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Eric Daryl Meyer

## On Making Fleshly Difference

Humanity and Animality in Gregory of Nyssa

This essay explores the theological stakes of differentiating humanity from animality in Gregory of Nyssa's treatise *De hominis opificio*. Gregory's conviction that the *imago dei* names an essential affinity to the angelic in human beings corresponds to his need to differentiate humanity categorically from animality. Yet, human affinity to God and the angels persistently threatens to collapse into beastly behavior and dispositions. Despite all Gregory's efforts to shore up human uniqueness, human animality plays an indispensable (though disavowed) role in his theological anthropology.

"Not all flesh is the same flesh"—Paul, 1 Corinthians 15:39

FOR GREGORY OF NYSSA, to be human is to be liminal. Humanity marks the borderline—simultaneously the conduit of exchange—between the spiritual-intellective heaven of angels and the corporeal-aesthetic earth of animals. Humanity is a riddle, a seam or stitch holding together fabrics of

Eric Daryl Meyer is Assistant Professor in Theology at Carroll College.

two nearly incommensurate kinds.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, human self-definition involves the impossible necessity (or the necessary impossibility) of reaching beyond the human psyche to know what the world is like from the perspective of the animal or the angel. These speculations are not just flights of imagination, but represent the Sisyphean task of self-understanding in relation to creaturely others, a limning of the boundaries of the human by human thought itself. Discerning the differences and similarities between animals, angels, and humans is a task inseparable from understanding humanity because humanity overlaps both angelic and animal others—above and below, as it were. Placing greater emphasis (particularly *theological* emphasis) on one or another difference can shift the whole constellation of characteristics that are “essentially” human. Nor is this process merely a maieutic for self-discovery, innocent of life-and-death consequences. The placement of the line between human and animal (and the perceived porousness of that boundary) carries enormous political and ecological freight. Constructions of animals and angels are eco-political trajectories toward human self-understanding.<sup>2</sup>

This essay seeks to explore the theological stakes in Gregory of Nyssa’s exposition of humanity and animality in his treatise *De hominis opificio* (“On the Making of the Human”). I will argue that Gregory not only concerns himself with the theological and physiological make-up of the human being,

<sup>1</sup> Human liminality/doubleness in Gregory’s theology is, in part, a function of his participation in the well-known exegetical tradition of harmonizing Gen 1 and 2 by reading them as the creation of the purely intellectual aspect and the material aspect of creation, respectively. The tradition gains traction through Philo and is exemplified by Origen. Philo of Alexandria, *De opificio mundi*, 16–19, 24 (text: *De opificio mundi*, ed. R. Arnaldez [Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1961]; translation: *On the Creation of the Cosmos According to Moses*, trans. David Runia [Leiden: Brill, 2001]); Origen, *De principiis*, 1.1.7, 3.6.7 (text: H. Crouzel and M. Simonetti, *Traité des principes*, vol. 3 [Sources Chrétiennes 268; Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1980]; translation: *On First Principles*, trans. G.W. Butterworth [New York: Harper and Row, 1966]). Gregory differs from both Philo and Origen in insisting that the intellectual being and the material being of humanity are never temporally separate (though he follows Philo and Origen in regarding them as formally distinct). Philo, *De opificio mundi*, §134, and *De gigantibus*, §3 (text: *De gigantibus: Quod Deus sit imutibilis*, ed. A. Mosès [Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1963]; translation: *Philo of Alexandria: The Contemplative Life, The Giants, and Selections*, trans. David Winston [New York: Paulist Press, 1981]); Origen, *De principiis*, 1.4.1, 1.8.4. See below, note 32.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Animal that Therefore I Am*, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet, trans. David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 12, 26, 30–32; Aaron Gross, “Introduction and Overview,” in *Animals and the Human Imagination: A Companion to Animal Studies*, ed. Aaron Gross and Anne Vallely (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 1–3, 12.

but also that Gregory discusses animals and animality as necessary components of his effort to “make the human” rhetorically. Because human affinity to God and the angels persistently threatens to collapse into behavior and dispositions quite patently beastly, Gregory’s conviction that there is an essential bond between humanity and the angelic corresponds to a need to differentiate the human ontologically from other animals. Angelic affinity requires an ideological buttress, accomplished by rendering (relative) anatomical/behavioral differences between humans and animals theologically (that is, absolutely) determinative. Nevertheless, despite the many ways in which Gregory shores up human uniqueness over against other animals, human animality still plays an indispensable role in his theological anthropology—even where such a role is disavowed.

The essay will proceed in four sections. The first considers the *formal* and *functional* implications of the divine image in human flesh (and its absence in the flesh of the animals); the second examines the *material* difference in human flesh that the image of God establishes, and the physio-logical construction of human flesh over against the flesh of animals; the third section inquires about the eschatology of human flesh and the double function of desire as both bestial and angelic; and the fourth summarizes this essay’s argument by examining what is at stake in Gregory’s particular differentiation of human and animal flesh. Along the way, I will engage several contemporary readings and re-readings of *De hominis opificio*.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Specifically, I seek to work out a tension between the readings of John Behr and J. Warren Smith. The lynchpin assertion in Behr’s re-reading of *De hominis opificio* is that the traditional interpretation of Gregory’s etiology of gender, genitals, and copulatory reproduction (more on this subject below) severs a connection with animal nature that Gregory was concerned to preserve. For Behr, the traditional reading does not take seriously enough Gregory’s understanding that animal nature is encompassed by, and elevated unto salvation in and through human nature. An eschatology that does not take stock of redeemed animality (in its entirety) betrays Gregory’s intentions. Behr is quite right in raising Gregory’s concern to the fore. However, given that Behr’s interpretation of the protology and eschatology of human genitals and copulation has proven controversial, I hope to illuminate a pervasive and fundamental connection to animals at another, perhaps deeper, point. See John Behr, “The Rational Animal: A Rereading of Gregory of Nyssa’s *De hominis opificio*,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 7, no. 2 (1999): 219–47. J. Warren Smith has responded to Behr’s rereading, suggesting that Behr too neatly irons out Gregory’s eschatology. Smith too, however, leaves unarticulated the deep, inner connection between humans and animals in the theological anthropology of *De hominis opificio*. See J. Warren Smith, “The Body of Paradise and the Body of the Resurrection: Gender and the Angelic Life in Gregory of Nyssa’s *De hominis opificio*,” *Harvard Theological Review* 92, no. 2 (2006): 207–28.

