BRILL

Vigiliae Christianae 65 (2011) 425-451

Vigiliae Christianae
brill.nl/vc

The Dialectics and Therapeutics of Desire in Maximus the Confessor*

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Abstract
Maximus the Confessor's *Ambiguum* 7 has long been considered the anchor of a substantial refutation of Origenist cosmology and teleology, with Maximus still seeking to rehabilitate the ascetical "gospel" of Origen. Yet in commenting on Gregory Nazianzen's *Oration* 14 in *Ambiguum* 7, Maximus acknowledges that Gregory is dealing less with the scheme of human origins per se than with the miseries attending life in the body, which opens up the whole question of how embodied, passible human existence is the frontier of human salvation and deification. I argue that for Maximus human desire in all its cosmological and psychosomatic complexity—both as a register of creaturely passibility and affectivity, and as integral to the definition of human volition and freedom—is central to the subtle dialectic of activity and passivity in the creaturely *transitus* to deification. The morally malleable character of desire and the passions, and their ambiguous but ultimately purposive status within the economy of human transformation, decisively manifest the divine resourcefulness in fulfilling the mystery of deification—especially in view of Christ's use of human passibility in inaugurating the new eschatological "mode" (*tropos*) of human nature. In his engagement of Gregory of Nyssa, in particular, Maximus develops a sophisticated dialectics and therapeutics of desire that integrates important perspectives of the Confessor's anthropology, christology, eschatology, and asceticism.

Keywords
deification, desire, ecstasy, embodiment, love, passibility, will

*) An original draft of this essay was presented in a special session on Maximus the Confessor's *Ambiguum* 7 at the 2007 Oxford Patristics Conference. I am grateful to the session's convener, Torstein Tollefsen, and the other participants for their valuable feedback and comments.

DOI: 10.1163/157007210X524286

Few if any texts from the corpus of Maximus the Confessor (588-662) have commanded more interest for historical theologians than the seventh entry in his *Book of Ambiguities* (*Ambiguorum liber*), a massive commentary on enigmatic statements in the writings of Gregory Nazianzen and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. Ever since the groundbreaking work on the *Ambigua* by the Benedictine scholar Polycarp Sherwood in the 1950s, *Ambiguum* 7 has been treated as Maximus's *tour de force* of "cosmic theology" and as his most concentrated refutation of Origenist cosmology. It also provides the framework and the vista, as it were, of his larger anthropology and eschatology. Historically, moreover, this text has been considered among the most crucial articulations of cosmological doctrine in the larger Eastern Christian intellectual tradition.

Specifically in *Ambiguum* 7 Maximus is attempting to elucidate a passage from Gregory Nazianzen's *Oration* 14 (*On the Love of the Poor*) regarding "fallen" humanity:

> What does Wisdom have in mind for me? And what is this great mystery? Is it God's intention that we who are a portion of God and have slipped down from above should out of self-importance be so haughty and puffed up as to despise our Creator? Hardly! Rather we should always look to him in our struggle against the weakness of the body. Its very limitations are a form of training for those in our condition.[1]

The image of human beings as "a portion of God... slipped down from above" was especially sensitive, as Sherwood long ago demonstrated,[2] because Origenists could ostensibly exploit it to support their doctrine of preexistence of souls and of dual creations, spiritual and material, distinguished not just ontologically but sequentially. Origenism, from its classic enhancement by Evagrius Ponticus in the fourth century to its innovative expressions among certain Palestinian monks in the sixth century, was an ascetical gospel framed within a thoroughgoing cosmological and eschatological scheme drawn from Origen himself. The first phase of the cosmic drama envisioned preexistent noetic beings, sublimely united in their

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[1] Gregory Nazianzen, *Or.* 14 (PG 35:865B-C), *ap.* Maximus the Confessor, *Amb.* 7 (PG 91:1068D), trans. in Paul Blowers and Robert Wilken, *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ: Selected Writings of St. Maximus the Confessor* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), p. 45.

[2] *The Earlier Ambigua of St. Maximus the Confessor and His Refutation of Origenism*, Studia anselmiana 36 (Rome: Herder, 1955), esp. pp. 21-9, 72-102.

contemplation of the divine Logos, falling away through negligence or satiety (κόρος) and thereupon being committed—punitively but providentially—to material bodies in time and space. Those diverse bodies, accommodated to the degree of their sin (hence the differences in angelic, human, and demonic bodily states), combined with the gift of free will, were intended in turn to serve creatures' gradual spiritual rehabilitation and ultimate restoration (ἀποκατάστασις) to eternal unity in God.[3] The "gospel" in this schema was the message of spiritual—and secondarily corporeal—renewal and transcendence communicated through Christ, who was conceived by Origen and his heirs as the one uncompromised soul perpetually united to the eternal Logos and incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth.[4]

In *Ambiguum* 7 and other texts as well, Maximus seeks, in the spirit of his Cappadocian forbears, to rescue this ascetical gospel from its Origenist framework, to set it within a new cosmological and metaphysical scheme projecting the progressive movement (κίνησις) of embodied created beings from a definite historical beginning (γένεσις) to an *unprecedented* rest (στάσις) in God.[5] In the argumentation of *Ambiguum* 7, together with the preceding *Ambiguum* 6 and the subsequent *Ambiguum* 8, Maximus is offering commentaries on passages from Gregory that relate directly to the constraints, hazards, and possibilities of life in the body. Maximus himself notes this partway through *Ambiguum* 7, admitting that "Gregory did not intend to explain how human beings came to be, but why misery attends their lives."[6] The grand frontier of passibility and life in the body is indeed the leitmotif of this whole segment of the *Ambigua*, and this leitmotif casts a broad shadow across other of Maximus's texts, especially his exegetical, spiritual, and ascetical works.

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[3] See the especially relevant passages in Origen, *De principiis* 1.4.1–2.3.7 (SC 252:166-275); 2.9.1-8 (SC 252:353-73); 3.1.1-24 (SC 268:16-150); 3.5.1–3.6.9 (SC 268:218-54).

[4] Ibid. 2.6.3-4 (SC 252:314-18). See also the trenchant analysis of the soteriological significance of the soul of Jesus in Origen's thought by Rowan Williams, "Origen on the Soul of Jesus," in R.P.C. Hanson and Henri Crouzel, eds., *Origeniana Tertia: The Third International Colloquium for Origen Studies, University of Manchester, September 7th-11th, 1981* (Rome: Edizioni dell'Ateneo, 1985), pp. 131-7.

[5] This scheme has been widely assessed in Maximian studies, but a good summary treatment is John Meyendorff, "The Cosmic Dimension of Salvation," in his *Christ in Eastern Christian Thought* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1975), pp. 131-151.

[6] *Amb.* 7 (PG 91:1089D-1092A; cf. 1093C), trans. Blowers and Wilken, *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ*, pp. 65, 68.

As a number of secondary studies have recognized, most recently that of Adam Cooper,[7] *Ambiguum* 7 launches Maximus's theology of human creation and embodiment—not only in response to Origenist theories of the fall and "double creation"—but in the larger *teleological* framework of the mystery of divine embodiment and the instrumentality of material bodies in the outworking of deification. Here I want to explore a subtheme within that theology of embodiment that provides a crucial bridge between Maximus's speculative and practical theology: the training, healing, and transforming of human desire. With Origen, the two Cappadocian Gregories, and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Maximus understands desire, in all its cosmological and psychosomatic complexity, as the principal register of creaturely passibility and affectivity, as integral to the definition of human volition and freedom, and as central also to the subtle dialectic of activity and passivity in the creaturely transitus (διάβασις) to deification. In the opening section of *Ambiguum* 7, we have a serene portrait of the natural desire (ὄρεξις) or longing (ἔφεσις) of creatures for God which has no end until it reaches the ecstatic state of "eternal well-being" (τὸ ἀεὶ εὖ εἶναι) where it is sublimely sated and "uncontainably contained" (ἀχωρήτως χωρουμένου) by God its object.[8] But by the concluding section of *Ambiguum* 7, and in further discussion in *Ambiguum* 8, Maximus has come round with Nazianzen to the tragic reality of post-lapsarian life in the flesh marked by the disorientation of desire and liability to base passions.[9]

Characteristically for Maximus, however, these two perspectives—the one focused on the overarching divine plan (λόγος; βουλή) to elevate a creation that antecedently and ontologically longs for deification, the other focused on the *historical* and contingent circumstances of sin, fallenness, and the perversion of desire—merge dialectically into a single *incarnational* economy, a single "story" of the providence and resourcefulness of the creative and saving Logos.[10] In *Ambiguum* 7 Maximus calls this the "newer mode of being" (καινοτέρος τρόπος),[11] which, on the one hand,

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[7] *The Body in St. Maximus the Confessor: Holy Flesh, Wholly Deified* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), esp. pp. 65-116 on *Amb* 7.

