

# Apatheia and Interpreting Human Experience: Body, Soul, and Apatheia in Maximus the Confessor's *Quaestiones ad Thalassium*

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*Summary:* 1. From Gnostic Apathy to Stoic Good Emotions: The Philosophical Background of *Apatheia* in Maximus the Confessor; 1.1. Balthasar's Misread of *Apatheia* in Maximus; 1.2 Stoic and Christian *Apatheia*; 2. Ignorance of God and the Re-education of the Passions in *Quaestiones Ad Thalassium*; 3. *Apatheia* as the Perfection of Human Emotion; 4. From Earthly Passion to Divinized Emotion: The Case of Grief

Maximus the Confessor (580-662) is well known for his defence of the two wills of Christ and the full integration of the doctrine of Chalcedon into Christian theology. Many scholars have claimed that “the mystery of Christ” is at the centre of Maximus’s theological vision<sup>1</sup>. Yet, as Brian Daley has argued in his recent book, *God Visible*, the tendency to limit our study of Early Christianity as the narrative of dogmatic development from Nicaea and Chalcedon obscures the diverse and distinctive theology of Patristic thinkers<sup>2</sup>. There is no doubt that Christology is a leitmotif of the Confessor’s thought. However, Maximus’s role in Palestinian monasticism has opened the question of the influence of his ascetic formation<sup>3</sup>. I argue that Maxi-

1 Lars Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator*, Chicago, 1995, 21.

2 Brian E. Daley, *God Visible*, Oxford, 2018. See also John Behr, *The Nicene Faith* (2 vols.), Crestwood, 2004.

3 Phil Booth, *Crisis of Empire: Doctrine and Dissent in Late Antiquity*, Berkeley, 2014; Christian Boudignon, “Maxime était-il constantinopolitain?”, in *Philo-*

mus's ascetic material forms his theological vision of the human being as much as his Christological concerns. This is most evident in Maximus's account of human passibility and its perfection as *apatheia*. Maximus draws his thinking from the monastic tradition, which revises the Stoic ideal according to Christian categories. With these tools, Maximus explores the role that human experience plays in the Christian life. I will first describe Balthasar's misunderstanding of *apatheia* in Maximus, which has had a deleterious effect on subsequent scholarship. Then I will provide the Christian background that Maximus inherits. I will then offer an interpretation of the *Introduction* to *Quaestiones ad Thalassium*, where we see Maximus's fullest exposition of the problem of human emotion and its resolution as *apatheia*. I will discuss how Maximus envisions the development of human emotion through the various stages of the spiritual life. I will analyse Maximus's understanding of grief, a key emotion in his thought that matures from the terrestrial sorrow for one's sin to the selfless concern for those not saved, experienced by the divinized. In short, Maximus does not consider the goal of the Christian life to be devoid of emotional activity, but full of deified, emotional content. Thus, without a body, we cannot fathom the experience Maximus describes of the purified soul.

1. From Gnostic Apathy to Stoic Good Emotions: The Philosophical Background of *Apatheia* in Maximus the Confessor

1.1. *Balthasar's Misread of Apatheia in Maximus*

Hans Urs von Balthasar is largely responsible for the renewed scholarly interest in Maximus the Confessor in the twentieth century.

*mathestatos: Studies in Greek and Byzantine Texts Presented to Jacques Noret for his Sixty-Fifth Birthday* (edd. B. Janssens – B. Roosen – P. Van Deun), Leuven, 2004, 15–22.

The French translation of his book *Cosmic Liturgy*<sup>4</sup>, provided both an access point to large swaths of Maximus's texts hitherto untranslated and a hermeneutical lens through which to read them<sup>5</sup>. However, Balthasar, in his concern to find a convincing Christian alternative to German idealism, at times distorts the Confessor's thought<sup>6</sup>. Maximus is presented as a legitimate Christian synthesizer of two polarities that he frames in various ways throughout the book: "Eastern and Western", "Gnosticism and Revelation", "Buddha and Hegel". As regards his exploration of the Confessor's use of *apatheia*, he likewise frames it against the horizon of this narrative. For Balthasar, *apatheia* regards historically a "gnostic" idea that regards not material creation but "wholly realized in the interior, invisible space of the soul"<sup>7</sup>. Ac-