*De hominis opificio* is intended to finish and fill out Gregory's older brother Basil's commentary on the Hexaemeron.<sup>4</sup> Basil's discourse on creation never arrived at a satisfactory account of the human being. Gregory's treatise articulates what it means to say that humanity represents God's image and likeness in space and time. Gregory proposes a full and complete inquiry into "everything about the human being—from things believed to have taken place long before us, to things expected to come about long after us, to those things we see at present—that nothing should be left uninterrogated."<sup>5</sup> As Gregory notes, "It is no small thing set before us as the focus of our contemplation," inasmuch as the full meaning and structure of human existence can only be discerned by reference to the whole span of created time—origin to eschaton.<sup>6</sup>

## The Image of God

For Gregory, the primary difference between human and animal flesh—the formal difference from which all material difference derives—is that human flesh bears the image of God, whereas animal flesh does not. In Gregory's reckoning, the rest of the universe was made with something like an offhand comment and a wave of the hand—"Oh ... let there be...."<sup>7</sup> In making the human being, however, God becomes self-reflective, "Let *us* make...."<sup>8</sup> From the outset, the imposition of the divine image entails that the place of human flesh in creation is linked to that of the ruler.<sup>9</sup> In the very first appearance

<sup>4</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *De hominis opificio*, preface, PG 128b (text: *Patrologiae Cursus Completus: Series Graecae*, ed. J.P. Migne, vol. 44 [Paris: Migne, 1863], hereafter, PG; translation: *Select Writings and Letters of Gregory, Bishop of Nyssa*, trans. William Moore and Henry A. Wilson, vol. 5, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954]). All excerpts from *De hominis opificio* are from my own translation; nevertheless, references are given to the section divisions of the *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* translation, followed by the column number in PG.

<sup>5</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *De hominis opificio*, preface, PG 125d. Already in the preface Gregory is figuring (or prefiguring) essential differences between animals and humans. Human flesh cannot be understood apart from a broader theological narrative of origins and ends; animal flesh on the other hand is simply "present" and "self-present" in that its meaning is oriented entirely to its current desires. The human is lost by nature, separated from beginning and end, muddled in a narrative arc so broad that it must be revealed rather than discerned. Animals are, naturally, "just there." Cf. Smith, "The Body of Paradise," 219.

<sup>6</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *De hominis opificio*, preface, PG 125d–128a.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.2, PG 133d.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.1, PG 133c.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.1, PG 136b.

of animals in *De hominis opificio*, they are already cast as subjects, even possessions. Gregory imagines the scene of creation as a lavish banquet laid out for a guest who has yet to arrive—a world made for human consumption.<sup>10</sup> He draws the lesson that the human being:

should be witness to the wonders in the world on the one hand, and on the other lord over them, in order that through delight [ἀπολαύσεως] he should have knowledge of the orchestrator of the chorus and that through the beauty and magnitude of what is seen he should track the power—unspeakable and beyond discourse [ἄρρητὸν τε καὶ ὑπὲρ λόγον]—of the one who made these things.<sup>11</sup>

*Within* human life, Gregory downplays the bodily significance of the image of God in preference for an intellectual and ethical articulation. Since God is illimitable and incorporeal, human beings do not image God in appearance like a photograph or painting, but with brush-strokes of virtue:

Just as the painters carry over human forms onto boards through certain colors ... so God's likeness means to me that our maker manifests divine authority in us by dispersing the beauty of the divine image through the application of virtues like shades of dye ... purity, the overcoming of passion, blessedness, aversion to every evil, and as many virtues of this sort which mold human beings in likeness to the divine.<sup>12</sup>

The measure of God's image in humanity, then, is humanity's free pursuit of virtue.<sup>13</sup> That material human flesh does not immediately and directly image God does not, for Gregory, prevent human flesh from signifying God in ways that are denied to animal flesh (a theme to which the essay returns below).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.1, PG 132d. Cf. Philo, *De opificio mundi*, 78.

<sup>11</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *De hominis opificio*, 2.1–2, PG 133a.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.1, PG 137ab.

<sup>13</sup> “Accordingly, there is within us every form of beauty, and of virtue and wisdom as well, and everything conceivable that works toward superiority. But in all of these is also freedom from necessity, not compulsion under some natural power, but rather autonomy for thoughtful judgment. For virtue is voluntary and has no master, and whatever is violently coerced cannot be virtue.” *Ibid.*, 16.11, PG 184b.

Because animals are transparently driven by their desires and lack the freedom of mind to make (moral or spiritual) choices for better or worse, the flesh of animals bears neither virtue nor vice. Nevertheless, although they are morally and spiritually neutral in and of themselves, the animal impulses concerned with self-preservation are shared by humans and become the driving force propelling humans toward vice and virtue.

For non-discursive life [ἡ ἀλογος ζωὴ] was safeguarded for self-preservation by means of the very things which become passions when carried over into human life.... Just as our natural rise of emotion [τόν θυμόν] is indeed the urge of the non-discursive animals [τῆ τῶν ἀλόγων ὀρμῆ], it also increases by means of alliance with the discursive powers [τῆ τῶν λογισμῶν συμμαχία]: for wrath, jealousy, falsehood, scheming, and duplicity come from this alliance; all these are the wicked cultivation of the mind [τῆς πονηρᾶς τοῦ νοῦ γεωργίας]; for if passion were stripped of its alliance with the powers of argumentation, then emotion would be left transient and devoid of force, like a bubble blown and immediately burst. So then, the gluttony of swine brings in greed and the superiority of the horse becomes the beginning of arrogance; and everything that begins from a beastly lack of reason becomes vice through the wicked employment of the mind [καὶ τὰ καθ' ἕκαστον πάντα τῆς κτηνώδους ἀλογίας ἀφορμηθέντα, διὰ τῆς πονηρᾶς τοῦ νοῦ χρήσεως κακία ἐγένετο]. Also, therefore, on the contrary, if the discursive power takes up the strength of these motions in turn, each of them is moved over into the form of virtue.<sup>14</sup>

The “animal” passions that multiply into every form of vice when put to *misuse* by the human mind can also be turned to virtues like courage, caution, obedience, and dignity if the mind gives proper guidance.<sup>15</sup> Gregory depicts the animal as the disordered “natural” that requires the rule and guidance of the human mind in order to rise to an ethical form of life.<sup>16</sup> The flesh of

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 18.2–4, PG 192bc–193ab.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 18.5, PG 193bc.