[8] *Amb.* 7 (PG 91:1069B- 1077B, 1084A-B, 1089A-B); cf. ibid. 10 (1176D-1177A).

[9] Ibid. 7 (PG 91:1089Dff).

[10] See the excellent treatment of this integrative and incarnational perspective of Maximus by Jean-Claude Larchet, *La divinisation de l'homme selon saint Maxime le Confesseur* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1996), pp. 83-123.

[11] Ibid. (PG 91:1097C).

recalls Irenaeus's classic principle of God's progressive reforming (*reformatio in melius*) of the human race, and, on the other hand, anticipates Maximus's later thinking on the "innovation" of created nature κατὰ τρόπον displayed in God's miraculous feats[12] and especially in the incarnation.[13]

The Dialectics of Human Desire and Passibility

Hans Urs von Balthasar, in his *Cosmic Liturgy*, insightfully demonstrated how Maximus negotiates dialectically and synthetically the tensions in creaturely existence.[14] "Maximus' reflection on history," he writes, "...stands in a curiously unresolved state, somewhere between a pure contemplation of natural being and a concrete involvement in the variegated, constantly changing reality of actual events."[15] The dilemma—which is also the dynamic *frontier*—of creaturely passibility runs the full gamut of Maximus's theological anthropology. As conveyed in *Ambiguum* 7 and elsewhere, the dialectics of desire begins, cosmologically, with the tension between divine immobility and stability, on the one hand, and creaturely mobility, passibility, and vulnerability on the other.[16] At this level, because God's ἐνέργεια precedes and grounds both the potency (δύναμις) and subsequent actuality (ἐνέργεια) of creatures,[17] and underlies their λόγοι, their natural impulse (ὁρμή) and desire (ὄρεξις) are already predisposed and projected toward God. They are already, in principle, suffused and prepossessed by the generous object of their eschatological longing. This natural goal-directedness, while reminiscent of the Aristotelian ἐντελέχεια,[18] represents more importantly for Maximus the *graced*

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12) *Amb.* 42 (PG 91:1341D-1345A).

13) Cf. *Amb.* 41 (PG 91:1308D-1316A); ibid. 5 (PG 91:1045D-1060D); *Opusc. theol. et pol.* 7 (PG 91:69B-89B).

14) *Cosmic Liturgy: The Universe according to Maximus the Confessor*, 3rd ed., trans. Brian Daley (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), esp. pp. 137-205.

15) Ibid., p. 179.

16) *Amb.* 7 (PG 91:1069B, 1072B-C); ibid. 8 (1101D-1105B); ibid. 10 (1177A, 1184B-D, 1185B); ibid. 15 (1217A-B); *Cap. theol.* 1-10 (PG 90:1084A-1088A). On the vulnerability and penchant for "deviance" (τροπή) in creaturely movement, see esp. *Ep.* 6 (PG 91:432A-B).

17) On this motif, see Philipp Gabriel Renczes, *Agir de Dieu et liberté de l'homme: Recherches sur l'anthropologie théologique de saint Maxime le Confesseur* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2003), pp. 54-9.

18) See Renczes, *Agir de Dieu et liberté de l'homme*, pp. 50-60, 143-4, 146-7, 365-8.

state of being which, stretching the creature's "natural" development as it were, opens the creature toward the future glory of supernatural deification while simultaneously anticipating the dynamic interplay of divine grace with the creature's own ἐνέργεια, its own desire and volition.[19]

Von Balthasar rightly underscores Maximus's distrust of the idea of pure nature (φύσις) existing prior to a participation in grace.[20] Maximus is a realist and, we might say in von Balthasar's own key, a "theo-dramatist" who spends precious little time dwelling nostalgically on the prelapsarian state of humanity. Such was more a potency than an extended actuality in the Confessor's thinking. For him, "the bronze doors of the divine home are slammed remorselessly shut at the very start of our existence,"[21] since Adam lapsed by squandering his faculties of spiritual desire the very moment he was created (ἅμα τῷ γίνεσθαι).[22] Thus emerges the next major tension in Maximus's dialectics of desire, that between the natural passibility (πάθος) or passivity[23] that characterizes human nature at its genesis and the postlapsarian πάθος understood as a liability to potentially deviant passions (πάθη) connected with the body.[24] This latter πάθος, both a curse and a blessing, in turn sets up a number of anthropological, psychological, and ascetical tensions which will play an enormous role in Maximus's spiritual doctrine: the basic tension between the body as agent of the soul's healthy desire[25] and the body as subjecting the soul to the circumstantial "law" of pleasure and pain;[26] the tension between natural

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19) Though Maximus famously errs on the side of Origen and Basil (cf. *Hom. in Hex.* 9.6) in distinguishing between the "image" and "likeness" of God in the human creature, he nonetheless implicitly sympathizes with Gregory of Nyssa's virtual equation of the two because the image, as an ontological endowment, carries with it the projection or summons toward eschatological completion and transcendence.

20) *Cosmic Liturgy*, p. 190.

21) Ibid., p. 187.

22) *Ad Thal.* 61 (CCSG 22:85).

23) *Amb.* 7 (PG 91:1072B, 1073B-C).

24) On the providential superaddition of the passions, see *Ad Thal.* 1 (CCSG 7:47-9), where Maximus expresses his reliance on Gregory of Nyssa. See also the discussion of the dialectics of creaturely passibility in Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy*, pp. 185-96; and Claire-Agnès Zirnheld, "Le double visage de la passion: malédiction due au péché et/ou dynamisme de la vie: *Quaestiones ad Thalassium* XXI, XXII et XLII," in A. Schoors and P. van Deun, eds., *Philohistôr: Miscellanea in honorem Caroli Laga septuagenarii* (Leuven: Peeters Press, 1994), pp. 361-80.

25) *Amb.* 7 (PG 91:1088C,1092B-C, 1096D, 1100A-B).

26) *Ad Thal.* 61 (CCSG 22:85-7, 95-7).

bodily passions connected with survival and the purely carnal passions;[27] the tension between passions useful for virtue and the vicious passions (with the lower psychic faculties of desire [ἐπιθυμία] and aversion [θυμός] poised for conversion either way); the tension between the soul's natural desire (ὄρεξις) or will (θέλησις) and the "gnomic" mode of desiring and willing; and derivatively the tension between gnomic desire or will as an agent of the natural desire or will and the same as a servant of individual self-interest and self-love. To carry through this dialectics of desire, we would need to emphasize the overarching *christological* dimension, which for Maximus frames the preceding tensions in the light of the mysterious and salvific tension within Christ's hypostasis between his embodiment of a new and eschatological mode (τρόπος) of human desire, emotion, and will, and his appropriation (οἰκείωσις) of humanity's fallen and passible nature.[28] Finally, we would need to add the properly eschatological tension in Maximus's teaching (already familiar from Gregory of Nyssa) between deification as the resting or final sating of desire and deification as an endless desire for God; likewise the tension in the fulfillment of deification between pure passivity to the divine ἐνέργεια and the sublime activity of graced human nature.

The Therapeutics of Desire

My purpose in outlining these dialectical tensions in broad strokes is to set the stage for analyzing what I shall call Maximus's "therapeutics" of desire, his understanding of the various strategies by which God, in his providence and judgment, heals and transforms the natural and unnatural appetency of creatures at multiple levels.

The Stretching and Rarefying of Desire

In *Ambiguum* 7, Maximus envisions the infinite God stretching to infinity (ἐπιτείνειν πρὸς τὸ ἀόριστον) the desire of those who enjoy him through participation (διὰ μετοχῆς),[29] and similarly in greeting his friend

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[27] Ibid. 55 (CCSG 7:487-9).

[28] See Maximus's nuanced interpretation of Christ's assumption of human passibility in *Ad Thal.* 21 (CCSG 7:127-133), trans. Blowers and Wilken, *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ*, pp. 109-18.

[29] *Amb.* 7 (PG 91:1089B).

Marinus credits him with a feverish desire for God that is "stretching out (συμπαρεκτείνων) alongside God's infinity."[30] The verb συμπαρεκτείνειν is almost certainly inspired by a passage in Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses* depicting those who participate in the divine Good having their desire endlessly stretched out with the divine infinity.[31] Beyond Maximus's shared polemical concern with Gregory to counter the Origenist postulate that a creature can experience a satiety (κόρος) of divine goodness,[32] these texts convey his sense that desire, by its very nature as a function both of the intellect (νοῦς) and of the sensate body, is malleable, and disposed to constant dilation and rarefying through gradually more intensive communion with its divine object.

