

Freedom and Heteronomy: Maximus the Confessor and the Question of Moral Creativity

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OF THE MANY CIRCLES within which Maximus the Confessor is invoked as an authority, one that merits particular attention in recent studies lies in the field of moral theology. While criticisms emerging from the disciplines of historical and systematic theology have sometimes held up Maximus's staunch defence of the doctrine of two wills in Christ as an embarrassing but typically Byzantine example of theological hair-splitting, not a few scholars have lauded the way the Confessor's expositions on the topic, particularly in his reflections on Jesus's prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, may contribute towards a clearer understanding of the nature of human volition and its moral actualization. One example of this positive appropriation may be seen in an article by New Zealand theologian Ivor Davidson subtitled "the ontological dynamics of incarnational intention."¹ Davidson takes issue with criticisms that allege that, by ascribing two wills to Christ, Maximus and the traditional proponents of dyothelete Christology end up with an implausible account of Jesus's conscious subjectivity. Besides asking too much of a Christological method whose interests and anxieties were more metaphysical and theological than they were physiological or psychological, the error in such allegations, argues Davidson, lies in

¹ Ivor J. Davidson, "Not My Will But Yours Be Done': The Ontological Dynamics of Incarnational Intention," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7.2 (2005): 178–204.

regarding our own fallen experience of volition as humanly normal and, therefore, as the adequate criterion of what Christ's experience of volition ought to be like. Drawing on Maximus's evolving concept of "gnomic" will (γνώμη) and the rationale behind his eventual denial of its presence in Christ, Davidson exposes the superficial and illusory character of freedom as it is commonly conceived in many contemporary moral theories. If Maximus's idea of freedom includes "the kind of self-determination appropriate to our real status as God's creatures," then, according to Davidson, "the diverse factors that complicate and impede such authentic direction—the kinds of factors, we might say, that have been highlighted in later modernity's demise of confidence in the stability of a choosing self—are testimony to the reality that humans are not in practice half so free as might be supposed."²

Another example of Maximus's dyothelete Christology being enlisted in the service of moral theology is found in a still more recent (2007) essay by American Ian A. McFarland entitled "Willing Is Not Choosing: Some Anthropological Implications of Dyothelite Christology."³ McFarland similarly argues that Maximus's assignment of will to the category of nature rather than to *hypostasis* "challenges the idea that willing is the source or ground of individual identity (*hypostasis*)." And, he continues, "if identity is not reducible to the will, then the will's lack of freedom with respect to sin either now or in glory may not constitute the kind of threat to human integrity that modern Westerners are inclined to fear."⁴ The mode of willing that characterizes the gnomic will, as McFarland interprets Maximus, is incapable of securing human fulfilment on its own because it is "in itself empty, directionless and (therefore) mutable."⁵ True human freedom is realised not in an unlimited range of possible choices, nor even in the ability to make such choices, but in "a direct and undeviating orientation to God."⁶

A third example of this recent appropriation of Maximus's dyothelete Christology in the field of moral theology appears in the "action theory" of Italian theologian Livio Melina.⁷ According to Melina,

² Davidson, "Not My Will But Yours Be Done," 194.

³ Ian A. McFarland, "Willing Is Not Choosing: Some Anthropological Implications of Dyothelite Christology," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 9.1 (2007): 3–23.

⁴ McFarland, "Willing Is Not Choosing," 4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁷ Livio Melina, *The Epiphany of Love: Toward a Theological Understanding of Christian Action* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 90–91.

behind Thomas Aquinas's recognition that Christ's humanity was not simply the passive instrument utilized by the divine Logos, but was rather the principle of actions that were fully human, free, and salvifically meritorious, lies the wealth of the Eastern Fathers' christological reflections, and not least the distinction made by Maximus between *thelêsis*, understood as the natural capacity to will, and *boulêsis*, understood as the subjective actuation of that capacity in this or that particular way.⁸ For Melina, this means that, "even if the will's natural dimension is the indispensable foundation of the freedom of action, it is not yet enough to explain it: spiritual nature founds but does not determine freedom. Action that is truly free not only implies the determination of the spiritual faculties [such as reason or will] . . . but also involves the personal subject taking a stance."⁹ This notion of "taking a stance" in Melina's action theory cannot be thought of outside an interpersonal relational structure. A human being "takes a stance" not simply with respect to certain things, but above all with respect to certain persons. According to Melina, human action always bears this interpersonal character: "the human act demands to be a personal act."¹⁰ The descriptor "human" here refers to its being purposeful and voluntary action, that is, its emerging from the common human faculties of reason and will. The descriptor "personal" refers to the specific mode in which such purposeful and voluntary action takes place, a mode whose character always includes "an interpersonal dimension" and whose defining and ultimate goal is a *communio personarum*, a communion of persons.¹¹ This is what Melina means when he asserts that "only with the appearance of the beloved" is the human act "complete in its final [i.e., personal] determination."¹²

On the face of things, the invocation of Maximus as a supporting authority seems to be more justifiable in the first two examples with Davidson and McFarland but less so in the third example with Melina. Unlike Davidson and McFarland, Melina does not engage in a direct exegesis of Maximian texts but, rather, relies on several

⁸ On Aquinas's appropriation of the patristic legacy on this topic, see Paul Gondreau, "St. Thomas Aquinas, the Communication of Idioms, and the Suffering of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane," in *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering*, ed. James F. Keating and Thomas Joseph White (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 214–45.

