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# Layers of Negativity in Thinking and Talking about God: Exploring John Chrysostom's Language of Negation

**Abstract:** Der Beitrag analysiert die sprachlichen Mittel, insbesondere die Termini mit *alpha privativum*, in der ersten *Homilie über die Unbegreiflichkeit Gottes* von Johannes Chrysostomos. Diese sprachlichen Mittel dienen dem Aufbau verschiedener Ebenen der negativen oder apophatischen Theologie. Der Zweck ist zu zeigen, dass Gottes Wesen unfassbar bleibt. Dennoch deutet Chrysostomos auf eine mystische Erfahrung hin, die alle diskursiven Konstruktionen der Negation übersteigt und ihnen einen umfassenden Rahmen verleiht.

**Keywords:** negative theology, God's essence, incomprehensibility, mystical experience

## 1 Introduction

In his first homily *On the Incomprehensibility of God*,<sup>1</sup> John Chrysostom (†407) raises two important questions: What can we know about God in this life, and can we fully comprehend God's essence (*ousia*)? In seeking answers to these questions, he attempts to refute the notion that the human being's earthly condition permits full and perfect knowledge of God. Asserting the fundamental unknowability of God's "essence," Chrysostom mobilises a range of *a fortiori* arguments that are similar in structure: if we are unable to fully comprehend God's manifestations or actions, then his essence must surely be wholly hidden and incomprehensible. John Chrysostom completes this framework with biblical references, images, and analogies

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1 The title mentioned in the manuscripts is *Περὶ ἀκαταλήπτου* – literally, "On the incomprehensible," with the adjective nominalised as in the titles of several ancient philosophical treatises (e.g., "On the good" or "On the beautiful"). The title in Latin is designed to be more explicit but loses the elegant and implicit parallel with philosophical works: *De incomprehensibili Dei natura*.

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and develops a refined negative language to characterise the inaccessibility of God's manifestations to human thought, knowledge, and speech. This paper explores the uses of negative terms expressed as alpha privative prefix constructions that render attributes such as "incomprehensible," "inaccessible," "inscrutable," "unsearchable," "indescribable," or "ineffable." The central term in this list is "incomprehensible" (*akataleptos*), which comes to be used as an overarching term for the unknowability of God.<sup>2</sup> The paper further analyses the nuances and differences between these negative terms while examining how they are attributed to different manifestations of God in his wisdom, judgments, rewards, ways, gifts, and glory. It therefore expounds on Chrysostom's construction of different layers of negation to preserve the purity of one final negativity: the impossibility of comprehending the essence of God. Finally, the inquiry emphasises the possibility of experiencing God in a mystical sense, which both assumes and transcends all these levels of negation.

## 2 Talking About the Apophatic – Again?

The above question relates to the difficulty and (alluding to both Socrates and Kierkegaard) even to the *irony* of discussing the *via negativa* – the negative way, the apophatic. As scholarly interest in apophaticism has increased, yielding numerous publications on the topic in recent decades,<sup>3</sup> we persist in discussing *what we*

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2 The term is already central to Philo of Alexandria's argument for the incomprehensibility of God's essence, as Beatrice Wyss demonstrates: "Biblical and Philosophical Influences on the Negative Theology of Philo of Alexandria," in *Filón de Alejandría: Filosofía, método y recepción*, eds. Paola Druille and Laura Pérez (Santa Rosa: Universidad Nacional de La Pampa, 2022), 39–41.

3 Deirdre Carabine, *The Unknown God. Negative Theology in the Platonic Tradition: Plato to Eriugena* (Louvain: Peeters, 1995). Paul van Geest, *The Incomprehensibility of God: Augustine as a Negative Theologian* (Leuven: Peeters, 2010). William Franke, ed., *On What Cannot Be Said: Apophatic Discourses in Philosophy, Religion, Literature, and the Arts*, vol. 2 (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2007). William Franke, *A Philosophy of the Unsayable* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2014). Jonathan D. Jacobs, "The Ineffable, Inconceivable, and Incomprehensible God: Fundamentality and Apophatic Theology," *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion* 6 (2015): 158–176. Dirk Westerkamp, *Via negativa: Sprache und Methode der negativen Theologie* (München: Fink, 2006). Mariele Nientied, *Reden ohne Wissen: Apophatik bei Dionysius Areopagita, Moses Maimonides und Emmanuel Levinas* (Regensburg: Pustet, 2010). Thomas Rentsch, "Theologie, negative," *HWPh* 10 (Basel: Schwabe, 1998): 1102–1105. Michael A. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). Ralf Stolina, *Niemand hat Gott je gesehen: Traktat über negative Theologie* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2000). Bruce Milem, "Four Theories of Negative Theology," *HeyJ* 48 (2007): 187–204. Willi Ölmüller, *Negative Theologie heute: Die Lage des Menschen vor Gott* (Leiden: Brill, 1999). Ulrich Felder, *Apophatik als Lösungsformel für den interreligiösen Dialog? Das Konzept der negativen Theologie in den pluralistischen Religionstheorien von John Hick und Perry Schmidt-Leu-*

*cannot talk about*. In such endeavors, one should exercise caution in navigating the various forms of “understanding and misunderstanding negative theology,” as described by Rowan Williams in the title of his 2021 Père Marquette Lecture in Theology.<sup>4</sup>

In search of the apophatic as it manifests in the writings of the Church Fathers, I will engage with John Chrysostom’s first homily *On the Incomprehensibility of God* in what may be a somewhat microscopic approach to an exemplary performance of negative theology executed by one of the most influential and prolific Fathers of the Eastern Church.<sup>5</sup> At the very least, it is intriguing that John Chrysostom is not afforded a chapter in many monographs dedicated to negative theology; in some cases, he goes practically unmentioned.<sup>6</sup> New approaches to his life, work, and context(s) have emerged in recent research, with fresh perspectives within an impressive interdisciplinary scope.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, negative theology is rarely explored in all its depth and implications. In this respect, two studies have been particularly

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kel (Würzburg: Echter, 2012). Chris Boesel and Catherine Keller, eds., *Apophatic Bodies: Negative Theology, Incarnation, and Relationality* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010). Susannah Ticciati, *A New Apophaticism: Augustine and the Redemption of Signs* (Leiden: Brill, 2013). Aristotle Papanikolaou, *Being with God: Trinity, Apophaticism, and Divine–Human Communion* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006). Wesley J. Wildman, *In Our Own Image: Anthropomorphism, Apophaticism, and Ultimacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). See also: Andreas Benk, “Negative Theologie,” *Das wissenschaftlich-religionspädagogische Lexikon* (www.wirelex.de), ed. Mirjam Zimmermann, Heike Lindner (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2018), 14.07.2021: <http://www.bibelwissenschaft.de/stichwort/200341>.