A firm consensus in recent scholarship on Gregory of Nyssa has established that desire, far from being an unfortunate superaddition to reason or the human intellectual constitution, lies at the very core of human nature.[33] The levels of the soul and the soul-body relationship indicate hierarchy and differentiation, to be sure, but in their actualization they disclose a deeper moral unity of the mind in its relation to all subsidiary faculties, including the affections.[34] Called to the highest knowledge of, and participation in, the Trinity the intellect is helpless without the inclination and passionate pursuit afforded by desire. The very same obtains

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30) *Opusc. theol. et polem.* 1 (PG 91:9A).

31) *De vita Moysis*, lib. 1 (GNO 7.1:4).

32) On this polemic, see Sherwood, *The Earlier Ambigua*, pp. 181-204.

33) For a good representation of this scholarly consensus, see Martin Laird, "Under Solomon's Tutelage: The Education of Desire in the Homilies on the Song of Songs," *Modern Theology* 18 (2002), pp. 507-25, reprinted in Sarah Coakley, ed., *Re-Thinking Gregory of Nyssa* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), pp. 77-80; id., *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith: Union, Knowledge, and Divine Presence*, OECS (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 35-40, 58-62, 96-7, 100-1, 104, 128, 139, 169, 208; also Morwenna Ludlow, *Universal Salvation: Eschatology in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa and Karl Rahner* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 56-64; J. Warren Smith, *Passion and Paradise: Human and Divine Emotion in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa* (New York: Crossroad, 2004).

34) This is born out particularly in Gregory's rich dialogue with Macrina in *De anima et resurrectione* (PG 46:11-160, and especially 49B-68A). For analysis of Gregory's own dialectics of desire, see also Rowan Williams, "Macrina's Deathbed Revisited: Gregory of Nyssa on Mind and Passion," in Lionel Wickham and Caroline Bammel, eds., *Christian Faith and Greek Philosophy: Essays in Tribute to George Christopher Stead* (Leiden: Brill, 1993), pp. 227-46; Smith, *Passion and Paradise*, 75-103; Michel Barnes, "The Polemical Context and Content of Gregory of Nyssa's Psychology," *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 4 (1994): 8-20; Laird, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith*, pp. 34-62; Ludlow, *Universal Salvation*, pp. 57-61.

in Maximus. Deviant desire can cause the mind to "slip downward from above" (in Nazianzen's phrase under analysis in *Ambiguum* 7), lapsing into the chaos of material infatuations and edging toward the precipice of non-being.[35] But as Maximus indicates in a long discourse in *Ad Thalassium* 59, desire is intrinsic to the upward intellectual and spiritual advance toward things divine. Seeking after (ζήτησις) God consists precisely in a *desirous* motion (μετ' ἐφέσεως κίνησις) of the mind.[36] In indwelling and stretching the *natural* faculties, which fully retain their capacity (ἕξις) and integrity while cooperating with divine grace, the Spirit specifically instills an "impassible desire" (ἀπαθὴς ἔφεσις) in the questing mind.[37] Among the many dimensions of deification, Maximus writes, is precisely

> ...the return of believers to their proper beginning (ἀρχήν) according to their proper end (κατὰ τὸ τέλος), which is the fulfillment of their desire (ἡ τῆς ἐφέσεως πλήρωσις). The fulfilment of their desire, in turn, is the ever-moving repose (ἀεικίνητος στάσις) of desirers around the object of their desire. The ever-moving repose of desirers around the object of their desire is, in turn, their uninterrupted and continuous enjoyment of the object of desire. And the uninterrupted and continuous enjoyment of their object of desire is, in turn, their participation (μέθεξις) in supernatural divine realities.[38]

Stating here, as he does also in *Ambiguum* 7,[39] that the creature's proper τέλος includes also its ἀρχή, Maximus means that deification is not simply the monistic return to an ontological baseline. In the historical "middle" (μεσότης) between ἀρχή and τέλος, a creature's desire expands rather than attenuates.[40] Sanctified desire broadens (πλατύνεται) along with the mind in the pursuit of divine realities.[41] As Maximus further suggests,

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35) *Amb.* 7 (PG 91:1084D-1085A); cf. ibid. 10 (1112A-B).

36) *Ad Thal.* 59 (CCSG 22:65). Maximus adds here that the mind's "seeking out" (ἐκζήτησις) of God is characterized by "burning desire" (μετὰ τινος ζεούσης ἐφέσεως).

37) Ibid. (CCSG 22:47).

38) Ibid. (CCSG 22:53).

39) *Amb.* 7 (PG 91:1080C, 1084A).

40) Cf. *Ad Thal.* 55 (CCSG 7:525), where Maximus suggests that the ἀρχή and τέλος of salvation is divine Wisdom, which "begins" by creating fear (φόβος) of God, but "finishes" by producing desire (πόθος); also *Exp. orat. dom.* prol. (CCSG 23:27-8), which credits love (ἀγάπη) as both the result and the cause of the salutary fusion of fear and desire.

41) *Cap. car.* 3.71-2 (PG 90:1037C-1040B); cf. *Exp. orat. dom.* (CCSG 23:58): "...the whole mind should strain toward God, stretched out like a sinew by the irascible faculty (τῷ θυμικῷ) and aflame with passion (ἐπιθυμίας) for the highest reaches of desire (τῇ κατ' ἄκρον ἐφέσει)."

rational and conceptual knowledge of God feeds desire (ἔφεσις), which in turn motivates the urge toward a higher, experiential and participative knowledge of God in deification.[42] At this level, in concert with faith and hope, love (ἀγάπη) as the ultimate theological virtue prepares the mind to become sublimely immovable in God's loving affection (στοργή), affixing the mind's entire faculty of longing (ἡ τῆς ἐφέσεως δύναμις) to the desire (πόθος) for God.[43]

The Diversifying of Desire

The principle of unity and differentiation, characteristic of Maximus's theological anthropology as a whole, is certainly operative in his therapeutics of desire. If at first sight, because of the Confessor's concession to the Platonic moral dualism of soul and body,[44] there appears a huge chasm between the deep-seated, appetitive desire (ὄρεξις) of the soul for God that Maximus describes in the opening of *Ambiguum* 7 and the affective desire (ἐπιθυμία) rooted in the soul's relation to the passible body, his larger teleological approach to human passibility makes the eschatological alignment of ὄρεξις and ἐπιθυμία imperative.

The differentiation of desire, in the first place, manifests itself in human nature's internal constitution and vocation. In Maximus's trichotomy of the powers of the soul, reason (λόγος) mediates between the νοῦς and the lower passible faculties of desire (ἐπιθυμία; τὸ ἐπιθυμητικόν) and aversion (θυμός; τὸ θυμικόν).[45] The soul must in this sense be continually rescued from the centrifugal force of internal dissension, confusion, and fragmentation.[46] But ἐπιθυμία and θυμός are to be "yoked with" reason (λόγος), not simply sublimated by it.[47] In *Ad Thalassium* 39, Maximus asserts that reason contributes the "seeking," ἐπιθυμία the "desiring," and θυμός the "struggling to acquire" incorruptibility and spiritual knowledge (γνῶσις), in the concerted "interrelation" (ἡ ἀλληλοῦχος σχέσις) between the three

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42) *Ad Thal.* 59 (CCSG 22:55-9).

43) Ibid. 49 (CCSG 7:351-3).

44) See von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy*, pp. 196-201.

45) This trichotomy is pervasive in Maximus's writings. See the excellent detailed analysis by Lars Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator: The Theological Anthropology of Maximus the Confessor*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Open Court, 1995), pp. 169-207.

46) On this theme see Melchisedec Törönen, *Union and Distinction in the Thought of St Maximus the Confessor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 176-9.

47) *Amb.* 10 (PG 91:1196A-B).

faculties cultivated through ascetical practice.[48] In this text and others, it is striking that Maximus recruits θυμός, normally a faculty of aversion and irascibility, and useful for righteous indignation against vice, as a function of desire, lending fervency to the quest for divine benefits and enabling the soul to transcend vicious passions.[49]

In the second place, the diversification of desire operates externally in the moral and social interactions of human beings, wherein they vary immensely in their customs (ἤθεσι), inclinations (γνώμαις), choices (προαιρέσεσι), and desires (ἐπιθυμίας).[50] Because γνώμη is ambiguous,[51] bespeaking on the one hand the fallen mode (τρόπος) or disposition (διάθεσις)[52] of volition whereby creatures are subject to their own vacillations of moral resolve, and, on the other hand, the freedom of will learned and "owned" through individual moral experience, desire too is intrinsically caught up in this "gnomic" dialectic. Maximus actually defines γνώμη technically as "an internally predisposed desire (ὄρεξις ἐνδιάθετος) toward that which is in our moral power (ἐφ' ἡμῖν), and the basis of free choice (προαίρεσις);" or else "a disposition (διάθεσις) toward those things in our moral power on which we have desirously deliberated (ὀρεκτικῶς βουλευθεῖσι)."[53] It habituates desire toward either evil or virtuous ends. It can thus become enslaved to the passion of self-love (φιλαυτία), which fragments human nature from within.[54] But by grace and by conformity

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48) *Ad Thal.* 39 (CCSG 7:259, 261); also *Ep.* 2 (PG 91:397A-B).