<sup>16</sup> Gregory differs from Origen on the relation between animality and ethics. For Gregory, animal impulses are only potentially subject to ethical judgment, and become actually ethical by the mind’s guidance. For Origen, in contrast, animal impulses are amoral and do not appear in an ethical register at all. Origen, *De principiis*, 1.8.4, 2.9.3, 3.4.3; *Contra Celsum*,

the human is identical to the flesh of the animal except that the power of the mind imbues its dispositions and actions with ethical significance.

At this point, it is worth noting that Gregory has already rendered impossible any single, clean, conceptual cut between humans and animals. If the substance of God's image in human life is to be found in the virtues that mirror God's triune life, and again, if human virtues are composed of the "raw material" of animal impulses under the careful shepherding of the mind, then the image of God cannot be conceived simply as a possession that differentiates the human being from the animals in an absolute manner. Or, more to the point, to the extent that Gregory *does* conceive of God's image in this exclusive way, he will be surprised to find animals perpetually creeping into God's image through the back door of virtue.<sup>17</sup> For all the rigor of Gregory's differentiation of humanity and animality, the human being necessarily fails to image God apart from animality. The animals are not without their own particular resemblance to God, a resemblance that—once assumed into human life—may be amplified by the wise guidance of the human mind, or brought to ruin by its vicious folly.

One constant in Gregory's cosmology is that while God remains unchangeable, all of creation is caught up in the oppositional flux of motion and rest (στάσει καὶ κινήσει).<sup>18</sup> Inasmuch as human beings are the *created* image of the uncreated God, they are always in motion in one manner or another. Whereas the flux of creation merely signifies the material changes of growth and aging for animals, human flesh ranges within an additional plane of motion by vacillating between virtue and vice. Gregory denies the possibility of spiritual or moral neutrality; rather, one's basic orientation to life includes a trajectory of growing integrity or licentious decay. Thus, as-

4.25 (text: *Contra Celsum: Libri VIII*, ed. M. Marcovich [Leiden: Brill, 2001]; translation: *Contra Celsum*, trans. Henry Chadwick [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965]). For helpful theoretical analysis of this pattern of thought see Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 15–16, 26; and *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 7–8, 66.

<sup>17</sup> Which is to say, Gregory's account of humanity is produced by what Agamben calls an "anthropological machine." Gregory produces an account of the human by strategically relying upon a "zone of indistinction" where humanity and animality cannot be neatly separated (in this case, at the conjunction of virtue and the energy, strength, or force of animal impulses); *The Open*, 37–38. Agamben argues that anthropological machines arise from a fundamental inability or refusal to assimilate some aspect of the self retrospectively marked as animal; *ibid.*, 15–16.

<sup>18</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *De hominis opificio*, 1.1, PG 128C.



cent and descent are pervasive metaphors for Gregory; the one who is not climbing toward God is sinking down into the mire of dissolution. So, the person oriented toward love and obedience to God ought to find that virtues align in her life, inasmuch as these are the “colors” comprising the image of God in human nature. Conversely, the morally and spiritually lax person will find his life devolving further into chaos.

### The Discursiveness of Human Flesh

While God’s image is primarily manifest through virtue and Gregory downplays the corporeal connections between human beings and the divine, his concern to present a comprehensive account of human life leads him to articulate a few bodily expressions of God’s image. Gregory correlates an absolute, metaphysical distinction (the image of God as the origin of human-animal difference) to relative anatomical or behavioral differences. Yet, Gregory’s tendency to regard every difference between humans and animals as an *effect* of the image of God is a line of thought that may be traveled in both directions. Rhetorically, Gregory presents these visible differences as *signs* of an extant categorical distinction, but one could easily argue that he over-determines relative differences in order to *construct* a categorical distinction.<sup>19</sup> Either way, corporeal differences appear as the traces of a unique celestial affinity. Here, I will examine a few of the material differences that Gregory takes as signs of anthropological exceptionalism.

Gregory begins his psychosomatic physiology by discussing three different modes of soul. Plants, he explains, have a vegetative soul that aspires to thrive and grow; animals have a sensitive soul capable of different forms of perception, whether auditory, visual, tactile, or otherwise; finally, the human being is equipped with a soul that Gregory describes as *ψυχὴ λογικὴ*. In this scheme, human flesh is identified with the flesh of plants and animals in that it shares the vital growth common to both and the aesthetic sensitiv-

<sup>19</sup> I would like to avoid two tendencies among Gregory’s readers. I am inclined to resist any reduction of Gregory’s metaphysical distinction between humanity and animality to mere rhetoric and likewise any effort to maintain the distinction on Gregory’s terms. Rather, I am interested in the way in which the innumerable differences and similarities between human beings and animals—too complex to account for within *any* single frame of reference—are explained and arranged, that is, the hermeneutic through which differences and similarities are understood and prioritized. How the image of God as a theological category shapes the fraught relationships between humans and our unimaginably diverse creaturely neighbors is neither self-evident nor without life-and-death consequences.

ity proper to the latter. Human flesh incorporates the essential properties of plant and animal flesh, but surpasses both with an intellective power of the soul which is foreign to them.<sup>20</sup> Gregory refers to the human being as a ζῶν λογικόν.<sup>21</sup> Given Gregory's play with both the intellectual and communicative semantic range of λόγος, translating ζῶν λογικόν by "discursive animal" remains preferable to other renderings.<sup>22</sup> The discursiveness of human flesh makes all manner of material differences between human and nonhuman animals.<sup>23</sup>

