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Cognitive Impairment, the Human Mind, and the Nous: Theological, Philosophical, and Pastroal Implication of a Traditional Understanding

Abstract

The understanding of the mind adopted by both medical professionals and theologians engaging with modern scientific perspectives fails to account for the intuitive mental faculty, termed the nous in ancient and medieval times. This concept remains an important one in Eastern Orthodox Christianity, however. While it may require re-interpretation for our present age, any recognition of its genuine reference to an aspect of human mental functioning will have a major impact on our response to several issues, not only in philosophical theology but also in medicine and pastoral care. In philosophical theology, our assessment of philosophical idealism and our understanding of the eschatological

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state will be affected; in both theology and medical practice, it will affect our understanding of various cognitive incapacities, especially dementia.

Keywords

cognitive science, dementia, eschatology, Gregory of Nyssa, idealism, nous

1 Cognitive Impairment

In recent decades, what is often called "disability theology" has become a major topic of research and debate among Western Christian scholars, who have focused in their studies on both physical and cognitive impairment. It is observable, however, that among these scholars there is at present no consensus about how the latter kind of impairment is to be understood theologically.

A major tension among these Western scholars arises from what is often labelled the "Aristotelian-Thomist concept of the human good," which is clearly still influential within the Roman Catholic tradition. This influence is often criticized, however, not only by Protestants but also by some within the Roman tradition itself. Hans Reinders, in particular, has been influential in promulgating this criticism by arguing that, because this framework defines the human good in terms of our capacities for reason and will, human beings with profound cognitive disabilities are effectively assumed to be precluded from participation in the human good because everything important about human life is seen as related to the perfection of these natural capacities. He argues against this Aristotelian-Thomist framework by pointing out that certain questions about the teleological potential and eschatological fulfilment of those with cognitive disabilities are effectively ignored by those who rely on

it, and he suggests that the end goal or telos of our human life must be central to our understanding. [1]

However, it may be that the Aristotelian-Thomist framework that Reinders attacks is something of a caricature of present-day Roman Catholic thinking. Some scholars within that tradition, such as Miguel Romero. have suggested that the framework attacked by Reinders is no more than "a form of theological shorthand that Thomistically-minded moral theologians occasionally use in an undisciplined way—specifically, the use of exclusively rationalistic terms when discussing the nature of the human being, human flourishing, or the perfection of the human being." He points out, however, that Thomism itself permits recognition that the consummation of grace can be understood as enabling someone who completely lacks the use of reason to develop what he calls "supernatural knowledge and a supernatural principle of self-movement". If we recognize this as possible, he argues, there is no reason to reject the possibility of what he calls "a virtuous knowledge and love of God in the case of a person with a profound cognitive impairment."[2]

If questions related to cognitive disability have emerged only relatively recently among Western Christians, the same cannot be said of Eastern Orthodox ones since, as Emily Ibrahim has pointed out, we can find in the work of the fourth century Cappadocian Fathers a real grappling – from both theological and practical perspectives - with the issue of integrating people with disabilities into the life of the Church.[3] Nevertheless, it is

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1 Hans S. Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disabilty, Theological Anthropology, and Friendship* (Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 2008)

2 https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/profound-cognitive-impairment-moral-virtue-and-our-life-in-christ/

3 Emily A. Ibrahim, "*Imago Dei* in Eastern Orthodox Statements and Implications for Inclusion of People with Disabilities in the Church: A Dissonant Relationship", *Horizons* (2023) – available at:

still possible to see in the Orthodox world a tension comparable to that to be found among Western Christians.

If we ask why this is the case, the answer seems to lie in the way in which, on the one hand, there is often, among Orthodox, an understanding of human flourishing of the Aristotelian kind (albeit one that is not filtered through the Thomist expansion of the Aristotelian framework in the same way as is common in Roman Catholic thinking) This creates, among some Orthodox, a quasi-instinctive sense of the "uselessness" of the cognitively impaired. Moreover, for those Orthodox who move beyond this quasi-instinctive stance, and look – as the Orthodox focus on Tradition suggests they should - at the patristic literature for guidance, it is unfortunately possible to read some of this literature, when it relates to the "image of God" concept, as focusing, in a quasi-Aristotelian way, only on certain "qualities" to be found in humanity. In contrast to this approach, however, Orthodoxy also manifests a tendency towards an attitude that reflects Romero's rejection of these quasi-Aristotelian attitudes. Although Orthodox thinking does not adopt the same kind of thinking about the "supernatural"[4] as Romero seems to, it, too,

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https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/horizons/article/imago-dei-in-eastern-orthodox-statements-and-implications-for-inclusion-of-people-with-disabilities-in-the-church-a-dissonant-relationship/6EBA4515C2D749A00074703A5C6421ED. Ibrahim quotes a number of works on this topic, the first of which is Almut Caspery, "The Patristic Era: Early Christian Attitudes toward the Disfigured Outcast", in *Disability and the Christian Tradition: A Reader*, ed. Brian Brock and John Swinton (Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans 1012) 29-30.