49) Cf. *Cap. car.* 2.48 (PG 90:1000C-D); ibid. 4.15 (1052A); *Exp. orat. dom.* (CCSG 23:58); *Ad Thal.* 49 (CCSG 7:355).

50) *Amb.* 10 (PG 91:1092D-1093A; *Myst.* 1 (PG 91:665C).

51) On the nature of γνώμη see Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator*, pp. 213-18, 227-8; John Meyendorff, "Free Will (*Gnomê*) in Saint Maximus the Confessor," in Andrew Blane, ed., *Ecumenical World of Orthodox Civilization* (The Hague: Mouton, 1974), pp. 71-75; J.J. Prado, *Voluntad y naturaleza: La antropologia filosófica de Maximo el Confesor* (Rio Cuarta: Ediciónes de la Universidad Nacional de Rio Cuarto, 1974), pp. 255-6; Renczes, *Agir de Dieu et liberté de l'homme*, pp. 271-81. Prado connects γνώμη with desire as "lo que efectivamente es del interés y del resorte de cada individuo en la situación concreta en la que quiere realizar du deseo." Renczes rightly emphasizes "le caractère essential du sens téléologique qui imprègne le rapport sous lequel le dynamisme du vouloir humain se déploie en passant part sa γνώμη." He thus proposes defining it in Maximus as the "faculté selon laquelle la personne dispose sa volonté en vue de son bien final, naturel et supernatural."

52) *Ep.* 6 (PG 91:428D).

53) *Opusc. theol. et pol.* 1 (PG 91:17C).

54) *Ad Thal.* 40 (CCSG 7:271).

to the principle (λόγος) inhering in human nature,[55] γνώμη can be healed, redisposed, not simply in the context of individual asceticism but more importantly in the context of relationships and personal communion, where, precisely through a γνώμη manifested in the equal love of all human beings and compassion toward all, the believer is endeared to God.[56] Healed through the utter single-mindedness of Christ's own γνώμη (as affirmed in Maximus's earlier works),[57] and "surrendered" to God as Maximus describes in *Ambiguum* 7,[58] the γνώμη differentiated among individual persons becomes the basis for a marvelous solidarity of inclination on a social,[59] ecclesial,[60] and even cosmic scale.[61]

The Educating and Reorienting of Desire

Nowhere is Maximus's dialectical approach to human passibility, as curse and blessing, more clearly in evidence than in his reflections on the divine strategies for educating irrational desire (ἔρως) and the deviant bodily passions, the principal registers of a creature's psychosomatic "history." In *Ambiguum* 8 he mentions three such means, which can be classified succinctly as (1) purgative suffering; (2) ascetical practice; and (3) the imitation of virtuous exemplars.[62]

Together *Ambigua* 7 and 8 constitute a springboard into Maximus's larger theology of redemptive bodily suffering and of human experience in the flesh, a richly nuanced theme already in Gregory Nazianzen that Maximus develops in numerous texts of his own.[63] The particular image

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55) *Ep.* 2 (PG 91:400D-401A); cf. *Exp. orat. dom.* (CCSG 23:65-6); *Ad Thal.* 65 (CCSG 22:279).

56) *Cap. car.* 1.24-26 (PG 90:965A-C).

57) See *Exp. orat. dom.* (CCSG 23:34, 51: γνώμης μοναδικὴ κίνησις).

58) *Amb.* 7 (PG 91:1076B). This "gnomic surrender" will be discussed in more detail below.

59) *Ep.* 2 (PG 91:396C-D, 400A-B); *Ep.* 3 (PG 91:408D-409A); *Ad Thal.* 64 (CCSG 22:237). See also Törönen, *Union and Distinction*, pp. 180-2.

60) *Myst.* 24 (PG 91:705A-B), describing the Church as ultimately joining the faithful "in a single identity of will" (κατὰ μίαν γνώμης ταυτότητα); cf. *Exp. orat. dom.* (CCSG 23:51).

61) *Exp. Ps. 59* (CCSG 23:3); *Ad Thal.* 2 (CCSG 7:51).

62) *Amb.* 8 (PG 91:1104B-1105A).

63) Cf. *Amb.* 7 (PG 91:1093A-B); *Cap. car.* 2.41-44 (PG 90:997B-100A); ibid. 3.82 (1041C); *Ad Thal.* 52 (CCSG 7:415-27). See also Vittorio Croce and Bruno Valente, "Provvidenza e pedagogia divina nella storia," in Felix Heinzer and Christoph Schönborn,

in *Ambiguum* 8, drawn from Nazianzen, is that of God's exposing fallen humanity to a "flowing stream," the chaos of material creation, which through a kind of providential buffeting becomes the stability and security of embodied, passible creatures.[64] In *Ambiguum* 7 Maximus cites Nazianzen's more adventurous image of divine playfulness in tossing human beings to and fro, instructing them precisely through the fickleness of life.[65] Again in *Ambiguum* 71 he revisits this theme in far more detail, commenting at length on Nazianzen's image of the Logos at play, surmising that through his *incarnational* ministry within the cosmic order, the Word positions and maneuvers "intermediate things" (i.e., visible created things in their historical transience) between the "extremes" of the enduring invisible realities of beginning and end.[66] Maximus also draws in Pseudo-Dionysius's striking image of the mutual ecstasy (ἔκστασις) of God and his creatures, the benevolent condescension whereby God, as it were, teases and enchants humanity experientially with the "toys" (παίγνια) of creation in order to entice them toward the contemplation of spiritual realities.[67] Maximus exploits the intriguing versatility of the image of play in order to express the divine felicity operative in the retraining of created beings, a felicity which, like a contagion, penetrates and transmutes their own desires and aspirations "ecstatically."

Maximus's other two stated strategies for the healing of the passions and desires clearly are of a piece: negatively, the ascetical discipline of learning how to obviate vice; positively, the imitation of virtuous exemplars. This is of course an enormous domain in his spiritual doctrine. But

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eds., *Maximus Confessor: Actes du Symposium sur Maxime le Confesseur, Fribourg, 2-5 septembre 1980* (Fribourg: Éditions Universitaires, 1982), pp. 247-59.

64) On this theme, see Paul Blowers, "Bodily Inequality, Material Chaos, and the Ethics of Equalization in Maximus the Confessor," *Studia Patristica* 42 (Leuven: Peeters Press, 2006), pp. 51-6.

65) *Amb.* 7 (PG 91:1093A-B), commenting on Gregory Nazianzen, *Or* 14.20. Cf. *Amb.* 71 (PG 91:1416A-B).

66) *Amb.* 71 (PG 91:1412B-1413A), citing Gregory Nazianzen, *Carmina moralia* II (PG 37:624A-625A). On divine "play" and its background in Maximus, see Hugo Rahner, *Man at Play* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972), pp. 11-25; Carlos Steel, "Le jeu du Verbe: À propos de Maxime, *Amb. ad Ioh.* LXVII [=*Amb* 71]," in A. Schoors and P. van Deun, eds., *Philohistôr: Miscellanea*, pp. 281-94; Cooper, *The Body in St. Maximus the Confessor*, pp. 51-4. On the Platonic background of "play," see Paul Plass, "'Play' and Philosophical Detachment in Plato," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 98 (1967), pp. 343-64.

67) *Amb.* 71 (PG 91:1413A-1416A), citing Ps-Dionysius, *div. nom.* 4.13 (PTS 33:158-159).

let us focus specifically on the rehabilitation and cultivation of ἔρως, the deep-seated affection of the soul the precise understanding of which recalled a long tradition of Greek patristic analysis, especially by Clement and Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and Evagrius. Catherine Osborne has cogently argued that the Platonic ἔρως appropriated by the Fathers was not necessarily the selfish, acquisitive, possessive love caricatured from too narrow a reading of Plato and his interpreters. In fact the coupling of self-interested and selfless motivations within Platonic and Neoplatonic conceptions of ἔρως opened the door for the patristic amalgamation of ἔρως and ἀγάπη, as evidenced in the commentaries of Origen and Gregory of Nyssa on the Song of Songs.[68] This development was not lost on Maximus, who in one of his *Chapters on Love* recognizes that the motives even of ἀγάπη may vary between selfless, neutral, and selfish motives.[69] Deviant ἀγάπη can even be called a "culpable passion" (πάθος ψεκτόν).[70] As for ἔρως, however, Maximus certainly follows Origen, Gregory of Nyssa,[71] and Pseudo-Dionysius in enhancing its mysterious and graciously bewitching character. Human ἔρως, implanted by God,[72] grows out of the inexplicable "wound" of God's own love (Song 5:8),[73] and is thus pivotal, right along with "the blessed passion (πάθος) of holy love (ἀγάπη),"[74] to the process of human assimilation (ὁμοίωσις) to God individually and corporately.

