**Not Without a Guide: The Role of Reason in the Orthodox Tradition**

Todd Trembley

Reading only the contemporary andpopular literature on the Orthodox spiritual life, it is possible to get the impression that Orthodox Christianity affirms only mystical theology and that it has no place for philosophical investigation, rational inquiry, or thinking for oneself. One hears again and again the famous dictum of Evagrius Ponticus, that “A theologian is one who prays, and one who prays is a theologian,”[[1]](#footnote-1) as well as St. Gregory the Theologian’s claim that theology and philosophy are not activities that everyone should engage in, but only those who are themselves purified or at least in the process of being purified,[[2]](#footnote-2) since purity allows the God who is light to be apprehended by light.[[3]](#footnote-3) The conviction is that theology can only be properly pursued from a living encounter with God rather than by trying to think about God without the benefit of this sort of experiential data. Some have even gone as far as to say that the Fathers of the Church reject not only all of the views of ancient philosophers but even their method of arriving at the truth.[[4]](#footnote-4) And according to these modern representatives of the hesychastic way, the only correct method for coming to know the truth about ourselves, the created world, and God is to purify our hearts of passions through ascetical disciplines such as prayer, fasting and alms-giving, so that we will be illuminated and attain to the vision of God as uncreated light;[[5]](#footnote-5) by contrast, philosophical inquiry, or metaphysics, which proceeds by conjecture and has reason at the center, leads to erroneous theories and brings innumerable evils upon the world.[[6]](#footnote-6) In this paper I hope to show that this view of the relationship between philosophy and the Orthodox Christian life is one-sided and distorted. For while it is certainly true that reason is impotent to lay bare the very nature of God,[[7]](#footnote-7) St. Gregory the Theologian, St. Maximos the Confessor, and St. John of Damascus all see it as a guide and powerful ally in coming to know that God exists and a little of what He is like, as well as in patterning our lives after He who is the source of all life. The explicit statements that these Fathers make as well as the use that they make of reason in their writings show how it can function as a guide for those in the beginning stages of the spiritual life even if it ultimately points beyond itself to the God who is beyond every conception.

In the Orthodox tradition, St. John of Damascus is undoubtedly the Church Father who most explicitly supports reason and philosophical inquiry. His *Fount of Knowledge*, of which *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* is only the concluding part, begins with a discussion and summary of philosophy since “Knowledge is the light of the rational soul,”[[8]](#footnote-8) and “The nature of all things… may be apprehended through industry and toil... by the grace of God.”[[9]](#footnote-9) He holds that it is right and proper to set forth “The best contributions of the philosophers of the Greeks, because whatever there is of good has been given… from above by God,” and He affirms St. Basil the Great’s dictum that we should be like the bee who visits every flower in order to gather even from those outside the faith what is true and good as an aid for our salvation.[[10]](#footnote-10) St. John thinks that we should not belittle what is good in the thinking of the philosophers but should instead use reasoning to overthrow falsehood.[[11]](#footnote-11) Finally, he admits that he has been hesitant to write about God since he has not purified his mind or understanding, “That they may serve as a mirror of God and His divine reflections,” but instead bears within himself the tumultuous seas of his conjectures.[[12]](#footnote-12) Nonetheless, he asserts that those “who have not received the gifts of miracles and teaching” can still discuss the teachings that have been handed down in the Scriptures and Holy Fathers,[[13]](#footnote-13) and can even reason with those who do not accept these sources of authority.[[14]](#footnote-14) St. Maximos the Confessor also affirms conjecture in *The* *Ambigua* where he undertakes to clarify some of the difficulties in St. Gregory the Theologian’s writings. For while St. Maximos believes St. Gregory to have been “utterly purified” such that he was “imbued with the qualities of the Holy Spirit” and “experienced the same things as the holy prophets,”[[15]](#footnote-15) he explicitly states that he himself cannot ascend to the height of such knowledge and must instead proceed conjecturally,[[16]](#footnote-16) which leads him to enjoin his readers to judge what he says for themselves before either accepting his interpretations of St. Gregory or putting forward better ones.[[17]](#footnote-17) These statements of St. John and St. Maximos offer preliminary support for the conclusion that rational inquiry and conjecture are a useful method for those who have yet to attain to the vision of God. Because even if they are just being humble and attempting to deflect attention from their own lofty spiritual experiences, such humility can only be regarded as saintly if it consists in following a more limited path rather than one that is wrong and worthy of outright rejection. For who would accept the teaching of someone who claims, at least in part, to be following a method that is known to be corrupt as well as corrupting?