4 Romero's use of the term "supernatural" is arguably inappropriate in an Orthodox context because, as Vladimir Lossky once said, the Orthodox understanding of grace and nature is such that there is "no 'pure' nature to which grace is added as a supernatural gift"[4] and the kind of separation between the natural and the supernatural that Romero seems to imply is not usually assumed. It may be, however, that the attitude that Lossky attacks is now less dominant in Roman Catholic thinking than it one was, partly because of the influence of the *Resourcement* movement of the early 20th century, in which a new focus

focuses on divine grace and the eschatological fulfilment of its effects, given its emphasis on what it sees as the proper goal of all human life: *theosis*.

As Ibrahim observes, this whole issue – although discussed by individual Orthodox scholars – is at present "sorely underrepresented in the official literature of the Orthodox Church." [5] The official Orthodox literature on this topic, she notes, is at present effectively limited to two documents that differ significantly in theological emphasis. One of these pronouncements - on "Disability and Communion" – has been made by the canonical Orthodox bishops in the United States and is, in her view, potentially the basis for further theological development in terms of her own focus on the "image of God" concept. The other – promulgated by the Moscow patriarchate and entitled "The Russian Orthodox Church's Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom, and Rights" – is, in her view, problematic because it creates what the Romanian scholar, Petre Maican - referring to the same document - has called "a hierarchy that leaves at the bottom disabled people lacking agency."[6]

This Moscow statement may be read as manifesting an attitude that is comparable in its effects to the "Aristotelian-Thomistic" one criticised by Reinders, even though it is expressed in

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on Greek patristic thinking entered Roman Catholic discussion – see Hans Boersma, *Nouvelle Theologie and Sacramental Ontology: A Return to Mystery* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009)

5 Emily A. Ibrahim, "*Imago Dei* in Eastern Orthodox Statements and Implications for Inclusion of People with Disabilities in the Church: A Dissonant Relationship", *Horizons* (2023) – available at: https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/horizons/article/imago-dei-in-eastern-orthodox-statements-and-implications-for-inclusion-of-people-with-disabilities-in-the-church-a-dissonant-relationship/6EBA4515C2D749A00074703A5C6421ED

6 Petre Maican, "Overcoming Exclusion in Eastern Orthodoxy: Dignity and Disability from a Christological Perspective", *Studies in Christian Ethics* 33 (2019) 496-509

different terms. As Ibrahim notes, the statement's implication that the image of God in humans is to be found "in certain qualities that God has granted to humans rather than being found in the wholeness of one's being" runs the risk of suggesting that "those people who lack [these] qualities do not possess the image or likeness of God, or do so only by the measurement with which they possess those qualities."[7] (Indeed, Maican would go even further in his critique of the Russian statement, arguing that its clear implication is that "those who do not possess these attributes cannot be considered humans.")[8]

The papers by Ibrahim and Maican that I have cited repay careful study, not only because of their implications for the ethical treatment and inclusion of those with profound cognitive disabilities within the Orthodox Church, but also because of their implications at a more abstract theological level. I would argue, in fact, that the questions raised by disability theologians such as Ibrahim and Maican help to clarify important aspects of theological anthropology. Therefore - quite irrespective of issues related directly to disability – their analyses represent an important resource for scholars seeking to explore the Orthodox understanding of what it is to be human.

My purpose here, however, is not to engage directly with the theological resources implicit in Ibrahim's focus on the "image of God" concept and Maican's focus on Christological insights. Rather, it is to suggest that there is another source of Orthodox insight that complements these considerations. This additional resource is the concept of the *nous,* often used in patristic and later Byzantine thinking, particularly within the hesychast tradition of understanding spiritual progress. (This resource, as we shall see, has important implications for the "teleological" focus that is central to Reinders' approach.)

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7 Ibrahim op.cit.