- 4 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Kosmische Liturgie*, Einsiedeln, 1961 = *Cosmic Liturgy: The Universe According to Maximus the Confessor* (tr. B. E. Daley), San Francisco, 2004. My references are from the English translation. For historical context on Balthasar's work, see Aiden Nichols, *Byzantine Gospel: Maximus the Confessor in Modern Scholarship*, Oxford, 1993, 221-252, esp. 230-235.
- 5 Until recently, very little exists in modern translations outside of pieces in scholarly monographs. Nicholas Conostas diagnoses the problem well: "Translations of Maximus' works are as necessary today as they were in the ninth century. That scholars are introduced to texts largely by way of translations can be confirmed by a footnote check of recent articles on Maximus the Confessor, which for the most part cite only those works or passages that have been translated into modern languages. Scholars are institutionally rewarded for promoting novel theories and interpretations of texts, but the limited range of citations in many secondary studies raises a question about the depth of their engagement with the actual primary sources". Nicholas Conostas, "St. Maximus the Confessor: The Reception of His Thought in East and West", in *Knowing the Purpose of Everything through the Resurrection: Proceedings of the Symposium on St. Maximus the Confessor, Belgrade, October 18-21, 2012* (ed. M. Vasilijević), Alhambra – Belgrade, 2013, 34.
- 6 See the comments of Brian E. Daley, "Translators Forward", in *Cosmic Liturgy*, at 16-19; Paul M. Blowers, *Maximus the Confessor: Jesus Christ and the Transfiguration of the World*, Oxford, 2016, 320-324.
- 7 Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy*, 282.

cording to Balthasar, Maximus's originality lies in his rescuing this term from this spiritualizing "gnostic" sect and making it conform "to the deepest structure of his thought"<sup>8</sup>.

### 1.2. *Stoic and Christian Apatheia*

If these distinctions between East and West seem overdrawn and vague, it is because they are. As a result, the supposed originality of Maximus's use of *apatheia* requires further examination, not least to correct Balthasar and contemporary interpreters who have followed suit to explain Maximus's account of *apatheia* and sensibility<sup>9</sup>. I will briefly review the origins of *apatheia* and its entry into Christian discourse. Against this horizon, we can better understand Maximus's use of the term and how it frames his understanding of the relationship to body and soul<sup>10</sup>.

Christian *apatheia* owes its origin not to gnostic sects, but to Stoicism. Incidentally, the Stoics were not anti-matter, but held a strong materialist, or better, vitalist position<sup>11</sup>. As early as Tertullian, Christians turned to Stoicism to explain the body-soul relationship<sup>12</sup>. However, the Stoics are most well known for their ethics, in particular the doctrine of the passions. Simply put, the passions (παθή) are

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 283.

<sup>9</sup> See recently, Frederick D. Aquino, "Maximus the Confessor", in *The Spiritual Senses: Perception of God in Western Christianity* (ed. P. Gavrilyuk – S. Coakley), Cambridge, 2012, 104-120.

<sup>10</sup> For greater detail on the reception of the Stoic doctrine of the passions into Christianity, see Andrew J. Summerson, *Exegesis of the Human Heart: Divine Scripture and Human Emotion in Maximus the Confessor*, Leiden, forthcoming 2021.

<sup>11</sup> I use the term "vitalism" so as to not confuse with contemporary materialism, which denies the existence of the soul. The Stoics had a well-developed theory of the soul.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. *adv. Prax.* 27; *anim.* 27. See Eric Osborn, *Tertullian: First Theologian of the West*, Cambridge, 1997.

disruptive movements of the soul and evil behaviours in relation to perceived goods and evils. These vicious states are not present in the “sage”, that is, the perfected human. To describe this state free of bad emotions (παθή), they use the term *apatheia*<sup>13</sup>. *Apatheia* does not denote cold-blooded emotional insensitivity, but rather, the presence of good emotions, that is, good behaviours (εὐπάθειαι) in relation to perceived goods or evils. From this overview we can draw a couple of conclusions. First, even in Stoicism, emotions are not simply mental activities, but always refer to impressions from the exterior world. Second, the perfection of the human psyche consists not in the elimination of our dependence on the exterior world, but a rightly ordered affective and moral relationship with it. In Clement of Alexandria, this doctrine enters into Christian moral discourse<sup>14</sup>. Christ is described explicitly as *apathe*s, and Christians are to imitate him to restore God-likeness as described in Genesis. This appropriation deepens in the ascetic tradition, notably in Evagrius Ponticus, a key source for Maximus<sup>15</sup>.

