

## Comparative analysis of the perfect human in the writings of Plato and Gregory of Nyssa

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**Abstract:** For centuries, philosophers have addressed the topic of the ideal human, solving it according to the requests of the time. On the example of the works of Plato and Gregory of Nyssa, we will consider how these views have changed over the millennia since the ancient times and ending with the era of the Byzantine Empire. For Plato the human's way to his ideal depends on the accomplishments and deeds of his ancestors. Life experience of the human himself can only adjust the result of life experiences of previous generations for the better or for the worse; the result of life experience influences the development of the individual representatives of the succeeding generations. Gregory of Nyssa says that the body and the soul are born at the same time. This means that the soul does not bear the imprint of the life experience of previous generations. According to Gregory of Nyssa, each person during his lifetime is able to get closer to the ideal. According to Plato, who lived in the times of polytheism, only the elite strata of society are capable of self-improvement. Gregory of Nyssa who lived in a monotheistic state believed that anyone can achieve the ideal. The content analysis of the authors' texts as well as of the texts of the researchers of Plato's and Gregory's of Nyssa creative work have been used in the research. It is noted that a person in Gregory's of Nyssa works possesses larger subjectivity than in Plato's works.

**Key words:** Gregory of Nyssa, the human ideal, monotheism, Plato, polytheism, soul, theology.

### Introduction

A problem of identity of personality is one of the basic issues for modern science. This problem has its history as it was formulated by ancient philosophers and developed by the Byzantine thinkers. Certainly, the concept of identity was not used at that time. The question was about the perfection of a person. It was considered that a person's activity is determined by the non-material essence - soul. A person's behaviour depends on the features of this substance. In the III century BC in the work "Phaedo" the great ancient Greek philosopher Plato offered the conception of the soul as the immortal substance. It is not connected with a concrete human and can be consistently lodged in different people. The substance of the soul, on the one hand, determines the actions of a human, and, on the other hand, a human himself can improve or worsen the quality of substance by his activity (Платон, 1993). Six centuries later, "Cristian Phaedo" appears in Byzantium - the work of theologian and philosopher Gregory of Nyssa "About the Soul and Resurrection". He gives the proofs of the non-material essence of the soul and its immortality in this work. Comparing two works, a researcher from Czech Republic L. Karfikova notes (Карфи́кова, 2012, 184): "The basic nerve of Plato's argumentation in *Phaedo* is the access of the soul to the world of ideas which is opened and developed by Logos. Logos imparts immortality to the soul... A necessary intermediate step here is the proof of the existence of ideas. Gregory..., in his turn, by way of such an intermediate step tries to prove the existence of the spiritual Creator of the material world. From here the transition to the parallel thesis follows. Although a human is "some small world, containing the same elements that the Universe is filled with", the mysterious action of the non-material soul is revealed in his body to which the eternity belongs.

The soul, according to the views of Gregory of Nyssa (Нисский, 1995), does not have the past beyond the human life. The soul is born together with a human and from the moment of birth it acquires immortality. The development of the soul takes place simultaneously with the development of a human. A human, and it is repeatedly underlined by the thinker in his works, is responsible for the development of the soul. He compares the work with the soul to the art of sculptor: chopping off the superfluous, he gradually approaches the perfection. This work requires the tension of all forces of a human, and it must not be interrupted even for a moment (Нисский, 1865). A way to perfection, striving for God is a necessary condition of liberation of the world from the evil.

Gregory of Nyssa is a theologian. But his views were formed under Plato's influence, as well as under the influence of neoplatonists and some other philosophers (Rist, 2000; Ионов, 1903). The Russian

researcher S. Averincev notes that the people of that epoch wished to think philosophically. Thus they aimed to think in the river-bed of ideas of Plato and his followers (Аверинцев, 1984). In his works Gregory of Nyssa often goes across the borders of theology and comes forward as a philosopher (Мартынов, 1886). The researcher R. Shchipina considers that his works are performed in the genre of "spiritual anthropology" (Щипина, 2013). Answering the question, who to a greater degree Nissky is, Z. Nesmelov marks that the merit of Gregory of Nyssa consists in the fact that he succeeded in making Christian divinity scientifically-philosophical, and the ancient philosophical science - Christian (Несмелов, 1887).

***The aim of research:*** carry out a comparative analysis of the perfect human in the writings of Plato and Gregory of Nyssa.

### **Methodology**

The content analysis of the authors' texts as well as of the texts of the researchers of Plato's and Gregory's of Nyssa creative work have been used in the research. The comparative analysis of the texts allowed to answer the question which changes in the views upon a person had taken place within the period of 700 hundred years separating Plato's life and creative work from the life and creative work of Gregory of Nyssa.

### **Results and discussion:**

#### ***Ideal personality according to Plato***

Understanding the space and human justice lies in the basis of Plato's idea of an ideal personality. These ideas were set forth by Anaximander and were developed by Heraclitus (Russel, 1964). The concept of justice includes in itself understanding and clear distinction between the good and the evil, the acceptance and support of the good and non-acceptance of the evil.