4 Rowan Williams, *Understanding and Misunderstanding “Negative Theology”* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2021). Lecture delivered on 11 April 2021.

5 For biographical accounts, see John Norman Davidson Kelly, *Golden Mouth: The Story of John Chrysostom – Ascetic, Preacher, Bishop* (London: Duckworth, 1995), Wendy Mayer and Pauline Allen, *John Chrysostom* (New York: Routledge, 2000), esp. 3–52, Chrysostomus Baur, *Der Heilige Johannes Chrysostomus und seine Zeit*, 2 vols (München: Hueber, 1929–30).

6 For example, in the patristic overview of Josef Hochstaffl, *Negative Theologie: Ein Versuch zur Vermittlung des patristischen Begriffs* (München: Kösel, 1976), where we find only one mention of *De incomprehens*. (p. 101). The study of Carabine has two mentions of John Chrysostom (*God*, 224 and 229): Carabine follows the assumption that Chrysostom’s negative theology merely repeats the ideas and patterns already demonstrated by Gregory of Nyssa and Basil but also notes that it is more scriptural than speculative and firmly rooted within a Pauline framework. Focusing primarily on interiority, ascent, light, and darkness as distinctive “metaphors” of an apophatic way of life, Denys Turner’s monograph, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), does not engage with John Chrysostom, though it mentions several of the Cappadocians’ doctrinal and mystical contributions.

7 Chris de Wet and Wendy Mayer, eds., *Revisiting John Chrysostom: New Approaches, New Perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, 2019). Catherine Broc-Schmezer, *Les figures féminines du Nouveau Testament dans l’œuvre de Jean Chrysostome: exégèse et pastorale* (Paris: Institut d’études augustinienes, 2010).

salutary: Jean Daniélou's introductory study<sup>8</sup> and Françoise Vinel's thorough investigation, offering a complete catalogue of the adjectives constructed with alpha privative prefixes.<sup>9</sup> The question of divine *paideia*, as examined by David Rylaarsdam, highlights God's incomprehensibility as the basic theological assumption of any discussion surrounding the possibility "to bridge the gulf between Creator and creature."<sup>10</sup> It is precisely because God's nature is incomprehensible that God is depicted as a teacher of true philosophy, the only means by which divine realities may be made accessible to human beings.<sup>11</sup> The predecessors of the Chrysostomic doctrine of divine incomprehensibility may be sought in Meletius of Antioch, as Pak-Wah Lai has demonstrated.<sup>12</sup> Equally inspiring is Marie-Ève Geiger's contribution, which links the vertigo effect with God's incomprehensibility, his unknowable ways, and complex passages in the Scriptures.<sup>13</sup>

Herein, I proceed from discussing the context to defining the philosophical and theological problems and formulating a dual-faceted response. In terms of the response's texture, I present the construction of the discourse, with a focus on negative language, closely examining the sources and uses of the terms taking alpha privative constructions and evaluating the nuances and layers of negation. I conclude with some remarks linking negation to mystical experience. Ultimately, I ask how we might reframe negation in the context of mystical experience and γνῶσις.

### 3 The Historical Context

Chrysostom's immediate context was characterised by Christian polemic against the Eunomians or Anomoeans: an extreme Arian faction founded by Aetius and later led by Eunomius. This faction claimed that Jesus Christ was neither of the same nature nor of like nature with the Father, and that God could be known

8 Jean Daniélou, Introduction to Jean Chrysostome, in *Sur l'incompréhensibilité de Dieu I* (Homélies I–IV), SC 28 bis, ed. Jean Daniélou (Paris: Cerf, 1970), 9–63.

9 Françoise Vinel, "L'incompréhensible demeure," *RSR* 84:4 (2010): 451–65.

10 David Rylaarsdam, *John Chrysostom on Divine Pedagogy: The Coherence of His Pedagogy and Teaching*, OECS (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 13.

11 Rylaarsdam, *Pedagogy*, 13.

12 Pak-Wah Lai, "The Eusebian and Meletian Roots of John Chrysostom's Trinitarian Theology," *Scrinium* 14 (2018): 37–62, esp. 40–50. Lai argues for the incomprehensibility and inexpressibility of the Creator in the Trinitarian Theology of Chrysostom starting from his *Catechetical Homilies/Baptismal Instructions*, delivered in Antioch around 388–390 ("Roots," 55–56).

13 See Marie-Ève Geiger's contribution to this volume: "Vertigo. Das Schwindelgefühl bei Johannes Chrysostomos."

through his name. The doctrine was notably refuted by Basil of Caesarea (*Against Eunomius*), Gregory of Nazianzus (*First Theological Oration*), and Gregory of Nyssa (*Against Eunomius*).