⁹ Melina, *Epiphany of Love*, 91.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

secondary studies, freely synthesising their results with his Thomistic and Blondelian-inspired version of Christian personalism.¹³ Moreover, rigorous historical research has made us more wary about readings of Maximus and other ancient thinkers who, utilizing such terms as “nature” or “person” or “intellect” or “will,” unwittingly import into the language of the Fathers a conceptual content derived from much later developments in theological history and indicative of interests sometimes far removed from the Fathers’ actual thought.¹⁴

But having said that, my sense is that Melina’s appropriation of Maximus’s insights on the nature of human volition and freedom has more going for it than may seem to be the case at first. For Melina, human freedom consists in “the power to introduce novelty into the cyclical time of history, breaking the pre-established schemes of physical laws and natural inclinations.”¹⁵ His instinct in interpreting Maximus is to avoid any reduction of morality and freedom to the practical calculation of moral values from cognitively accessible universal principles and, instead, to presuppose that the specifically Christological aspect in the Confessor’s analysis of human action says something crucial about the realization of all human freedom: it “only occurs in reference to the will of a person: the beloved, the Father.”¹⁶ In other words, human action is free not just when it conforms to the general *logos* of human nature, but when it arises in the mode of radical love for another person, a mode whose concrete embodiment, being personal and unique and exposed to all the variables of interpersonal freedom, will always be creative and new.

¹³ In this context, Melina cites the work of R. -A. Gauthier, “Saint Maxime le Confesseur et la psychologie de l’acte humain,” *Recherches de Théologie Ancienne et Médiévale* 21 (1954): 51–100. Elsewhere, Melina has also collaborated with Rome-based Maximian scholar P. -G. Renczes, publishing the latter’s essay “La gloria del Padre e pianezza dell’umano: L’apporto di Massimo il Confessore a una precisazione dell’antropologia teologica dei Padre,” in *Il bene e la persona nell’agire*, ed. L. Melina and J. -J. Pérez-Soba (Rome: Lateran University Press, 2002), 147–57.

¹⁴ See the recent summary of this issue by Alexis Torrance in “Personhood and Patristics in Orthodox Theology: Reassessing the Debate,” *Heythrop Journal* 52 (2011): 700–07. On this question, it may be apt to mention Vladimir Lossky’s remark that “the quest for a Christian personalist anthropology in the Fathers is certainly worthwhile,” even if it must be “pursued with care” (reported in *ibid.*, 705).

¹⁵ Melina, *Epiphany of Love*, 4.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 91.

What I want to do in the present article, therefore, is to revisit Maximus's theological exegesis of the scriptural accounts of Christ's prayer in Gethsemane with a view to judging whether the creative appropriation of his anthropology along the lines outlined by Melina is justified. I shall begin by turning to a number of familiar and well-studied passages to see whether they might yield any fresh insights when approached with three particular questions in mind. The first concerns the extent to which Maximus maintains the integrity of Christ's singular subjectivity, representing all of Jesus's speaking, acting, and suffering in such a way that we encounter in them one and the same personal "I." The second question concerns the creative and novel character of Christ's speaking, acting, and suffering, the extent to which we encounter in them a completely new actuality that reveals what it means to be God, and what it means to be human in a surprising and hitherto unexpected way. The third concerns the integration of instinct and intention, the extent to which Christ's conscious acts of will incorporate, and do not oppose, even the most instinctive human impulses and natural inclinations. With the discussion generated by these three questions, I shall proceed to offer an assessment of the possible merits in Melina's line of interpretation.

Singularity of Subject

We begin by asking to what extent Maximus maintains the integrity of one and the same personal "I" of which is properly predicated all of Jesus's speaking, acting, and suffering, particularly those manifested in his Gethsemane prayer. Exegesis of this narrative event appears in a number of places in Maximus's writings, but most of the focus in secondary studies centres on its appearance in three *Opuscula* (3, 6, and 7) and the famous *Disputation with Pyrrhus*, texts that date from a brief period in the Confessor's African sojourn between 642 and AD 645, subsequent to the publication of the Imperial *Ekthesis* (638) and prior to the Imperial *Typos* (647/8).¹⁷ Maximus's chief concern in

¹⁷ Traditional ascriptions of authorship and dating for the *Disputation with Pyrrhus* have recently been questioned by Ryan W. Strickler, "A Dispute in Dispute: Forgery, Heresy, and Sainthood in Seventh-Century Byzantium," (master's thesis, University of Kentucky, 2013). Elements in Strickler's case may deserve attention in the broader field of Maximian historiography but are not really relevant to the concerns of the present article. For the scholarly consensus on context and dating, see Polycarp Sherwood, O.S.B., "An Annotated Date-List of the Works of Maximus the Confessor," *Studia Anselmiana* 30 (1952): viii–64;

