

FOLLOWING THE INCARNATE LOGOS: CLEMENT OF
ALEXANDRIA AND THEOLOGICAL ETHICS AS
THEOLOGIA VIATORUM

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Abstract:

Clement of Alexandria is famous for his philosophical eclecticism and his sometimes enigmatic writings. While his *Paedagogus* offers straight-forward reflections on Christian ethics, it is less obvious what to make of theological ethics in the *Stromateis*. Clement's theology has been described as a *theologia viatorum*, a theology of the pilgrim. This article argues that such a description is also applicable to Clement's theological ethics. Negative theology sets limits to the possibility of imitating the ineffable and incomprehensible nature of God. Assimilation to God consists in following the Logos in practice, and since truth can only be indirectly and partly captured in language, there can be no such thing as a finished or closed system of theological ethics.

Key Words:

Clement of Alexandria, theological ethics, *theologia viatorum*, negative theology

[I]n the case of people who are setting out on a road with which they are unacquainted, it is sufficient merely to point out the direction. After this they must walk and find out the rest for themselves."¹ (Clement, *Str.* 4.2.4.4)

Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215) is a prime example of how philosophical conceptions of knowledge and ethics was applied to Christian theology at the turn of the third century.² Clement's thinking has, since Adolf von Harnack, at times been described as a philosophical or theological "system".³ Salvatore Lilla went so far as saying that Clement transformed his faith into "a monumental philosophical system" in which the idea of Christ as redeemer was replaced by an "esoteric idea of *gnosis*".⁴ Still, the intentional eclecticism of Clement has earned him the reputation of an ambitious, but unfocused thinker.⁵ Apparent inconsistencies are numerous in Clement's thinking, but this is often due to how he perceived the nature of theology as such. As Henny Hägg has more recently argued, the "so-called inconsistencies in Clement are, no doubt, intended" as alternative ways to represent the otherwise incomprehensible truth.⁶ This naturally raises the question whether Clement's thinking was an attempt at formulating a theological or philosophical

¹ References to Clement are to the GCS-editions in O. Stählin, L. Früchtel & U. Treu, *Clementis Alexandrinus, I-II*, Berlin: Akademie Verlag 1970–1985. Translations are mine, with due consideration to available translations.

² For a recent study of Clement's moral philosophy in its late antique context, see Kathleen Gibbons, *The Moral Psychology of Clement of Alexandria: Mosaic Philosophy*, London: Routledge 2016.

³ See Adolf von Harnack, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte I*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 1909, 642.

⁴ Salvatore R. C. Lilla, *Clement of Alexandria: A Study in Christian Platonism and Gnosticism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1971, 232 and 159. According to Lilla, Clement conceived of "the highest aspect of Christianity" as an esoteric "system of doctrines which can be known only by a select few", *ibid.*, 56. Lilla can also talk of "Clement's ethical system", *ibid.*, 85.

⁵ E.g., David T. Runia, *Philo in Early Christian Literature*, Assen: Van Gorcum 1993, 153.

⁶ Henny Fiskå Hägg, *Clement of Alexandria and the Beginnings of Christian Apophaticism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2006, 29.

system after all, if by “system” we mean a complete or closed set of more or less coherent doctrines?⁷

Seeming inconsistencies are also reflected in Clement’s approach to theological ethics. He often affirms the Platonic ideal of assimilation to God as far as possible.⁸ However, at times he seems to deny the possibility of any likeness to God.⁹ Considered as the ineffable first principle, God the Father cannot be represented by anything created. Assimilation to God is nevertheless possible by imitating the divine Logos. This fact shapes Clement’s ideal of moral perfection through anticipatory faith. While moral perfection is possible through anticipation on the one hand, there is always room for progression on the other. This raises a question about the possibility of adequately describing moral progress and perfection through a theological ethics. As Piotr Ashwin-Siejkowski explains in his study on Clement’s theory of perfection, Clement’s ethical project remained an “unfinished experiment”.¹⁰ Clement’s theology is, as Eric Osborn expresses it, a “pilgrim theology” or a “*theologia viatorum*” antipathetic to a “closed system”.¹¹

In the following I will take this description as a cue and argue that, for Clement, theological ethics in particular might best be described as a *theologia viatorum*. This is, not least, because the Christian cannot “be” like God in essence, but is continually in the process of “becoming” like to God in work and practice. Theological ethics can be true because it emerges from and leads to God, but it is inadequate in the sense that we

⁷ Cf. Quentin Skinner’s criticism of the “mythology of coherence” that seeks to find coherent systems behind the otherwise scattered doctrines of past authors. Rather than trying to place some idea of an author in relation to other ideas in a “system”, we should ask what intention the author had in formulating the particular idea in its particular context. Quentin Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas”, in his *Visions of Politics, vol. 1*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2002, 68. See also Leo Catana, *The Historiographical Concept ‘System of Philosophy’: Its Origin, Nature, Influence and Legitimacy*, Leiden: Brill 2008.

⁸ “To escape is to become like God, so far as this is possible” (φυγή δὲ ὁμοίωσις θεῶν κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν). Plato, *Theaetetus* 176B; Cf. Clement, *Stromateis* 2.22.133.3.

⁹ E.g. *Str.* 6.18.163.1; *Str.* 6.14.114.4-6.

¹⁰ Piotr Ashwin-Siejkowski, *Clement of Alexandria: A Project of Christian Perfection*, New York: T&T Clark 2008, 103. For Clement, the Gnostic was not, says Ashwin-Siejkowski, “a static, semi-divine” spirit; *ibid.*, 228.

¹¹ Eric Osborn, *Clement of Alexandria*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2005, 232; 261. The Christian is a stranger traveling a pilgrimage in the world; *ibid.*, 46.

cannot have (ethical) knowledge of God that is co-extensive with its subject.¹² Since truth can only be described indirectly through metaphors and analogical language, theological ethics cannot describe the contents of the Christian life in any fully adequate manner. The Christian may not be capable of imitating the divine nature, but the incarnated Logos is to be followed in daily practice.

In other words, I will argue (*pace* Lilla) that Clement does not so much replace the idea of Christ as redeemer with a philosophical idea of *gnosis*, as much as he attempts to explain how it is possible to relate to God's eternal Logos through Christ as incarnate in human history. This conception of theological ethics suggests that while Clement's three main works may to some degree be seen as representing three stages of moral progress, this distinction should not be strained since Clement's whole oeuvre, together with pre-Christian culture and philosophy, continues to be relevant even for the advanced Christian.

