongs to creatures.” Thomas differed from Gregory in that Thomas did believe that those things known by human comprehension can be ascribed to God – but the key is that those things known to man can be used to describe God in an analogical way, rather than a univocal way. Thomas explained that “for in analogies the idea is not, as it is in univocals, one and the same.” A term is used in the analogical sense when it is meant to be understood as describing something as “partly the same and partly different.” For example, when used in the phrase “the beauty of God,” beauty when ascribed to God is meant to be partly the same and partly different from what is meant when it is ascribed to a created thing. Thomas further clarified that a term that is used to describe God analogically should be understood in a proportional sense: “whatever is said of

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17 Aquinas, *A Shorter Summa*, I, q. 8, a. 1, fn. 16 (p. 75); see also p. 35 (glossary).
18 Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, 96 (original parentheses removed for readability).
19 Aquinas, *A Shorter Summa*, I, q. 13, a. 5 (p. 75).
20 Aquinas, *A Shorter Summa*, I, q. 13, a. 5 (p. 77).
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God and creatures, is said according to the relation of a creature to God as its principle and cause, wherein all perfections of things pre-exist excellently.”

**Incorporeal and Without Boundaries**

Both St. Thomas and St. Gregory held that God is incorporeal. By doing so, both Thomas and Gregory are using univocal language to describe God in a negative manner (what God is *not*, as opposed to what God is). Describing God as incorporeal is to say that God does not have a material form.

Gregory taught that when considering the passage in Exodus about Moses seeing the back of God, the narrative should be “contemplated in a spiritual sense” rather than being understood in a literal sense. This is because God “is free of a bodily nature”, and therefore a literal understanding of the passage would lead to an “inappropriate” perception of God. That is, it would lead one to the impression that God has a material shape, which is incorrect.

Gregory explains that God could not have a material form because bodies decompose, and “God is incorruptible” and therefore He is incorporeal. Thomas echoed Gregory’s position when he stated that “God is incorporeal” and taught that He is infinite in the sense that He is “not limited by matter.”

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23 Aquinas, *A Shorter Summa*, I, q. 13, a. 5 (p. 77).
24 Exodus 33:1-33.
28 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 12, a. 3.
29 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 12, a. 1.
Establishing the principle that God is incorporeal (without matter) is important here because it leads to a key understanding of God: that God is without any boundaries (and therefore can never be fully understood).\(^{30}\) Gregory explained that “the Divine is by its very nature infinite, enclosed by no boundary. If the Divine is perceived as though bounded by something, one must by all means consider along with that boundary what is beyond it. For certainly what is bounded leaves off at some point . . .”\(^{31}\) Anything with boundaries is limited, and since God is without limits, it therefore follows that He has no boundaries. Thomas put it succinctly: “the divine essence is uncircumscribed.”\(^{32}\) Therefore, God cannot be described in a manner that delimits Him. Thomas adopted the explanation that “the whole is comprehended when it is seen in such a way that nothing of it is hidden from the seer, or when its boundaries can be completely viewed or traced; for the boundaries of a thing are said to be completely surveyed when the end of the knowledge of it is attained.”\(^{33}\) Since “God is incomprehensible”\(^{34}\) (because the finite cannot fully comprehend the infinite), any language claiming to fully define (and thus set up boundaries around God) would be in error.

Another reason for this is that proposing a boundary vis-à-vis God would necessarily entail the opinion that evil is greater than the Good (i.e., that evil is greater than God). Gregory explained that whatever has a boundary is therefore “surrounded by something different in

\(^{30}\) This is not to say that incorporeality automatically entails infiniteness. Angels are incorporeal and not limited by matter, but nevertheless are created intellects and not infinite. \textit{Cf.} Aquinas, \textit{Summa Theologiae}, I, q. 12, a. 4.

\(^{31}\) Gregory of Nyssa, \textit{Life of Moses}, 115.

\(^{32}\) Aquinas, \textit{Summa Theologiae}, I, q. 12, a. 2.

\(^{33}\) Aquinas, \textit{Summa Theologiae}, I, q. 12, a. 7.

\(^{34}\) Aquinas, \textit{Summa Theologiae}, I, q. 12, a. 7.
nature,” encompassed by something larger. If God were to have a boundary, He would then be encompassed by something greater which possessed a different nature. Since God is the Good, this other would be evil. Therefore, God would be less than evil. Gregory concluded that “he who encloses the Divine by any boundary makes out that the Good is ruled over by its opposite [i.e., evil]. But that is out of the question.” It is “out of the question” because perceiving God as being ruled over by evil would be like perceiving a triangle as a circular shape. The essence of God simply does not comport with being less than anything, just as the essence of a triangle does not comport with being circular in shape.

**St. Gregory of Nyssa and St. Thomas Aquinas on The Nature of God and Existence**

Both St. Gregory of Nyssa and St. Thomas Aquinas contemplated the nature of God. Gregory stated:

> what true Being is, that is, what possesses existence in its own nature, and what nonbeing is, that is, what is existence only in appearance, with no self-subsisting nature.