The human, Gregory argues, is made like a musical instrument for discourse to play on and through; that is to say that human *anatomy* is built around sheltering and developing discourse. Human hands are the favored example. Because humans walk upright they no longer need forelegs to support half their weight. But having hands also allows human faces and mouths to be shaped for unique purposes. Where the animals are equipped to gather and tear their food with their mouths, using strong lips and tongue and teeth, human beings do all these things more or less politely with their hands. This, in turn, frees up the mouth and lips and throat to be more delicate instruments capable of the fine motor movements that speech requires.<sup>24</sup> Human

<sup>20</sup> These three kinds of soul correspond to distinctions within the human soul for Gregory (or distinct powers of the soul), so that the progression from vital plants, to sensitive animals, to discursive humans corresponds to the carnal, irascible, and spiritual aspects of the human. Though he also relativizes the difference between the two, J. Warren Smith argues that Gregory's psychology is primarily trichotomous (Aristotelian) rather than tripartite (Platonic); *Passion and Paradise: Human and Divine Emotion in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa* (New York: Herder and Herder, 2004), 72. Regardless, in Gregory's thought, there are both concrete likeness and unlikeness between the souls of humans and animals arranged in a hierarchical gradation. Gregory shares this hierarchical gradation with Philo and Origen. Philo, *De opificio mundi*, 65–66; Origen, *De principiis*, 2.8.1.

<sup>21</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *De hominis opificio*, 8.8, PG 148c; following Origen, *De principiis*, 1.5.2.

<sup>22</sup> I mean to invoke the Foucauldian sense of "discourse" that highlights the interrelation and mutual constraints of language and thought. In attempting to translate both the communicative and the cognitive connotations of being λογικός, "discursive" seems to be an improvement on the one-sided "rational," as well as on Behr's suggestion, "word-bearing." Behr, "The Rational Animal," 231.

<sup>23</sup> Of course, Gregory is not unique in this conviction in late antiquity. Robin Darling Young notes, "Not surprisingly, like them [Philo and Origen] Gregory thought that humans were most like God in their speech (λόγος) and thought (διάνοιᾶ), because God is mind (νοῦς) and word (λόγος)." Robin Darling Young, "Gregory of Nyssa's Use of Theology and Science in Constructing Theological Anthropology," *Pro Ecclesia* 2, no. 3 (1993), 358.

<sup>24</sup> The physiological connection between discursiveness and human hands is a trope with

discursiveness is not just a cognitive or semantic participation in divine λόγος, but a corporeal one as well.<sup>25</sup> The enfleshment of discourse is *physiologically* significant for Gregory, a matter of the body as much as the mind.

Gregory is quite clear that human discursiveness constitutes a superiority over plants and animals.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, this superiority is not as straightforward as we might expect. For all Gregory's language of royalty and hierarchy, when he begins to explain concretely the manner in which human flesh relates to the flesh of animals, he sees interdependence. God's intention for human dominion over creation is paradoxically discerned in physiological weakness, so that human sovereignty must take the form of wisdom, not physical subjection. Gregory pities the human being, who is "naked of any natural covering! ... by nature the human has no provision of horns for leading the way, nor pointy talons, nor hooves, nor teeth, nor deadly venom in a sting."<sup>27</sup> On account of being brought into the world so ill-equipped, the human being must be dependent on other creatures, even in dominion:

What seems like a lack in our nature is the site of our mastery over those subject to us.... As it is, gracious provision [χάριν] of what is useful for our life is distributed among each of the

a long history, originating with Aristotle (*On the Parts of Animals*, trans. James Lennox [New York: Oxford University Press, 2001], 4.10), likely mediated to Gregory through Galen (*Galen on the Usefulness of the Parts of the Body*, trans. Margaret May [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968], 1.3.25ff). Gregory's contemporary Nemesius of Emesa makes use of the same tradition in *De natura hominis*, §27 (text: *De natura hominis*, ed. Moreno Morani [Leipzig: BSB B.G. Teubner, 1987]; translation: *On the Nature of Man*, trans. R.W. Sharples and P.J. van der Eijk [Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008]).

<sup>25</sup> Gregory's correlation of properly human rationality to a normative account of human physiology contributes to a broader pattern of animalizing human differences. Under the sway of this sort of connection, human bodies that do not conform to prevalent norms can be associated with animality (and subsequently denigrated and dehumanized). See especially Sunaura Taylor, "Beasts of Burden: Disability Studies and Animal Rights," *Qui Parle* 19, no. 2 (2011): 191–97.

<sup>26</sup> "If Scripture says that the human being came last, after all the ensouled creatures, the lawgiver teaches us nothing other than the philosophy concerning the soul. By the necessity of a well-ordered sequence what is perfect is last. For indeed, the discursive soul incorporates the other kinds. Likewise, the form of the growing soul is altogether incorporated in the aesthetic soul; next, the growing soul is seen to incorporate only properties of matter. Most reasonably, then, the rising way of nature is made by steps from more trivial things to what is perfect—I am speaking of the characteristics of life." Gregory of Nyssa, *De hominis officio*, 8.7, PG 148b.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.1, PG 140d.

subjugated creatures, in order to make our rule over them necessary.<sup>28</sup>

The relative physiological weakness of human beings correlates directly to the same discursive faculty that sets the human on a moral/spiritual plane and, just so, signifies for Gregory an absolute (because theological) difference between animals and humans. Animals have the powerful flesh of necessary passion; human beings have the discursive flesh of dominion *and dependence*.<sup>29</sup> Animal flesh is driven by its aesthetic sense, whether in pursuit of food, pleasure, or procreation. On the one hand, human discourse transmutes these activities (bodily concerns) into ethical matters; on the other, it binds humans to other animals by weakness and need.<sup>30</sup>

One point of anatomical similarity between human beings and animals has received an inordinate amount of attention in secondary literature on *De hominis opificio*. In foresight that human beings will employ their ethical freedom rather badly and fall from their celestial origins (διὰ τοῦτο τῆς ἀγγελικῆς ζωῆς ἀποπίπτουσιν)<sup>31</sup> rather than continue in perfect (and progressively more perfect) fellowship, God appropriates an animal mode of reproduction to humanity, who counterfactually might have procreated in the mode of angels.<sup>32</sup> Scholars disagree sharply over what Gregory intends here. It is clear

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 7.2, PG 141b.