Negative Theology and the Assimilation to God

Clement's way of writing in the *Stromateis* reflects a deeper connection between negative theology and theological ethics. Like Philo of Alexandria and Justin Martyr before him, Clement held that God is essentially ineffable and incomprehensible in essence, although knowable through his Logos.¹³ God is not capable of being taught (διδακτόν) or expressed in speech (ῥητόν), but can be known "only by His own power" (μόνη τῆ παρ' αὐτοῦ δυνάμει).¹⁴ The Father is inaccessible, but is revealed through the Son, the Logos, who is the image of God in the sense of

¹² I borrow the definition from Hans Lassen Martensen, *Christian Dogmatics: A Compendium of the Doctrines of Christianity*, New York: T&T Clark, 1874, 82. For Martensen, this notion was not antithetic to that of "system" as such, but only to that of a theology as a finished, closed system. For a recent application of the notion of *theologia viatorum* to contemporary ontologies of "becoming" and the idea of *epektasis* as typically associated with Gregory of Nyssa, see Christopher Ben Simpson, *Deleuze and Theology*, London: Bloomsbury 2012, 107ff.

¹³ See Philo, *De mutatione nominum* 7.10; Justin Martyr, *Apologia* 2.6.

¹⁴ *Str.* 5.11.71.5.

being an energy or activity (ἐνέργεια) of the Father.¹⁵ Only through the mediating Logos is it possible to relate to God.

Although Clement is often described as a negative or apophatic theologian, it has been argued by some scholars that his theology is not, strictly speaking, apophatic.¹⁶ This is because Clement applies a method of abstraction rather than negation in its more radically apophatic sense of unsaying.¹⁷ Clement does not, like the Cappadocians later, present a theory of how the ineffable God can be described through negative definitions. God the Father can, for Clement, only be approached through faith in silence. Divine truth can be communicated by being put into language, but only indirectly as language can never capture truth in any final or adequate way. As Raoul Mortley puts it, for Clement theology is a “generalised parable”, and since rational discourse can never demonstrate reality but only symbolize transcendent truth, “language itself calls for a hermeneutic.”¹⁸

The distinction between God as the incomprehensible first principle and the comprehensible Logos is also reflected in Clement’s ethics. Clement makes it clear that nothing created can be “a representation of God” (ἀπεικόνισμα τοῦ θεοῦ).¹⁹ God is not circumscribed by place and cannot be represented (ἀπεικονίζεται) by “the form of a living creature” (ζώου σχήματι).²⁰ While God can be described as “the Father of all”, in the sense of being the creator of everything, Clement is quite clear that human beings only become the children of God by adoption. God has no “natural relation” (φυσικὴν σχέσιν) to us, says Clement in

¹⁵ *Str.* 7.7.7. By himself, God is remote, although near in virtue of his power. *Str.* 2.2.5.4. For similarities with Middle Platonism, see Raoul Mortley, *From Word to Silence II – the Way of Negation, Christian and Greek*, Bonn: Hanstein 1986, 36. According to Hägg, Clement represents an early example of the distinction between God’s essence and activities, although Clement does not so much talk of the common activity of the divine persons as of Christ as the activity of God. Hägg, *Clement of Alexandria*, 238–251.

¹⁶ Cf. Hägg, *Clement of Alexandria*, 154; Daniel Jugrin, “The Way of ἀνάλυσις: Clement of Alexandria and the Platonic Tradition” in *Studia Philosophiae Christianae UKSW* 52 (2016) 2, 91. We may, I think, nevertheless talk of Clement’s theology as negative in the aphairctic sense. See also Deirdre Carabine, *The Unknown God: Negative Theology in the Platonic Tradition*, Eugene: Wipf & Stock 2015, 231–232.

¹⁷ E.g., *Str.* 5.11.71.2–3. Cf. Alcinous, *Didaskalikos* 165.1.14.

¹⁸ Mortley, *From Word to Silence II*, 36.

¹⁹ *Str.* 6.18.163.

²⁰ *Str.* 7.6.30.1.

the second book of the *Stromateis*.²¹ Human beings have nothing “to do” (προσήκοντας) with God either in essence (οὐσία) or nature (φύσει), nor in the “peculiar energy of our essence” (δυνάμει τῆ οἰκεία τῆς οὐσίας). In fact, it is the greatest proof of God’s goodness, that he cares for us, even if we are “by nature wholly estranged” (φύσει ἀπηλλοτριωμένων παντελῶς) from him. We are not “by nature His children”, says Clement, but God nevertheless cares for us by calling us into adoption.

As Ashwin-Siejkowski remarks, Clement’s notion of perfection is formulated in opposition to Gnostic theologians who considered perfection an inborn, essential likeness to God. For Clement, the “road to perfection” was a long process with “many ethical stages”.²² The philanthropic love of the divine Logos is what guides people into salvation, initially by exhortation and baptism.²³ As a result of the instruction of the Logos, we are, says Clement in the *Paedagogus*, “assimilated to God by participation in virtue” (μετ’ οἰκειότητος ἀρετῆς ἐξομοιούμενοι τῷ θεῷ).²⁴ Echoing his negative theology, Clement denies, however, that likeness to God is possible by virtue, since virtue is not the same in God and human beings. Likeness (ὁμοίωσιν) to God, says Clement, consists in the “adoption and the friendship of God”, which comes from being perfected according to the gospel as taught by the Lord, i.e. the Logos.²⁵ It may be the case then, as Clement says, that human beings have nothing to do with God in either essence (οὐσία) or power (δυνάμει), but it is nevertheless possible to relate to God through “the working out” (τῷ ἔργον) of God’s will.²⁶

The fact that human beings are only made children of God by adoption, even if God as creator is the Father of all, is echoed in Clement’s distinction between the “image” and “likeness” in which humanity is created according to Genesis (Gen. 1:26). Similar to how the Logos is the image of God, the image of the Logos is “the mind in the human being”

²¹ *Str.* 2.16.74.1.

²² Ashwin-Siejkowski, *Clement of Alexandria*, 14.