these texts is not to answer the kinds of questions we moderns might typically raise of this narrative event, but to respond to the assertion made by the *Ekthesis* that any attribution of two activities to Christ would imply two wills and that to attribute two wills to Christ would be to envision a virtual two-personed Christ in which the divine and human elements were at best juxtaposed. The wording of the *Ekthesis* indicates an implicit intention to exclude any interpretation of the Gethsemane event that would find in it an internal struggle in Christ between “God the Word,” who “wished to fulfill the salutary suffering,” on the one hand, and on the other, “his humanity,” which “resisted his will and was opposed to it.”¹⁸ In putting it this way, the *Ekthesis* brought to the surface a hermeneutical question of abiding importance for both Christology and theological anthropology: how are we to reconcile what appear to be two conflicting desires in Jesus? “Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me.” Here, the object of desire is avoidance of impending suffering and death. “Yet not my will, but yours be done.” Here, the object of desire is the accomplishment of the Father’s will, which, in this case seems, to necessitate existential crisis.¹⁹ The idea that Jesus experienced an internal affective conflict seems to be at odds with an understanding of virtue as an excellence arising from the harmonious, rational integration of our various inclinations and desires. Any such conflict would seem to be more a symptom of the kind of volitional uncertainty and unruly appetitive disintegration that characterize humanity’s fallen and wounded state and that Maximus sums up in the word *gnomê*. As is well known, Maximus, while insisting on a duality of wills in Christ, rejected any notion of a natural opposition between them. There is nothing inherent in human nature that opposes its Creator. But that left him with the challenge of making sense of

Guido Bausenhardt, *In allem uns gleich ausser der Sünde : Studien zum Beitrag Maximos’ Des Bekenners zur altkirchlichen Christologie : mit einer Kommentierten Übersetzung der “Disputatio Cum Pyrrho”* (Mainz: Matthias-GrünewaldVerlag, 1992); Pauline Allen and Bronwen Neil, eds., *Maximus the Confessor and His Companions: Documents from Exile* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2002), 14–18; and Pauline Allen, ed., *Sophronius of Jerusalem and Seventh Century Heresy: The Synodical Letter and Other Documents* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹⁸ *Ekthesis*. This is my own translation of the Greek text found in *Sophronius of Jerusalem and Seventh-Century Heresy: The Synodical Letter and Other Documents*, ed. Pauline Allen (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009), 214.

¹⁹ The Gospel of Luke repeatedly expresses this sense of “divine necessity” behind Jesus’s mission with the impersonal verb *δεῖ*; see Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke I–IX* (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 179–80.

what has been called the “graphic realism of Jesus’ initial resistance and his *coming to* a final resolve in the Gethsemane prayer.”²⁰

Studies of Maximus’s attempts in these texts to interpret Jesus’s Gethsemane prayer have clarified the prominence he gives to the active role of Christ’s humanity in the resolution of this resistance. Ever since Marcel Doucet’s criticism of von Balthasar’s over-dramatization of the duality between the Logos and his assumed humanity, interpreters have rightly located the drama of resolution and obedience *within* Christ’s human volitional complex.²¹ In his studious monograph on the topic, Demetrios Bathrellos fairly sums up scholarly consensus by asserting that, in *Opusculum* 6 especially, Maximus offers “a piece of meticulous and insightful exegesis” in which he points out “in an unambiguous way that it is the Logos *as man* who addresses the Father in Gethsemane.”²²

But is this an adequate explanation? True enough, Maximus does use the “as man” formula once, right near the end of *Opusculum* 6: “Having become like us for our sake, he who is God by nature said to God the Father in a fittingly human manner, ‘Let not my will but yours prevail,’ since, possessing the fullness of the Father’s will, he also has a human will as man [ὡς ἄνθρωπος].”²³ But it seems to me that we do not have here a simple ascription of Jesus’s prayer to the Logos “as man.”

At stake here is not just a moot point in Maximian interpretation, but a much wider issue in Christology. While a survey of texts from the history of patristic Christology attests to the ubiquity of the formulations “as God” or “as man” used to qualify Christ’s various activities for the sake of a certain dogmatic precision, this way of speaking arguably falls short of accounting for the full depth and drama of Christ’s passion, whether in Gethsemane or elsewhere. It was against such a mathematical dividing up of Christ’s various

²⁰ Paul M. Blowers, “The Passion of Jesus Christ in Maximus the Confessor: A Reconsideration,” *Studia Patristica* 34 (2001): 361–77, at 367.

²¹ See Marcel Doucet, “La Volonté Humaine du Christ, Spécialement en son Agonie: Maxime le Confesseur, Interprète de l’Écriture,” *Science et Esprit* 37.2 (1985), 123–59, esp. 135–36.

²² Demetrios Bathrellos, *The Byzantine Christ: Person, Nature, and Will in the Christology of St Maximus the Confessor* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2004), 147.

²³ *Opusculum* 6 (PG, 91:68C; all translations from this text are my own). Notice here how Maximus embellishes the words of Jesus with the verb ἰσχυσάτω (“prevail”), which does not appear in the Synoptics.

actions into those that he performed “as God” and those that he performed “as man” that Cyril’s *Third Letter to Nestorius*, endorsed by the Council of Ephesus (431), required that all of Christ’s actions and passions be attributed to the one subject, “the one enfleshed hypostasis of the Logos.”²⁴

Elsewhere, in commenting on the Gethsemane event in *Opusculum* 7, Maximus does indeed use the “as God” and “as man” formulations a number of times. But it is not clear to me that he means them to be regarded as virtual subjects of predication, nor even as simple qualifiers. His intention can be better understood, I think, by turning to study their appearance in *Ambiguum* 5, a text dating from before the full-blown outbreak of the Monothelete controversy. It is here, while defending the coherence and applicability of the Christology of Dionysius the Areopagite, that Maximus proposes what I regard as his profoundest insights into the mystery of Christ’s person and action.