For Maximus, to modulate ἔρως goes far in redeeming and reorienting a potentially vicious constellation of human passions rooted in ἐπιθυμία and θυμός. Ἔρως, like the passions, can be subverted by self-love (φιλαυτία),[75] but it is also capable of good "use" (χρῆσις).[76] Or as Maxi-

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[68] Catherine Osborne, *Eros Unveiled: Plato and the God of Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 52-70.

[69] *Cap. car.* 2.9 (PG 90:985C-D).

[70] Ibid. 3.71 (PG 90:1037C-D).

[71] On ἔρως in Gregory, see Ludlow, *Universal Salvation*, pp. 61-4; Laird, "Under Solomon's Tutelage," pp. 80-90; Smith, *Passion and Paradise*, pp. 104-47, 183-227.

[72] *Amb.* 48 (PG 91:1361A-B): God not only graces humans with ἔρως and longing (πόθος) for him, he grants the knowledge of the means (τρόποι) for fulfilling that longing.

[73] See Osborne, *Eros Unveiled*, pp. 71-85.

[74] *Cap. car.* 3.67 (PG 90:1037A-B). Ἔρως and ἀγάπη are virtually equivalent in *Cap. car.* 1.10-12 (PG 90:964A-B); ibid. 2.6 (985A-B); ibid. 2.48 (1000C-D).

[75] *Ad Thal.* Prol. (CCSG 7:33).

[76] For a detailed exploration of this theme, see Paul Blowers, "Gentiles of the Soul: Maximus the Confessor on the Substructure and Transformation of the Human Passions," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 4 (1996), pp. 57-85, and esp. pp. 66-78.

mus also says, ἐπιθυμία, the concupiscible faculty, while liable to becoming lust or infatuation with material goods, can be converted into ἔρως[77] as well as ἀγάπη.[78] This close spiritual link between ἔρως and ἐπιθυμία has implications for Maximus's treatment of sexuality and marriage, which does not venture significantly beyond the ascetical tradition in which he stood—a tradition that sought to sublimate sexual passion in the conjugal relationship.[79] But it extends beyond that to all social relations. With cultivated use and "improvement,"[80] ἔρως, and with it ἐπιθυμία, not only enhance the soul's attachment to God[81] but simultaneously condition and enhance the bonds of affection with one's neighbors. In *Ad Thalassium* 54 Maximus connects the unifying ἀγάπη of God and other human beings with the soul's being caught up ecstatically in a kind of "erotic union" (ἐρωτικὴ σύγκρασις) with God, which also *laterally* includes the "infallible pleasure (ἀδιάπτωτος ἡδονή) and indivisible union enjoyed by those who, of their own desire (κατ' ἕφεσιν), participate in him who is good by nature."[82] The contemporary Orthodox theologian Christos Yannaras has cast significant light on this erotic dimension in Maximus's thought, arguing that this "true ἔρως" serves ecstatically to draw human beings out of solipsism into the unrestricted sphere of personal (hypostatic) existence and communion, transcending the constraints of erotic satisfaction in the "non-dimensional present of personal immediacy" that is of infinite duration.[83]

It is little surprise that in identifying the means for healing desire and the passions, Maximus mentions last the role of imitation (μίμησις) of the virtuous.[84] Human desire, as René Girard has eloquently argued of late, is inherently mimetic, refined and honed precisely by interaction with other

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77) *Ad Thal.* 55 (CCSG 7:499); ibid. 49 (355); *Cap. car.* 2.47-48 (PG 90:1000C-D).

78) *Amb.* 6 (PG 91:1068A).

79) Cf. *Cap. car.* 2.17 (PG 90:989A-B); ibid. 2.33 (996A-B).

80) See *Cap. car.* 2.56 (PG 90:1001D), where Maximus affirms that the virtuous mind not only restrains its passionate fantasies and impulses (ὁρμαί) but "philosophizes (φιλοσοφεῖ) on improving its emotions of this kind"—a compatible notion with that of the good "use" (χρῆσις) of the affections (ibid. 2.75 [1008C]; ibid. 3.1 [1017B]; ibid. 3.3 [1017C]).

81) On ἐπιθυμία as a vehicle of passion for God see *Cap. car.* 1.43 (PG 90:968D); ibid. 2.48 (1000C-D); ibid. 3.64 (1036C); *Exp. orat. dom.* (CCSG 23:58).

82) *Ad Thal.* 54 (CCSG 7:451). On Christ as displaying this unifying ἀγάπη on a cosmic scale, see *Amb.* 41 (PG 91:1308B).

83) *Person and Eros*, trans. Norman Russell (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2007), pp. 142-5.

84) See again *Amb.* 8 (PG 91:1104D-1105A).

desiring beings.[85] And even though Girard is speaking foremost of a desiring subject's counterparts in the present moment, the mimetic dimension of desire can certainly be extended to include those in the past whose desiring remains vivid and vital to the imagination of the desirer in the present. Maximus's discourses defer to the virtues and godly desiring cultivated by his *present* addressees, but he—just like other patristic and monastic pedagogues who embrace scriptural characters as living, immediate exemplars—certainly appeals to ascetical *exempla* in the Bible, those whose godly desires imitate God's own φιλανθρωπία, which is the quintessentially deifying virtue.[86] And in the larger scheme of things, Maximus envisions, with Pseudo-Dionysius, a μίμησις built into the very fabric of the cosmos as the receptacle of God's own ecstatic ἔρως. Pseudo-Dionysius writes that:

> ...when the hierarchic order lays it on some to be purified and on others to do the purifying, on some to receive illumination and on others to cause illumination, on some to be perfected and on others to bring about perfection, each will actually imitate God in the way suitable to whatever role it has.[87]

This and other passages no doubt inspire Maximus's observation in *Ambiguum* 37 that the biblical narrative, exactly like the cosmos itself, is a grand theatre of spiritual growth and uplifting (ἀναγωγή) among created beings, invisible and visible, all of which, positively or negatively, actively or passively, participate in the gracious, condescending movement and revelation of God, who draws up the lower to the higher through complex relationships of μίμησις.[88] Not just biblical heroes, but angels and

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85) See Girard's *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), pp. 15-16. For Girard, this "mimetic" desire can certainly have the negative consequence of vicious forms of human rivalry, but the positive side is that the horizons of our desire are expanded precisely through imitating others in their desiring. "If our desires were not mimetic, they would be forever fixed on predetermined objects; they would be [merely] a particular form of instinct."

86) *Myst.* 24 (PG 91:713B); cf. *Cap. car.* 1.24 (PG 90:965A-B); ibid. 1.61 (973A).

87) *Cel. hier.* 3.2 (PTS 36:18-19); cf. *Div. nom.* 4.8 (PTS 33:153).

88) See *Amb.* 37 (PG 91:1296A-B), and the discussion in Paul Blowers, "The World in the Mirror of Holy Scripture: Maximus the Confessor's Short Hermeneutical Treatise in *Ambiguum in Joannem* 37," in Paul Blowers, Angela Russell Christman, David Hunter, and Robin Darling Young, eds., *In Dominico Eloquio / In Lordly Eloquence: Essays on Patristic Exegesis in Honor of Robert Louis Wilken* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), pp. 420-22.

archangels,[89] cherubim and seraphim, are our exemplars in the passionate desire for God.

The Consolidating of Desire, and "Gnomic Surrender"

It goes without saying that the Monothelite Controversy significantly impacted Maximus's reflection on the dynamics of human motion, desire, and will. The ultimate denial of gnomic will in Christ in favor of emphasizing his deified "natural will" (θέλησις φυσική) carried with it the concern to firm up the psychology of human volition itself, to play down the precariousness of desire and play up the natural appetency for God, to accentuate the stability of the *logos* of human nature as the intrinsic principle guiding human motion. In Maximus's technical description of the volitional components in human action in *Opusculum* 1 (*Ep. ad Marinum*), γνώμη drops out completely. On the other hand, there are still component roles in human action for "wishing" (βούλησις) *qua* "imaginative appetency" (ὄρεξις φανταστική), "deliberation" (βουλή or βούλευσις) *qua* "inquisitive appetency" (ὄρεξις ζητητική) and "choice" (προαίρεσις) *qua* "deliberative appetency" (ὄρεξις βουλετική).[90] This should not, however, be taken as evidence to conclude, as does Michel Despland, that patristic thinkers ultimately gave up on the religious role of *desire*, so pivotal in Platonic philosophy, in order to privilege the role of an independent *will*.[91] Indeed Maximus himself, with his developed concept of "natural will," has sometimes been credited with helping to articulate the Christian doctrine of the will as distinct from Greek philosophical notions of rationally-directed desire or impulsion.[92] The adjustments in

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89) See e.g. *Exp. orat. dom.* (CCSG 23:33-4, 58-9).