The broader context within which John Chrysostom's work is positioned consists in the 4<sup>th</sup>- and 5<sup>th</sup>-century endeavors of Christian theologians to defend the unknowability and ineffability of God.<sup>14</sup> Basil of Caesarea, for example, asserted the incomprehensibility of God's *ousia* as follows: "It is to be expected that the very substance of God is incomprehensible to everyone except the Only-Begotten and the Holy Spirit."<sup>15</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus emphasises, "if it is impossible to express God in words, it is even more impossible to conceive him" (ἀλλὰ φράσαι μὲν ἀδύνατον . . . νοῆσαι δὲ ἀδύνατώτερον).<sup>16</sup> He further stresses that humanity's present condition is not conducive to true and ultimate knowledge of God:

No one has yet discovered or ever shall discover what God is in his nature and essence. As for a discovery some time in the future, let those who have a mind to it research and speculate. The discovery will take place, so my reason tells me, when this God-like, divine thing, I mean our mind and reason, mingles with its kin, when the copy returns to the pattern it now longs after. This seems to me to be the meaning of the great dictum that we shall, in time to come, 'know even as we are known' (1 Cor 13:12).<sup>17</sup>

Along with the Cappadocians, John Chrysostom is a champion of these endeavors, and clear similarities may be drawn between Gregory of Nazianzus' *Or. 28* and Chrysostom's arguments for God's incomprehensibility.<sup>18</sup>

Chrysostom's homily can be further positioned within an even broader context: the construction of a language of "negative theology" in the philosophical and

14 See Tomasz Stępień and Karolina Kochańczyk-Bonińska, *Unknown God, Known in His Activities: The Incomprehensibility of God during the Trinitarian Controversy of the 4<sup>th</sup> Century* (Berlin: Lang, 2018), especially Ch. 5: "The Development of the Negative Theology in the Latter Half of the 4<sup>th</sup> Century." See also Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

15 Basil of Caesarea, *Con. Eun.* 1.14.14–17: Πᾶν γάρ που τὸ ἐναντίον, εἰκὸς αὐτὴν μὲν τὴν οὐσίαν ἀπερίοπτον εἶναι παντὶ, πλὴν εἰ τῷ Μονογενεῖ καὶ τῷ ἁγίῳ Πνεύματι· ἐκ δὲ τῶν ἐνεργειῶν τοῦ Θεοῦ ἀναγομένους ἡμᾶς (tr. DeCoglano and Radde-Gallwitz, p. 113).

16 Gregory of Nazianzus, *Or. 28.4* (SC 250, 108, l. 5–6). This echoes Plato, *Tim.* 28c.

17 Gregory of Nazianzus, *Or. 28.17*, trans. Wickham, *On God and Christ* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002), 49–50. Cf. *Or. 28.6*: "whatever we may have imagined or figured or our reason may have indicated, this is not the reality of God (οὐδὲ τοῦτο εἶναι Θεόν)."

18 Rylaarsdam (*Pedagogy*, 14) astutely remarks, "Chrysostom's arguments for divine incomprehensibility are strikingly similar to those of Gregory of Nazianzus, who was bishop in Constantinople seventeen years before Chrysostom."

Christian theological traditions.<sup>19</sup> From Plato's claim in the *Republic* that the idea of the Good remains beyond essence or being (ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας) in dignity and power (*Resp.* 509b),<sup>20</sup> thinkers grounded in the Platonic tradition – pagan, Jewish, or Christian – endeavored to reinforce the inaccessibility of the divine. In late Neo-Platonism, for example, even the accumulation of negation was insufficient to visualise the radical transcendence of the Principle (i.e., the divine). This is Proclus' (ca. 412–485) insight in his *Commentary on Plato's Parmenides* (7.70). However, let us return to the 4<sup>th</sup>-century Christian debate.

The five homilies *On the Incomprehensibility of God* arose within the debate against the Eunomians. They are the product of Chrysostom's preaching in Antioch around 386, and their polemical nature is inherent in their subtitle "Against the Anomoeans". The Arian crisis prompted not only debates regarding the generation of the Son but also fundamental epistemological questions regarding God's knowability (as he knows himself). Chrysostom embarks on his series of five homilies in the context of these doctrinal and epistemological issues. Moreover, this series belongs to the first months of his homiletic activity after his ordination to the priest-

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19 Some bibliographical suggestions: Georgiana Huian, "Negative Theology: Greco-Roman Antiquity," *EBR* 21 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023). Hella Theill-Wunder, *Die archaische Verborgenheit: Die philosophischen Wurzeln der negativen Theologie* (München: Fink, 1970). Marios P. Begzos, "Apophaticism in the Theology of the Eastern Church: The Modern Critical Function of a Traditional Theory," *GOTR* 41 (1996): 327–357. Jens Halfwassen, *Der Aufstieg zum Einen: Untersuchungen zu Platon und Plotin* (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1992). Jens Halfwassen, *Plotin und der Neuplatonismus* (München: Beck, 2004), 43–49. Darryl W. Palmer, "Atheism, Apologetic, and Negative Theology in the Greek Apologists of the Second Century," *VC* 37 (1983): 234–259. Daniel Jugrin, "The Taxonomy of Negation in Plotinus," *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai. Philosophia* 59:2 (2014): 73–90. Jan Opsomer, *In Search of Truth: Academic Tendencies in Middle Platonism* (Brussels: Paleis der Academiën, 1998). Marilena Vlad, *Damascius et l'ineffable: Récit de l'impossible discours* (Paris: Vrin, 2019). Dirk Westerkamp, *Via Negativa: Sprache und Methode der negativen Theologie* (Paderborn: Fink, 2006). Josef Hochstaßl, *Negative Theologie: Ein Versuch zur Vermittlung des patristischen Begriffs* (München: Kösel, 1976). Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1<sup>st</sup> 1981 and 2<sup>nd</sup> 2007). Ilaria L.E. Ramelli, "The Divine as Inaccessible Object of Knowledge in Ancient Platonism: A Common Philosophical Pattern across Religious Traditions," *JHI* 75 (2014): 167–188.

20 Rafael Ferber, "Is the Idea of the Good Beyond Being? Plato's *epekeina tês ousias* Revisited (*Republic* 6, 509b8–10)," in *Platonische Aufsätze* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 139–146. As to whether the expression can be interpreted as a *hyperbolê*, see Thomas A. Szlezák, *Die Idee des Guten in Platons Politeia: Beobachtungen zu den mittleren Büchern* (St. Augustin: Akademie, 2003), 364–65, and Luc Brisson, "L'approche traditionnelle de Platon par H.F. Cherniss," in *New Images of Plato: Dialogues on the Idea of the Good*, ed. Giovanni Reale, Samuel Scolnicov (St. Augustin: Akademie, 2002), 85–97: 87. Cf. Thomas A. Szlezák, "Die Idee des Guten als *arche* in Platons *Politeia*," in *Aufsätze zur griechischen Literatur und Philosophie*, hg. v. Thomas A. Szlezák (Baden-Baden: Akademie, 2002), 569–590.

hood in 386.<sup>21</sup> As such, they inevitably bear the watermark of late ancient rhetoric, including adjustment to the audience and the intention to achieve greater vividness than other public speech performances in late antique Antioch<sup>22</sup> and to simultaneously be more convincing than his theological opponents. Most likely, Chrysostom's intention was not merely to refute his opponents' arguments and to keep his audience uncorrupted by their errors but also to convince those adversaries who were present to embrace his views and to welcome them into the fold. The polemic functioned less as a delimitation than as a means of converting the heterodox to the right understanding, to effect a change of mind in the Anomoeans themselves.<sup>23</sup> Through their rhetoric, the sermons present a robust dogmatic argument,<sup>24</sup> but doctrinal arguments also promote identity formation and reinforcement<sup>25</sup> in the aftermath of Nicaea.