The central thesis of *Ambiguum* 5 is that, while Christ is essentially divine and essentially human, the circumstances of the hypostatic union have impacted his existence and activity in such a way that his divine nature can no longer be accounted for in purely divine terms, nor his human nature in purely human terms: “He exists neither as a mere human being, nor as bare God.”²⁵ Thus, when Maximus uses the “as God” and “as man” formulas, they must be interpreted with this thesis in clear view. So when he says, “As God, he [Christ] was the moving principle of his own humanity, while as man, he was revelatory principle of his own divinity,”²⁶ the point he wants to make is that one and the same subject, the incarnate Logos, is involved in each and every one of his actions both “as God” and “as man” simultaneously. The characteristic properties of both natures are manifest at the existential level in one way or another in each particular, concrete act of the one person. Maximus’s preferred way of expressing this exchange of properties in Christ is to say that he did human things in a divine way and divine things in a human way.²⁷

²⁴ Norman P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 1 (London: Sheed and Ward, 1990), 56.

²⁵ *Ambiguum* 5, lines 33–43. English translation from this work is my own and done from the critical edition of the Greek text in *Maximi Confessoris Ambigua ad Thomam una cum Epistula Secunda ad Eundem*, ed. Bart Janssens, Corpus Christianorum Series Graeca (hereafter, CCSG) 48 (Turnhout, BE: Brepols, 2002), 20–21.

²⁶ *Ambiguum* 5.192–93 (CCSG, 48:28).

²⁷ See further Adam G. Cooper, *The Body in Saint Maximus the Confessor: Holy Flesh, Wholly Deified* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005), 127–56.

Something similar, I believe, is going on in the formulations of *Opuscula* 6 and 7. In these, Maximus is at pains to bring out the dual or theandric character of all of Christ's actions, even those that seem most markedly human. In *Opusculum* 7, for example, while discerning in the two parts of the Gethsemane prayer a reference to two distinct wills, he nevertheless builds into his "as man" and "as God" formulations this cross-over reciprocal qualification: "For it appears that the same as man, who is also God by nature, wills in accordance with the economy that the cup pass, and in this he typifies what is human. . . . And again it appears that as God, being also a human being in essence, he wills to fulfill the economy of the Father and work the salvation of all."²⁸ He continues again: "It is made clear then that as man, being God by nature and acting humanly, he willingly accepts the experience of sufferings for our sake. And it is again made clear that as God, being by nature a human being and acting divinely, he naturally exhibits the signs of his divinity."²⁹

It is from both these sufferings and these signs, Maximus concludes, that "the same one is recognised as being at the same time [ὁμοῦ] both God and man."³⁰ The Confessor's emphasis here and throughout the treatise seems to be on avoiding reducing this or that action of Christ to one enacted by him *either* "as God" *or* "as man" and on, instead, predicating actions to Christ *both* "as God" *and* "as man." He champions this double predication over against the pious but misguided Monothelete tendency to credit certain actions to Christ only "as God." "For if," Maximus argues, "it is only as God that he willed these things [hunger, thirst, weariness, and so on], and not the same as man, then either the body has become divine by nature, or the Logos has changed his nature and become flesh by loss of his own divinity."³¹

The same train of thought seems to be operative in *Opusculum* 6. There Maximus considers three ways of reading the first part of the Gethsemane prayer, the petition, "Let this cup pass from me." The first is to understand it as a prayer arising "from the man who is like us" (ἀπο τοῦ ἀνθρώπου . . . τοῦ καθ' ἡμᾶς), a characterization Maximus explains in terms of a will that "often resists and contends with God."³² But such an interpretation would not fit the second half of the

²⁸ *Opusculum* 7 (PG, 91:84C).

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid. (PG, 91:77B).

³² Ibid. 6 (PG, 91:65BC).

prayer, in which the same subject does not oppose but acquiesces to God's will. A second possible interpretation is to attribute the petition to "the eternal divinity of the Only-Begotten Son," but this would either introduce a division of will between the Father and the Son or ascribe the wish to avoid the cup also to the Father, which would negate the intelligibility of the prayer altogether. The third way of understanding the petition, a way that Maximus commends, is as belonging to "the man we know as Savior" (τοῦ κατὰ τὸν Σωτῆρα νοουμένου ἀνθρώπου). Quite possibly it is this phrase, with its mention of *anthropos*, that would lead interpreters to say that Maximus here ascribes the prayer to Christ "as man." But the crucial "Savior" part of this phrase for Maximus necessarily includes what is proper to Christ's divinity, for as he says a little further on, it is God's very nature to will our salvation.³³ To ascribe the petition to "the man who is Savior" is in effect to ascribe it to the man who is God, which is altogether different from ascribing it to Christ simply "as man."³⁴

The Creative Newness of Christ's Action

The second question I want to explore concerns the creative and novel character of Christ's actions, the extent to which we encounter in them a completely new actuality that reveals what it means to be human in

³³ Τοῦτο γὰρ αὐτῷ φύσει καθέστηκε θελητόν. "This object of will" (Τοῦτο θελητόν) is a reference back to the immediately previous clause, to "our salvation"; see *ibid.* (PG, 91:68B).