St. Gregory the Theologian’s statements in *The Five Theological Orations* offer a useful supplement to those above, for while he never says that he is only proceeding conjecturally, he still makes use of reason and affirms a role for it in coming to know something of the truth. And this is all the more striking since he explicitly states that he has primarily followed the hesychastic method. So St. Gregory, who ran to lay hold of God and followed Elias and Moses in ascending the mountain by separating himself from material things and withdrawing within himself so as to enter through the curtain of the cloud and attain to the vision of God’s Majesty and Glory, also thinks that Plato skillfully recognized that “It is difficult to conceive God but to define Him in words is an impossibility.”[[18]](#footnote-18) And while he ultimately corrects Plato’s statement because his experiences showed him that it is even “more impossible to conceive God than to express Him” since the subject is so great that it is beyond even those who are most highly exalted, he quickly adds that “our very eyes and the Law of Nature teach us that God exists,” in order to refute atheists or agnostics who would take his statement the wrong way.[[19]](#footnote-19)

These three Church Fathers, who are in agreement that “the Divine Nature cannot be apprehended by human reason,”[[20]](#footnote-20) all nonetheless affirm that through reason we can know that God exists, as well as a little of what He is like. St. Gregory says that “every rational nature longs for God and for the First Cause, but is unable to grasp Him,” which is why so many turn to idolatry and the worship of created things.[[21]](#footnote-21) But for St. Gregory the very existence of rational and speaking creatures, who are the most honorable of the whole creation, is proof of the supreme goodness of God.[[22]](#footnote-22) And this is surely due in part to the fact that reason receives “us in our desire for God, and in our sense of the impossibility of being without a leader and guide, and then making us apply ourselves to things visible… leads to that which is above these, and by which being is given to these.”[[23]](#footnote-23) So St. Gregory holds that there are natural proofs for God’s existence that are compelling to anyone not wanting in sense, such as when we see the beautiful stability, progress, motion, and natural lawfulness of visible things and then reason back to their Author that “is the Efficient and Maintaining Cause of all things.”[[24]](#footnote-24) And he praises Aristotle for inquiring into the cause of the ceaseless and unhindered motion of all things and thus arriving at their Artificer who implanted reason in everything so as to move and control the universe.[[25]](#footnote-25) St. Gregory finally concludes that, “reason that proceeds from God, that is implanted in all from the beginning and is the first law in us, and is bound up in all, leads us up to God through visible things.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

In the same way, St. John of Damascus opens his work *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* by saying that God is ineffable and incomprehensible because no one has seen Him or ever known Him unless He revealed Himself to them.[[27]](#footnote-27) But he also immediately adds that, “God has not gone so far as to leave us in complete ignorance, for through nature the knowledge of the existence of God has been revealed by Him to all men,” because the harmony and ordering of the created world “proclaims the majesty of the divine nature,”[[28]](#footnote-28) which is why God’s existence was not doubted “by the majority of the Greeks,”[[29]](#footnote-29) even though they lacked the witness of the Scriptures. First St. John argues that “all things are either created or uncreated” and that created things are “definitely changeable” since whatever originates with a change is “subject to change.”[[30]](#footnote-30) And since all created things are created by something there must be something that is uncreated and unchangeable, which is God. What is more St. John thinks that the harmony, preservation and governing of creation attest to the God who put everything together and keeps it together by virtue of His all-powerful force, for the order and unceasing motion of all things, as well as their arrangement and persistence according to definite principles cannot come to be spontaneously but only from God. [[31]](#footnote-31)