8 Maican op.cit.

2 Noetic "knowledge"

In important strands of Orthodox understanding, contemplation – θεωρία in Greek – is seen as the *direct* perception or vision of the mental faculty that ancient Greek philosophers called the *nous.* The *noetic* perception that arises from the full functioning of this faculty is seen as essentially intuitive in character, and not as something based on discursive rationality. This understanding of noetic "knowledge" means that the common translation of *nous* into English as "mind" or "intellect" is misleading. In modern English, the term *mind* usually refers to both the conscious and the unconscious components of mental activity, which need to be distinguished from one another. However, the term *nous* primarily refers to the second of these components and is therefore not simply equivalent to *mind* in the modern sense of the term. Moreover, the equally common translation of *nous* into English as "intellect" – which has its origin in an ancient translation into Latin as *intellectus* - is even more potentially misleading because the modern English notion of *intellect* is focused on discursive reasoning rather than on the essentially intuitive apprehension that was important for early users of the terms *nous* and *intellectus.*[9]

There are, admittedly, several distinct, if related, understandings of the *nous* to be found in the works of early Christian authors, due in part to how different authors took up one or other of the

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[9] Discursive reasoning was seen – especially in the hesychast strand of Orthodox thinking – as arising, not from the *nous* but from a quite different mental faculty, the *dianoia*. See the discussion of these terms given in the *Glossary* section of Palmer, Sherrard and Ware, eds., *The Philokalia*, vol.1, 357-367.(There may, however, be a tendency in this glossary to suggest a uniformity of usage that is not, in fact, to be found in the *Philokalia*, since this anthology contains texts written many centuries apart by authors influenced by slightly different understandings of the *nous*.)

different nuances of the term to be found in the works of Aristotle, of Plato, and of the neo-Platonists. Nevertheless, as one recent analysis has summed up the issue, the concept of the *nous* was widely used by early Christian authors in relation to its perceived functions as "a connector, the medium by which we relate to God, the ordering principle of our relation to the complex that is our selves, and the director of external relations, inasmuch as our moral existence stands at its command."[10]

This early Christian (and modern Orthodox) focus on the *nous* and on its use in developing an essentially intuitive response to God through contemplative activity is at the heart of the common insistence – found especially in the work of Vladimir Lossky - that Orthodox theology is essentially an experiential or "mystical" pursuit, which must be approached "in such a fashion that instead of assimilating the mystery to our mode of understanding we should, on the contrary, look for a profound change, an inner transformation of the spirit, enabling us to experience it mystically."[11] This kind of understanding is reflected in the notion of the contemplation of nature - *θεωρία φυσική* – which was developed in the Christian East from the time of the fourth-century writer, Evagrius Ponticus, and which reached its fullest form in the seventh-century work of Maximos the Confessor.[12] In this kind of contemplation of nature, as Bruce Foltz has put it, "the same kind of noetic, contemplative deportment that Plato had reserved solely for the eternal forms, denuded of any earthly encumbrance, is now directed towards

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10 A. N. Williams, *The Divine Sense: The Intellect in Patristic Theology* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007) 234.

11 Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Cambridge, James Clarke, 1957) 8

12 See e.g. Joshua Lollar, *To See into the Life of Things: The Contemplation of Nature in Maximus the Confessor and His Predecessors* (Turnhout, Brepols, 2013)

the cosmos itself."[13] Evagrius saw this process as involving two things: not only training in the use of both philosophical and scriptural insights but also "a radically altered state in which the mystic is transformed."[14] While this understanding was later often broadened to be applicable to all Christians and not just to highly educated ones, the notion of the importance of a noetic grasp of reality and of spiritual transformation was still maintained, at least to the extent that ascetical effort was seen as an essential component of the contemplative task.

3 The Unity of the Human Person

This kind of understanding of the *nous* is very different from the notions of the "mind" or "intellect" often assumed by Western scholars involved in what they now call either the science-theology dialogue or science-engaged theology.[15] These

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13 Bruce Foltz, *The Noetics of Nature: Environmental Philosophy and the Holy Beauty of the Visible* (New York, Fordham University Press, 2014) 248-249

14 David T. Bradford, "Evagrius Ponticus and the Psychology of Natural Contemplation", *Studies in Spirituality* 22 (2012) 110

15 In practice, the term *dialogue* suggests a reciprocity that is in practice usually absent from the interaction of theological and scientific insights so that, although my approach falls into what Ian Barbour famously called "dialogue" in its *theology of nature* component, it may equally well be described in terms of *science-engaged theology.* This latter term has been popularised in John Perry and Joanna Leidenhag, *Science-Engaged Theology* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2023) and in an Orthodox context has been explored in terms of patristic and neopatristic understandings in Doru Costache, "Patristic and Neopatristic Antecedents of Scientifically Engaged Theology", *St. Vladimir's Theological* Quarterly 67, 1-2, 115-145. However, there may be problems with the term science-engaged theology because it is understood in several different ways, some of which are overly-

scholars – like the scientists whose work they attempt to interpret theologically - tend to focus on consciously apprehended mental functions such as memory, emotion, and discursive rationality.[16]