Plato considers that not all people understand the distinction between the good and the evil. This understanding can be innate. We can try to teach a human to distinguish the good and the evil. That requires special organization of education and upbringing. Plato names an innate capacity for distinction of the good and the evil kalokagathia. Not many people possess kalokagathia. They are elected by the Gods. They are special people, daimons. They are able to hear their inner voice, the Voice of Gods. The good is manifested in the human following the principle of the blessing. At that, the person can not fully realize the principle of the blessing during his/her earthly existence as the idea and its concrete realization are different essences. „The blessing is not existence. It is beyond the existence exceeding it in dignity and power” (Платон, 1998, 317). The good is first of all realized in the ability to be just and to become just.

The stability of the state depends on how well its rulers can follow the principle of the blessing. Teaching to follow the principle of the blessing, according to Plato, should take into consideration the peculiarities of the human soul structure.

There are three beginnings in a person's soul: reasonable, unreasonable and the longing ones.

The upbringing and education are connected with the development of the reasonable part of the soul and with different limitations of manifestations of its longing part. The development of the reasonable part is based on sophrosyne – the ability for the cognition of oneself and other people, for evaluating your actions and social phenomena according to what is good and what is evil. Sophrosyne is also manifested as decency and tranquility of the soul and the body, modesty of the soul and doing „one's own deeds” (Платон, 1986).

In the work „The State” Plato writes about four kinds of the blessing (divine virtue): wisdom, courage, prudence and justice. In „Laws” he writes about different kinds of the blessing: health, beauty, corporal power and wealth (Платон, 1998).

In the first case, the author seems to concentrate his attention on a person's spiritual perfection while in the second case he focuses on the bodily perfection. The soul and the body are inseparably connected. This connection in Plato's works constitutes the basis of the conception of an ideal person's education.

This conception includes two most important elements: gymnastics (harmonization of the body) and moysicos arts (harmonization of the soul).

An important place in the conception of an ideal personality by Plato belongs to time, that can be named mythological. It goes away to the endless past, as people, possessing kalokagathia and called daimons, trace their ancestries back to higher Gods. The tsars of Persia originate from Zeus. Lacedaemon tsars are the descendants of Zeus and Alcmene (Платон, 1986, 538). On the other hand, the identity is related to the endless future, as the soul of human is immortal. Therefore, the spiritual health of subsequent generations depends on his/her earthly acts. Thus, Plato introduces eugenic substantiation into the understanding of identity. This substantiation in its obvious or hidden way is presented in two Plato's conceptions of a person's finding of his/her personality identity (Makarevičs, 2012).

### ***Gregory of Nyssa about the development of personality***

The starting point of reasoning of Gregory of Nyssa about a human is a biblical idea that a man was created according to the image and similarity with the Creator. Thus he divides image and similarity, as image of deity is not created, but similarity is produced by creation (Нисский, 1995). Similarity to the image implies the presence of the divine beginning in a human that shows up as innate ability to understand and accomplish virtuous deeds and be wise. Everybody has the divine beginning, but far from everybody can use them. For this a person needs to activate the mind. This is the first step of a human on the way to the realization of Divine intention... An obstacle to this step is the duality of a human, that simultaneously has the soul, containing in itself a spirit (godlikeness, mind) and the body (passions) (Нисский, 1995). But the spirit can operate only through the human's body that is material, and consequently is subject to the influence of the evil. The way of a human's development is related to the liberation of himself and the world from the evil. For this, a human needs to realize the higher aim which is striving for God. The faith and readiness are needed for achieving the perfection. The main condition for this is the unity of the way of thinking, words and actions (with the supremacy of the way of thinking) (Нисский, 2007).

The researcher Z. Nesmelov (Несмелов, 1887), analysing the work of Gregory of Nyssa, marks that all perfections mentioned in the works of the theologian and philosopher, can be divided into two groups:

- mind and wisdom (image);
- all other perfections, including beauty, love and virtue (similarity).

L. Karfikova (Карфикова, 2012) notes that the theme of the way as an infinite approach to God is the leitmotif of the works of Gregory of Nyssa. Comprehension of perfections is part of this way.

The substance, opening the way to God, is a human's soul. One of the researchers of the work of Gregory of Nyssa, Z. Nesmelov, notes that the essence of all reasoning of Gregory of Nyssa about the soul can be formulated by four theses (Несмелов, 1887):

- the soul of human is reasonable;
- being reasonable, the soul is opposite to the body;
- being opposed to the body, the soul can unite with it only through semimaterial sensible force;
- once united, it develops the activity in connection and in parallel to the development of the activity of the body.