³⁴ Thomas Weinandy has argued that all of Christ's actions and passions should be predicated of him "as man" and none of them "as God": "If the Son of God is man and has identified himself as man, then, it seems to me, that he exists, as incarnate, totally within the parameters or boundaries of all that is human. Thus the Son of God not only has a human body, soul, intellect, will, and emotions, etc., but equally he also has an integral human 'I,' a psychological centre within which all of these are expressed and experienced. The human 'I' of Jesus is the human psychological self-consciousness of the divine Son. He thought, spoke, and acted as well as underwent all his experiences from within the limits of his human 'I.' When Jesus said 'I,' it was truly the Son of God saying 'I' in a fully authentic human manner"; see Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 2000), 209–10. But if this is so, then in what sense can we say that Jesus is divine? Only nominally? If really and ontologically, this seems to challenge the exclusive integrity of the human "I." In short, Jesus must be able to say both "I am a man" and "I am God"; both the divine and the human must coincide in his "I." Put another way, the divine "I" is concealed (and thereby revealed) in the human "I." If it is asked what it is in the first part of the Gethsemane prayer that manifests his divinity, one need only be reminded of the fact that this is a prayer addressed to God as "Father," a form of invocation proper to the divine Son.

an entirely fresh and hitherto unexpected way. For this, we may refer first of all to a typically Maximian theme brought out so well by Paul Blowers in his essay on the Confessor's "passiology."³⁵ Blowers suggests that a richer and psychologically more compelling exposition of the Gethsemane prayer can be found in the two other *Opuscula* (3 and 7) and the *Disputation with Pyrrhus*, especially when they are illuminated by passages in the earlier *Ambigua ad Ioannem* and the *Quaestiones ad Thalassium*. Above all, Blowers's reconsideration highlights the expression often employed by Maximus that speaks of the way Christ makes "use" (χρησις) of typically human passions such as the fear of death, indeed even death itself, so as to transform them into redemptive and life-giving instruments.

To speak of Christ "using" his fear of death for salvific purposes should not be thought of in the sense of Christ opting on some occasions to "use" his *human* attributes and opting on other occasions to use his *divine* attributes, thereby effecting a kind of break between the person who does the "using" and his two instrumental natures.³⁶ Rather, it seems more akin to the way, for example, a person might harness the initial motions of anger that sometimes arise in him, allowing them to propel him towards acts of justice or courage instead of allowing them the kind of undisciplined free reign that would more likely end up in acts of injustice or self-pity.³⁷ Moral failure or success arises not at the level of the initial affective motion, but in its respective appropriation, deployment, or "use" in this or that purposeful action. Similarly, there is in principle a blameless, even a positively "good" impulse embedded in our natural aversion to pain and death; indeed, its absence would normally indicate some sort of psycho-physical abnormality. Moral evaluation applies not to its presence as such, but to how it is used.

Another context in Maximus's writings in which the novelty and freedom of Christ's action comes to light is again in the fifth *Ambiguum ad Thomam*. In discussing the meaning of the disputed

³⁵ Blowers, "The Passion of Jesus Christ in Maximus the Confessor."

³⁶ Davidson criticizes this conception in Hans Schwartz ("Not My Will but Yours Be Done," 198).

³⁷ Maximus envisions the positive use of impulses such as anger and desire in *Oratioinis dominicae exposition*, lines 520–60 (CCSG, 23:113) and, of course, in the famous passage of *Quaestiones ad Thalassium* 1, lines 5–40 (CCSG, 7:47–49), where desire, pleasure, fear, and grief are transformed into virtuous dispositions in those "who take captive every thought in obedience to Christ" (2 Cor 10:5).

Dionysian phrase “a certain new theandric activity,” Maximus argues that Christ fully manifested what we recognise as our common human nature, but he did so “by way of new modalities that are not ours.”³⁸ On this basis, Maximus can say that “there is nothing human [in Christ] that, on account of its supernatural modality, was not also divine.”³⁹ By renewing human nature, by pioneering it afresh and making of it a gift available to all, Christ shows how human action in its free and fulfilled state properly introduces into history an utterly singular and unexpected quality that transcends all “normal” and predictable schemes of natural causation.

With respect to the Gethsemane prayer, then, this means that Christ really did feel the properly human aversion to death, for there would be something wrong with a being that did not at some level resist its own destruction. Yet, he experienced this aversion not in a way that might drive him to seek refuge in selfish or escapist behavior, but in a uniquely transcendent way—that is, in God’s way—and therefore in a way that serves for human salvation. Through this unique mode of appropriation by Christ, the natural human fear of death, which so often takes the concrete form of a crippling power or overwhelmingly impulsive drive, was thereby granted a new, supernatural quality as “a precious resource of salvation and deification.”⁴⁰ In this way, summarizes Blowers, Maximus envisions Christ in the garden as “pioneering” for all human beings “a new and edifying mode” of the common human aversion to death, one that does not curtail or frustrate human aspirations but enables their ultimate fulfilment.⁴¹

Integration of Instinct and Intention

The third question that calls for our attention concerns the integration of instinct and intention, the extent to which Christ’s conscious acts of will incorporate, rather than oppose, even the most instinctive human impulses and inclinations. In two statements in *Opusculum* 7, Maximus affirms that Christ’s natural human will “was not opposed to God,”⁴²

³⁸ *Ambiguum* 5.184 (CCSG, 48:28).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.173–74 (CCSG, 48:27–28).