## 4 The Theological and Philosophical Problem

In his first homily *On the Incomprehensibility of God*, John Chrysostom addresses two key questions:

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21 Daniélou, Introduction, 9; Harkins, Introduction, 23. A general description of Chrysostom's homiletic activity in the first years of priesthood may be found in Rudolf Brändle, *Johannes Chrysostomus: Bischof – Reformator – Märtyrer* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1999), esp. 35–39: “Erste Zeit als Presbyter (386–387)”.

22 For insights on John Chrysostom and his audiences, see Wendy Mayer, “John Chrysostom: Extraordinary Preacher, Ordinary Audience,” in *Preacher and Audience: Studies in Early Christian and Byzantine Homiletics*, ed. P. Allen and M. B. Cunningham (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 105–37; Jaclyn LaRae Maxwell, *Christianization and Communication in Late Antiquity: John Chrysostom and His Congregation in Antioch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

23 Harkins, Introduction, 23: “The setting was unique because not only were the Anomoeans present to hear him but they had even challenged him to do battle with them (cf. *Hom.* 1.39). Here was an opportunity both to refute and root out the errors of the heterodox and also to instruct the orthodox in the tenets of the true faith.”

24 Scholarship on John Chrysostom generally regards these sermons as exceptional by virtue of their “dogmatic and doctrinal” character, maintaining – as, for example, Liebeschuetz – that “the great majority of his sermons were concerned with doctrine only in passing, or not at all.” Cf. J. H. W. G. Liebeschuetz, *Ambrose and John Chrysostom: Clerics between Desert and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 188. I consider the dogmatic content of Chrysostom's work to be in need of reconsideration and argue that it should be taken more seriously. Pak-Wah Lai also challenges the reception of Chrysostom as a “mere moralist” and makes a case for engaging systematic theology with Chrysostom's theological legacy (“Roots,” esp. 38–40).

25 Cf. Liebeschuetz, *Ambrose*, 190–194 (who shows that other worshiping practices contributed, together with preaching, to the creation of identity in 4<sup>th</sup>-century Antioch).



- (1) What can we know about God in this life? and
- (2) Can we truly comprehend the essence (*ousia*) of God?

He follows these questions by stating his intention to refute the Eunomian claim that the human being, in its earthly condition, can fully and perfectly know God. Throughout the homily, the Anomoeans, compared to wolves threatening the flock of Christ,<sup>26</sup> are portrayed as having reached the utmost peak of madness through their “meddlesome inquisitiveness” concerning the “very essence of God.”<sup>27</sup> The problem of direct, full, and assured access to the essence (*ousia*) of God is the epistemological topic at stake. It is gradually formulated as the adversaries’ thesis through rhetorical constructions, such as

Where are those who say they have attained and possess the fullness of knowledge (τὸ πᾶν τῆς γνώσεως)?<sup>28</sup>

They are the ones to say that their knowledge is entire, perfect and complete (παντελῆ καὶ ὁλόκληρον καὶ τελείαν).<sup>29</sup>

And I tell you that it is the ultimate madness (μανίαν. . . ἐσχάτην) to obstinately strive to know what God is in his essence (τί τὴν οὐσίαν ἐστὶν ὁ θεός).<sup>30</sup>

Let us examine the answers that John Chrysostom gives to these questions:

- (1) What we can know (of God) in this life is very little, infinitesimal, almost nothing, a little part that amounts to zero and nevertheless is not absolutely nothing. Commenting on 1 Cor 13:9 (“Our knowledge is imperfect”), Chrysostom claims: “We grasp the part of a part” and later: “You grasp the smaller, and not simply the smaller, but the hundredth and the ten thousandth part.”<sup>31</sup>
- (2) The answer to the second question is simply: No; by no means of knowledge and by no process or power of reasoning can we comprehend the essence of God. One rhetorical formulation reads as follows:

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<sup>26</sup> *Incomprehens.* I.3. I refer to the following editions: for the English translation: John Chrysostom, *On the Incomprehensible Nature of God*, translated by Paul W. Harkins (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1984) FC 72; for Greek text: Jean Chrysostome, *Sur l'incompréhensibilité de Dieu* I. Homélies I–IV. SC 28 bis, introd. de Jean Daniélou (Paris, Cerf, 1970). I give the number of the homily and the paragraph in Harkins’ translation, corresponding to the lines of the Greek text in the SC edition.

<sup>27</sup> *Incomprehens.* I.26, tr. Harkins, 60, cf. also I.36, 66.

<sup>28</sup> *Incomprehens.* I.20, tr. Harkins, 58 (1,168–9, SC 28 bis, 112).

<sup>29</sup> *Incomprehens.* I.21, tr. Harkins, 58 (1,175–6, SC 28 bis, 114).

<sup>30</sup> *Incomprehens.* I.23, tr. Harkins (revised), 59 (1,188–9, SC 28 bis, 116).

<sup>31</sup> *Incomprehens.* I.13, tr. Harkins, 55–56 (1,112–114, SC 28 bis, 106).