13 For elaboration, see Brad Inwood, *Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism*, Oxford, 1985; Margaret Graver, *Stoicism and Emotion*, Chicago, 2007.

14 See Michel Spanneut's valuable studies of the Christian interpretation of Stoic *apatheia*. Idem, “Apatheia ancienne, apatheia chrétienne. Ière partie: L'apatheia ancienne”, in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* II,36,7 (1994), 4640-4717; “L'apatheia chrétienne aux quatre premiers siècles”, in *Proche-Orient Chrétien* 52 (2002), 165-302. See also Idem, *Le stoïcisme des pères de l'Église de Clément de Rome à Clément d'Alexandrie*, Paris, 1957; See Richard Sorabji, *Emotion and Peace of Mind: From Stoic Agitation to Christian Temptation*, Oxford, 2000. For relevant comment on Stoicism and its legacy in Patristic Christian anthropology, see John M. Rist, *What is Truth?: From the Academy to the Vatican*, Cambridge, 2004, esp. 44-64. For the reference to Stoicism and the formation of Christian free will, see Michael Frede, *A Free Will*, Berkeley, 2011; On Augustine, see especially Sara C. Byers, *Perception, Sensibility, and Moral Motivation in Augustine: A Stoic Platonic Synthesis*, Cambridge, 2013.

15 On Maximus's use of Evagrius, see Lars Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator*, esp. 335-367, passim. The classic study is Marcel Viller, “Aux sources de la spirit-

2. Ignorance of God and the Re-education of the Passions in  
*Quaestiones Ad Thalassium*

Maximus's most thorough explanation of human passibility occurs at the beginning of his second-largest work, *Quaestiones ad Thalassium*. The work is occasioned by the request of his friend, Thalassius<sup>16</sup>, a Libyan abbot, who presents two sets of questions: one set on difficulties in Scripture and one set on the nature of the passions. Maximus does not offer two separate treatises for a specific reason: He sees difficulties in Scriptural interpretation and the passions as the same problem. They both represent a "hermeneutical crisis", the result of a wrong reading of both the Bible and the world<sup>17</sup>. He thus treats them inseparably throughout the work, using Scripture to reflect on the nature of the passions. Conversely, the questions of the passions focus his exegesis.

The *Introduction to Ad Thalassium* offers an account of the problems of body and soul through an exegesis of Genesis. Maximus understands the fall of Adam as idolatry. Using Paul in the Letter to the Romans 1,25, humanity worships created things instead of the Creator. This fundamental mistake has long-lasting ramifications. According to Maximus, it engenders "ignorance of God (ἄγνοια τοῦ θεοῦ)"<sup>18</sup>. We should resist the temptation to consider this problem in

ualité de saint Maxime. Les oeuvres d'Évagre le Pontique", in *Revue d'Ascétique et de Mystique* 11 (1930), 156-184, 239-268.

16 For more on the identity and thought of Thalassius Libanus, see Michel van Parys, "Un maître spirituel oublié: Thalassios de Libye", in *Irenikon* 59 (1979), 214-240.

17 I borrow this term from Fr. Maximos (ne Nicholas) Constas. See "Translator's introduction", in *St. Maximos the Confessor: On Difficulties in Sacred Scripture: The Responses to Thalassios* (The Fathers of the Church Series), Washington, 2018, at 21.