There are, nevertheless, aspects of this Western theological reflection that Orthodox Christians can surely affirm, and especially its increasing abandonment of the kind of dualism in which body and mind are seen as distinct entities in some loose association. This has led to a revival of a more Orthodox understanding among them, in which body and mind are seen as components of a unified being. This revival has come about, not only because these western theologians have reacted against the dualism common in certain periods in the past, but also – especially among those exploring the implications of scientific understanding of the mind for theology[17] - because analyses of brain scanning data and of the effects of brain damage have led cognitive scientists more and more to emphasize and elucidate the physical basis of human mental functioning, at least as this is usually understood.

However, in their exploration of the implications of scientific insights in this field, these western theologians have until recently given little or no consideration to unconscious processes, whether of the kind assumed in the notion of noetic understanding or of the kind in which a few of them have

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prescriptive: see Simon Maria Kopf, "Prospects and Pitfalls of Science-Engaged Theology", *Religious Studies* (2005) 1-24; available at doi:10.1017/S0034412525000307 .

16 While there has in recent decades also been recognition by scientists of some unconscious processes, it is only the reality of what is called the "cognitive unconscious" that is usually recognized. This term first came into widespread use through the influence of an article by John F.Kihlstrom: "The Cognitive Unconscious", *Science* 237 (1987) 1445-52

17 See e.g. Warren S.Brown, Nancey Murphy and H.Newton Malony, *Whatever happened to the Soul?: Scientific and Theological Portraits of Human Nature*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998); c.f. Nancey Murphy, *Bodies and Souls or Spirited Bodies?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006)

recently begun to take an interest because they recognize differences between the functioning of the two hemispheres of the brain. These differences have been made known to many through the work of Iain McGilchrist,[18] whose perspectives have been influential well beyond the boundaries of the scientific and theological communities. This influence arises from the way in which McGilchrist focuses, not only on scientific insights into brain functioning, but also on the way in which it is becoming increasingly recognized – partly through his work - that our present culture is one in which we have, for several centuries, attributed great value to the capacities that arise from the left hemisphere of the brain – our quantitative and analytical capacities – but little value to the capacities that arise from the right hemisphere, which are related to creativity, emotion and intuition. McGilchrist's analysis of this lack of balance has led, among other things, to a new appreciation, among theologians interested in scientific insights, of the concept of *spiritual intelligence* and - among a few of them at least – to explorations linking this concept to the ancient concept of the *nous*.[19]

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18 Ian McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (new expanded edition, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2019) What McGilchrist does not do, it must be emphasized, is think of the two hemisheres of the brain as doing completely different things (as was once widely thought.) Rather, he emphasizes that, while both are involved in all mental processes, they contribute to these processes in different ways. Each hemisphere is associated with a different kind of *attention*, which (so to speak) "creates" in us two different versions of the world that we can potentially integrate into a unified understanding but in practice, in the modern western world, keep apart.

19 This topic of spiritual intelligence is addressed in general terms by various authors in an edited volume *Perspectives on Spiritual Intelligence*, ed. Fraser Watts and Marius Dorobantu (London, Routledge, 2024.) It is also the focus of a special issue of the journal *Christian Perspectives on Science and Theology*, New Series 3 (2024),

One way of exploring this link has been through the strand of disability theology that focuses on the kind of cognitive impairment associated with conditions such as Alzheimer's disease. In relation to this, the Orthodox scholar, Petre Maican, has pointed out the relevance of the thinking of the Protestant theologian, John Swinton, who has argued, on Biblical grounds, that it is wrong to see human beings – as is often done – primarily or only as the sum of their cognitive capacities and the web of social relationships that they establish throughout their lives. We are, Swinton argues, *persons* and - from a theological perspective - the loss of cognitive capacities and social relationships in old age does not diminish what is most important about personhood.[20] The important thing, he argues, is that our personhood arises from the "breath of God" (*nephesh*)[21] which, according to the Book of Genesis (2:7; 6:17; 7:22), is breathed into all living beings. Our true identity, he argues, is found in God, and it will be revealed to us fully only in the "world to come". The spiritual identity we are endowed with by God, he suggests, is not lost in dementia. Rather, it continues to exist in God even when the sum of our cognitive abilities and our web of human relationships have been lost. Swinton's account may, Maican argues,[22] be expanded in terms of the concept of the *nous*, and this reflects my own emphasis on the way in which that concept

guest edited by the same two scholars and based on contributions to the 2023 conference of the international Society for Science and Religion. The relevance of the *nous* concept is highlighted in the contributions to this latter collection by myself and by Petre Maican.