⁴⁰ Blowers, “The Passion of Jesus Christ in Maximus the Confessor,” 369.

⁴¹ Paul M. Blowers and Robert L. Wilken, *St Maximus the Confessor: On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ*, (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003), 112n7.

⁴² *Opusculum* 7 (PG, 91:81D).

but then in referring to the movement from the stance of aversion expressed in the first part of the prayer to the stance of agreement expressed in the second part of the prayer, says, with reference to that aversion, that he “turns against it” (ᾠρμα κατ’ αὐτοῦ).⁴³

A solution to this problem has been helped greatly by the recognition that the terms used for “will” in many passages do not denote the rational appetite exclusively, but sometimes include also reference to the lower appetitive and instinctive impulses. For example, in *Opusculum* 3, Maximus defines *thelêma* as a natural desire for being, which he explains is not a conscious psychological longing, but a kind of constitutive, organizing energy within a being that orients it toward its own actuation and fulfilment.⁴⁴ Again in *Opusculum* 1, Maximus defines “natural will” (*physikon thelêma*) as a power that “holds together in being” the various properties of a nature.⁴⁵ As Bathrellos summarises the wider textual evidence, “the will is a unity of instinctive and rational elements.”⁴⁶ This assertion is set over against the thesis of both von Balthasar and Marcel Doucet, who hold that Christ’s repulsion in the face of death was “not simply a blind, vital drive to stay alive, but intelligent willing.”⁴⁷

Of course, Doucet was himself critical of von Balthasar on this issue. Already back in 1985, Doucet rejected von Balthasar’s dramatic rendition of the duality of wills in Christ in terms of a symmetrical, face-to-face struggle and its resolution in advance, as it were, by the overarching will exercised by the Logos in becoming human to begin with. Von Balthasar’s approach is well illustrated by his translation of the phrase ᾠρμα κατ’ αὐτοῦ with “he does violence to his own will” (*Er «stürmt gegen seinen eigenen Willen an»*).⁴⁸ Such an approach, Doucet argued, leaves no room for the possibility of speaking of a real submission and obedience on the part of Christ’s human will. There can be no radical contrariety in Christ. If there is an internal tension, it is played out not between the Logos and his humanity, but within the dynamisms of Christ’s human will itself, between the natural

⁴³ Ibid., (PG, 91:81B).

⁴⁴ Ibid., 3 (PG, 91:45C).

⁴⁵ Ibid., 1 (PG, 91:12C–13A).

⁴⁶ Bathrellos, *The Byzantine Christ*, 145n273.

⁴⁷ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy: The Universe according to Maximus the Confessor*, trans. Brian E. Daley (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2003), 264. Cf. Doucet, “La Volonté humaine du Christ,” 135 (quoted by Bathrellos, *The Byzantine Christ*, 145n273).

⁴⁸ Von Balthasar, *Kosmische Liturgie*, 266 (*Cosmic Liturgy*, 268).

“velleity,” the instinctive tendency to conserve one’s own being, and the concrete act of will that brings such velleity into submissive obedience to God.⁴⁹ The “fighting against” that Maximus speaks of, says Doucet, takes place “in his humanity, or more precisely, in his human will.”⁵⁰

Yet, to my mind, the two claims need not be so keenly opposed. It is not legitimate, at least not without imposing a neo-Kantian interpretation on Maximus, to dismiss the non-rational or instinctive element of will as irrelevant to Christ’s self-determination, as Bathrellos seems to do.⁵¹ Here von Balthasar’s proposed solution to the problem of opposition seems to me to make certain sense not only of Maximus’s thought but also of the exigencies of the human reality. In an intellectual being, argues von Balthasar, natural desire is always, “at its root, an intellectual desire.”⁵² The implications are twofold. First, spirit or intelligence not only is operative in a human being at the level of conscious acts of choice but penetrates all the way down to qualify in some way even the deepest instinctive drives. Second, concrete determinations of will always arise out of the intelligent, but they do so as a yet unfulfilled complex of affects and desires that mark our psychophysical constitution. Of course, precisely therein lie both our unity and our vulnerability. In Christ, however, this same complex of natural drives, says Maximus, “does not precede and lead the will, as happens with us,”⁵³ but is itself the result of a higher act of will, the will of the Logos who, in becoming incarnate, gives his humanity existence and, within the limits of a purposeful salvific project, freely makes his own the full range of its natural motions. In this way, says von Balthasar, Christ’s natural fear of death “was itself supported by his underlying hypostatic freedom, which supported his whole nature. His hypostatic identity, therefore, bears and results in the natural opposition of the two natures, and in its supreme personal disponibility [to the Father’s will] it dissolves the opposition between them to the same degree that it brings them into being.”⁵⁴

In embracing and making his own the nature he assumed, the Logos personally willed and affirmed all its finite proclivities and

⁴⁹ Doucet, ‘La Volonté humaine du Christ’, 136.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ See Bathrellos, *The Byzantine Christ*, 123.