90) *Opusc. theol. et pol.* 1 (PG 91:12C-16C, 17D-20A, 21D-24A); cf. *Disp. Pyrrh.* (PG 91:293B-C). Interestingly, John Damascene reinserts γνώμη in the list of volitional elements (*Fide orth.* 2.22, PG 94:944C-945B). See also Thunberg's important discussion in *Microcosm and Mediator*, pp. 218-26.

91) *The Education of Desire: Plato and the Philosophy of Religion* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), pp. 280-7. For a critique of this argument, see Blowers, "Gentiles of the Soul," pp. 82-3.

92) In two studies, Richard Sorabji gives Maximus some of the credit along with Augustine for helping to frame a uniquely Christian doctrine of the will, but also argues that Maximus's theory of θέλησις owed something to the Stoic notion of οἰκείωσις, the attachment of a being to its natural constitution. See his *Emotion and Peace of Mind: From Stoic Agitation to Christian Temptation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 337-40; and "The Concept of the Will from Plato to Maximus the Confessor," in Thomas Pink and

Maximus's later thinking on the will, though considerable, do not in the end undermine his antecedent affirmations that human freedom, as a response to the gracious and "ecstatic" love of God, rises up out of the whole complex *appetitive* nature of individual human beings. As Lars Thunberg puts it, when Maximus thinks of the universally shared "natural" will of humanity, he can only be thinking of "a co-ordination of wills under the principle of nature,"[93] a solidarity of the τρόποι of individual persons acting in intentional harmony. And at the level of individual persons, the τρόπος, the mode of existing or of intentionality, always presupposes for Maximus the full interplay of the constituent faculties of willing and desiring.

We can reasonably ask whether, when in *Ambiguum* 7 Maximus envisions a gradual "gnomic surrender" (ἐκχώρησις γνωμική) of creatures to God, he was already in effect providing a bridge between his early thinking on the constructive role of "gnomic" desire and will and his later definitions of the will as defined by the natural *logos*. In the first place, this "surrender" is absolutely voluntary, an expression of genuine free will, as Maximus insists. But that freedom is defined here precisely as freedom to will what God wills (≈ "natural" will in its ultimate sense). In the second place, there is a definite *affective* and even ecstatic dimension.[94] The gnomic surrender (Sherwood translates ἐκχώρησις "outpassing") also means that "from the one from whom we have received being we long (ποθήσωμεν) to receive *being moved* (τὸ κινεῖσθαι) as well."[95] Indeed, the surrender takes place in the context of the Son's gracious subjection (ὑποταγή) of all things to the Father (1 Cor 15:28),[96] which happens in concert with his reintegration of the λόγοι of all created natures.

The Deifying of Desire

For Maximus the various strands of the therapeutics of desire—the stretching, diversifying, educating, and consolidating of desire—converge and culminate in the mystery of deification. The "gnomic surrender"

M.W.F. Stone, eds., *The Will and Human Action: From Antiquity to the Present Day* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 20-22.

93) *Microcosm and Mediator*, p. 228.

94) See ibid., p. 424.

95) *Amb.* 7 (PG 91:1076B), trans. Blowers and Wilken, *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ*, p. 52 (emphasis added).

96) Ibid. (PG 91:1076A-C).

described in *Ambiguum* 7 is a superb summary image because it conveys both the gradual, lifelong ascetical-contemplative discipline of handing one's desires and free will over to God *and* the ecstasy of passing over into a new, eschatological mode (τρόπος) of existence. One is "seized by God" (ὑπὸ θεοῦ ἁρπάζεσθαι), says Maximus, precisely to the extent that one actively manifests the virtues.[97] So too the conversion of ἔρως was for Maximus, as it had been for Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, a potent image because it went far in conveying how pure activity and pure passivity are simultaneous within the mystery of deification, just as human falling-in-love entails both intelligent will and the experience of being rapt by an alluring force beyond one's power.

Ambiguum 7 is foundational for Maximus's attempt to hold together the activity and passivity of human desire in the mystery of deification. Creatures' natural desire for God cannot be satisfied or stopped save by the beauty of the triune God, and yet that eschatological satisfaction, that repose in a state of "eternal well-being," must in some sense be a *dynamic* reality. If human nature as such persists in deification,[98] perpetually opening itself to participation in God, desire must endure, must continue to be "stretched" in a new mode, or τρόπος. In numerous texts Maximus reveals his sympathy for Gregory of Nyssa's vision of ἐπέκτασις, a perpetual straining for God as the soul eternally spirals "around God" (περὶ θεόν),[99] sublimely orbiting the circumference of God's energies without penetrating his ineffable essence. Creatures find a relative rest, or better yet "encouragement" (ἀϊδιότης), in these energies or perfections "around" God, but are still drawn onward and inward "ecstatically" toward God himself by pure and passionate love.[100] Paralleling Nyssen's paradoxical

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97) *Amb.* 10 (PG 91:1113B-C).

98) On this principle see Larchet, *La divinisation de l'homme*, pp. 572-93.

99) Cf. *Amb.* 10 (PG 91:1112D, 1196B) and *Amb.* 41 (1308C), indicating an ineffable state of the eternal affective movement around God; ibid. 13 (1209B), on "the yearning and stretching of the soul around God" (ὁ περὶ θεὸν τῆς ψυχῆς πόθος τε καὶ τόνος); ibid. 15 (1220C); ibid. 16 (PG 91:1221C-1224A), commenting on Gregory Nazianzen's statement (*Or theol.* 2.9) that negative predications like "unbegotten," "unoriginate," "incorruptible," etc., apply not to God's essence but are said to be "about God (περὶ θεοῦ) or around God (περὶ θεόν)."

100) Cf. *Cap. car.* 1.100 (PG 90:981D-984A); *Myst.* 5 (PG 91:676C-677A); *Cap. theol.* 1.48 (PG 90:1100D); ibid. 2.86 (1165A-B); *Amb.* 7 (PG 91:1073C-D). On the broader philosophical background and implications of this principle in Maximus, see David Bradshaw, *Aristotle East and West: Metaphysics and the Division of Christendom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 188-95.

equation of motion and rest in God in the *Life of Moses* and other works,[101] Maximus will employ the oxymora "ever-moving repose" (ἀεικίνητος στάσις) and, conversely, "stationary eternal movement" or "stationary identical movement" (στάσιμος ταὐτοκινησία) to express this exalted state of deification.[102] In *Ambiguum* 7 he calls it an ecstasy of love and pleasurable suffering,[103] elsewhere a "supernatural passion" (ὑπὲρ φύσιν πάθος).[104] Most importantly, however, the passivity of the soul in deification, the ultimate ravishing of its desire, is the eternal initiative and ἐνέργεια of a God who delights in "insatiably satisfying" his creatures,[105] giving them a share, by graced participation and experience (πεῖρα) in what he is by nature.[106] Because, moreover, that eschatological, deifying grace is *incarnational* grace, expressed most boldly in the new humanity pioneered in Jesus Christ, the ultimate satisfaction—and stretching—of desire must be imagined as including, rather than excluding, the multiple levels and faculties of desire in human nature within its eschatological τρόπος.

In retrospect, Maximus's careful exposition of the dialectics and therapeutics of desire is clearly not restricted to any one text or concentration of texts in his corpus, but elicited in subtle insights across his writings, with *Ambiguum* 7 still providing a kind of interpretive center of gravity, a privileged theological anchor or filter through which all other relevant texts can be assessed in relation to the big picture of things both cosmologically and eschatologically.

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101) Maximus is clearly referencing Gregory's *De vita Moysis* in his discourse on spiritual progress in *Ad Thal* 17 (CCSG 7:111-15). See the translation with notes in Blowers and Wilken, *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ*, pp. 105-8.