When the prophets cannot perfectly understand his wisdom, how great would be the foolishness [of the Anomoeans] to think that they could make his very essence subject to their own processes of reasoning?<sup>32</sup>

## 5 The Construction of the Discourse

In supporting these answers with argument, the homily proceeds from an exegetical approach, referring to 1 Cor 13:8 (“But prophecies will cease, and tongues will be silent, and knowledge will pass away.”). In his First Epistle to the Corinthians, Paul’s intention was to demonstrate the superiority of love over knowledge and praise love as the ultimate virtue and power that does not lose its vigor in the afterlife. John Chrysostom shifts the focus from love to knowledge (γνῶσις). Therefore, in his exegesis to 1 Cor 13:8, he refutes the Eunomians’ pretensions that they can attain fullness of knowledge in the here and now, within the limitations of this earthly life. Chrysostom thus builds his epistemological scheme on an image of contrast to legitimise the loss of knowledge in the afterlife/future. He wishes to demonstrate the vast chasm between the knowledge attainable in the here and now and the knowledge of there and then – in the *eschaton*, the Kingdom of God. A series of images and analogies, with clear Pauline echoes, serve to illustrate this distance.

A problem arises in 1 Cor 13:8 in the statement on the “passing of knowledge”. Does this not suggest the loss of something positive while enjoining the embracing of *nothing*? What of value or worthy of striving for can we expect in the afterlife if no knowledge is available, if knowledge will pass away? Chrysostom admits,

But the passing away of knowledge does raise a question. [. . .] If indeed, then, knowledge should be going to pass away, our situation will not improve but will go worse; without knowledge we shall destroy what makes us completely human.<sup>33</sup>

The crux of Chrysostom’s argument is that not all knowledge will disappear, and, in fact, knowledge in itself will not disappear; rather, partial knowledge will pass away to allow the actualisation of its complete form. Thus, this loss represents not a step into a void but rather the retirement of incompleteness for the sake of completeness. The loss of knowledge is not “complete dissolution” but an “increase and advancement into better.”<sup>34</sup> In other words, “the result is that the imperfec-

<sup>32</sup> *Incomprehens.* I.23, tr. Harkins (revised), 59 (1,195–198, SC 28 bis, 116).

<sup>33</sup> *Incomprehens.* I.8, tr. Harkins (slightly revised), 54 (1,75–76, 78–81, SC 28 bis, 100–102).

<sup>34</sup> *Incomprehens.* I.11, tr. Harkins, 55 (1,102–103, SC 28 bis, 104).

tion of knowledge passes away, so that it is no longer imperfect, but perfect.”<sup>35</sup> However, this optimistic turn of interpretation still does not permit knowledge of God’s essence.

How does this rhetorical move reconcile the fullness of knowledge with the radical denial of the knowledge of God’s essence? I identify three key elements in the construction of discourse on the present partiality of knowledge and the impossibility of comprehending God’s essence.

First, the arguments: In arguing for the unknowability of the essence of God, Chrysostom mobilises *a fortiori* arguments that are similar in structure: if God’s manifestations or actions are incomprehensible to us, then his essence is surely even more hidden and incomprehensible.<sup>36</sup> These arguments typically conclude with a rhetorical question – for example, “Is his wisdom beyond the prophet’s grasp”<sup>37</sup>, and do we comprehend his essence?”<sup>38</sup> or “His greatness has no limit, and do you put his essence within the limits of a definition [do you circumscribe – περιγράφεις – his essence]?”<sup>39</sup>

The second element comprises biblical references and imagery: Chrysostom fills the structure with biblical references, images, and analogies. For example, the child,<sup>40</sup> the mirror, and the unclear or indistinct image<sup>41</sup> function as representations, figures, or exemplary images (ὁποδείγματα) of the present condition of knowledge.

The third element comprises the negative attributes: John Chrysostom develops a refined negative vocabulary to characterise the inaccessibility of God’s manifestations to human thought, knowledge, and speech using negative terms

35 *Incomprehens.* I.12, tr. Harkins (revised), 55 (1,107–108, SC 28 bis, 104): Ὡστε τὸ ἀτελὲς αὐτοῦ καταργεῖται, ὡς μηκέτι εἶναι ἀτελές, ἀλλὰ τέλειον.

36 Vinel also remarked on the structure of these *a fortiori* arguments in “L’incompréhensible.”

37 Referring to Ps 146(147):5.

38 *Incomprehens.* I.26, tr. Harkins, 61 (1,231–232, SC 28 bis, 120).

39 *Incomprehens.* I.26, tr. Harkins (revised), 62 (1,233–234, SC 28 bis, 120).

40 *Incomprehens.* I.11, tr. Harkins (revised), 55 (1,97–99, SC 28 bis, 104): “The age of a child passes away but the child’s essence does not disappear nor does it cease to exist. The child’s age increases and turns him into a complete and perfect human being. Such is the case with knowledge.”

41 *Incomprehens.* I.18, tr. Harkins, 57 (1,146–156, SC 28 bis, 110). Cf. 1 Cor 13:11 (the child); 1 Cor 13:12 (the mirror and the indistinct image/riddle). Harkins (57, footnote 26) notes that the mirror metaphor was popular in Stoic–Cynic philosophy, whereas the “indistinct image/riddle” has a biblical background (Num 12:8). Nevertheless, both invite further reflection on the ontological and epistemological status of the image/reflection in the mirror. For the mirror and its Pauline use against a philosophical (Middle Platonist) background, see Rainer Hirsch-Luipold’s contribution in this volume.

(attributes) that take the form of alpha privative constructions.<sup>42</sup> The term “incomprehensible” (*akataleptos*) is central to this list, becoming an overarching term to denote the concept of God’s unknowability.<sup>43</sup>

## 6 The Negative Attributes

Middle Platonists, including Philo, Plutarch, Alcinous, Celsus, and Maximus of Tyre, introduce a range of terms constructed with alpha privative prefixes to suggest that the limitations of human comprehension preclude the conception of God. He is “without beginning” (ἀναρχος), “unbegotten” (ἀγέννητος), “indestructible” (ἀνολέθρος), “incorruptible” (ἄφθαρτος), “invisible” (ἀόρατος), “intangible” (ἀναφής), “form- and shapeless” (ἀνείδεος, ἄμορφος) and “unspeakable” (ἄρρητος).<sup>44</sup>

Neoplatonic thinkers continue the tradition of constructing and using terms with alpha privative prefixes. For example, Plotinus (ca. 205–270) argues that the divine principle – the One – is “formless” (ἄμορφον, ἀνείδεον), “unthinkable” (ἀνόητον), “infinite” (ἄπειρον)<sup>45</sup> and “indefinite” (ἀόριστον).<sup>46</sup> The One is infinite because it is intraversable and incomprehensible.<sup>47</sup>

The way was thus prepared, so to speak, for Christian thinkers to adopt and refine this vocabulary. John Chrysostom embarks on constructing a similar negative vocabulary, which he connects to abundant biblical references.