Finally, St. Maximos the Confessor, who holds that God cannot be known after the manner of beings, since He absolutely transcends beings,[[32]](#footnote-32) and so cannot be captured in words nor demonstrated with the help of arguments,[[33]](#footnote-33) as He is beyond all human comprehension,[[34]](#footnote-34) nonetheless offers a series of “natural contemplations” that aim to show among other things that God exists as the creator and provider of all things.[[35]](#footnote-35) Here some claim that natural contemplation only occurs through the special activity and revelation of the Holy Spirit,[[36]](#footnote-36) since the disciples “received the perfect and correct knowledge of God” contained in both the Written and Natural Laws only after the Lord’s Transfiguration opened their eyes to see the inner meaning of the words of Holy Scripture as well as the variety of different forms that constitute creation and declare the power of the creator Word. [[37]](#footnote-37) But St. Maximos also speaks about natural contemplation in language that implies the kind of straightforward rational inquiry that is possible for everyone, even those who are not yet specially illumined by the Holy Spirit. For instance, in one of the natural contemplations St. Maximos utilizes logical necessity as well as possibility and rational coherence to prove that anything that is subject to alteration and change cannot be eternal.[[38]](#footnote-38) What is more, he repeatedly identifies his natural contemplations as demonstrations, and in them he traces lines of implication to show how one thing follows from another or that another view must be rejected as an irrational idea.[[39]](#footnote-39) But all of this is the language of rational argumentation, not special revelation or illumination. And if St. Maximos is only able to come to such knowledge of the natural world through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, then why does he offer it to us in the form of arguments with supporting evidence rather than simply as pronouncements from on high? Do we also need special divine help in understanding them or has God already given us a guide in the very faculty of reason that everyone uses to construct and assess arguments?

Here, then, St. Maximos echoes the arguments put forward by St. Gregory and St. John, saying that, “the fact of being teaches us theology, for it is through being that we seek the cause of beings and learn from them that such a cause exists, without however attempting to know what this cause is in its own essence.”[[40]](#footnote-40) In addition, motion manifests God’s providence since it allows us to detect “the unvarying and essential identity of beings in their particular species,” and to see that they are held together and preserved, each distinct from the others and “consistent with the principles according to which they were created,”[[41]](#footnote-41) which is evidence of “God’s attentive care.”[[42]](#footnote-42) Thus, the natural law that is “directed by reason through the marvelous physical phenomena that we see, which are naturally interconnected, so that the harmonious web of the universe” constitutes a kind of book, allows us to read Christ the Word who wisely inscribed the principles of all things and is also “ineffably inscribed within in them… communicating to us solely the concept that He exists, and not what He is.”[[43]](#footnote-43) All of this shows that these three Fathers of the Church are in agreement that reason can be a useful tool in demonstrating that God exists as the creator and provider, that He is one, and that He is wise, supremely good and all-powerful.

But perhaps the main objection to thinking that reason has this role in the Orthodox Christian life is to argue that since the Fathers seem to say that we cannot know the world itself through rational inquiry alone, it is also not possible to prove these things about God since He transcends even infinity itself.[[44]](#footnote-44) So St. Gregory, after a thorough survey of all of the things that remain unknown about the created world, asks whether natural philosophers with their useless details have anything to teach those who have ready access to the Scriptures, since they attempt to measure the mighty works of God by merely human conceptions, which is as futile as trying to “measure the sea with a wineglass.”[[45]](#footnote-45) This leads him to conclude that since “even the secondary natures surpass the power of our intellect,” the First and only Nature does so much more,[[46]](#footnote-46) and so we should “let faith lead us rather than reason” since we have learned its feebleness from matters nearer to us.[[47]](#footnote-47)

One can detect two responses to this objection in St. Maximos’ analysis of these passages in *The Ambigua*. First, he recognizes that St. Gregory only says these things so that those who are “accustomed to idle impiety,” and who “pounce impudently upon every word predicated of God” will learn “their limits in small matters” and thereby “honor by silence the ineffable reality of the divine essence, which transcends all thought and knowledge.”[[48]](#footnote-48) The immediate context for St. Gregory’s argument, then, is to quiet the tongues of those who turn clever arguments against what the Scriptures and Holy Tradition teach about God, and so his condemnation of reason is not global but directed only against those who would twist it to their own ends.