⁵² Von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy*, 264.

⁵³ Οὐ γὰρ προηγείται ἐν τῷ Κυρίῳ καθάπερ ἐν ἡμῖν, τῆς θελήσεως τὰ φυσικά; see *Disputatio cum Pyrrho* (PG, 91:297D).

⁵⁴ Von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy*, 266.

vulnerabilities, including those that “naturally” move it in a certain healthy and blameless direction, but which in the circumstances of the saving economy would require modal re-configuration. In essence, these inclinations are human. In their modal actualisation and determination by Christ, they are rendered divine.⁵⁵ Maximus can thus speak of Christ, in the very moment in which the instinctive human aversion to death arises in him and comes to expression in prayer, “turning against” the inclination manifest in this aversion. The intensity implied by this verb “turning against” is softened if we compare it to parallel expressions in the immediate context that speak of “setting aside” (ἀθέτησις), “surrendering” (ὑποκλίνω), or “constraining” (συνελαύνω) this inclination in order to bring it into union with the saving plan of the Father.⁵⁶

For von Balthasar, all of this can only make sense inasmuch as this natural inclination is “from the start, already in submission.”⁵⁷ In submission to what? Only to the will of the Logos? This is how von Balthasar has it. Must we not also add: “and also to the will of his human nature”? But this would be to fall into the trap again of ascribing actions or events to this or that nature in a way Maximus never quite permits. While he affirms the presence of a human will, its decisive determination, its concrete actualization, is never an act of a nature, nor even of a mere man, but always that of a singular subject who is the humanized God.⁵⁸ As Maximus asserts in *Opusculum* 3, it is the overarching salvific *skopos* of the Incarnation that functions as the decisive personal orientation within which Christ’s shrinking from death is integrated. Since the Son of God became a human being not primarily to suffer but to save, his natural aversion to suffering does not stand intrinsically opposed to the saving divine will, nor is it simply reigned in by a higher act of bare human volition, but arises as a normal motion of natural inclination that, in Maximus’s words, is “shaped and brought into concordance with the interweaving of the natural *logos* with the mode of the economy.”⁵⁹

⁵⁵ *Opusculum* 7 (PG, 91:81D).

⁵⁶ Ibid. (PG, 91:80D–81A).

⁵⁷ Von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy*, 269.

⁵⁸ See *Opusculum* 4 (PG, 91:60A): ὡς ἄνθρωπος οὐ ψιλός, ἀλλ’ ἐνανθρωπήσας Θεός.

⁵⁹ *Opusculum* 3 (PG, 91:48C).

Concluding Application

What I have been doing in the discussion up until this point is trying to visit a number of well worked-over Maximian problems in order to generate some thoughts that will better allow us to judge the validity of one particular appropriation of Maximus's dyothelete Christology in the field of moral theology. It is my sense that all three areas of discussion open up insights that lend themselves to an interpretation of morality and human action along the lines indicated by Melina. My purpose in this concluding section is to recall briefly two aspects of Melina's thought outlined in the introduction and see how they may dovetail with what we have gleaned from Maximus. The first was Melina's notion that human freedom consists in "the power to introduce novelty into the cyclical time of history, breaking the pre-established schemes of physical laws and natural inclinations."⁶⁰ The second aspect was Melina's sense that the specifically christological aspect in the Confessor's analysis of human action says something crucial about the realization of all human freedom: that it "only occurs in reference to the will of a person: the beloved, the Father."⁶¹

It seems to me that the first of these two points fits well with what we have said about the Maximian notion of Christ as pioneer of a new and saving modality of human action. Christ performs human activities "in a way beyond the human."⁶² He thereby inaugurates a new level of human freedom, actualizing everything that is proper to human nature, but "by way of new modalities that are not ours."⁶³ This is not to envisage freedom as totally autonomous and self-designing. Christ's freedom simultaneously transcends and affirms the limitations of our common human nature and bodily structure. There is much in the normal course of human experience that unfolds unavoidably as a matter of natural necessity. In Christ, however, these dynamisms provide the crucial ground and trajectory for creative and renovative action.

Herein lies an obvious difference between Christ's affectivity and our own fallen proclivities. A stable disposition to perform good acts relies upon the impetus provided by the affections and desires. In the unvirtuous person, however, such affections and desires lack the appropriate order and temper, and thus, instead of impelling him

⁶⁰ Melina, *Epiphany of Love*, 4.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁶² *Ambiguum* 5.73 (CCSG, 48:23).