– ἀκατάληπτος (incomprehensible) is the most frequently used of these terms: God as Master cannot be comprehended,<sup>48</sup> let alone God in his essence: “He passes over the incomprehensibility of his essence as if it is something on which everybody

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<sup>42</sup> This is the layer of “grammatical negation,” according to Williams, *Understanding and Misunderstanding*, 12 (who mentions the Liturgy of St Basil and St John Chrysostom as exemplary for this type of negation).

<sup>43</sup> In her article, Françoise Vinel remarks that in the third homily the adjective “inaccessible” (*aprositos*) seems to be proposed as a stronger term than “incomprehensible” (*akateleptos*).

<sup>44</sup> Gregory P. Rocca, *Speaking the Incomprehensible God: Thomas Aquinas on the Interplay of Positive and Negative Theology* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2004), 3–26: 6.

<sup>45</sup> Plotinus, *Enn.* 6.9.6.10–11.

<sup>46</sup> Plotinus, *Enn.* 6.9.7.

<sup>47</sup> Plotinus, *Enn.* 2.4.7.15.

<sup>48</sup> *Incomprehens.* I.25, tr. Harkins, 60 (I,213–214, SC 28 bis, 118), commenting on Ps 138(139):6.14 (LXX), cited earlier. The term “incomprehensible” (ἀκατάληπτος) is used here for the first time in these homilies. Without occurrences in the NT, the term is philosophical in origin and is used

is agreed.”<sup>49</sup> God’s omnipresence is also incomprehensible; it causes the prophet to tremble and feel destitute or deprived of all means of understanding, to be at a loss.<sup>50</sup> This is a holy trembling, as before a *mysterium tremendum*, to borrow Rudolf Otto’s expression.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, humans cannot hope to comprehend God’s wisdom, which is boundless, defying measurement (Ps 146:5).<sup>52</sup> God’s judgments cannot possibly be understood,<sup>53</sup> any more than his rewards can.<sup>54</sup> According to the mystical account of Paul’s ascent to heaven (1 Cor 2:9), such rewards are inaccessible to the human eye, ear, or heart. In short, everything that manifests or comes from God is beyond the grasp of the human mind. Could God’s *ousia*, his most hidden essence, possibly be within human reach? Chrysostom asks rhetorically, “Are all these incomprehensible while only God himself can be comprehended? What excessive madness would it be to say that?”<sup>55</sup>

– ἀπρόσιτος (inaccessible) applies to the wisdom of God:

Even when God reveals to extraordinary human beings, such as the prophets, hidden and secret aspects of his wisdom (Ps 50[51]:8), the wisdom itself remains inaccessible (as well as incomprehensible).<sup>56</sup> The theologian confronts God’s wisdom as he confronts locked doors or the unreachable summit of a mountain.<sup>57</sup>

– ἀνεξερεύνητος (inscrutable), in Rom 11:33, is used to describe God’s judgments:

The idea of inscrutable judgment carries the sense of the abyss in addition to the vertigo effect. When faced with even a minuscule manifestation of God’s providence, the human being is left as though “shuddering at a limitless sea” or “peering into its yawning depth.”<sup>58</sup> However, this depth is impenetrable to human vision or intelligence. In relation to Rom 11:33, it appears that “inscrutable” carries greater force than “incomprehensible”: “Paul did not say incomprehensible, but inscrutable. But if his judgments cannot be searched out, it is much less possible that they can be comprehended.”<sup>59</sup>

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frequently in 4<sup>th</sup>-century theology, as observed by both Anne-Marie Malingrey (SC 28 bis, 118, footnote 1) and Harkins (60, footnote 37).

49 *Incomprehens.* I. 25, tr. Harkins, 60–61 (1,215–216, SC 28 bis, 118).

50 *Incomprehens.* I.25, tr. Harkins, 61 (1,216–222, SC 28 bis, 118).

51 Rudolf Otto, *Das Heilige. Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen* (München: Beck, 1. Auflage 1917).

52 *Incomprehens.* I. 26, tr. Harkins, 62 (1,227–231, SC 28 bis, 118).

53 *Incomprehens.* I.29, tr. Harkins, 63 (1,261–263, SC 28 bis, 122).

54 *Incomprehens.* I.30, tr. Harkins, 63 (1,265–266, SC 28 bis, 122–4).

55 *Incomprehens.* I.30, tr. Harkins, 64 (1,276–278, SC 28 bis, 124).

56 *Incomprehens.* I.26, tr. Harkins, 62 (1,228, SC 28 bis, 120).

57 For the mountain metaphor, see Marie-Ève Geiger’s contribution in this volume.

58 *Incomprehens.* I.29, tr. Harkins, 63 (1,256–258, SC 28 bis, 122).

59 *Incomprehens.* I.29, tr. Harkins, 63 (1,261–263, SC 28 bis, 122).

– ἀνεξιχνίαστος (unsearchable) also occurs in Rom 11:33: “How unsearchable are his ways”.

That the ways of God are unsearchable confirms that God cannot be comprehended: “Are his ways unsearchable, while he himself is comprehensible?”<sup>60</sup>

– ἀνεκδιήγητος (indescribable/ineffable):

God’s gift is indescribable, according to 2 Cor 9:15 (“Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift”), whereas his “peace surpasses all understanding” (Phil. 4:7).<sup>61</sup> Neither human language nor human thought is capable of evoking the gifts or the serenity that God bestows; these are simply ineffable.

## 7 Layers of Negation

Three questions arise in reviewing this tapestry of negative attributes:

- (1) What nuances and differences are evident between these negative terms?
- (2) How do they synthesise to preserve the intangibility of one last negativity: the impossibility of comprehending the essence of God?
- (3) What is the effect of this negative theology when there is no longer anything – in thought or speech – to cling to?