However, St. Maximos also adds to St. Gregory’s statements and thereby gets us to a deeper response to the objection, for, he asks, “who, among even the wisest in this world, trusting solely in the powers of his reason, and emboldened by groundless logical proofs, could grasp by means of logic the magnitude of beings, reduce it to words, and set the whole of it before us?”[[49]](#footnote-49) He goes on to wonder who “can know the intelligible principles of beings as they are in themselves” or how they have a distinct and immovable “natural movement that prevents them from being transformed into one another,”[[50]](#footnote-50) and concludes that those who “look deeply into these intelligible principles… or even into one of them,” are “left feeling completely debilitated and speechless, for the intellect finds nothing to grasp, except for the divine power.”[[51]](#footnote-51) Here St. Maximos notes that what is ultimately incomprehensible for reason and the intellect in regard to God is not *that* He is, but *what* He is.[[52]](#footnote-52) And the same thing that he affirms of God can be extended to all created things, since we can certainly know *that* they exist, but seem unable to come to a precise knowledge of *what* they are since within each of them lies the mystery that they are contingent and cannot account for their own existence or nature, which means that they can only be fully understood in the light of their cause, God Himself who is the first nature and ultimate mystery. Thus St. Maximos asks,

Who, in contemplating the beauty and magnificence of creation, does not immediately understand that God is the one who has brought all creatures into existence, since He is the Origin and Cause and Creator of all beings? And would not such a person’s thoughts subsequently ascend to God alone, leaving all these things below… in his desire to grasp immediately the One whom he has come to know through the medium of His works?[[53]](#footnote-53)

So through reason we are able to gain enough knowledge of the existence of things to see that God exists as their origin and cause, but not so much that we are willing to rest content with the knowledge that reason alone provides us. And this is a point that St. Maximos also emphasizes elsewhere, saying,

Anyone who through contemplation has piously understood the manner in which beings exist, and who through deduction and logical deliberation has correctly discerned their inner rationality, and… who keeps himself steadfast in this judgment, comprehends within himself the sum of all virtue, and is no longer moved toward anything beyond the truth that he has already come to know. In… zeal he hastens past all things, taking no thought for the world or the flesh.[[54]](#footnote-54)

And this is, paradoxically, reason’s supreme dignity, for when we apply it to created things it not only shows us that God exists as the eternal Prime Mover who brings everything that moves into being, but also urges us to pass beyond its limits as well as those of every created thing so as to reach He who is both the source of our existence and our final end and rest.[[55]](#footnote-55) Thus the true value of reason emerges where St. Maximos breathes ethical significance into the cosmological argument – since all things that have come to be have not come to be from themselves or from any other created thing, their proper end and fulfillment is not to be found in creation, but beyond it in the bosom of God the self-existent and eternal creator. And again, reason itself pushes us past itself, due to this reasoning, for,

When the intellect naturally apprehends all the logoi in beings and contemplates within them the infinite energies of God, it recognizes the differences… to be multiple and – to speak truly – infinite. Then, as regards scientific inquiry into that which is really true, the intellect – for reasons one may readily appreciate – will find the power of any such inquiry ineffective and its methods useless.[[56]](#footnote-56)

So that,

Having thought through everything that is naturally thinkable, after which, in a manner beyond intellect and reason and knowledge, without thought, without knowing, and without words, it simply casts itself forward to be united with God, without thinking in any way whatsoever, or reasoning about God. For God is not an object of knowledge or predication, so that He might be intellectually grasped by the soul according to a certain condition, but rather (is grasped) according to the simple union, unconditioned and beyond all thought… known only to God, and to those who in the future will come to experience it.[[57]](#footnote-57)

And thus what can finally be said of philosophy is that,

The task of practical philosophy is to purge the intellect of all impassioned images, while that of natural contemplation is to show forth the intellect as understanding the science of beings in light of the cause that created them, while the aim of theological mystagogy is to establish one by grace in a state of being like God and equal to God, as much as this is possible, so that by virtue of this transcendence he will no longer give any thought to anything after God.[[58]](#footnote-58)

St. Maximos elsewhere calls this third stage “theological philosophy,” and it is nothing other than deification or theosis. And while reason is certainly impotent to reach this lofty goal since it only occurs “by grace,” it nonetheless points beyond itself to the “perfect *love*, and an intellect completely and voluntarily blind to beings by virtue of its condition of transcendence,” that “brings about divinization.”[[59]](#footnote-59)