²³ See Andrew Hofer, “Clement of Alexandria’s *Logos Protreptikos*: The Protreptics of Love”, *Pro Ecclesia* 24:4 (2015), 498–516.

²⁴ *Paedagogus* 1.12.99.1–2.

²⁵ *Str.* 6.14.114.5–6.

²⁶ *Str.* 2.16.75.2.

(ὁ νοῦς ὁ ἐν ἀνθρώπῳ).²⁷ But while all human beings are in this way born with the image of God, they will have to be made into the likeness of God by assimilation.²⁸ The Gnostic is the perfect Christian who is made after both the “image and likeness” (εἰκόνα καὶ ὁμοίωσιν) of God and “imitates God as far as possible” (ὁ μιμούμενος τὸν θεὸν καθ’ ὅσον οἷόν τε).²⁹ Conformity with the image and likeness is achieved in “mind and reason” (νοῦν καὶ λογισμὸν) as the Lord impresses (ἐνσφραγίζεται) the seal of likeness.³⁰

Negative theology as a matter of abstraction comes into play when Clement describes the simplicity, impassibility and self-sufficiency of God as ideals for the Christian.³¹ Intellectual abstraction and virtue are linked, since piety consists in a kind of abstraction from the body.³² Clement, in his *Paedagogus*, explains that although God alone is in need of nothing (ἀνευδής), being “assimilated to God” (ἐξομοιωθήσεται θεῷ) consists in requiring as few things as possible.³³ In the exercise of self-restraint we are being assimilated to the Lord as far “as possible” (κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν).³⁴ By disciplining itself to the need of little, our nature “endeavours to approximate in character to divine nature” (συνεγγίζειν πειραῖται κατὰ διάθεσιν τῇ θείᾳ φύσει).³⁵

The purification of body and soul through abstinence from evil things, is the perfection of “the common believer” (τοῦ κοινοῦ πιστοῦ). For the Gnostic, however, righteousness “advances” (προβαίνει) to “activity in doing well” (ἐνέργειαν εὐποιίας).³⁶ It is not enough to be justified by abstinence (ἀποχῆ) from evil, but perfection requires doing well like the Lord.³⁷ Doing well (εὐποιία) is not simply a matter of imitating

²⁷ *Protrepticus* 10.98.4; cf. *Str.* 5.14.94.4.

²⁸ *Paed.* 1.12.98.3; *Prot.* 12.120.3–4. See also Matyáš Havrda, “Grace and Free Will According to Clement of Alexandria”, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 19:1 (2011), 35–37.

²⁹ *Str.* 2.19.97.

³⁰ *Str.* 2.19.102.6.

³¹ E.g., *Str.* 7.3.14.5

³² *Str.* 5.11.67.1.

³³ *Paed.* 3.1.1.1, cf. *Paed.* 3.7.39.4.

³⁴ *Str.* 2.18.80.5.

³⁵ *Str.* 2.18.81.1–2. To “approximate” (συνεγγίζειν) suggests that it is possible to draw near to, but not touch, the divine nature. That our nature “endeavours” also suggests that this approximation is not complete.

³⁶ *Str.* 6.7.60.2–3.

³⁷ *Str.* 4.6.29.2.

the impassible nature of God, but of imitating the concrete works of Christ in relation to others. We must, as far as possible, imitate (μιμῆσθαι) the Lord, says Clement elsewhere, by doing the will of God as we freely give to others what we have received from God.³⁸ In other words, while all human beings may be said to carry the image of the Logos, the actual likeness to God consists in the practice of good works. There may, then, be a negative side to the assimilation to God, where the believer can approximate the divine nature by needing as little as possible, but positive likeness to God is a matter of imitating the Logos in work and practice. Salvation is to follow (ἔπεσθαι) Christ.³⁹

In the seventh book of the *Stromateis*, Clement again denies a similarity in the virtue of God and human beings: “We do not say, as the Stoics, that virtue in man and God is the same”.⁴⁰ When Christ admonishes his disciples to be perfect as the Father is perfect (Matt. 5:48), this means forgiving sins and living a life free of the passions. However, none of this is received (παραλαμβάνεται) “in the sense of likeness to God” (εἰς ὁμοιότητα θεοῦ). It is “utterly impossible” (ἀδύνατον γὰρ καὶ ἀμήχανον) for anyone to become perfect as God is, says Clement, but the Father wishes us to be perfect by living in obedience to the Gospel.⁴¹ Again, perfection does not consist in an essential likeness to the Father, but in following the Logos. Righteousness “imitates the divine character” (μιμητικὴ τῆς θείας διαθέσεως), says Clement elsewhere, but this means assimilation to the Lord, Christ, rather than the divine nature.⁴²

Although critical of the Stoic definition of virtue, Clement happily borrows the Stoic notion of anticipation or *prolepsis* (πρόληψις) which he identifies with faith.⁴³ God can be apprehended by faith alone, says Clement, since first principles are incapable of demonstration.⁴⁴ Faith is

³⁸ *Str.* 1.1.9.4, cf. *Str.* 2.19.102.2.

³⁹ *Paed.* 1.6.26.3.

⁴⁰ *Str.* 7.14.88.5–6. The seventh book of the *Stromateis* is Clement’s attempt at describing “the life of the Gnostic” rather than theoretical teachings (τῶν δογμάτων θεωρίαν), as he puts it. *Str.* 7.10.59.7.

⁴¹ *Str.* 7.14.88.6.

⁴² *Str.* 2.18.80.5.

⁴³ *Str.* 2.4.17.3.