18 Maximus Confessor, *Quaestiones ad Thalassium* (Corpus Christianorum Series Graeca, 7, ed. C. Laga et al.), Turnhout, 1980, 31. All translations of Maximus are my own in consultation with other sources, where available.

a Cartesian way, as simply a cognitive category mistake. Understood in a more Platonic sense, ignorance of God is the root of all moral imperfection and results in a fundamental disposition toward created reality<sup>19</sup>. Maximus explains this reductionist view of creation in reference to the beginning of the Book of Genesis and proposes the Tree of Good and Evil as an allegorical image of creation. Both the tree and creation are facts – benign in themselves – that require interpretation. He writes: “And, perhaps, one would not be wrong in saying that the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil is visible creation. On the one hand, it possesses the knowledge of the good, when contemplated spiritually, on the other hand, the knowledge of evil when received corporeally”<sup>20</sup>.

The problem of embodied nature underlies Maximus’s description of “ignorance of God”. Humanity conceptualizes spiritual concepts, which do not occur in time in space, in terms of spatial dimensions. Idolatry then is the result of a thin reading of creation, where man collapses the distinction between the Creator and the creature. Creation here is no longer of God, but is God, itself a divine idol. Hence, idolatry follows from ignorance of God, leaving man to grasp for a placeholder for his forgotten Creator. Man can recognize the good in creation. The problem is that the corporeal exerts an influence on the mind and distorts his analysis. It presents a corporeal vision that is

19 Jean-Claude Larchet notes similarities with Athanasius, who claims that the soul’s forgetfulness (λήθη) begins with the fall and engenders the passions, cf. *inc.*, 4.5, *gen.*, 3.9; 8,21. See Id., *Maxime le Confesseur: Questions à Thalassios*, vol. 1 (Sources Chrétiennes 529; tr. F. Vinel), Paris, 2010, at 140 n1. For comment on Athanasius, see Jonathan Morgan, “The Soul’s Forgetfulness of God in Athanasius’ Doctrine of the Fall”, in *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 60/4 (2016), 473-488, esp. 480-484.

20 *ad Thal.* Intro., (CCSG 7, 37). For an analysis on Maximus’s comment in light of the prior tradition, see Lars Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator*, esp. 162-68, and Blowers, *Exegesis and Spiritual Pedagogy: An Investigation of Quaestiones ad Thalassium*, South Bend, Ind., 1991, esp. 189-191.

ill-attuned to the subtle mark of the divine, the spiritual *logoi* laden in creation<sup>21</sup>.

This continued wrong read of creation sets off a series of chain reactions. To describe this picture, Maximus uses highly rhetorical language that evokes key theological themes elsewhere in his writings. One such example is his employment of rhetorical anaphora and the characteristic formula, “ὅσον...τοσοῦτον/*tantum...quantum*”<sup>22</sup>.

Hence, inasmuch as man was preoccupied with knowledge of visible realities only according to sense, in the same measure, he fastened himself tighter to the ignorance of God;

and inasmuch as he tightened the latch of this ignorance, in the same measure, he clung to the experience of the physical enjoyment of material known to him;

and inasmuch as he sated himself with sensual pleasure, in the same measure, he fastened himself to the desire of self-love wrought by it;

and inasmuch as he carefully guards his desire, in the same measure he guards pleasure, it being the beginning and end of self-love<sup>23</sup>.

Maximus's repetition continues as he uses key verbs of fastening (ἐπέσφιγγεν; ἀντείχετο; ἐξήπτε) to describe how the choice to embrace what he calls “synthetic knowledge”, or knowledge distorted by sense experience. These are not mere poetic embellishments. Maximus's *tantum/quantum* scheme typically functions in light of his soteriolog-

21 *Ibid.* On this key theme of “*logoi*” in Maximus, the classic text is *Amb.* 7 (PG 91: 1068D-1101D). For comment, see Irenée-Henri Dalmais, “La théorie des ‘logoi’ des créatures chez S. Maxime le Confesseur”, in *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 36 (1952), 244-249. More recently, see Jean-Claude Larchet, *La divinization de l’homme selon saint Maxime le Confesseur*, Paris, 2009, 125-151; Blowers, *Maximus the Confessor: Jesus Christ and the Transfiguration of the World*, 109-119.