20 John Swinton, *Dementia: Living in the Memories of God* (Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 2012)

21 The Hebrew word *nephesh*, correctly translated as "breath", is frequently mistranslated as" soul" – a term that has connotations in modern English that are not to be found in the Hebrew word (or indeed in patristic and medieval Christian thinking about the soul.)

22 Petre Maican, "Spiritual Intelligence and Dementia: A Theological Re-evaluation of the Nous", *Christian Perspectives on Science and Theology*, New Series, Vol. 3, Special Issue: Artificial and Spiritual Intelligence, https://doi.org/10.58913/RLLA6585

is still used within the Orthodox tradition, underlining the way in which the *nous* should be seen as in some sense what truly links the human mind directly to the "mind of God."[23]

In general, however, most Western theologians exploring the implications of scientific understanding have not yet seen this Orthodox focus on the *nous* as relevant to their exploration of mental processes, partly because their focus has tended to be on attempting to refute the widespread reductionistic view that mental processes are nothing but epiphenomena of physical brain processes. This attempt at refutation has frequently used the strong version of the philosophical notion of *emergence* to defend the ontological reality of mental experience, using this concept to insist that "bottom up" causality - the only causality acknowledged in reductionist analysis – must be seen as being supplemented by "top down" causal effects, so that the relationship between mind and brain is seen in terms of complex feedback loops. According to this view, the qualities often associated with the term *soul* – discursive thought, the sense of free will, and so on – are not simply to be dismissed as epiphenomena with no ultimate reality. [24]

This kind of analysis is not (as we shall see) without merit. Still, it has the disadvantage that, as it stands, it is difficult to reconcile with the notion that these "soulish" qualities can have any reality apart from the body, so that it has become fashionable among

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[23] See Christopher C. Knight, "The Human Mind in this World and the Next: Scientific and Early Theological Perspectives", *Theology and Science* 16 (2018) 151-165; c.f. Christopher C. Knight, *Science and the Christian Faith: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Yonkers NY, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2020) 99-138.

[24] The current state of debate about emergence is well represented in the essays in *The Re-Emergence of Emergence: The Emergentist Hypothesis from Science to Religion*, ed. Philip Clayton and Paul Davies (Oxford, Oxford University Press) 2006.

some theologians in the west to discard the word *soul* and replace it with Warren Brown's term, *embodied soulishness.*[25] Some, in this context, have suggested that it is helpful to think of the distinction between the body and the mind in terms of hardware and software in an electronic computer. Without the software/mind, they say, the hardware/body has no real purpose; but without the hardware/body, the software/mind has no natural means of functioning. Just as, in a computer, software can operate only through appropriate hardware, so, according to this analogy, the human mind requires a body of some kind to function.

This hardware-software analogy may not, as we shall note, be as useful as it initially seems. It has, nevertheless, been helpful in making Western theologians wary of the dualistic notion of the eschatological existence of disembodied souls, which is now often seen as untenable because it assumes software functioning without appropriate hardware. It has thus provided these theologians with a plausible argument for upholding the traditional Christian concept of the eschatological state, in which humans in the "age to come" are seen, not as disembodied souls, but as possessing *resurrection bodies*. Our natural state – both in this world and the next - is not, they have argued, one in which our "software" alone can constitute our being. Moreover, since different types of computer hardware can be used to run any particular software, this analogy has enabled these theologians to conceive of the resurrection body as significantly different from the earthly one. (This notion is sometimes seen in the West as a novel one but in fact – albeit for different reasons - it was

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25 See e.g. Warren S. Brown and Brad. D. Strawn, *The Physical Nature of Christian Life: Neuroscience, Psychology and the Church* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012)

common in the Eastern part of the Christian world at least from the fourth century.)[26]

