
Evagrius and Gregory: Mind, Soul and Body in the Fourth Century
by Kevin Corrigan

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This book, the third in a new series dedicated to Philosophy and Theology in Late Antiquity, is a most welcome addition. Here Corrigan (who has previously contributed much in his publications to both Neoplatonism and Patristics) turns to a comparative study of the thought of two fourth-century Christian theologians who are of rather different character but yet considerable doctrinal connection, Evagrius of Pontus and Gregory of Nyssa. In this work, Corrigan sets himself to study their respective positions on such questions as the relation between body and soul, the freeing of the soul from bodily concerns and influences (*ἀπαθεία*), the relation of soul to mind, the nature of *gnosis*, and the development of the concept of a person.

The book comprises 10 chapters and a general conclusion. The first two set the scene by introducing us to the two personalities concerned and to the general background of Church history and doctrinal controversies in the fourth century in which they both took part. (Evagrius later came under the hammer as a heretic, infected with ‘Origenism’, while Gregory remains a Father of the Church, though somewhat in the shadow of his elder brother Basil.) We then proceed to a series of eight chapters on various aspects of their thought, duly compared.

Evagrius (*ca* AD 334–399) was the son of a country bishop in the province of Pontus, and was himself ordained priest by Basil of Caesarea. He then served as archdeacon to Gregory of Nazianzus in Constantinople and took part in the Council of Constantinople in 381, as did Gregory of Nyssa. His good fortune went to his head though, it seems, leading to an affair with a married woman and then to a

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radical change of heart which saw him departing first to Jerusalem (where he came under the influence of a holy woman, Melania) and then to the deserts of Egypt in search of a life of purity and asceticism. Once in Egypt, he became the chronicler and spiritual guide of the monks there and, as Corrigan argues, a theologian of great acuteness and originality. Corrigan even wishes to claim him as ‘the father of cognitive psychology’.

As for Gregory (*ca* AD 335–395), Corrigan presents his life as something of a contrast to that of Evagrius, being born as he was in the countryside of Cappadocia and being wedded initially to a monastic life but consenting to become bishop of Nyssa in 372 at the insistence of his brother Basil. He and Evagrius, as mentioned above, were in Constantinople together for a while around 381, during which time Gregory composed a number of his more important works.

Corrigan next gives us, in chapter 3, an overview of the thought of both figures on the central topic of the relations of mind, soul, and body. Their thought here owes something to Aristotle’s distinction between νοῦς—itself partly ‘external’ (θύραθεν)—and soul, and to later Platonist distinctions between mind and soul (including Plotinus’ concept of the ‘undescended’ soul). But it also shows distinctive characteristics, in particular as regards defining the relation between mind and body in a way that subsumes the body into the higher levels of the person rather than rejecting it outright.

Chapter 4 sets out most illuminatingly the doctrine of ἀπαθεία as propounded by both thinkers, which, as Corrigan emphasizes, is far from being a negative or privative concept but rather a freeing up of the soul for an appreciation of spiritual realities and the love of God. The influence of Plotinus is operative here rather than that of Stoicism directly.

After this, Corrigan is forced to allow his two thinkers to part company, as their doctrines, though connected, are significantly different. We get a series of chapters devoted to each in turn. In chapter 5, we have an examination of Evagrius’ remarkable doctrine of the Eight Λογισμοί or ‘(Bad) Thoughts’, ancestor of the later ‘Seven Deadly Sins’ (as propounded by Pope Gregory the Great). These seem to be the eight types of unprofitable mental tendencies that serve to distract a monk from his prayers. Corrigan sees them as a

creative adaptation of Plato's treatment of debased forms of personality in books 8–9 of the *Republic*, which seems a bit optimistic but not impossible, I suppose.

In chapter 6, we turn to Gregory and the theme of the 'Fall of the Intellect', where once again Corrigan discerns the adaptation of Platonist motifs. Gregory speaks of evil as a function of the fall of the mind into matter, such as also is presented by Plotinus, e.g., in *Ennead* 1.8. For Gregory, mind falls away from 'the beautiful' through perversity (the Plotinian *τόλμα*) and must be reclaimed through the sacraments.¹

In chapter 7, we are back to Evagrius and the converse topic of 'Body into Mind', where Evagrius is credited with a 'scientific eye' which discerns the system of signs of which the physical world is made up. As Corrigan argues, for Evagrius, 'nature does not simply reflect intelligible reality; in some sense it already is intelligible.' And connected with this is the thought that body itself is in a way intelligible. This sounds like a version of the doctrine of spiritual body, or 'pneumatic vehicle', common to Origen and later Platonists; but Corrigan argues that it is not quite that. Evagrius, it seems, sees the actively perceptive body, together with its supporting structures, as *intelligible in its own right*. Corrigan wishes to see here a connection with some passages of Plotinus [e.g., *Enn.* 6.3.9.1–7] but, again, perhaps somewhat optimistically. Does this view make Evagrius an interesting kind of monist? Corrigan balks at the term but it seems to fit to some extent.

In chapter 8, Corrigan turns back to Gregory to discuss *his* anthropology against the background of his doctrine of the Trinity. Here I would note, first of all, that the best source for Gregory's interesting view of the relations between the persons of the Trinity [cf. 135] is really not so much a passage of Plotinus such as *Enn.* 6.1.4 but the doctrine of Porphyry which links the noetic triad of Being-Life-Mind with the One itself, a doctrine made use of also by the other Cappadocians. Then, the idea of an original Man, free of gender distinctions or the passions, may be derived from Origen; but

¹ See the nice image of the Egyptian army, as the passions, being drowned in the Red Sea, representing the water of baptism, at *Vita Mosis* 1.122].

it seems to owe something also to Philo. It is notable also how interested Gregory is in the 'latest' medical discoveries about human physiognomy from Galen and other sources.

Chapter 9, 'The Human in the Divine: The Dialogical Expansion of Mind and Heart', returns to Evagrius and his view of the mystical life. Here we see most clearly why Corrigan wishes to credit Evagrius with the development of 'cognitive psychology', by reason of his interesting tendency to integrate mind and body to produce a philosophy of the person—though this is really driven by Evagrius' concern for the management of the monastic life.

Lastly, Corrigan turns in chapter 10 to a study of Gregory's mystical theology and of the role of individuality and personhood in that context, which is in turn bound up with the doctrine of the Trinity. A general conclusion brings all these themes together. Corrigan ends with a speculation as to how far both thinkers saw themselves as reconciling, at least to some extent, the philosophical position of Origen and Plotinus; but he leaves this as a question.

All in all, a most stimulating and thoughtful book, which sheds considerable light on each of these interesting thinkers and on the links between them.