22 For comment on this theme in Maximus, see Larchet, *La divinisation de l’homme*, 376-382.

23 *Ibid.* (CCSG 7, 31).



ical balance, as he does in *Ambiguum* 10: “For they say that God and man are paradigms of each other, so that as much as (τοσοῦτον) man enabled by love, has divinized himself for God, to that same extent (ὅσον) God is humanized for man by His love for mankind”<sup>24</sup>. In this language of the *Introduction*, Maximus hints at the need to resolve the fall in such a way that it demands equilibrium wrought by the salvation offered in Christ. Maximus later in *Ad Thalassium* succinctly expresses Jesus’s wondrous exchange of human passibility as follows: “By his passion he grants us *apatheia*, and by his sufferings, liberation, and by his death, life eternal”<sup>25</sup>.

Before we discuss this remedy, it is helpful to discuss the specific symptoms of the disease. As is clear from the above citation, Maximus sees the unbridled pursuit of pleasure as a core feature of this sickness. Maximus goes on to describe how fallen sensibility interacts with sense experience, laying out the binomy of pleasure and pain. According to this view, fallen humanity stands between these two polarities, hastening to pleasure and fleeing the possibility of pain: “Toward pleasure he aims all his desire, from pain, every escape. In struggling for pleasure with all his forces, yet struggling against pain with all his zeal”<sup>26</sup>.

Towards the end of the *Introduction*, Maximus answers the problem of the passions with their necessary remedy. First, he insists that the unhealthy myopia fixated on the pursuit of pleasure is resolved through *apatheia*, which is described as a corrected vision of creation granted by God. Maximus’s proposal underscores the metrical aspect of God’s gift. Instead of the self-assertion of our will to interpret creation in an idolatrous way, humanity is given the gift through grace to “examine God’s creation with God’s help, without harm in freedom

24 *Amb.* 10 (PG 91: 1113B; tr. N. Constatas, *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers: The Ambigua*, Vol. 1. [Cambridge Mass., 2018], at 165).

25 *ad Thal.* 61 (CCSG 22, 91).

26 *ad Thal.* Intro. (CCSG 7, 31).

and so that man might appropriate knowledge of these things as God does, not as man”<sup>27</sup>.

Maximus is not advocating a total flight from the world in his understanding of *apatheia*. Rather, the grace bestowed through *apatheia* offers a particular vision of the world, one that unveils the world to see it imbued with divinity:

Having been deemed worthy of this, we shall possess the salvific ignorance of this world, no longer without wise thinking, as before, with the face of sensibility having been unveiled, no longer seeing the manifestation of sensible reality as his glory. Rather, with the face of intellect being unveiled, through the freeing of every veil of sensible experience, which by virtue and spiritual knowledge we contemplate the glory of God<sup>28</sup>.

One immediately can see the echoes of 2 Corinthians 3,18: “And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit”. Maximus, however, extends Paul’s analogy to include a double unveiling. First, the human mind is freed from ignorance of God to contemplate radically the glory of God in creation. Second, creation itself is unveiled to reveal more clearly the glory of God.

Therefore, *apatheia* for Maximus requires contact with the physical world, for such is the nature of embodied existence. Sense experience has a redemptive purpose. Our relationship to it is healed when it is unveiled by divine intervention and our ascetical cooperation with grace. Maximus is not speaking solely in abstraction. He has in mind an example “in the flesh”, namely his friend, Thalassius. According to Maximus, Thalassius has corrected the problem of reading both Scripture and the created world. At the beginning of the *Intro-*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* (CCSG 7, 37).

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* (CCSG 7, 41).

*duction*, Maximus remarks that Thalassius has successfully “separated his soul” from the flesh, through his ascetic effort. According to Maximus, Thalassius’ asceticism has permitted him privileged insight into Scripture. Having disassociated himself from the inclination of the flesh and of the senses, Thalassius is uniquely able to “navigate the infinite sea of the words of the spirit”<sup>29</sup> – Scripture. As a result, Thalassius can fish out some difficulties, which he then presents to Maximus for an anagogical interpretation.