⁴⁴ *Str.* 4.25.162.5; *Str.* 8.3.7.2. See Dragoş A. Giulea, “Apprehending ‘Demonstrations’ from the First Principle: Clement of Alexandria’s Phenomenology of Faith”, *Journal of Religion* 89:2 (2009), 199.

the voluntary anticipation of apprehension (καταλήψεως),⁴⁵ but this is also why future perfection can be anticipated here and now through faith. The Gnostic rejoices in the things promised by anticipation (φθάσας), “as if they were already present” (ὡς ἤδη παροῦσιν).⁴⁶ Those “who first have touched the confines of life” (τῶν ὄρων τῆς ζωῆς), are already perfect, says Clement in the *Paedagogus*.⁴⁷ As Raoul Mortley has argued, for Clement the true Gnostic is “characterized by the present tense, and never the future: it is never said the he *will* obtain knowledge, peace, righteousness or heavenly rewards; he has them now.”⁴⁸ Clement can even speak of the Gnostic as one who has “already become God” (ἤδη γενέσθαι θεόν).⁴⁹

The anticipation of perfection is a matter of hope and love. The Gnostic, says Clement, loves the things hoped for as “already known” (τὰ ἐγνωσμένα ἤδη) and apprehended through hope.⁵⁰ The Gnostic has predestinated (προορίσας) himself, says Clement, and thereby made the future “already present” (ἐνεστὸς ἤδη) through love and knowledge.⁵¹ His point seems to be that although perfect insight is not possible here and now, the anticipation of perfection is in itself a form of perfection. Clement also notes that he, who by love is already in the midst of that which is to become, possesses “as far as possible” (ὡς οἶόν) the very thing reached for (τὸ ὀρεκτόν).⁵² However, that “which is to become” (γενόμενος) is hardly something fully achieved yet. As suggested by the phrase “as far as possible” (ὡς οἶόν), the Gnostic is still in a process of attainment.⁵³ Love is what makes present that which is to become, but, as Peter Karavites puts it, for Clement love is not an easy beginning, but the “never fulfilled perfection” of the moral journey.⁵⁴

⁴⁵ *Str.* 2.6.28.1.

⁴⁶ *Str.* 7.7.47.5.

⁴⁷ *Paed.* 1.6.26.3.

⁴⁸ Mortley, *From Word to Silence II*, 40.

⁴⁹ *Str.* 4.23.149.8.

⁵⁰ *Str.* 7.11.63.1.

⁵¹ *Str.* 6.9.77.2–4.

⁵² *Str.* 6.9.73.4.

⁵³ Notice that Clement is not using the Platonic κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν but ὡς οἶόν. G.W. Butterworth, “The Meaning of ΩΣ ΟΙΟΝ ΤΕ”, *Classical Review* 33 (1919), 15–17.

⁵⁴ Peter Karavites, *Evil Freedom, and the Road to Perfection in Clement of Alexandria*, Leiden: Brill 1999, 174.

There is for Clement, as Osborn notes, a “two-foldedness” of faith.⁵⁵ Through hope, future realities become present, but not fully as hope would then cease to be hope (cf. Rom. 8:24). It may be true, then, that the Gnostic is characterized by “the present tense”, as Mortley says, but this does not mean that the perfection of faith in knowledge does not at the same time consist in a continuing process. This is because the perfection of faith in knowledge does not consist in a static likeness to the divine nature, but in works of love. The aim of knowledge is to make “faith active by love” (τὴν πίστιν διὰ τῆς ἀγάπης).⁵⁶ Faith is the beginning of action (ἀρχὴ γὰρ πράξεως),⁵⁷ and the purpose of faith is the performance of the commandments (ἐντολὰς ἐπιτελεῖν).⁵⁸

Perfection as an Endless Process

In a puzzling statement Clement says that: “You shall be what you do not hope, and cannot conjecture” (ἔση γὰρ οἶος οὐκ ἐλπίζεις οὐδ’ εἰκάσαι δύναιο ἄν).⁵⁹ Perhaps it could be argued that these words, from the *Paedagogus*, must be directed at the ordinary believer, considering that the Gnostic is to some degree already that which he hopes for. Still, even if the Gnostic has attained knowledge, this knowledge is not something fixed or final. For Clement, knowledge is, says Hägg, “a subject matter”, but also “a way or a process”. To have knowledge of God is “to be part of a process, leading from faith via gnosis to the love of God.”⁶⁰ This should not be mistaken for a kind of esotericism with secret doctrines, but faith is, as mentioned above, nevertheless two-fold in the sense that it admits of growth (αὐξησις) and perfection (τελείωσις).⁶¹

The ordinary believer is not yet righteous (οὐδέπω καὶ δίκαιος) in the sense of “progress and perfection” (προκοπὴν καὶ τελείωσιν).⁶² This apparent identification of righteousness with progress as well as perfection may suggest that perfection itself consists in progression in

⁵⁵ Osborn, *Clement of Alexandria*, 232.

⁵⁶ *Str.* 1.1.4.1.

⁵⁷ *Str.* 2.2.9.2; *Str.* 2.6.27.4.

⁵⁸ *Str.* 5.1.2.6.

⁵⁹ *Paed.* 2.12.99.1.

⁶⁰ Hägg, *Clement of Alexandria*, 149–151.

⁶¹ *Str.* 5.1.2.4.

⁶² *Str.* 6.12.102.5.

righteousness. Righteousness can, says Clement, be called the royal road (ὁδός), on which “the royal race travels”.⁶³ In an article on Clement’s reading of the beatitudes, Veronika Černušková quotes this passage and notes that for such a person, righteousness results from neither fear nor hope, but only from free choice. While the latter two belong to earlier stages, spiritual progress culminates in a higher kind of desire that does what is good for the sake of goodness itself.⁶⁴ However, due to human freedom, perfection is not achieved immediately, but only in an on-going process. Human beings are not forced to choose the good, but must gradually learn to do so.⁶⁵

That perfection could be considered as an on-going process may also be the point when Clement in the seventh *Stromateis* explains how knowledge leads to “the endless and perfect end” (τέλος ἄγει τὸ ἀτελεύτητον καὶ τέλειον) by “teaching beforehand” (προοιδάσκουσα) the future life.⁶⁶ This somewhat paradoxical description of the perfect end (or perfection) as in some way endless (or imperfect) seems to support the idea of perfection as itself a matter of continual progress in anticipation of future perfection. With reference to Phil. 3:13, Clement notes in the *Paedagogus* that Paul reckons himself perfect, not because he is already perfect in knowledge, but because he has been emancipated from his former life and now strives after the better by “aspiring” (ἐφιέμενος) after perfection.⁶⁷

In this way Clement may be said to prefigure the idea of continual perfection as *epektasis* often associated with later theologians like Gregory of Nyssa. Clement can, much like Gregory, describe how the Gnostic as “the son and friend” of God devotes himself to “insatiable contemplation”.⁶⁸ Clement, however, describes this contemplation as “face to face”, whereas Gregory would in a more radical manner claim that like

⁶³ *Str.* 7.12.73.5

⁶⁴ Veronika Černušková, “Clement of Alexandria and the Sermon on the Mount”, in: V. Černušková, J. L. Kovacs & J. Plátová (eds.), *Clement’s Biblical Exegesis: Proceedings of the Second Colloquium on Clement of Alexandria*, Leiden: Brill 2017, 224–225.