<sup>29</sup> Gregory's sense that the divine image in humanity is expressed through corporeal *dependence* rather than through self-sufficient autonomy provides an alternative avenue into the intersection between animality and disability analyzed brilliantly and powerfully in Taylor, "Beasts of Burden," 211–17. "Dependence" has often been marked as deviation from the norm of independence, and subsequently used to disenfranchise and oppress those marked as dependent. Gregory's sense of dependence as basic and normative—in the context of inter-species relations, no less—might provide the groundwork for building a multi-species politics centered on interdependence and an expansive sense of the common good.

<sup>30</sup> Origen develops a somewhat more triumphal understanding of the same dominical dependence. Where Gregory remarks that humans rely on animals to accomplish basic life functions, Origen regards the slaughter and taming of animals as a clear sign of human superiority despite physical weakness; *Contra Celsum*, 4.76–78.

<sup>31</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *De hominis opificio*, 17.4, PG189c.

<sup>32</sup> The image of God further complicates this already difficult passage. Playing off the double creation theories of Philo and Origen, Gregory argues that the image of God is not attributable to human beings individually, but rather belongs to the collective whole—the *πλήρωμα*. Since this ideal archetype of humanity is not sexed in any clear way (though its "neutral" gender looks more male than female), Gregory regards sex as a secondary, not essential characteristic of humanity. Furthermore, since Christ is the prototype of the human, Gregory draws together Gal 3:28 and Gen 1:27 (and the Adam/Christ typology of Romans

that this animal mode of reproduction involves the bondage of humanity to concupiscence and sexual passions, and that, at present, human flesh is like animal flesh in that it is generated through sexual intercourse. It is less clear whether the introduction of genitals and copulation are the intervention by which God ties the reproduction of human flesh more closely to animal flesh, *or* whether genitals and copulation were intended all along, but could have functioned in an angelic, rather than animal, mode.<sup>33</sup>

and 1 Corinthians) to assert that in Christ, who is the perfect image of God, in which all human beings participate, there is neither male nor female. God implants the animal mode of procreation in order that the πλήρωμα of human beings—and thus the divine image—might be realized through history despite humanity's foreseen fall into bondage to spiritual death—which, Gregory seems to think, would have stymied any human capacity to reproduce in an angelic mode, and thus left humanity with no means of propagation and no way to fill out the πλήρωμα. While Gregory appropriates the double-creation tradition of Philo and Origen, he resists the perceived tendency of both to view the first creation as spiritual/intellectual and the second as bodily. His complex understanding of time is involved in this resistance; in short, however, the first creation is that of the πλήρωμα, not merely the intellectual form in which all subsequent individuals participate, but the fullness (bodies and all) of creation in its dynamic, eternal perfection. The second creation is the unfolding of this creation through the διάστημα of space and time—by which creation lives into its fullness gradually. *Ibid.*, 28.1, PG 229bc; and 29.3, PG 236ab. See also Johannes Zschücker, *Human Nature in Gregory of Nyssa: Philosophical Background and Theological Significance* (Boston: Brill, 2000), 154, 169; and Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought: An Essay on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa*, trans. Mark Sebanc (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 27–35.

<sup>33</sup> On one hand lies the traditional (but provocative!) reading which regards genitalia and copulation as a provisional addition to the human body (an addition that may become eschatologically superfluous). The majority of scholars follow this view, including: Smith, "Body of Paradise," 218; *idem.*, *Passion and Paradise*, 17; Sarah Coakley, "The Eschatological Body: Gender, Transformation, and God," in *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy, and Gender* (Malden: Blackwell, 2002), 162–63; Nonna Verna Harrison, "Male and Female in Cappadocian Theology," *Journal of Theological Studies* 41, no. 2 (1990), 441–42; and "Allegory and Asceticism in Gregory of Nyssa," *Semeia* 57 (1992), 119; Virginia Burrus, "Begot-ten, not Made": *Conceiving Manhood in Late Antiquity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 131, 210 n.20; Morwenna Ludlow, *Universal Salvation: Eschatology in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa and Karl Rahner* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 71. On the other hand, Behr (extending a trajectory that he roots in Mark Hart's articles on Gregory's view of marriage in *De virginitate*) takes the view that in fundamental continuity with animals, genitalia, and copulation are essential to humanity and that only the moral or spiritual *mode* of human reproduction was changed in God's foresight of the fall; Behr, "The Rational Animal," 245. Behr is right to correct the views of Gerhart Ladner ("The Philosophical Anthropology of Saint Gregory of Nyssa," *The Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 12 [1958], 83–87), who gratuitously connects this "animal mode" of procreation to embodiment and the "garments of skin" from Gen 3; he is likewise right to correct Hans Urs von Balthasar who argues that the present form of human reproduction is a *punishment* in anticipation of sin; *Presence and Thought*, 78.

The main argument of this paper, thankfully, does not depend on resolving the precise contours of Gregory's account of the origin of human sexuality.<sup>34</sup> All are agreed that, for Gregory, similarities between human and animal procreation are threatening signs that human beings have subordinated discourse to passion and are therefore encumbered and fragmented.<sup>35</sup> There is similarity where there should be difference. Desire, including sexual desire, is not faulty *per se*, but where human discourse is placed in the *service* of sexual passions, the (angelic) distance of virtue and freedom between human flesh and animal flesh collapses and the human is consumed by grasping concerns for what is fleeting and transient. Where human sexual desire becomes bestial, human beings actively mar the image that sets their flesh apart. Gregory regards this as a threat to human uniqueness and humanity's angelic affinity.