Tentative responses to these questions may help us comprehend how these layers of negation function and what their effects are.

- (1) Nuances: “Incomprehensible” is the overarching term. It expresses the human mind’s incapacity to grasp something that lies beyond our limited understanding. “Inaccessible” denotes the confrontation of God’s mystery as though confronting locked doors, even when God occasionally unveils the riches of his secrets, or contemplating unattainable heights. “Inscrutable” carries a stronger force, invoking awe and tremor, as though looking directly into the deepest depth of a bottomless abyss, unable to envisage anything with the mind’s eye.<sup>62</sup> “Unsearchable” brings us from the aquatic to the terrestrial representations:

<sup>60</sup> *Incomprehens.* I.29, tr. Harkins, 63 (1,263–4, SC 28 bis, 122).

<sup>61</sup> *Incomprehens.* I.30, tr. Harkins, 64 (1,268–271, SC 28 bis, 124).

<sup>62</sup> On the stupor, sacred fear, overwhelming terror and tremor and the whirlpool effect of the theophany or presence of God, see Daniélou, Introduction, 30–39. Note the interesting comparison with Rudolf Otto’s understanding of the experience of the numinous (*mysterium tremendum*) or Kierkegaard’s “tremor.” In John Chrysostom’s *Homilies on John*, “stupor” is the reaction to the Resurrection of Jesus, as exhibited by Mary Magdalene (*Hom. 86 Io.*). For commentary, see Broc-Schmezer, *Figures*, 231–232.

God's ways are as unsearchable as the reaches of unexplored lands. Finally, "indescribable" elevates the discussion into the realm of language's possibilities (potentialities). It is not merely that one cannot find the words for a reality but that the reality itself is ineffable; it fundamentally evades any attempt at its expression using words, signs, or symbols.

- (2) These negations are not simply juxtaposed with one another, and the result is not a sum of negations but rather a progression through increasingly radical levels of negation that demonstrates or preserves the incomprehensibility of God's *ousia*. We may imagine a system of concentric circles of negations, with God's incomprehensible essence concealed in the center, or a ladder with numerous rungs, with the incomprehensible *ousia* of God inaccessible beyond the topmost rung. This idea of a *crescendo* or climax is suggested by the text itself:

His judgements are inscrutable (ἀνεξερεύνητα), his ways are unsearchable (ἀνεξιχνίαστοι), his peace surpasses all understanding, his gift is indescribable (ἀνεκδύγητος), what God has prepared for those who love him has not entered into the heart of man, his greatness has no bound, his understanding is infinite. Are all these incomprehensible while only God himself can be comprehended? (πάντα ἀκατάληπα, καὶ αὐτὸς μόνος καταληπτός).<sup>63</sup>

- (3) The language of the negative theology, the climax of the circles of negation, highlights the impossibility of finding any assured ground in thought or language; neither habitude of thought, concept, nor words. The mystery remains impenetrable, with no available means of entry but merely a crushing aporia, with the use of the verb ἀπορεῖν demonstrating the effect of the negative theology.<sup>64</sup> Therefore, the human tendency is to withdraw, to recoil from this frightening experience of that which is beyond comprehension.<sup>65</sup> This is the withdrawal, the retreat – ἀναχωρεῖν<sup>66</sup> or ἀποπηδᾶν<sup>67</sup>. It is the opposite of the inquisitive meddlesomeness of those who pretend that they can grasp the essence of God. It is also a sign of humility, or that which today we might call intellectual honesty.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>63</sup> *Incomprehens.* I.30; tr. Harkins, 64 (1,272–277, SC 28 bis, 124).

<sup>64</sup> *Incomprehens.* I.23, tr. Harkins, 59 (1,194, SC 28 bis, 116). Cf. Plato, *Lysis* 216c.

<sup>65</sup> On the fear of grasping nothing (οὐδέν) that threatens the soul and fuels the tendency to shrink from encounters with the divine (the One), see Plotinus, *Enn.* 6.9.3.

<sup>66</sup> *Incomprehens.* I.24. tr. Harkins, 60 (1,209, SC 28 bis, 118).

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Daniélou, Introduction, 34.

<sup>68</sup> In fact, early Christian authors distinguished between "legitimate and pernicious forms of inquiry" in both their exegetical and theological (doctrinal) works. On Chrysostom's participation in the ancient Christian ethos of such questioning and his approach of inquiry (ζήτημα) or problem (ἀπορία), with an application to his *Homilies on Genesis*, see the dissertation of Samuel Arthur Pomeroy, *Chrysostom as Exegete: Scholarly Techniques and Traditions in the Homilies on Genesis*

## 8 Transcending Negation: the Mystical Experience of God

How can the human being overcome the games and traps of negations as well as the “foolishness” of false pretensions to positive knowledge of God? The answer to this question is only by contemplating the celestial beings – the angels.<sup>69</sup> They do not speculate about God’s being but simply adore and praise God: “They chant without ceasing their triumphal and mystical hymns with a deep feeling of religious awe.”<sup>70</sup> It is thus not “meddlesome investigations” that lead to God, but rather the praising of God, with “eyes veiled” before God’s “ineffable glory.”<sup>71</sup> Even when one attains mystical experience of God, the mystery of God’s essence persists.<sup>72</sup> This recalls the Eunomians’ arrogance in their claims of perfect speculative knowledge: “Did you see how great is the holy dread in heaven and how great the arrogant presumption here below?”<sup>73</sup>

The earthly theological debates with the Anomoeans are likened to combat. Before his listeners in Antioch, the preacher compares himself to an athlete who hesitates to enter the arena.<sup>74</sup> Like “a mother in labor,” he experiences “anguish” in his “desire to bring forth” his arguments against the adversaries but confesses his

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(Leuven: Leuven Catholic University, 2019), esp. Ch. 2. Christian authors – like Chrysostom in his homilies – claim that there are intrinsic normative reasons to discern between legitimate and illegitimate (foolish, blasphemous, heterodox) forms of inquiry. However, Richard Lim claims that “meddlesome curiosity” lies in the “eye of the beholder,” see *Public Disputation, Power, and Social Order in Late Antiquity*, TCH 23 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 163.