⁶⁵ Havrda, “Grace and Free Will”, 27–32.

⁶⁶ *Str.* 7.10.56.2.

⁶⁷ *Paed.* 1.6.52.3.

⁶⁸ *Str.* 5.6.40.1.

Moses the friend of God never gets to see the face of God.⁶⁹ The difference is arguably due to the fact that for Clement, the face of God is the Logos through which the Gnostic relates to God. Nevertheless, Clement does seem to agree that perfection is, at least in this life, not finally achieved. The Gnostic soul, says Clement, is ever improving in the increase (αὔξησιν) of righteousness in its journey (προκοπήν) as it is reaching out (ἐπεκτεινομένην) towards the habit of impassibility (ἔξιν ἀπαθείας).⁷⁰ While this aim is described by Clement in a way that may suggest that such perfection is the end of the journey, the soul hardly arrives there, at least not in this life.

The Gnostic possesses all good things as far as possible but not likewise in number, says Clement, since otherwise he would be incapable of “changing his place” (ἀμετάθετος) through the inspired stages of “advancement” (προκοπάς).⁷¹ Stability in virtue does not mean that there is no room for further perfection. When Clement in the seventh book of the *Stromateis* describes how progress to what is better goes on until the soul comes to the Father’s “doorway” or “vestibule” (προθύροισι) which is “the Good itself”, Clement is arguably not here imagining some final, static end to the progress in virtue.⁷² Rather, this “doorway” is itself the room in which the continuous movement in perfection takes place. That the Gnostic “has become inflexible” (ἀκλινῆς γενόμενος) hardly means that the Gnostic cannot change. Rather, such inflexibility consists in, as Clement puts it, walking “unswervingly” where justice advises him to go. Perfection consists in the continuous, ongoing approximation to God through the assimilation to the Logos. The act of salvation is never still, as Osborn rightly puts it.⁷³ This becomes even clearer when we consider Clement’s understanding of deification.

Echoing Irenaeus, although in pedagogical terms, Clement notes that the Logos of God became human, that we may learn from a human being how to “become God” (γένηται θεός).⁷⁴ Deification is the aim of the

⁶⁹ E.g., Gregory, *De Vita Moysis* 2.239.

⁷⁰ *Str.* 7.2.10.1.

⁷¹ *Str.* 7.7.47.7.

⁷² *Str.* 7.7.45.3.

⁷³ Osborn, *Clement of Alexandria*, 37.

⁷⁴ *Prot.* 1.8.4.

Christian life.⁷⁵ Knowledge of the Father is eternal life through communion (μετουσίαν) with the power (δυνάμειως) of the incorrupt, and to be incorruptible, says Clement, is to participate in divinity (θειότητος μετέχειν).⁷⁶ The human person “becomes unified” (μοναδικὸς γίνεται) like the Son when deified (θεοούμενος) into a passionless state, as Clement puts it, but this does not necessarily mean that deification is achieved once and for all.⁷⁷

Although it may seem to be just another aspect of the assimilation to God, deification is more than a matter of likeness to an ideal. According to Arkadi Choufrine, Clement could not have arrived at his notion of deification simply through the Platonic idea of assimilation to God “as far as possible”, where assimilation “does not make one *closer* to God in any sense.”⁷⁸ Clement not only sees Jesus as an example to be followed, but as the ontological ground for the possibility of participating in the divine.⁷⁹ Deification means nearness to God through participation in Christ.⁸⁰ This is arguably implied when Clement in the fifth book of the *Stromateis* describes “contemplative analysis” as a process of abstraction that leads to a notion of unity, as mentioned above. Clement goes further than the standard Middle Platonic account of abstraction, as this notion of unity must finally be left behind as we cast ourselves into “the magnitude of Christ” (τὸ μέγεθος τοῦ Χριστοῦ) and advance (προοίμεν) into immensity (ἀχανές) by holiness.⁸¹

Since Clement’s description here comes as a conclusion on a discourse on the infinity of God considered as the One, it may be argued

⁷⁵ See Henny Fiskå Hägg, “Deification in Clement of Alexandria with a Special Reference to his Use of *Theaetetus* 176B”, in: J. Baun et al. (eds.), *Studia Patristica XLVI*, Vol. 3, Leuven: Peeters Publishers 2010, 169.

⁷⁶ *Str.* 5.10.63.8. Clement more or less identifies μετουσία and μέθεξις.

⁷⁷ *Str.* 4.23.152.1–2. Clement affirms the Pythagorean saying that “man ought to become one” (ἕνα γενέσθαι καὶ τὸν ἄνθρωπον δεῖν). *Str.* 4.23.151.3.

⁷⁸ Plato, *Theaetetus* 176b; Arkadi Choufrine, *Gnosis, Theophany, Theosis: Studies in Clement of Alexandria’s Appropriation of His Background*, New York: Peter Lang 2002, 179.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 7. Choufrine criticizes Lilla for an inadequate understanding of the role of deification in Clement.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 159; Eric Osborn, *Ethical Patterns in Early Christian Thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1976, 66.

⁸¹ *Str.* 5.11.71.3.

that perfection is indeed endless due to the infinity of God.⁸² Choufrine understands Clement's use of the term "magnitude" here as being related to his use of the term "infinite" (ἄπειρον). When Clement talks of the magnitude of Christ he is talking of infinity in the Aristotelian sense of infinite potentiality of growth.⁸³ The magnitude of Christ is what differentiates the Gnostic infinitely from God, while simultaneously being the infinite proximity to God.⁸⁴ There is hardly any possibility that the human mind can come into direct touch with God the Father, but the "magnitude of Christ" holds "the possibility of unlimited advance towards a transcendent limit". The end (τέλος) of this advancement is a limit (πέρας) which is not a part of this magnitude. The true Gnostic's un-ending progress is for Clement an approximation to the Son's proximity to the Father, who alone is infinite in the absolute sense.⁸⁵

Choufrine, as opposed to Mortley, argues that coming into direct contact with God the Father is not possible according to Clement.⁸⁶ This is due to the infinity of the "magnitude" in which the Gnostic advances towards God. This does not mean that the Christian is completely separated from God ontologically, since deification is still possible through participation in Christ. Nevertheless, the idea of deification should, I think, be balanced by Clement's clear emphasis on the distinction between creator and creation. This ontological difference is exactly why deification does not culminate in a final deified state, but can only be a continuous process of participation. The unlimited advance in the magnitude of Christ is what it means for our nature to "endeavour" to "approximate in character" to the divine nature.⁸⁷ This approximation does not, however, blur out the distinction between creator and creation. In terms of ontology, deification does not mean having one's essence or nature changed into a divine nature, but to participate in "the power"

⁸² See Damian Mrugalski, "La dottrina dell'infinità di Dio e le sue implicazioni: Clemente di Alessandria e Gregorio di Nissa" (forthcoming).