> . . . the great Moses . . . came to know that none of those things which are apprehended by sense perception and contemplated by the understanding of really subsists, but that the transcendent essence and cause of the universe, on which everything depends, alone subsists.

Likewise, Thomas stated that “the essence of God is His own very existence” and “the divine essence is existence itself.” Both Gregory and Thomas are recognizing that God’s nature (or essence) is the same as His existence – His essence and existence are one and the same.

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39 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 12, a. 2.
40 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 12, a. 2.
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Thomas held that “God is in all things; not, indeed, as part of their essence, nor as an accident; but as an agent is present to that upon which it works.”\footnote{Aquinas, \textit{A Shorter Summa}, I, q. 8, a. 1 (p. 70).} Thomas further explained, “Now since God is very being by His own essence, created being must be His proper effect; . . . God causes this effect in things not only when they first begin to be, but as long as they are preserved in being. . . . Therefore as long as a thing has being, God must be present to it, according to its mode of being.”\footnote{Aquinas, \textit{A Shorter Summa}, I, q. 8, a. 1 (p. 70).} Gregory, by holding that all of creation “depends” upon God,\footnote{Gregory of Nyssa, \textit{Life of Moses}, 60.} seems to be agreeing with Thomas that all of creation is caused by God and continuously sustained by God.

If by stating that what is not “self-subsisting” by its own nature is “nonbeing” Gregory means that what is not self-subsisting is “nonexisting”\footnote{Gregory of Nyssa, \textit{Life of Moses}, 60.} (and therefore all of creation would be technically non-existing), I think Thomas would disagree with Gregory. Thomas seems to hold that what has been created by God is real,\footnote{e.g., Aquinas, \textit{Summa Theologiae}, I, q. 12, a. 12 (“Since everything is knowable according as it is actual.”); Using perhaps similar logic, everything that is knowable (e.g., man) is also actual).} but also acknowledges that although creation is grounded in God (e.g., “we know that His relationship with creatures so far as to be the cause of them all”\footnote{Aquinas, \textit{Summa Theologiae}, I, q. 12, a. 12.}), God is above and beyond creation (e.g., God “exists above all that exists”\footnote{Aquinas, \textit{Summa Theologiae}, I, q. 12, a. 1.} and “He superexceeds” all of creation\footnote{Aquinas, \textit{Summa Theologiae}, I, q. 12, a. 12.}). But perhaps Gregory is simply making the point that all of
creation is real because of its “participation” in God,\textsuperscript{49} thus just further highlighting how God continuously sustains creation.

**Seeking God**

The knowledge of God is utterly otherly and inexhaustible; but that is not to say that we are not meant to approach God and seek an understanding of Him. Gregory stated that God is “inaccessible to knowledge”,\textsuperscript{50} “what is divine is beyond all knowledge and comprehension”\textsuperscript{51} and “it is not in the nature of what is unenclosed to be grasped.”\textsuperscript{52} Gregory explained that “true knowledge” of God “is the seeing that consists in not seeing, because that which is sought transcends all knowledge.”\textsuperscript{53} However, despite these views on the human ability to understand God, Gregory also taught that we are meant to seek God. The soul naturally seeks God, and “once it is released from its earthly attachment . . . rises ever higher” towards God.\textsuperscript{54} “No limit would interrupt growth in the ascent to God, since no limit to the Good can be found nor is the increasing of desire for the Good brought to an end because it is satisfied.”\textsuperscript{55} Not only did Thomas hold that the human intellect have some knowledge and understanding of the nature of God; he also held that the natural end and ultimate purpose of humans is to seek out and develop our understanding of God.\textsuperscript{56}

\textsuperscript{49} Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, 60.
\textsuperscript{50} Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, 115.
\textsuperscript{51} Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, 95.
\textsuperscript{52} Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, 116.
\textsuperscript{53} Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, 95.
\textsuperscript{54} Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, 113.
\textsuperscript{56} Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 12, a. 1; Aquinas, *A Shorter Summa*, I, q. 75, a. 6 (pp. 100–101) (“a natural desire cannot be in vain.”).
Conclusion

Thomas and Gregory differed with respect to whether a human being could develop an understanding of the nature of God. Gregory held that God is so different and ‘other’ that knowledge of Him is beyond human understanding. Thomas held that although we cannot exhaustively comprehend the nature of God, we can develop a partial understanding of Him. This difference is based in part on two different views of language when attempting to describe God in a positive manner: the univocal sense versus the analogical sense. However, when it comes to describing God in a negative manner, both Thomas and Gregory agree that God is incorporeal and without boundaries. Furthermore, they agree that God’s essence and existence are the same. Perhaps most importantly, despite their differences both Thomas and Gregory taught that even though we have finite limited intellects, we are nevertheless naturally meant to seek God.
Bibliography