Maximus now deepens their correlation by proposing the same ascetical approach to both Scripture and the cosmos to correct man’s mistaken comprehension of these respective “texts.” Yet the performance of the ascetical effort, while necessary, is not sufficient for a proper “spiritual reading”. Ascetical renunciation prepares us for our guide, the gift of God himself. Maximus proposes that through the gift of *theosis*, man is guided by God to see creation as God sees. In the same way Thalassius, because of his ascetical renunciation, can examine “the profundities of the spirit” in Scripture “with the assistance of the Spirit”<sup>30</sup>.

### 3. *Apatheia* as the Perfection of Human Emotion

As noted above, Maximus provides the fullest account of human passibility in his oeuvre. Elsewhere, Maximus uses language that suggests the opposite, namely, that human perfection consists in the complete absence of sensation, such as *Ad Thalassium* 55, where he distinguishes *apatheia* into four levels, while trying to make sense of an obscure list in the Book of Ezra:

Or again the four thousand signify these, which are called the four types of *apatheia*. The first *apatheia*, that is the total abstention of evil

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* (CCSG 7, 19) cf. 1Cor 2,10.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

actions – consider these the beginners; the second is the total rejection, by reflection, of the assent to evil thoughts – which occurs in those who participate in virtue and reason; the third is the total immobility of desire regarding the passions – found in those who intellectually contemplate through the *logoi* the form of invisible realities; and the fourth *apatheia* – this is the total purification of the simple representation of the passions, occurring in those who, through knowledge and contemplation, have made their commanding faculty (ἡγεμονικόν) a pure and clear mirror of God<sup>31</sup>.

Here, *apatheia* is divided into various stages of purification, the final stage resulting in the total absence of any shadow of the passions that might dim the pure soul of the divinized. Maximus's use of levels of perfection is a familiar theme in his writings. However, he does not restrict himself to one schema to describe the path to Christian perfection. Maximus employs various descriptions and levels of human perfection, depending on their usefulness in context<sup>32</sup>. For example,

<sup>31</sup> *ad Thal.* 55 (CCSG 7, 493).

<sup>32</sup> In this way, he is a close reader of the preceding tradition. Origen and Gregory of Nyssa are among the first to describe levels of the spiritual life, as they interpret the books attributed to Solomon – Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs – as representing the three-fold division of man's progression in philosophy – ἡθική, φυσική, and θεολογία respectively. For Origen, see *Homiliae in Cant.* Prologue. For Nyssa, see *Homiliae in Cant.* Prologue. Following them, Evagrius develops a three-fold definition that becomes a classic trope of Byzantine spiritual literature – πρακτική, φυσική, θεολογική. *Pract.* Prologue 9. Cf. Tomas Špidlik, *La spiritualité de l'orient chrétien: manuel systématique*, Rome, 1978, 69-73 (OCA 206). In *Ep.* 8, Maximus uses the following triad: σαρκικός, ψυχικός, πνευματικός (PG 91: 440C-445B). Irenaeus tells us this scheme was used by Valentinian. Cf. *Haer.* 1,5,1; there is an instance of it in Gregory the Theologian's poetry, but I fail to see how this can constitute a minority tradition. Cf. *Carm.* I 2,34,242. Lest Maximus be accused of gnosticism, it should be noted that for Maximus these states are a result of man's choice, whereas for the gnostics these states are predetermined, fixed, and inescapable. This schema had quite a following in Syriac spiritual writers such as John the

in his *Two Hundred Chapters on Theology*, Maximus describes the levels of perfection with the Biblical term “Sabbath”, playing on the distinction found in scripture between “Sabbath”, “Sabbaths”, and “Sabbath of Sabbaths”<sup>33</sup>. He writes:

“Sabbath” means the *apatheia* of a rational soul, by the practical entirely removing sin’s scars.

“Sabbaths” means the freedom (ἐλευθερία) of a rational soul, through natural contemplation by the Spirit having put off the very activity according to nature directed at sensory perception.

“Sabbath of Sabbaths” means the spiritual quietude (ἡρεμία πνευματικῇ) of the rational soul, having contracted the mind away from even all the truly divine *logoi* themselves which are in beings, and wholly having put on God alone in an erotic ecstasy (ἐρωτικὴν ἔκστασιν), and altogether making it unmovable from God through mystical theology<sup>34</sup>.