⁸³ Choufrine, *Gnosis, Theophany*, 173f.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 182.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 160. The "magnitude of Christ" is arguably more or less synonymous with the Father's "vestibule" as discussed above. Cf. *Str.* 5.11.71.3 with *Str.* 7.7.45.3.

⁸⁶ Cf. Choufrine, *Gnosis, Theophany*, 182; Mortley, *From Word to Silence II*, 119.

⁸⁷ *Str.* 2.18.81.1–2.

(δυναμέως) of God.⁸⁸ Deification consists in continuously becoming a partaker in God's works, rather than in God's being or essence.

This may be illustrated by some of Clement's notes in the appendix to the *Stromateis* (the eighth book). In defining the types of causes, Clement explains that being (τὸ εἶναι) should be distinguished from becoming (τοῦ γίνεσθαι) like cause from effect.⁸⁹ The cause (αἴτιον) is that which acts (ἐνεργεῖ).⁹⁰ Elsewhere Clement seems to make a somewhat parallel distinction between action and habit, when he says that no action (ἐνεργεῖα) is a habit (ἔξις).⁹¹ In this way, perhaps habit may be considered a matter of "being" while action may be considered a matter of "becoming". While the Gnostic is said to abide in the unchanging habit (ἀμεταβόλω ἔξει) of well-doing (εὐποιίας) after "the likeness of God" (ὁμοίωσιν τοῦ θεοῦ),⁹² it is arguably not this "habit" itself, but the well-doing effected by the habit, that assimilates the Christian to God.

It would probably be going too far to argue in modern Kierkegaardian terms that Christian ethics, then, is not about habitual "being" but only about continuously "becoming".⁹³ Nevertheless, deification, for Clement, is first of all a matter of participating in the activities of God by imitating the Logos in action. Perfection does not consist in an essential likeness to God the Father, but in obedience to the gospel.⁹⁴ Moral perfection should, for this reason, not be taken for granted, but must rather be "continually supported, strengthened and further developed", as Piotr Ashwin-Siejkowski puts it.⁹⁵

The Possibility of Theological Ethics

To sum up, assimilation to God cannot be a matter of an essential likeness to the ineffable and incomprehensible first principle, but must, for Clement, be the outcome of following Christ by imitating his works in practice. Perhaps this may be taken as suggesting a somewhat positive

⁸⁸ *Str.* 5.10.63.8.

⁸⁹ *Str.* 8.9.29.6.

⁹⁰ *Str.* 8.9.29.3.

⁹¹ *Str.* 7.11.66.2.

⁹² *Str.* 6.7.60.3.

⁹³ See Clare Carlisle, *Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Becoming: Movements and Positions*, Ithaca: SUNY Press 2005, 3.

⁹⁴ *Str.* 7.14.88.6.

⁹⁵ Ashwin-Siejkowski, *Clement of Alexandria*, 168.

or “kataphatic” moral epistemology, rather than a negative or “apophatic” one. Still, it seems that moral perfection cannot easily be pinned down in moral propositions as the virtue of the Gnostic to some degree runs unnoticed by himself and others. This is at least the case when at one point Clement, arguably reflecting Jesus’ sermon on the mount (Matt. 6:1–4), remarks that “[n]ot even he himself who shows mercy ought to know (γινώσκειν) that he does show mercy; for in this way he will be sometimes merciful, sometimes not.”⁹⁶ Moral integrity goes under the radar, so to speak.

This does not mean that the Gnostic acts spontaneously with no moral reflection. All the practice of “someone of knowledge” (τοῦ ἐπιστήμονος) is right action, says Clement in the seventh book of the *Stromateis*, while practice without knowledge is bad action (κακοπραγία), since it lacks reflection (λογισμοῦ).⁹⁷ The virtue that results from following the Logos is, moreover, not entirely invisible. On the contrary, the soul of the righteous man, says Clement, is “a divine ornament” (ἄγαλμα θεῖον) that “resembles God” (θεῶν προσεμφορῆς), while the person who is assimilated to God “adorns those who hear him”.⁹⁸ The Gnostic who considers the benefit of his neighbours as his own salvation is “a living ornament” (ἄγαλμα ἔμψυχον) of the Lord, says Clement, if not in respect to “the peculiarity of form” (μορφῆς ιδιότητα), then at least as “the symbol of the power” (κατὰ τὸ τῆς δυνάμεως σύμβολον) and similarity of preaching.⁹⁹

The point again seems to be that the Gnostic resembles the Logos, not by an essential likeness to the divine nature, but by imitating the works of Christ. An important part of this work is in teaching others. While becoming assimilated to God, the Gnostic not only “builds and creates himself”, as Clement famously puts it, but the Gnostic also simultaneously “forms those who listen”.¹⁰⁰ Every soul that has “lived purely in the knowledge of God” and obeyed the commandments is a witness or martyr (μάρτυς) by “life and word” (βίῳ καὶ λόγῳ).¹⁰¹ Martyrdom, broadly speaking, is perfection, not because a final end has been

⁹⁶ *Str.* 4.22.138.2

⁹⁷ *Str.* 7.10.59.5.

⁹⁸ *Str.* 7.3.16.5.

⁹⁹ *Str.* 7.9.52.3.

¹⁰⁰ *Str.* 7.3.13.3.