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 5.184 (CCSG, 48:28).

toward the good, they tend to dissipate his energies and impede the singleness of heart, the clarity of purpose, and the connatural instinct for good called for by the moral situation. When faced with impending pain or evil, our natural fears and desires often tend to exercise a compelling and sometimes turbulent influence on our intentional choices. In Christ, by contrast, all these affections and desires are actively harnessed and spontaneously integrated into the free and creative actualization of a purposeful salvific project. As Maximus puts it:

By freedom of will [ἐξουσίᾳ γνώμης], he turned the passions of nature into active deeds, though not as consequences of natural necessity, as they are in our case. Moreover, possessing what belongs to us, he passed through the passibility of our nature and, by his freedom, proved that there was moving in him that which in our case tends to bring about a seditious turbulence of will. That which with us is naturally present as a mover of will [γνώμης κινητικὸν: something that puts *gnome* into motion] is rendered by Christ's freedom something movable by will [γνώμη κινητὸν].⁶⁴

In Maximus's mind, this lack of necessity in Jesus is a consequence of his virgin birth, by which his human nature comes into being not by a law of natural necessity but by the free and supernatural act of the Word.⁶⁵

The validity of the second point becomes clearer when we supplement our findings with an observation whose importance is only hinted at by Maximus but that seems to me to be of peculiar relevance to the integration of Christ's natural human desires and their actualization within an interpersonal, filial modality. It has to do with the role of prayer as the concrete means by which this integration and actualization take place. On several occasions in the passages under discussion, Maximus alludes to Jesus's act of prayer in Gethsemane as the means by which he manifests his humanity in all

⁶⁴ Ibid., 5.163–67 (CCSG, 48:27). In this earlier work, Maximus clearly still attributes *gnome* (deliberation) to Christ. Yet, the point made here remains essentially applicable even when one denies *gnome* to Christ.

⁶⁵ See also *Ambiguorum liber sive de variis difficilibus locis SS Dionysii Areopagite et Gregorii Theologi* 41 (PG, 91:1309A).

its weakness and constrains it to union with the Father's will.⁶⁶ But what Maximus does not seem to reflect on—at least in the *Opuscula*—is the filial mode in which this prayer is expressed as personal address to God as “Father.”⁶⁷ The concrete content and intention of the prayer corresponds exactly both to Christ's filial identity and to the motion of his normal human desires. Thus, Christ in Gethsemane is what a human being looks like when all his natural capacities and propensities are actuated in a divine way, or more specifically, in the way proper to the relation that pertains between the Son and the Father.⁶⁸ Those capacities and propensities that might, in other cases, lead to actions that undermine this relation are, in Jesus, drawn into the ambit of filial communion with the Father and effectively made to actualize his universal saving purpose in history precisely through the medium of intimate (though agonizing) prayer.

In a similar way, Melina proposes that human action is essentially—that is, according to its Christocentric *telos*—filial and interpersonal. The knowledge that guides particular moral actions is discovered not in an objective cognitive recognition of a universal norm and subsequent conformity to it, but rather relies on a “creative moral insight” born from within the subjective and particular conditions of a concrete “I-Thou” relationship.⁶⁹ To say that human moral action is filial is to say that it has its origin and end in the reciprocal love of God the Father and his Son in the freedom of the Spirit. The proper horizon against which human action must be compared or measured is not human nature, in the first instance, nor even the divine will, but filial communion with the Father.

⁶⁶ See, e.g., *Opusculum* 7 (PG, 91:80CD—81A) and *Opusculum* 6 (PG, 91:68C).

⁶⁷ However, in his *Commentary on the Lord's Prayer*, Maximus takes up a prominent patristic *topos* in highlighting the fact that only the Son properly calls God “Father,” so that it is only by grace of adoption that human beings, for whom God is properly called “creator,” can also call him “Father”; see *Orationis dominicae expositio* 258–69 (CCSG, 23:71).

⁶⁸ “Jesus exhibits the nature and character of God in the only way in which they can be absolutely and perfectly exhibited in the context of human behaviour, namely in such a relationship as properly belongs to man over against God, the relationship of glad and willing filial obedience”; see C. F. D. Moule, “The Manhood of Jesus in the New Testament,” in *Christ, Faith and History: Cambridge Studies in Christology*, ed. S. W. Sykes and J. P. Clayton (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 95–110, at 101.

⁶⁹ On this notion of “creative moral insight,” see Stephen A. Dinan, “The Particularity of Moral Knowledge,” *The Thomist* 50 (1986): 66–84 (referred to by Melina, *Epiphany of Love*, 59).

Only by insertion into this filial relation does human action come to full flower.

Whether or not these reflections satisfy a strict exegesis of Maximus's writings, they encourage us to penetrate the letter of his texts in order to get nearer the mystery they surely try to express. Maximus's account of Gethsemane teaches us that human beings actualize their freedom not in the mode of decisions whose rightness is deduced in advance through a detached and rational grasp of the truth in all its blazing objectivity, but *in actu*, in the mode of an interpersonal communion within which desire, born of love, is wholly captivated by the Father's redemptive purpose for broken humanity. This in turn leads us to think again about the meaning of Christ's obedience, which the Confessor, in connection with the Christ hymn of Philippians 2: 5–11, links especially to the Gethsemane event.⁷⁰ It consists not simply in external conformity to a heteronomous divine command, nor in a heavy-handed and forceful coercion of unwilling impulses in a direction that they are bound to resist, but in an active interpersonal union of two desires, two freedoms. In short, Christ's obedience in the garden is essentially an embodied form of love, the love between the Son and the Father. This obedience opens the way for our historically acquired alterity to God to be healed of its divisive and alienating quality and, through its inclusion in the loving and fruitful alterity of the divine persons, to attain the communion with God that, from the beginning, has defined the human vocation. **N V**

⁷⁰ *Opusculum* 6 (PG, 91:68C).