The "brutal" results of humanity's turning to sin draw attention to the dynamics of a fascinating turn *within* Gregory's text.<sup>36</sup> Through the first half

However, I am inclined to see genitals and copulation as a provisional addition to human bodies as the best reading of *De hominis opificio* in its own right. Furthermore—and despite Behr's warning about reading Gregory synthetically—while consulting other writings in an author's corpus ought not to predetermine what can possibly be found in a single text, it can clarify what is uncertain there. My reading of Gregory on this issue substantially aligns with that of Zachhuber, *Human Nature*, 171–72.

<sup>34</sup> If, in what follows, I can demonstrate that the human bond to the animals is fundamental and concrete then I will have answered for the substance of Behr's concern about the failure of the traditional reading to see integral positive connections between humans and animals, whether or not his revised reading on the finer points of genitalia and copulation finally stands to scrutiny.

<sup>35</sup> Likening human nature to a carved stature of Janus, with two faces, Gregory says, "Just so, the human being seems to me to have a double affinity, drawn to opposites: on the one hand formed unto divine beauty through a god-like intellect, on the other hand having a conformity unto herd animals through inborn impulses toward passion. Many times, even discourse becomes almost bestial through an influential inclination toward the non-discursive animal, completely obscuring the better by means of the worse. For whenever someone drags his intellectual activity down toward these impulses and forces his discursive power to become the galley-slave of the passions, a perversion occurs, shifting the distinctive mark of the good toward an animal image. His nature is entirely remodeled according to that image, so that the working of the discursive power becomes the beginning of the passions, and the few grow into a multitude." Gregory of Nyssa, *De hominis opificio*, 18.3, PG 192cd.

<sup>36</sup> Behr rightly suggests that Gregory's text "turns" on the introduction of sin in the fifteenth chapter. "Human beings, encompassing all lower levels of existence, are to raise, in themselves, all of these dimensions of creation to their true dignity, gracing that which is merely irrational by a rational employment. The Fall consists in the freely chosen reversal of the ascending dynamic—an *epistrophe*—to a descending movement." Behr, "The Rational

of his text, when Gregory explains humanity's place in creation as the place of dominion and inquires into the proper interaction of the human body, senses, and mind, he emphasizes *continuities* between human beings and animals in order to evoke the marvel that such a humble creature should have celestial connections. In these earlier passages Gregory is not shy about presenting differences between human and animal flesh, but their similarities are not perceived as a threat. Once Gregory turns to discuss humanity's fall into sin, however, the stability of humanity's transcendence of the animal realm comes into question and similarities become threatening. He forcefully disavows the propriety, which he had more than implied earlier, of speaking about plants and animals as ensouled—now, plant and animal flesh is only ensouled inasmuch as it has a kind of derivative participation in human flesh (as its *telos*).<sup>37</sup> Gregory shifts his emphasis to the differences between humans and animals precisely in order to mark the fall to sin as unbearably catastrophic—the “beastly” state of human beings in the present is monstrous and inconceivable in light of humanity's “truer” nature. Thus, the intensity of Gregory's ideological differentiation of the human from the animal rises exponentially precisely where human affinity to the angels is threatened and the human begins to appear as “another animal.”

### **Eschatological Flesh: The Limits of Discourse and the Function of Desire**

Discourse constitutes the key material difference between the flesh of humans and the flesh of animals. Yet, for Gregory, human discursiveness has limits on many sides—whether expressed in the epistemic limits of reason or the apophatic limits of language. At the limit of human understanding with regard to God, Gregory posits the beginning of an infinite approach to the true object of human desire—the infinite and inscrutable life of the triune God. Paradoxically, the highest triumph of discourse in contemplation or instruction occurs precisely when discourse acknowledges its own failure and God's Spirit carries the discursive animal beyond the capacity of discourse.

Animal,” 224. Morwenna Ludlow also notes a turn at this point in Gregory's text, marking it by the transition from an inclusion of the body in the image of God (though it must be noted that even this inclusion is derivative and secondary: flesh images God inasmuch as its shape cannot remain unaffected in bearing discourse) to a much stronger emphasis on the soul (to the exclusion of the body) as the image of God; *Universal Salvation*, 52.

<sup>37</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *De hominis opificio*, 15.2, PG 177a.

The limits of discourse, however, are fixed inwardly as much as eschatologically. Human subjectivity is, in the image of God's own unknowability, never fully transparent even to human subjects. Inasmuch as God is inscrutable to human reason, some stubborn remainder of the human psyche persists as an impenetrable knot which vexes self-reflection.

If the nature of the image were grasped but the nature of the original were beyond grasping, then the discrepancy found between the two would expose the image as a fraud. But since the nature of our mind (made according to the image of the creator) escapes knowledge, it has a precise likeness to the transcendent, bearing the mark of the ungraspable nature by means of its own unknowability.<sup>38</sup>

God's image burdens humanity with a fathomless excess; God's image is a knot with no loose ends. The divine bond is not a deficiency but in self-reflection it can only figure as an abyss that swallows any comprehensive understanding.<sup>39</sup> God's image names the impossibility of arriving at any confidently comprehensive self-knowledge; for Gregory, humans are restless and searching by constitution. Humanity itself cannot be fit neatly within the bounds of discourse; some obstinate and opaque remainder always persists.

In being both internal and unclosable, the gap of God's image in human subjectivity incites desire for God.<sup>40</sup> In Gregory's economy, animal flesh is

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 11.4, PG 156b.

<sup>39</sup> Von Balthasar marks this attribution of obscurity to the human as "perhaps the first time a Greek thinker considered the incomprehensibility of a thing not only as a sign of its remoteness from us but as a perfection of the thing itself"; *Presence and Thought*, 94. See also, Lewis Ayres, "Deification and the Dynamics of Nicene Theology: The Contribution of Gregory of Nyssa," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 49, no. 4 (2005): 393.