It is observable that many of the Western theologians who are interested in scientific understanding now adopt this understanding of the body-mind relationship in a way that uncritically accepts an aspect of the materialist framework of our current scientific culture. They focus on how the human mind emerges from the matter of the brain, but very little on how, from a theological perspective, matter has its origin in the "mind of God". This means that they have rejected any form of philosophical *idealism,* in which the mind is given ontological priority over matter. I have challenged this dismissal of idealism elsewhere, partly based on a critical engagement with aspects Keith Ward's defence of idealism[27] and partly based on the way in which Gregory of Nyssa's views – based on his understanding of the *nous* - exhibit interesting parallels, not only with Berkeleyan idealism, but also with questions that arise from quantum mechanics about the role of the observer in "creating" reality.[28]

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26 This sense of novelty exists because early Western Christian perspectives on the resurrection body – based on the views of authors like Tertullian - are wrongly assumed to have been accepted throughout the Christian world until relatively recently. For a useful brief summary of the differences between Eastern and Western parts of the Christian world in this respect, see Philip Sherrard, *Christianity and Eros: Essays on the Theme of Sexual Love* (London, SPCK,1976) 40.

27 Keith Ward, "Bishop Berkeley's Castle: John Polkinghorne on the Soul", in *God and the Scientist: Exploring the Work of John Polkinghorne*, ed. Fraser Watts and Christopher C. Knight (Farnham, Ashgate, 2012) 127-37

28 In the dominant (Copenhagen) interpretation of quantum mechanics, reality consists of multiple potentialities, only one of which is actualized when an observer "collapses the wave function." This understanding leads, however, to a paradox that is highlighted by the "Schrödinger's

This argument in defence of idealism is, however, too complex to be dealt with adequately here, and the reader who is interested in that argument will need to look at what I have said elsewhere.[29] One corollary of this argument, however, can be summarized briefly and is relevant to our present discussion of cognitive disability because it relates directly to Reinders' focus on the *telos* of human life. This corollary arises from the way in which I have criticized the way in which certain theologians in the West have assumed that our state in the "world to come" will be one in which, while the earthly body may be very significantly modified when it is transformed into a resurrection body, the earthly mind will continue much as it is in this life, differing only insofar as certain faculties, such as memory, may be made perfect rather than being (as at present) incomplete and fallible. This assumption ignores two factors, one scientific and one theological. The scientific one is that most cognitive scientists no longer accept, in any straightforward way, the analogy in which mental processes constitute the functioning of "software" that yields the same results, whatever the hardware that enables it to function. They increasingly stress that mental processes are not only emergent from but also *conditioned by* the physical substrate with which they are associated. This seems to be true,

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Cat" thought experiment, devised by the physicist, Erwin Schrödinger to illustrate the implications of this paradox, in which a hypothetical cat may be considered both alive and dead simultaneously because its fate is linked to a random event that may (or may not) occur. This paradox is one of the issues that led to the quasi-idealist metaphysics of the quantum physicist, David Bohm, which have been analysed in Orthodox theological terms in both Joshua Schooping, "Touching the Mind of God: Patristic Christian Thought on the Nature of Matter", *Zygon: Journal of Science and Religion* 50 (2015) 583-603 and Richard de Grijs and Doru Costache, "The Cosmology of David Bohm: Scientific and Theological Significance", *Theology and Science* 22 (2023) 204-220.

29 Christopher C. Knight, *Science and the Christian Faith: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Yonkers, NY, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2020) 107-111; Christopher C. Knight, *Eastern Orthodoxy and the Science-Theology* Dialogue (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2022) 26-31.

not only in relation to the very specific way in which the brain works, but also – if certain formulations of the notion of "embodied cognition" are accepted – in relation to the interactions between the mind and the rest of the body and between the mind and the world beyond the body. [30] If we accept these insights, then – unless the resurrection body and resurrection cosmos are assumed to be identical to those we experience in this life - the "resurrection mind" that will be associated with the resurrection body and its environment will inevitably be rather different from our earthly mind.

The related theological issue is that early Christian thought did not always hold the view that is taken for granted in much recent Western theological discussion of this topic. Continuity of our mental faculties in their transition from this world to the next was not simply assumed. The eastern patristic tradition often made a firm distinction between our present, biological state –

[30] Embodied Cognition is a growing research program in cognitive science. It emphasizes the formative role the environment plays in the development of cognitive processes, based on a general theory that cognitive processes develop when a tightly coupled system emerges from real-time, goal-directed interactions between organisms and their environment. The nature of these interactions, it is believed, influences the formation and further specifies the nature of the developing cognitive capacities. Since embodied accounts of cognition have been formulated in a variety of different ways in each of the sub-fields comprising cognitive science, a rich interdisciplinary research program is emerging. The different conceptions arising from different sub-fields are all besed, however, on the belief that one necessary condition for cognition is embodiment, where the basic notion of embodiment is broadly understood as the unique way an organism's sensorimotor capacities enable it to successfully interact with its environmental niche. All share a quest for cognitive explanations that capture the manner in which mind, body, and world mutually interact and influence one another to promote an organism's adaptive success.