¹⁰¹ *Str.* 4.4.15.3.

achieved, says Clement, but because the martyr “points out a perfect work of love” (τέλειον ἔργον ἀγάπης ἐνεδείξατο).¹⁰²

In this way, as Karavites puts it, the Christian’s moral journey may begin with a realization of human inadequacy, but it goes through a conversion of one’s isolated life to a life of communion and relationship.¹⁰³ In the words of Ashwin-Siejkowski, Clement’s ideal of the Gnostic is “not an anchorite or hermit living in isolation”, but active in the “pedagogical education of others” in the local community.¹⁰⁴ An ideal of the Gnostic as someone isolated from others might have followed if assimilation to God was only a matter of, for example, imitating the Father’s simplicity, but for Clement imitating God means teaching others to become partakers of the Logos by following Christ. This makes the question about the possibility of formulating a theological ethics still more acute.

However, Clement’s negative theology seems to put some limits to the possibility of formulating a theological ethics. As a result of God’s ineffability, when theological and ethical truth is expressed in language it will necessarily be clothed with metaphors and allegories that are only partially true. This may be illustrated by Clement’s remarks on the nature of “wisdom” in the sixth book of the *Stromateis*. Clement explains that wisdom is in one sense “eternal” (αἰώνιος), presumably in the Platonic sense of being outside time, but in another sense it “becomes useful in time” (δὲ χρόνῳ λυσιτελής).¹⁰⁵ Wisdom is, as such, “partly perfect” and “partly incomplete” (ἦ μὲν τέλειος, ἦ δὲ ἐνδεής), says Clement. While eternal, wisdom is only revealed indirectly and in part in human life. The wisdom in the instruction of the Logos is many (πολλή) and the modes of His economy for salvation is manifold (πικίλος), says Clement in the *Paedagogus*, with clear allusions to Ephesians.¹⁰⁶ Divine truth is only gradually disclosed, since the measures

¹⁰² *Str.* 4.4.14.4.

¹⁰³ Peter Karavites, *Evil Freedom, and the Road to Perfection in Clement of Alexandria*, Leiden: Brill 1999, 174.

¹⁰⁴ Ashwin-Siejkowski, *Clement of Alexandria*, 172–173.

¹⁰⁵ *Str.* 6.7.54.1; *Str.* 6.7.54.3.

¹⁰⁶ *Paed.* 1.8–9. The Logos is “one thing as all things” (ὡς πάντα ἔν), mediating between the ineffable unity of the Father and the diversity of creation; *Str.* 4.25.156.1.

taken by the Logos in leading to this truth are relative to the circumstances and needs of those who are being taught.¹⁰⁷

We should, says Clement at the very beginning of the first book of the *Stromateis*, “walk towards the truth which shows through Scripture things which are not written in Scripture”.¹⁰⁸ Since truth itself – due to God’s ineffability – cannot be expressed in language, Scripture is, in other words, a road-sign to a truth only indirectly revealed.¹⁰⁹ The commandments in Scripture should not simply be taken at face value, but interpreted in a spiritual sense. It is not, of course, that for example the Decalogue does not apply to the Gnostic. Rather, its particular commandments must be understood in a more general sense, as when the prohibition against coveting is said to apply to self-centered desire (ἐπιθυμία) in general.¹¹⁰ The aim of the law is to emancipate “the free choice” (τὸ ἐκούσιον ἐλευθερώσας) that makes faith possible.¹¹¹ The law has a preliminary function, but its commandments cannot simply be replaced by higher or more general moral principles. To the degree that the Gnostic wants to communicate spiritual and moral truth, such truth must again be veiled (or particularized). As Hägg observes, the message should be adapted to the needs and capacities of different categories of readers.¹¹²

The Gnostic imitates the Logos by adapting his or her lessons to each student. This is arguably what is going on in Clement’s own writings, not least in the *Stromateis* but also in the *Paedagogus* and the *Protrepticus*. Judith Kovacs, in an article on the *Protrepticus*, draws attention to the fact that in teaching others, the Gnostic, according to Clement, may resort to speaking “an untruth” as a doctor might do for the deliverance

¹⁰⁷ Hägg, *Clement of Alexandria*, 143.

¹⁰⁸ *Str.* 1.1.10.1.

¹⁰⁹ Or perhaps, Scripture is itself “the road taken by the faithful”, as Clement also puts it in *Str.* 3.5.42.5; cf. Osborn, *Clement of Alexandria*, 46. See also Johannes Aakjær Steenbuch, “Negative Theology and Dialectics in Clement of Alexandria’s Understanding of the Status and Function of Scripture”, in: V. Černušková, J. L. Kovacs & J. Plátová (eds.), *Clement’s Biblical Exegesis: Proceedings of the Second Colloquium on Clement of Alexandria*, Leiden: Brill 2016, 127–146.

¹¹⁰ *Paed.* 2.6.51.

¹¹¹ *Paed.* 3.12.

¹¹² Hägg, *Clement of Alexandria*, 149.

of those who are ill.¹¹³ The adaption of truth to circumstances is not, of course, a matter of leading people into falsity, but the contrary. Truth, it seems, must be communicated in fitting doses if the patient is to grow from ignorance to knowledge. For this reason it can be necessary to leave the more advanced aspects of truth out in silence. This is, according to Kovacs, reflected in the differences between Clement's rather harsh criticism of Pagan religion in the *Protrepticus*, and the more optimistic tone of the *Paedagogus*, directed at Christians in a process of maturing. God is both righteous and merciful, but sometimes it is necessary to focus more on God's judgments and leave out the rest in silence.

It could perhaps be argued that for Clement, the particularity of the law is left behind as soon as one arrives at faith. Clement explains in the *Protrepticus* that with the coming of Christ, all the counsels and precepts that deal with what is "partial" (*ἐπὶ μέρους*) have become unimportant compared with piety. Piety is the only command that is "universal, and over the whole course of existence, at all times and in all circumstances".¹¹⁴ This does not mean, however, that theological ethics can now be reduced to a simplistic teaching about piety. Ashwin-Siejkowski notes that for Clement, piety as taught by the Mosaic laws together with gentleness and kindness are the three "canons" or "measurements" of progress towards assimilation to God.¹¹⁵ However, I find it reasonable to say that as "measurements" these virtues are not adequate descriptions of what likeness to God consists in. They are only signs whose actual content must be worked out in an ongoing process. There continues, in other words, to be a particularity to the instruction of the Logos even if its universal aim is revealed in the incarnation.