69 See Daniélou’s remarks on the role and scope of the “angelology” in these five homilies, which are remarkable for their frequent mentions of the angels throughout the whole of Chrysostom’s work. (Introduction, 40).

70 *Incomprehens*. I.35, tr. Harkins, 66 (1,310–312, SC 28 bis, 128).

71 *Incomprehens*. I.36, tr. Harkins (revised), 66 (1,323–325, SC 28 bis, 128).

72 In this homily, angelic activity provides the model for mystical experience. Otherwise, the pattern of mystical experience may correspond to the ineffable mysteries granted to Paul, as narrated in 2 Cor 12:2–5. On Chrysostom’s exegesis on Paul’s heavenly or “ecstatic experiences,” see Margaret M. Mitchell, *The Heavenly Trumpet: John Chrysostom and the Art of Pauline Interpretation*, HUT 40 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 301–302.

73 *Incomprehens*. I.36, tr. Harkins, p. 66 (1,321–322, SC 28 bis, 128).

74 Cf. Pauline passages with athletic images or allusions (such as 1 Cor 4:9, 9:24–27; Gal 2:2; Phil 2:16, 3:13–14; 1 Tim 4:7–10; 2 Tim 2:5). On the athletic metaphor, its origin, use and reception in Early Christianity, see Victor C. Pfitzner, *Paul and the Agon Motif: Traditional Athletic Imagery in the Pauline Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1967), Manfred Kertsch, *Exempla Chrysostomica: Zu Exegese, Stil und Bildersprache bei Johannes Chrysostomos* (Graz: Institut für Ökumenische Theologie und Patrologie an der Universität Graz, 1995), Christopher P. Jones, “Imaginary Athletics in Two Followers of John Chrysostom,” *HSCP* 106 (2011): 321–338.



conflicting wish to postpone the open debate.<sup>75</sup> When he finally accedes to combat and enters the arena, he is reluctant to brandish arguments as weapons that might “inflict wounds.”<sup>76</sup> On the contrary, he intends to “cure those who are sick”<sup>77</sup> with gentleness and kindness.<sup>78</sup> His teachings regarding God’s unknowability are thus analogous to healing with medicine.<sup>79</sup>

## 9 Conclusion? God and Negation

In conclusion, I wish to make the following observations:

- i. Nothing that can be thought or spoken of can express the essence (substance) of God.
- ii. God (in his essence) is *nothing* . . . less than the inexpressible.
- iii. Nonetheless, the paradox is that a rigorous philosophical language and an expressive rhetoric are developed to support this view of “nothing . . . less than the inexpressible.”
- iv. The ascent through these various layers of negativity culminates in the mystical. The angels in heaven, their song, and their holy fear constitute the paradigm of the mystical experience.

One final question remains: Can God ultimately be called upon by name – any name (including biblical name)? Chrysostom’s response to this question, which can be found in his third homily *On the Incomprehensibility of God*, is characterised by radical negativity. To call upon God yields nothing less than a waterfall of negative terms that correspond to the mystical insights of the angels:

Let us call upon him, then, as the ineffable (ἀνέκφραστον) God who is beyond our intelligence (ἀπερινόητον), invisible (ἀόρατον), incomprehensible (ἀκατάληπτον), who overcomes the power of human language and transcends the grasp of mortal thought. Let us call on him as the God who is inscrutable (ἀνεξιχνίαστος) to the angels, unseen/uncontemplated (ἀθέατον) by the seraphim, inconceivable (ἀκατανόητον) to the cherubim, invisible (ἀόρατον) to the principalities, to the powers, and to the virtues, in fact, to all creatures without qualification, because he is known (γνωριζόμενον) only by the Son and the Spirit.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>75</sup> *Incomprehens.* I.38, tr. Harkins, p. 67 (1,334–336, SC 28 bis, 130).

<sup>76</sup> *Incomprehens.* I.39, tr. Harkins, 67 (1,349, SC 28 bis, 132).

<sup>77</sup> *Incomprehens.* I.39, tr. Harkins, 67 (1,349–350, SC 28 bis, 132).

<sup>78</sup> *Incomprehens.* I.40, tr. Harkins, 67 (1,352–353, SC 28 bis, 132).

<sup>79</sup> On Chrysostom’s use of medical images, see James D. Cook, “Therapeutic Preaching: The Use of Medical Imagery in the Sermons of John Chrysostom,” *StPatr* 96 (2017): 127–132.

<sup>80</sup> *Incomprehens.* III.5, tr. Harkins (revised), 97 (3,53–59, SC 28 bis, 190).

God's essence transcends the comprehension of all creatures, both human and angelic, who are all limited in their capacity for knowledge.<sup>81</sup> Far from being a lament over the finitude of these creatures' knowledge, however, the abundance of negative epithets constitutes an affirmation of the infinite distance between the created and the uncreated and a doxology of the incomprehensible God. Nonetheless, as a philanthropic Creator, God can make himself accessible to humans' limited and weak capacity for comprehension.<sup>82</sup> Rather than denying apophatic theology, however, this is the consequence and confirmation of its necessity.

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81 Cf. Rylaasdam, *Pedagogy*, 16.

82 Rylaasdam, *Pedagogy*, 18: "Remaining unchanged in his incomprehensible essence, God adapts his revelation to the capacity of humans. The pedagogical way in which Chrysostom reads God's adaptation has roots in classical rhetoric and the Christian theological tradition." See also the remarks on the condescension (*synkatabasis*) of God as a means of transcending the boundaries between God and human finitude and weakness in John Chrysostom, with reference to his *Homilies on John*: Athanasios Despotis, "Drawing and Transcending Boundaries in the Dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus: Fresh Perspectives from John's Hellenistic Background and Chrysostomic Reception," *Journal of Early Christian History* 8:1 (2018): 68–87. For *synkatabasis* as a focal doctrinal point in Chrysostom, see also Brändle, *Chrysostomus*, 52–53. The articulation of the doctrine of *synkatabasis* with the apophatic approach in John Chrysostom's writing remains a topic for future exploration.