102) Cf. *Amb.* 67 (PG 91:1401A); *Ad Thal.* 59 (CCSG 22:53); ibid. 65 (CCSG 22:285); *Myst.* 5 (PG 91:676D-677A). On this sublime state, see Paul Blowers, "Maximus the Confessor, Gregory of Nyssa, and the Concept of 'Perpetual Progress,'" *Vigiliae Christianae* 46 (1992), esp. pp. 160-5; Paul Plass, "'Moving Rest' in Maximus the Confessor," *Classica et medievalia* 35 (1984), pp. 177-90.

103) *Amb.* 7 (PG 91:1073C, 1088C-D); cf. *Ad Thal.* 59 (CCSG 22:55).

104) *Ad Thal.* 22 (CCSG 7:139-41).

105) *Cap. car.* 3.46 (PG 90:1029C).

106) *Ad Thal.* 6 (CCSG 7:69-71). See also Larchet, *La divinisation de l'homme*, pp. 533-53; Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator*, pp. 418-27. On Maximus's doctrine of participation (μέθεξις), see Torstein Tollefsen, *The Christocentric Cosmology of St. Maximus the Confessor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 190-224.

Postscript: The Fecundity of Desire in Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus

To conclude this essay, I wish briefly to revisit the extensive discussion that has unfolded of late on the role of desire and the affections in Gregory of Nyssa, and to propose how Maximus the Confessor should be brought to bear on that discussion. The newer assessments of Gregory—by scholars such as Rowan Williams, Verna Harrison, Sarah Coakley, Martin Laird, J. Warren Smith, and Morwenna Ludlow—have asserted that the multifaceted dynamics of creaturely desire for the triune God stands at the heart of Nyssen's vision of human aspiration and spiritual striving (ἐπέκτασις), being a key connecting point of his trinitarian theology, anthropology, asceticism, and ethics.[107]

As Rowan Williams summarizes, for Gregory "the 'passionate' in human nature... is not outside the scope of salvation; the human ideal is not the extirpation of inferior faculties, but a controlled and integrated use of all that is human." Accordingly, the journey toward deification is not a purely intellectual venture, but commences out of the precarious and restive state of human nature, and with the dramatic "stirring of desire" and longing for divine beauty.[108] Martin Laird for his part discerns in Gregory's exegesis of the graphic eroticism of the Song of Songs "a Trinitarian strategy that attracts and inflames desire to long for the Beloved" in a philosophic pedagogy governed by Gregory's intense apophaticism.[109] In a different vein, Verna Harrison and Sarah Coakley, with sympathy from Morwenna Ludlow, have tracked Nyssen's interpretations of sexuality and the destiny of sexed bodies, seeing his adventurous, sometimes fluid images of virginity and of gender roles as evoking the "fecundity" of human desire for eschatological transformation of the body beyond the "gender binaries" of humanity's present, fallen state.[110]

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[107] For an overview see Sarah Coakley, "Introduction—Gender, Trinitarian Analogies, and the Pedagogy of *The Song*," *Modern Theology* 18 (2002), pp. 431-43, reprinted in Sarah Coakley, ed., *Re-Thinking Gregory of Nyssa* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), pp. 1-13.

[108] *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to Saint John of the Cross*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1990), pp. 66-67, 73; cf. also Morwenna Ludlow, *Gregory of Nyssa: Ancient and (Post)modern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 121, 127-31.

[109] Laird, "The Education of Desire," pp. 77-89; id., *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith*, pp. 63-107; id., "The Fountain of His Lips: Desire and Divine Union in Gregory of Nyssa's *Homilies on the Song of Songs*," *Spiritus* 7 (2007), pp. 40-57.

[110] Cf. Verna Harrison, "Male and Female in Cappadocian Theology," *Journal of Theological Studies* 41 (1990), pp. 441-71; ead., "A Gender Reversal in Gregory of Nyssa's First

If an earlier generation of scholarship fixated on Gregory's Platonism and the leitmotif of the embodied soul struggling to be re-assimilated to its elusive divine archetype, these newer approaches have instead found a theologically robust asceticism according to which the whole array of human faculties, including desire (ἔρως; ἐπιθυμία) and the passions associated with postlapsarian life in the body, become the raw materials of the new creature in Christ, projected into a boundless eschatological horizon of participation in the infinite God.

Maximus the Confessor, as himself an interpreter of Gregory, lends credence to certain aspects of this revised view of Nyssen's ascetical and doctrinal project. Despite his dramatically different theological context in the seventh century, Maximus saw in Gregory an integrated portrait of the spiritual life, at the center of which was the desire for God in its varied psychosomatic dimensions, anchored with appropriate trinitarian and eschatological underpinnings. As we have observed above, Gregory exemplified for Maximus his own sophisticated dialectics of desire, a strategy for understanding how the passible element (τὸ παθητικόν) in human nature, while distinct from the core self, or νοῦς, remained still—providentially—within the operational field of the νοῦς and of reason, capable of serving as well as complicating the quest toward deification.[111] Gregory was also the premier inspiration of Maximus's doctrine of the salutary "use" (χρῆσις) of the human passions, as Maximus explicitly attests.[112]

More controversial is Maximus's embrace of Gregory's vision of the fecundity of desire vis-à-vis human free will and the "creative" capacity of human nature challenged constantly to transcend its own limitations. An oft-cited text in the newer approaches to Nyssen is his statement in the

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Homily on the Song of Songs," *Studia Patristica* 27 (1993), pp. 34-8; ead., "Gender, Generation and Virginity in Cappadocian Theology," *Journal of Theological Studies* 47 (1996), pp. 38-68; Sarah Coakley, "Creaturehood before God: Male and Female," *Theology* 93 (1990), pp. 343-53, reprinted in her *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 109-29; ead., "The Eschatological Body: Gender, Transformation and God," *Modern Theology* 16 (2002), pp. 61-73, reprinted in *Powers and Submissions*, pp. 153-67; Morwenna Ludlow, *Gregory of Nyssa: Ancient and (Post)modern*, pp. 175-201.

111) Specifically on the dialectics of desire, see Gregory's discussion with Macrina in *anim. et res.* (PG 46:49B-68A); cf. Maximus's allusion to Gregory on this point in *Ad Thal.* 1 (CCSG 7:47-9). See also notes 24, 33 and 34 above with related text.

112) *Ad Thal.* 1 (CCSG 7:47-9). See also the discussion in Blowers, "Gentiles of the Soul," pp. 68, 71-2.

Life of Moses identifying the constant change of spiritual rebirth: "In a certain sense we are our own parents, birthing ourselves by our own free choice (προαιρέσεως) according to whatever we desire to be, male or female, as we so mould ourselves by the teaching of virtue or vice."[113] As Williams comments, for Gregory "the believer is called to exercise freedom—once again, to create his or her own life—in the arena of moral struggle, temptation, and uncertainty, and this is a vocation requiring trust and courage and a readiness to confront the wilderness that lies ahead."[114] Some Maximus scholars, however, have argued that it is precisely this "existentialism" and rehabilitation of the function of change (ἀλλοίωσις; τροπή) on Gregory's part that the Confessor opposed. The following statements of Juan-Miguel Garrigues, sweeping in scope, are exemplary:

> Assumant dans sa compréhension de l'intinéraire vers Dieu, les aspects les plus profonds de la mystique d'Évagre et de Grégoire de Nysse, Maxime ne cède cependant ni à l'intellectualisme du premier... ni à l'"existentialisme" dramatique du second: il n'y a pas pour Maxime d'épectase infinie du desir compris comme l'instabilité du libre-arbitre, mais une montée sereine et sûre vers la plénitude et repos de port céleste.
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> Mais Maxime corrige la radicalité de l'"existentialisme" de Grégoire de Nysse, de même qu'il a corrigé le dualisme platonicien d'Évagre. Pour Maxime, l'homme n'est pas que liberté: si sa personne est irréductible à sa nature, son être n'est pas purement et simplement convertible en liberté. Pour cette raison, le péché n'a pas le caractère tragique et quasi nécessaire qu'il a chez Grégoire de Nysse.
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> L'aventure de la liberté humaine, qui, pour Grégoire de Nysse et l'origénisme, était l'archè et le télos de l'économie du dessein de Dieu, est insérée par Maxime dans le dynamisme naturel de l'être créé tendu entre son origine et sa fin. C'est ici qu'apparaît une troisième référence déterminante: celle du Pseudo-Denys... Maxime n'a pas hésité à replacer le personnalisme radical de Grégoire de Nysse dans la vision dionysienne d'un monde structuré et dynamisé par la participation. Ce faisant, Maxime a tenté la tâche grandiose de combiner, de manière originale et libre de concordisme, les deux plus grandes "Weltanschauungen" chrétiennes de l'époque patristique: l'économie cosmique d'Origène et l'ontologie cosmique du Pseudo-Denys. En effet, Maxime a intégré l'économie dramatique de la liberté dans une ontologie fundamentale de la participation.[115]

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113) *V. Moysis* lib. 2 (GNO 7.1:34).