The researchers mark that the works of Gregory of Nyssa have non-obvious references to Plato and his conception of three-part structure of the soul (Десницкий, 2003). But, unlike Plato, who believed that the soul can dwell in different bodies innumerable number of times, Gregory of Nyssa believed that each person has their own soul. While Plato believed that the errors committed in one life can be corrected in the other, then, according to Gregory of Nyssa, the errors made in the time of life of the body can not be corrected. Gregory of Nyssa rejects the idea of predetermination of human life, because the person is able to choose his/her own development alternatives. (Нисский, 2000).

The soul of human, according to Gregory of Nyssa, as well as according to Plato - is immortal. But immortality of the soul for Gregory of Nyssa differs from the conception of immortality of Plato. Metropolitan Macarius, analysing eschatology creations of Gregory of Nyssa, says that the sinful soul can die. Only this death is moral, but not physical (Макарий, 2009). The souls of the people dead in body constitute the Pleroma, or the world soul, having transpersonal character. Pleroma, in contrast to the infinite God - is finite. The finiteness of the Pleroma is determined by a finite number of people who

have lived and will live until the second coming of Christ when the souls will be able to re-connect with their bodies.

A look at the history of Gregory of Nyssa is interesting. As L. Karfikova notes (Карфи́кова, 2012, 94): "Gregory perceives the human history as a kind of pause in the rhythm of cymbals (bronze plate), when the two cymbals went in different directions, to triumph in the final meeting again". Central to this counter cymbals movement is that "all human parapsis (process) must be filled with the search for God, and the search itself is already the acquisition, and there is no other finding, except for the constant search" (Карфи́кова, 2012, 113).

### **A comparative analysis of the concepts of Plato and Gregory of Nyssa**

To compare the conceptions, we will use Table 1. Two conceptions presented in Table 1 are brought together by the faith in a person's reasonableness and wisdom and his capacity for positive changes. Only, according to Plato, positive changes take place in the process of life of many generations. Each generation is capable of acquiring a positive behavioural capital, which being accumulated in the soul, ultimately leads to the appearance of a perfect human. In the opinion of Gregory of Nyssa, a human can fulfil oneself in the process of the life. For this it is necessary to work continuously with the soul.

Table 1.

**Comparison of conceptions of the soul and development of human by Plato and Gregory of Nyssa**

<b>No.</b>	<b>Parameter</b>	<b>Plato</b>	<b>Gregory of Nyssa</b>
1.	Socio - historical conditions of conception creation	Paganism (Polytheism)	Christianity (Monotheism)
2.	Functions of the soul	Determines the activity of a human, serves as the basis for his perfection	Determines the activity of a human, serves as the basis for his perfection
3.	Temporal descriptions of the soul	In the moment of appearance in the body of human the soul already has the experience of past lives	The soul appears simultaneously with a body and does not have the experience of past lives
4.	"Starting" terms of development	Different for all people. Depend on past experience of the soul	Identical for all people
5.	Innate features of aspiring to perfection	Sophrosyne is a capacity for cognition of oneself and other people, of the evaluation of the acts and public phenomena on the basis of what is good and what is bad.	Ability to understand and accomplish virtuous deeds and be wise
6.	The dependence of the content of the soul on human actions	Direct	Direct
7.	Human's work with the own soul for perfection	Discrete	Continuous
8.	Connection of human and society	The stability of the state depends on whether its rulers are able to follow the principle of blessing	Aspiring to perfection, to God assists in freeing the world from the evil
9.	Development of personality and development of individuality	Personal progress negates individuality. In the eventual point of development individuality disappears	Personal progress negates individuality. In the eventual point of development individuality disappears

Thus, it is necessary to take into account a very important circumstance. Two beginnings make and support the essence of the world: masculine and feminine. The carriers of the masculine beginning are men, but the carriers of the feminine beginning are women. The virtues underlying the personal

development are associated with these two principles. In the work "About life of Moses Legislator" Gregory of Nyssa, using the allegoric form of expressing his ideas, marks: when the law is directed against the masculine beginning, Moses is born (Нисский, 1861). Failing to observe the balance between these two beginnings the world begins to slide to disaster, and it can be saved only by the newly-born hero.

## Conclusions

The authors of conceptions believe in possibilities of perfection of man and society.

Plato considers that the process of perfection of man takes place slowly, during the lifetime of many generations. In the opinion of Gregory of Nyssa, perfection can be achieved within the framework of a person's individual life. For this it is necessary to work continuously with the own soul and seek to comprehend God.

According to Plato, a perfect human provides stability of the state. According to Gregory of Nyssa, a perfect human provides a steady positive development of all humanity.

The conception of a perfect human by Gregory of Nyssa is a new historical look at the development of a personality. A human acquires subjectivity, that is, the ability to influence their own destiny. However, this choice is carried out in the framework of the good and the evil alternatives. This individual choice of the development path is connected with the ways of the world development. A human in his works is not just a part of the universe. He becomes the creator of the universe, the bearer of which is his soul.

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