Moreover, Clement is aware that even for Christians, repentance may sometimes be necessary.¹¹⁶ Even the "people of the Lord" may be in need of correction and chastisement for their own good.¹¹⁷ In this way, the high ideal of Christian perfection is balanced by a realistic awareness of the prevalent risk of sin. This suggests that the *Paedagogus* and the

¹¹³ *Str.* 7.9.53.1–2; Kovacs, "'To Exhibit Silently': What Clement of Alexandria Leaves Un-said in His *Protreptikos*", *Eastern Theological Journal* 3/2 (2017), 257–287 (273–274).

¹¹⁴ *Prof.* 11.113.1.

¹¹⁵ *Str.* 7.13.4; Ashwin-Siejkowski, *Clement of Alexandria*, 160–161.

¹¹⁶ E.g., when he reads the parable of the prodigal son as a story about the possibility of repentance for Christians.

¹¹⁷ *Str.* 7.16.102.4–5.

Protrepticus continue to carry a relevance even for the advanced Christian. The *Protrepticus* is, as Andrew Hofer puts it, not merely propaedeutic to Clement's real intellectual agenda, but a part of "his own *paideia* toward Christian perfection".¹¹⁸ If, in fact, the intended audience of the *Protrepticus* is not so much Pagans as Christians, exhortation may be considered a part of the continuous formation of Christians rather than just an initial step left behind.¹¹⁹ The critique against Pagan religion continues to be relevant for the Christian, if only as a sign-post of what is, or should have been, left behind.

The divine Logos trains and teaches through progressive stages of salvation according to a plan (οικονομία), says Clement in the *Paedagogus*.¹²⁰ Scholars often mention how Clement distinguishes between three phases of the Logos' relation to human beings.¹²¹ While this is indeed true, perhaps we should be careful not to box up Clement's teachings too neatly into a three-fold system. The partial, symbolic nature of *all* language, including moral language, suggests that Clement's often very specific moral advice, especially in the *Paedagogus*, should not be taken as expressing a finished system. This is not just because Clement happened not to finish his system, but rather because of the open nature of truth as such. The "stages" of the divine plan are, in other words, typological of something that may be much more dynamic and messy in real life. We wander in life (ἀλώμενοι τῷ βίῳ) as in deep darkness, says Clement in the *Paedagogus*. The Logos is the guide that does not stumble or stray, and his commandments and counsels (τὰς ἐντολάς καὶ τὰς ὑποθημοσύνας) are short and straight paths to immortality.¹²² However, since human beings differ much in where they are on their way to perfection, and since the assimilation to God is never achieved finally, at least not in this life, the Logos continues to adapt to the particular needs of each individual person. Theological ethics will necessarily reflect this fact.

¹¹⁸ Hofer, "Clement of Alexandria's *Logos Protreptikos*", 504.

¹¹⁹ Diana M. Swancutt, "Paraenesis in Light of Protrepis Torubling the Dichotomy", in: J. Starr & T. Engberg-Pedersen (eds.), *Early Christian Paraenesis in Context*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter 2005, 113–153.

¹²⁰ *Paed.* 1.3.3.

¹²¹ *Paed.* 1.1.3.3; Kovacs, "To Exhibit Silently", 275; Havrda, "Grace and Free Will", 24.

¹²² *Paed.* 1.3.9.2–4.

Conclusion: Theological Ethics as *Theologia Viatorum*?

To repeat, Clement's theological ethics is not a finished system. This explains why Clement would never write the promised *Didascalus*, but ended up writing the *Stromateis* instead. As Eric Osborn puts it in a footnote: "Clement's *theologia viatorum* can never offer the closed system which some have foolishly thought proper to a *Didascalus*."¹²³ For this reason, non-Christian culture and philosophy continues to be useful, as is clear from Clement's own use of the Hebrew bible and as Pagan philosophy and religion in the *Stromateis*. Human culture and language cannot be left behind as long as we are on our way. It may, in other words, be possible, as Lilla formulates it, to establish a sort of "parallelism" between the function of Greek philosophy in the history of mankind on the one hand and the role which it still plays in the formation of the perfect Christian.¹²⁴ This is not, however, because Christian knowledge consists in a philosophical system like that of Middle Platonism, but on the contrary, because perfection is an on-going process, both ontologically and epistemologically. That theological ethics is not a finished system is not just due to the nature of divine truth, which can only be represented in part, allegorically and symbolically, but also due to the way moral perfection continues to be an on-going process even for the advanced Christian.

In the above I have argued that Christian perfection must be considered an ongoing process even if the Christian anticipates perfection by faith and love. The deification and assimilation to God is not a matter of having one's nature changed into the divine nature but of imitating the works of Christ in practice. In other words, imitating God is not a matter of imitating the ineffable divine nature, but of following the incarnated Logos in its humanity. Becoming assimilated to God is, as such, to become more fully human. This also means, however, that theological ethics can be true by leading to God, but never adequate in the sense of fully representing God or the good in its essence. Theological ethics is as such a *theologia viatorum* as defined above: true, but never fully adequate. Moral propositions can be considered true when they describe what following the Logos looks like in practice, but this does not make moral knowledge adequate in the sense of capturing the good in a

¹²³ Osborn, *Clement of Alexandria*, 232.

¹²⁴ Lilla, *Clement of Alexandria*, 12.

closed ethical system. Theological ethics can point out the direction, but we must, to paraphrase Clement, walk and find out the rest for ourselves.¹²⁵

In the words of Ashwin-Siejkowski, Clement's theory contains a "realistic perception of the current, historical development of the church, but with a strong emphasis on its divine core."¹²⁶ While Clement's theological ethics can hardly be used as an argument for moral relativism in the modern sense, it should at least remind us of the importance of having a fundamental moral sensibility to the peculiarities of circumstances and the ongoing development of the individual person as well as the culture of communities. Clement's ethics presents us with a high ideal of deification through assimilation to God, but the road towards realizing this ideal must be fenced with realism. Far from making his work of less value, this is exactly why Clement's ethical teachings can still be valuable today. While aimed at universal and eternal truth, theological ethics must always be contextualized if it is to have any relevance or meaning for concrete human beings in their historical and cultural circumstances.

¹²⁵ *Str.* 4.2.4.4

¹²⁶ Ashwin-Siejkowski, *Clement of Alexandria*, 192.