1. Evagrius Ponticus, The Philokalia, Volume II, ed. G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware (London: Faber & Faber Inc, 1984), 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. St. Gregory Nazianzen, “The Five Theological Orations,” in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Volume 7, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wallace (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1894), 285. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., 288. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Hierotheos Vlachos, The Person in the Orthodox Tradition, trans. Esther Williams (Birth of the Theotokos Monastery, 1998), 32, 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 34-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Which nothing can ultimately do, since even through the union with God through prayer God remains unknown to us in His essence if not in His mode of existence which are His energies or those activities and operations that reach down to us (St. Gregory Nazianzen, 289). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. St. John of Damascus, “The Fount of Knowledge,” in Fathers of the Church, Volume 37, trans. Frederic H. Chase Jr. (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1958), 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid., 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. St. John of Damascus, 169. Here St. John does ask us to invoke the aid of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., 173. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. St.Maximos the Confessor, On Difficulties in the Church Fathers: The Ambigua, Volume I, ed. and trans. Nicholas Constas (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2014), 403. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. St.Maximos the Confessor, On Difficulties in the Church Fathers: The Ambigua, Volume II, ed. and trans. Nicholas Constas (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2014), 329. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid., 121, 187. To this St. Maximos elsewhere adds that he would gladly offer thanks to anyone who can offer better explanations for enlightening him about matters of which he has so far been ignorant (361). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. St. Gregory Nazianzen, 289. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid., 290. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid., 292, 294. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. St. Gregory Nazianzen, 293. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid.,292. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid., 294. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid., 290. Here St. Gregory combines cosmological and teleological arguments together, and both seem to be drawn from Aristotle. However, it should be noted that St. Gregory also says that they do not prove that God exists in this passage. How can one make sense of such a seeming contradiction? This paper presents one solution to this problem that is an attempt to be faithful to all of what St. Gregory and the other Fathers discussed here say, for they affirm that reason is effective in showing us that God exists, but not who or what God is. When they declaim against reason then it seems best to assert that they are placing limits on reason rather than denying it altogether, since holding the latter forces one to ignore a great many things that they say in defense of reason. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Ibid., 294. Aristotle is the clear referent when St. Gregory says “I commend the man, though he was a heathen, who said, What gave movement to these, and drives their ceaseless and unhindered motion?” (294) [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. St. John of Damascus, 165. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid., 166. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid., 168. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid., 169. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid., 169-170. All told, St. John offers two cosmological arguments for God’s existence (169, 171) and one teleological one (169-170), as well as two arguments for the oneness of God, one from divine perfection and one from God’s being uncircumscribed (173). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. St.Maximos the Confessor, On Difficulties in the Church Fathers: The Ambigua, Volume I, 163. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Ibid., 183. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Ibid., 193. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Ibiid., 283-285. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Christopher Veniamin, The Orthodox Understanding of Salvation: Theosis in Scripture and Tradition (Dalton, PA: Mount Thabor Publishing, 2013), 128. It is easy to see why one would think that the inspiration of the Holy Spirit is altogether superior to reason since it can provide us with direct and immediate knowledge of God Himself, and not just His existence, as well as of everything that comes after God, which is in part the logoi or intelligible principles of all created things. On this last point, St. Maximos is clear that we come to know the logoi, when we attain to the vision of God who is the Logos (St.Maximos the Confessor, On Difficulties in the Church Fathers: The Ambigua, Volume I, 245, 247, 257, 263). But the passages quoted in this paper point to the conclusion that reason can also give us preliminary knowledge of the logoi, from which we learn that God exists as the creator and provider of all things. However, we only achieve knowledge of who God is by transcending reason in love and participating in His energies. And since this knowledge is knowledge of the cause of all things, it is at this point that we can be said to fully understand them as well. So there is certainly much to be said for Orthodox ascetical and mystical theology and philosophy. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. St.Maximos the Confessor, On Difficulties in the Church Fathers: The Ambigua, Volume I, 193. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Ibid., 277. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Ibid., 277, 285, 287, 291, 293, 295, 299, 309. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Ibid., 205. Also 283-285, 307-309. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Ibid., 205. Also 285, 309-311. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Ibid., 311. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Ibid., 195. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Ibid., 373. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. St. Gregory Nazianzen, 298. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Ibid., 300. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Ibid., 299. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. St.Maximos the Confessor, On Difficulties in the Church Fathers: The Ambigua, Volume I, 387. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Ibid., 389. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Ibid., 393. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Ibid., 285-287. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Ibid., 153-155. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Ibid., 287. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Ibid., 449. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Ibid., 373 [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Ibid., 419. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)