<sup>40</sup> Rowan Williams expresses this insight in similar terms: "The conviction of our dependence on an unchangeably loving God draws us into a state of strictly objectless attention, love without projection or condition, moving and expanding but not restless, a kind of *eros*, yet only capable of being called "desire" in a rather eccentric sense, because of its distance from the processes of wanting and getting, lack and satisfaction. We are challenged to imagine a radical lack, accepted without anxiety, hunger, fantasy. *That* is the final form of structure of spirit, the structure within which the whole of our intentionality fits, the prime analogue from the movements of instinct and mind"; "Macrina's Deathbed Revisited: Gregory of Nyssa on Mind and Passion," in *Christian Faith and Greek Philosophy in Late Antiquity: Essays in Tribute to George Christopher Stead*, ed. L.R. Wickham and C.P. Bammel (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 242; see also Von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought*, 127.



the transparent flesh of necessity, bound to the accessible, visible, and needful elements of its livelihood. Likewise, angelic existence is transparently ordered to God's service and praise. The flesh of the human being, however, differs from both. At the boundary between angelic existence and animality, human flesh is opaque; its purposes are interminably doubled, deferred.<sup>41</sup> Human flesh, the flesh which is free relative to its bodily needs, generates an impossible but inalienable desire for the infinite good that is God. Where discourse falls short, desire drives the human being forward. The image of God, then, names an abyssal fissure or impenetrable kernel within human subjectivity that incites an incurable desire. But what is the source and the structure of this desire?

At precisely this point—where discourse's ultimate outward curiosity and inward self-understanding terminate in fundamentally insatiable desire—an intriguing intersection of the human, animal, and angelic occurs, a connection that Gregory (understandably) fails to develop. The drive of animal instinct for food or coitus and the angelic drive toward worship are both *full* and constitutive—an animal *is* its material instincts, an angel *is* its spiritual praise. Humans, by contrast, are constituted by a lack or fissure; as the misfit joint between the terrestrial and celestial, humans remain free to assimilate in either direction. The “emptiness” of the human generates a drive toward a fullness that can already be found among animals and angels—structurally identical in both—the one a total fixation on God, the other a total fixation on worldly concerns. Discourse (λόγος) is bordered by desire not only “below” where unruly urges threaten to overcome order, but also “above” where desire proves more capacious than discourse in absorbing the influence of the divine life. In short, since the kind of proximity to God that angels enjoy remains inaccessible to humans, human flesh comes most to resemble angels by enacting a sublimated resemblance to animals; the desire at the center of animal life drives a spiritual fixation on God. Only in cultivating a transparent desire that orients the whole being (a “spiritual” desire structurally identical to—and drawing on the energy of—the animal's “natural” desire), can a human being approach something like angelic fullness.

In this vein, the ἀπάθεια that Gregory enjoins upon his readers may be understood, not as the repression of human animality, but as the refusal to prematurely seize on any accessible object as the site of fullness. So long as human discourse is overcome by πάθος, people are deceived into think-

<sup>41</sup> Smith, “The Body of Paradise,” 210.

ing that some object or action is capable of resolving the discordant interval within their own psyche into a full and complete harmony. Rather than the caricature of an emotionless state of transcendent disinterest, ἀπάθεια is the intentional preservation of the interval of incompleteness inherent to infinite desire. Desire must be structured eschatologically—oriented to the infinite—if it is not to lead the human being astray. Ἀπάθεια can be seen as a practice that transgresses the human-animal boundary; forcibly keeping open the gap at the core of human nature *not* in order to eradicate desire (or kill off the animal, as it were), but to incite the structure of animal desire toward an angelic, even a deiform, end.<sup>42</sup> The “space” of λόγος within the human, the discordant interval opened by the *imago dei*, is preserved by means of ἀπάθεια, which simultaneously differentiates the human from passion-driven animals (the ἄλογοι), but *also protects the integrity of (inner) animal desire* as that which sustains the contemplative approach to God.<sup>43</sup> Paradoxically, animality remains the site of the spiritual vitality through which God lures human beings into angelic life. Spiritual discipline must guard animal desire in order to refine it, not guard against animal desire in order to eradicate it.

<sup>42</sup> This understanding of ἀπάθεια in the relationship between the (interior) animal and the (essentially human) discursive soul accords with Mark Hart’s reading of the same intersection in Gregory’s *De virginitate* (“Reconciliation of Body and Soul: Gregory of Nyssa’s Deeper Theology of Marriage,” *Theological Studies* 15 [1990], 463) and finds deep resonance with his concept of “irony” (“Gregory of Nyssa’s Ironic Praise of the Celibate Life,” *Heythrop Journal* 33, no. 1 [1992]: 7–8). See also, Burrus, “*Begotten, not Made*,” 94; and Williams, “Macrina’s Deathbed,” 239–40. Thus, despite providing a fine-grained study of the term, Anthony Meredith cuts the line between humans and animals too neatly in his assertion that Gregory defines πάθος as “whatever originates in the elements either of desire or of aggression within us, born of our animal nature and not strictly belonging to our rational [discursive] nature”; “What Does Gregory of Nyssa Mean by ΠΑΘΟΣ (Pathos),” *The Downside Review* 126, no. 442 (2008), 64–65. Animal desire and animal aggression require the husbandry of discourse, keeping them from their destructive proclivities and directing their energies toward God on a trajectory where they might stretch out in virtue. Human discourse cannot (as Meredith seems to imply) leave the animal behind in seeking God in contemplation; desire pushes beyond discourse’s limits. Meredith’s definition of πάθος is better fit to Philo or Origen, from whom Gregory deviates on this point. Philo, *De gigantibus*, §8; Origen, *De principiis*, 1.8.4.

<sup>43</sup> This point represents, in my opinion, a critical oversight in Smith’s otherwise excellent text, *Passion and Paradise*. He carefully follows Gregory’s anthropology, distinguishing the discursiveness of the distinctively human soul from the desire-driven souls of animals. When Smith argues, however, that erotic passion remains indispensable to human salvation as the drive which sustains redeemed humans in an eternally deeper delving into the unfolding life of God, he simply repeats Gregory’s theological disavowal of animals and animality (rather than interrogating it). Desire and passion are named “animal” when they carry a negative valence, but never when they play a theologically positive role. Smith, *Passion and Paradise*, 1–2, 69, 146, 183, 187, 191.