in mythical terms viewed as the result of "the Fall" [31] - and the embodied state for which we were originally made and are ultimately intended. In this kind of view, the "original" and eschatological human state is something that has, in some sense, been "covered up" by our present biological state – a view often expressed in the patristic period in terms of an allegorical interpretation of the way in which God is reported to have given "garments of skin" to those expelled from Paradise (Genesis 3:21).[32]

A useful exploration of this aspect of eastern patristic thinking is that of Panayiotis Nellas, who makes the interesting point that the patristic interpretation of our "garments of skin" relates not only to the physical body. What has sometimes been overlooked, he notes, is that writers like Gregory of Nyssa use the term *garments of skin* to refer to "the entire postlapsarian psychosomatic clothing of the human person." For Gregory, he stresses, the Fall has brought about a situation in which the "functions of the soul … have also become 'corporeal' along with the body …. [they] form together with the body 'the veil of the heart … the fleshy covering of the old man'" [33] A corollary of this perspective would seem to be that both body and soul are to be transformed when the "garments of skin" are thrown off in our eternal life.

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[31] Patristic thinking did not, we should note, always understand the Genesis account of the Fall in straightforward historical terms. Especially by those strongly influenced by the Origenist tradition, it was often seen as meta-historical, with the Fall being a fall *into* our present space-time universe and biological state. In a comparable way, Maximus the Confessor seems to have seen creation and fall as simultaneous.

[32] For an exploration of how this view has implications for science-engaged theology, see Christopher C. Knight, "The Fallen Cosmos: An Aspect of Eastern Christian Thought and its Relevance to the Dialogue Between Science and Theology", *Theology and Science* 6 (2008) 305-317; c.f. Knight, *Science and the Christian Faith*, 177-195.

[33] Panayiotis Nellas, *Deification in Christ: The Nature of the Human Person* (Crestwood, NY, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997) 50-52

For many in our present era, the particular way in which this discontinuity between our present and eschatological states was perceived may seem unpersuasive. However, what I have called the "spiritual instinct" that lies behind early understandings may still be worthy of attention even when the particular way in which that instinct was expressed may now seem questionable. In this case, the need for attentiveness to that instinct arises from the scientific insight that at least some human mental processes are not only inextricably linked to the human body but also strongly conditioned by it. Given this strong conditioning, it seems to follow that a resurrection body that is significantly different from the earthly one implies precisely what Gregory of Nyssa seems to have envisaged: an associated mind that is also significantly different from that which we now possess.[34]

Related to this perception is another important insight that may perhaps inform our thinking about eternal life. This is the notion that what we nowadays tend to think of as constitutive of our minds and personalities – things like our discursive rational faculty and our memories – may in fact be no more than servants, in this world, of something more central to our being: the *nous*. (Here, as we have seen, John Swinton's analysis of personhood in

[34] This notion is, of course, incompatible with the widespread Christian hope that eternal life will mean the survival of our "personalities". However, we need to recognise that our usual focus on personality may be no more than a kind of egoism, a spiritual blindness and self-centredness to be overcome. As Vladimir Lossky has put it, we need to make a distinction between being individuals and being what we are called to become: persons in relationship. He says that the one "who is governed by his nature and acts in the strength of his natural qualities, of his character, is the least personal. He sets himself up as an individual, proprietor of his own nature, which he pits against the nature of others and regards as his 'me'" (Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 121f.).

relation to dementia, as interpreted by Petre Maican, seems to point in a very similar direction.)

The point here is that, in the kind of late antique and medieval Christian understanding that focused on the concept of the *nous*, our spiritual journey in this world was often seen as having as one of its prime aims the purification of that *nous*, the overcoming of the distortion or darkening of its functions in our present "fallen" state. Often, in Christian literature, the *nous* was described as the "eye of the soul", and it was the full opening of this eye that was seen as making possible what is sometimes called, in Western Christian theology, the beatific vision.[35] In the light of this understanding, it seems possible to understand the functioning of our "resurrection minds" largely, or even completely, in terms of the expanded and transformed functioning of the *nous*. This suggests that our transition to the "world to come" may, in fact, involve the shedding of all kinds of mental activity other than the direct intuitive knowing that arises from the perfected *nous*. (Something of this kind – albeit expressed in different terms - certainly seems to be hinted at in some of the most well-known New Testament passages that refer to our eschatological state.)[36]

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35 There are, we should note, significant differences between the way the beatific vision is interpreted in Western and Eastern Christian traditions, with the latter, unlike the former, insisting that the essence of God remains forever unknowable.