114) *The Wound of Knowledge*, p. 67.

115) *Maxime le Confesseur: La charité, avenir divin de l'homme*, Théologie historique 38 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1976), pp. 85, 91, 92.

And Alain Riou similarly avers,

> À l'épectase infinie du désir [de Grégoire de Nysse], saint Maxime substitue la progression, à travers les épreuves et les tentations certes, mais vers un terme stable, une plénitude à laquelle elle aspire. Cette progression elle-même de la nature se fait sous la conduite d'un pasteur-higoumène, d'un guide, d'un "gouvernail."[116]

Riou and Garrigues typify the view that Maximus corrected the residual Origenism (and "existentialism" and "personalism") of Gregory by firming up the doctrine of human freedom and by sharpening the distinction between free will as grounded in the λόγος φύσεως as opposed to the personal or individual τρόπος ὑπάρξεως. By this account, Maximus's evolving emphasis on "natural" will and desire, as opposed to "gnomic" desire and volition, galvanized all the more by his rejection of γνώμη in Christ during the Monothelite controversy, served to clarify the properly ontological and moral dimensions of human transformation. I do not wish to dispute this perspective altogether, and I concur with some of its assumptions. Given that Maximus saw gnomic desire as the basis of prohairetic choice,[117] his gradually more pejorative redefinition of γνώμη, as a vacillating or deliberative mode of desiring and willing, contrasts sharply with Gregory's sanguine vision of προαίρεσις achieving a consistent change-for-the-better resulting in a constant rebirthing of the self. Moreover, Maximus remained suspect of his opponents (contemporary Origenists) asserting that creaturely mutability (τροπή) itself, rather than human nature (φύσις) as such, was the matrix of progressive change.[118]

The problem, however, with the sweeping summaries of Garrigues and Riou—besides the tidy caricatures of Evagrius's "intellectualism" or Nyssen's "existentialism" or "personalism" or "Origenism," all of which Maximus supposedly overrides in deference to the "ontologie fundamentale" of Pseudo-Dionysius—is the underplaying of Maximus's own intense engagement with the very tensions and paradoxes in human becoming, desiring, and aspiring to deification that Gregory of Nyssa (and Gregory Nazianzen) strove to articulate.[119] One of these, as already discussed, was

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[116] *Le monde et l'église selon Maxime le Confesseur*, Théologie historique 22 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1973), p. 43.

[117] *Opusc. theol. et polem.* 1 (PG 91:17C).

[118] *Ep.* 6 (PG 91:432A-B).

[119] One of the virtues of von Balthasar's classic study of Maximus was this very recognition, as evidenced in *Cosmic Liturgy*, pp. 185-205, 264.

the dialectics of desire and the tensions between "natural" and postlapsarian passions. Another, though not dealt with in this essay, was the tension created by sexuality, leading Maximus like Gregory to treat of the provisional character of sexual distinction and the eschatological urge to transcend that distinction in Christ. Even more basically, however, Maximus learned from Gregory Nazianzen and Gregory of Nyssa alike to read between the lines of these and other tensions and anomalies of mundane existence to the vulnerability and chaotic element within material reality itself—which God continuously and purposively reorders through the instrumentalities of created "nature" itself (natural desire, natural will, etc.).[120] As von Balthasar has demonstrated, for Gregory human nature is itself dynamic, bespeaking its openness to re-creation, its deep-seated affinity (σχέσις) and impetus of desire (τῆς ἐπιθυμίας ὁρμή) for God, whereby the faithful are always drawn *ecstatically* outside themselves in assimilation to God.[121] Likewise for Maximus, contemplating this mystery through the lens of the incarnation, the divine ἐνέργεια is ever working a new thing in human nature, which, even if incapable of deifying itself, is nonetheless always gifted and "energized" in its passivity to the gratuitous action of the Trinity.[122]

As for Gregory's ultimate eschatological paradox of unsated and unceasingly inflamed desire for God being in itself a sublime satisfaction, carrying the soul forward in endless movement "around God" (περὶ θεόν) and graced perpetual striving (ἐπέκτασις) for intimacy with the Trinity, we have noted Maximus's deep sympathy with this projection, though scholars still debate the extent of his positive reception of Gregory's paradoxical language. I have already quoted the claim of Garrigues and Riou that Maximus sought to correct "l'épectase infinie du désir" in Gregory. Thunberg also denies that Maximus ultimately allows the pure paradox of infinite motion (desire) and rest (satisfaction),[123] while Sherwood tentatively postulates on the basis of *Ambiguum* 15 that Maximus tries to overcome the paradox by distinguishing between πέρας, as the limit of natural

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120) See *Amb.* 8 (PG 91:1104B-1105A); as discussed above at notes 62-64.

121) *Presence and Thought: An Essay on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa*, trans. Mark Sebanc (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), pp. 116-17, citing *De mortuis* (PG 45:497B = GNO 9:29); *Instit. chr.* (PG 46:288A = GNO 8.1:40); *Hom. orat. dom.* 5 (PG 44:1177A = GNO 7.2:59); and *Hom. de beat.* 7 (PG 44:1280C = GNO 7.2:151).

122) Cf. *Amb.* 20 (PG 91:1237A-D); *Ad Thal.* 22 (CCSG 7:141-3); *Opusc. theol. et pol.* 1 (PG 91:33C-36A).

123) *Microcosm and Mediator*, p. 422.

movement at the infinity "around" God, and τέλος as the goal of God himself and union with him by grace.[124] More recently Larchet shows his own skepticism about Gregory's paradox enduring in Maximus, arguing that the only text (*Opusculum* 1, the *Epistula ad Marinum*) in which Maximus explicitly affirms the infinite stretching of desire is one in which he is encouraging his friend Marinus's virtue and referring to the progress toward God solely in earthly life.[125] I find this interpretation untenable, since the "infinite" dilation of desire could not refer to the earthly ascetical quest alone unless Maximus is speaking purely metaphorically, which is highly unlikely in this text. Larchet, moreover, prematurely dismisses the key passage in *Ambiguum* 7 where Maximus states that "for those who enjoy fellowship with God who is infinite, desire becomes more intense and has no limits."[126] Larchet posits that "on voit...dans ce passage que Maxime se place moins du point de vue du désir de l'homme (point de vue qui est le plus souvent celui de Grégoire) que de celui de l'infinité de Dieu..."[127] Even if Maximus does mean to prioritize the infinity of God here, however, it is not at all clear how this ipso facto downplays the correspondent infinite dilation of human desire.

How one comes out on this issue depends largely on whether one reads Maximus here primarily as an anti-Origenist polemicist using the motion/rest (desire/satisfaction) paradox only functionally to discourage the "satiety" postulate, or primarily as a constructive theologian holding together crucial philosophical or theological tensions and subtleties without any one finally definitive summation—*Ambiguum* 7 being crucial no doubt, but also a relatively early text in Maximus's larger corpus. Maximus's solution to the issue, as I have suggested elsewhere, is neither exclusively philosophical nor exclusively mystical. I concur with Stephen Gersh's argument that for Maximus, the sublime "moving repose" or infinite sating of desire in deification reflects the fact that in God himself there can be no "gap" whatsoever between his transcendence (*qua* perfect repose

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[124] *The Earlier Ambigua*, 95, n. 49, citing *Amb.* 15 (PG 91:1216A-C). Sherwood concedes that this terminological distinction may not always be applied by Maximus.

[125] *Le divinisation de l'homme*, pp. 671-2, n. 140, in reference to *Opus. theol. et pol.* 1 (PG 91:9A). See also above, notes 30-31 and related text.

[126] *Amb.* 7 (PG 91:1089B), trans. Blowers and Wilken, *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ*, pp. 64-5.

[127] *Le divinisation de l'homme*, p. 672.

and "immobility") and his immanence as the creative "motion" operative in created beings.[128]

Maximus seeks carefully to preserve the notion of a genuine eschatological sating and repose of the desiring soul, the cessation of its natural desire and movement, and yet concedes in his own way the *relative* character of that rest, since there is a continuing ecstasy in the experience of the divine perfections and participation in the divine nature. With appropriate qualifications, then, that consider the discontinuities as well as continuities in the path to transcendence, Maximus's eschatology allows, like Gregory's, for the unceasing "fecundity of desire" reciprocating the superabundant re-creative power and grace of the infinite triune God.

[128] Stephen Gersh, *From Iamblichus to Eriugena: An Investigation of the Prehistory and Evolution of the Pseudo-Dionysian Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 1978), pp. 250, 278-9; see also Blowers, "Maximus the Confessor, Gregory of Nyssa, and the Concept of 'Perpetual Progress,'" pp. 164-5.