## The Theological Stakes of Fleshly Difference

In closing, what is at stake theologically for Gregory in differentiating human beings from the animals? Clearly, Gregory is deeply concerned to conceptualize the formal difference between human beings and animals as a human share in the intellective heaven of angels.<sup>44</sup> If Gregory is to uphold his anthropological exceptionalism, then developing the affinity of human beings to angels (and concomitantly their differentiation from animals) becomes a freighted task. If the human being were merely “another animal” among so many others, Gregory would lose his sense that human life is intended to be a canvas for displaying the virtues of God. It is the conceptual distance between human flesh and the flesh of the other creatures that valorizes human self-restraint in the face of bodily compulsions and simultaneously excuses the animals for acting “naturally” in following their impulses. Animal flesh, then, is the foil that generates the fragile space of human virtue, freedom, and discursiveness, while simultaneously serving as a threatening example of what may become of those who fail to exercise these gifts. Gregory “makes the human” by discerning the trace of a theological-metaphysical distinction between animals and humans in the plain physiological and behavioral differences proper to human bodies and societies. This theological distinction helps him to shore up his conviction that humanity is celestial as much as earthly, bearing a special affinity to the angels. However, Gregory’s efforts at absolute differentiation are *necessarily* fractured and flawed. Even human dominion is founded on a relationship of dependence. More importantly, animal impulses remain the raw material of both human virtue and the spiritual desire that drives the human pursuit of God.

Here at the end, a few remarks about the broader context of this essay’s argument are in order. Christian theologians and biblical scholars have nearly ubiquitously, for a range of historical reasons, thought about human beings as categorically distinct from and superior to all other animals. Scholars in the far-flung-and-still-emerging field of animal studies draw attention

<sup>44</sup> “The teaching [of Scripture] is this: Two extremes stand apart from one another, and between them is humanity. On the one side is the divine and bodiless nature, on the other is the non-discursive animal life. For it is possible to see a share of both in the compound of humanity. From the divine comes discursiveness and intellect, which are not distinguishable according to male and female. From the non-discursive animal comes bodily construction and the formation which has been divided into male and female. In any case, both of these natures are in everything sharing in the human life.” Gregory of Nyssa, *De hominis opificio*, 16.9, PG 181bc.

to the way that such anthropological exceptionalism leads directly to staggering suffering and injustice borne (and resisted!) by nonhuman animals.<sup>45</sup> Additionally, scholarship in animal studies critiques the normative account of humanity at the foundation of anthropological exceptionalism (along with its epistemologies, affective regimes, and eco-politics).<sup>46</sup> Some urgent tasks emerge where this work intersects with Christian theology. The deep sources of the tradition (the Bible and influential figures across its history) must be critically analyzed to discern: first, where and how the rigid boundaries between human and other animals collapse under the weight of their own assumptions and, second, what hidden resources the tradition holds for thinking differently.<sup>47</sup> This essay makes a small contribution to that effort. Constructively, the pervasive theological disavowal of nonhuman animals and human animality must be replaced—through the work of a renewed theological imagination—with accounts of creation, sin, redemption, and transformation that recognize and honor animality in human encounters with God.<sup>48</sup> By not beginning from a hermetically enclosed humanity, such work con-

<sup>45</sup> Two excellent introductions to animal studies may be found in Matthew Calarco, *Thinking Through Animals: Identity, Difference, Indistinction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015) and Dawne McCance, *Critical Animal Studies: An Introduction* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2013).

<sup>46</sup> A partially representative sampling might include Derrida, *The Animal*; Kelly Oliver, *Animal Lessons: How They Teach Us to Be Human* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); Donovan Schaefer, *Religious Affects: Animality, Evolution, and Power* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015); Brian Massumi, *What Animals Teach Us about Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014); Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

<sup>47</sup> See the calls to action in David Clough and Celia Deane Drummond, “Postscript,” in *Creaturely Theology: On God, Humans, and Other Animals*, ed. Celia Deane-Drummond and David Clough (London: SCM Press, 2009), 267; and Matthew Calarco, *Zoographies: The Question of the Animal from Heidegger to Derrida* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 140–41. For some examples of this work, see Aaron Gross, *The Question of the Animal and Religion: Theoretical Stakes, Practical Implications* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); Eric Daryl Meyer, “The Logos of God and the End of Man: Giorgio Agamben and the Gospel of John on Animality As Light and Life,” in *Divinanimality: Animal Theory, Creaturely Theology*, ed. Stephen Moore (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014); idem., “Gregory of Nyssa and Jacques Derrida on the Human-Animal Distinction in the Song of Songs,” in *The Bible and Posthumanism*, ed. Jennifer Koosed (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2014).

<sup>48</sup> David Clough, *On Animals: Volume I, Systematic Theology* (New York: T&T Clark, 2012); Celia Deane-Drummond, *The Wisdom of the Liminal: Evolution and Other Animals in Human Becoming* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014); and Eric Daryl Meyer, *Inner Animalities: Theology and the End of the Human* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018).

tributes to the invention of an alternative politics capable of recognizing and enforcing mutual responsibility within an expansive, multi-species, vision of the common good.<sup>49</sup>

Drawing these reflections back to Gregory of Nyssa, this essay claims that inasmuch as virtue and mysticism are hallmarks of God's image in human life, the human being at the eschatological limit of Gregory's imagination turns out to be an angelic creature in whom animality is perfected rather than eliminated. Gregory may not have explicitly embraced the point himself, but the logic of his text suggests that in redemption, God enmeshes human beings more deeply into animality, folding the heaven of angels back together in communion with the animals of sea, sky, and earth.

<sup>49</sup> See Eric Daryl Meyer, "The Political Ecology of Dignity: Human Dignity and the Inevitable Returns of Animality," *Modern Theology* 33, no. 4 (2017): 549–69.

<sup>49</sup> I owe a considerable debt of gratitude to Benjamin Dunning for generously critical remarks at various stages and to Nonna Verna Harrison for an illuminating comment about the virtues of animality at a very early point in this essay's development.