36 In the Johannine literature, for example, there is a strong sense that eternal life is something that the believer can experience, not only in the future, but also now, in our knowledge of God. Indeed, in the fourth gospel there is the report that Jesus himself not only described but also *defined* eternal life as the state in which we "know … the only true God and Jesus Christ" (John 14:3). In the Pauline strand of New Testament teaching, the emphasis is, admittedly, different, with a stronger sense of eternal life as belonging to the future. There is also, however, a sense that we are unable in this life to anticipate what our eschatological state will be, and that our knowledge in that state will not simply be an extension of the type of knowledge we have now, but in some sense it will be knowledge in a mode akin to that of God's knowledge. What "God

Might it be, then, that those of us who are believers in the eschatological state should recognize that, in that state, we may not know *about* anything, or even "think", in the sense in which we usually use that term? Rather – as Gregory of Nyssa puts it of our ascent to God in this life (Laird 2004, 127) - "every form of comprehension" should eventually be abandoned in that ascent. This suggests that, in the "world to come", we will simply *know* – directly and intuitively - in the way that mystics, in their most sublime moments in this life, are said to *know*. And if this is valid, then continuity in our existence as unique *persons* will not necessarily involve continuity of much with which we tend to identify ourselves. Rather, it will involve a transformation of our whole being that will be far more radical than we usually appreciate: a casting aside of our "garments of skin" in both their physical and mental dimensions.[37]

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has prepared for those who love him", says Paul, is something that "no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived" (1 Cor.2:9). In this life "we see in a mirror dimly", but in eternal life "we will see face to face", knowing "fully" even as we "have been fully known" (1 Cor.13: 12).

37 A corollary of this kind of understanding relates to the concept of *emergence*. This corollary is that there would seem to be no theological problem in seeing most aspects of our present mental functioning – those not intrinsically associated with the *nous* – as emergent properties of our biological bodies, which will cease to function when we die and will not resume their functioning when we receive our resurrection bodies. This permanent cessation of functioning may be seen simply as an aspect of the way in which casting off our 'garments of skin' includes casting off all those 'functions of the soul' which […] have become 'corporeal' along with the body." This view of our transition beyond death need not, we should perhaps note, challenge the notion that we shall, in the "world to come", experience a resurrection body that is in some way continuous (and in other ways discontinuous) with the body of our present life. The notion of "embodied cognition", which has already been mentioned (see note 30),

May it be, then, that we should reject any notion of the ultimate goal (*telos*) of human life that assumes the survival of "qualities" of the sort that are central to Aristotelian assumptions about what makes us human? And if we do reject these assumptions, may it be that Reinders' focus on seeing cognitive disability in terms of the true *telos* of human life points Orthodox Christians – who see this *telos* in terms of *theosis* – towards seeing this *telos* as something that is as attainable by the cognitively impaired at least to the same extent as it is by those whose impairment is not evident?

This possibility is reinforced by the witness of many who have been the carers of cognitively impaired people, who have sometimes seen in these people a special kind of grace, uneclipsed by the kind of ordinary human "cleverness" that so often hides the reality of God and leads either to atheism or to the kinds of "idolatrous" concepts that Vladimir Lossky warned against by saying that the concepts we form "in accordance with the understanding and the judgement which are natural to us, basing ourselves on an intelligible representation, create idols of God instead of revealing to us God Himself."[38]

Moreover, if people never grow beyond childlike incapacity, or descend into it in old age, we should never forget what Jesus Christ said to those who tried to turn children away from him:

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points to the way in which, even in this life, cognition is far more than the sum of the "purely mental" processes that we usually think of as constituting our cognitive capacities, and it is arguable that this bodily aspect of our cognition will be true also of those capacities when those aspects of them that constitute our "garments of skin" have been shed. Moreover, the Orthodox focus on the dignity of matter – as manifested, for example, in the veneration of icons – together with the way in which Orthodox theology sees salvation as relating, not just to humans but to all created things, seems to reinforce this notion that the material aspects of our being will be essential to our experience of the new creation.

38 Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 33 (paraphrasing Gregory of Nyssa, Life of Moses II.165)

"the kingdom of God belongs to such as these" (Mark 10:16). Indeed, he went further. "Truly," he said, "unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:5).