At the peak of Maximus’s description of Sabbath rest is not the absence of emotional activity. Rather, the “Sabbath of Sabbaths” rest is full of emotional content. He calls it an erotic ecstasy (ἐρωτικὴν ἔκστασιν). Hence, for Maximus, there is a specific type of human emotion present among the saints. Though *apatheia* in its highest form is

Solitary, Philoxenes, and Isaac of Nineveh. See Irénée Hausherr, *Jean Solitaire (Pseudo-Jean de Lycopolis). Dialogue sur l’âme et les passions des hommes*, Rome, 1939, 7-37; Isaac of Nineveh, *De perfectione religiosa* 12 (ed. P. Bedjan), Paris, 1909, 122.

33 *Cap. th. oec.* 1,36 (PG 90:1097 A-B) cf. Is 66,23; Ex 31,13; Lv 16,31. For the Biblical background regarding Maximus’s notion of Sabbath rest, see Gregory Benevich, “The Sabbath in St. Maximus the Confessor”, in *Studi sull’Oriente Cristiano* 9/1 (2005), 63-80. For discussion on Maximus’s different perspectives on eschatology, see Paul M. Blowers, “Realized Eschatology in Maximus the Confessor, Ad Thalassium 22”, in *Studia Patristica* 32 (ed. E. Livingstone), Leuven, 1997, 258-263. Sotiris Mitralaxis, *Ever-Moving Repose: A Contemporary Reading of Maximus the Confessor’s Theory of Time*, Eugene, Or., 2017.

34 *Cap. th. oec.*, 1,37-39 (PG 90: 1097A-D).

a pure mirror of God, it is no *tabula rasa*. Yet, human emotion as we understand it happens in the realm of human experience. Maximus understands emotion on a continuum. It begins in this world and is therefore liable to passionate states. Through purification, these emotional states are transfigured and present in the saints. I will spend the rest of this paper discussing one emotion on this continuum, grief.

#### 4. From Earthly Passion to Divinized Emotion: The Case of Grief

Grief or distress (λυπή) is a complex emotional state since it involves the rejection of the attainment of pleasure, an important theme in Maximus's ascetical perspectives in *Ad Thalassium*. To provide an adequate account of grief, he must therefore delineate types of pleasure. In *Ad Thalassium* 58, he distinguishes between two types of pleasures, one that afflicts the soul and another the body. Under both these forms, pleasure is encountered with the experience of temptation. To get at what type of pleasure is desirable and, as a result, what sort of grief is desirable, Maximus teaches that there are two basic types of temptations: voluntary (ἐκούσιος) and involuntary (ἀκούσιος)<sup>35</sup>. A voluntary temptation consists in the soul's assent to physical pleasure. The end of every chosen physical pleasure is grief in the soul. Maximus here is consistent with his teaching on pleasure and pain,

35 The scholion of this passage explains this well: "He speaks of a double affliction, one that is related to sensibility and is created by the privation of physical pleasures. The other is related to the intellect and is born of the privation of the goods for the soul. And he speaks of two sorts of grief, one voluntary and the other involuntary. The voluntary ones are the fathers of physical pleasure joined to sensibility and give birth to the affliction—for only sin can humble the soul – the involuntary show themselves in the opposition to the disposition of the will and they are the fathers of pleasure of the soul and give birth to bodily, sensible pleasure". *ad Thal.* 58, *scholion* 2 (CCSG 22, 41). Note that these *scholia* are not original to Maximus, but survive from the earliest manuscripts.

which he established in the *Introduction*: there is no experience of finite pleasure that does not end in pain in the physical life. He also holds that a voluntary choice (ἐκούσιος προαίρεσις) of physical pleasure results in being deprived of eternal joy.

Involuntary temptations, on the other hand, happen to the body against our free will (παρὰ προαίρεσιν), such as sickness, disease, or personal injury by an enemy. However, despite the involuntary status of these temptations, Maximus recommends that one accept them willingly, since they provide useful grief (τὴν λύπην ὠφέλιμον) of the kind that produces salutary pleasure for the soul (τὴν ἡδονὴν σωτήριον)<sup>36</sup>. Thus, he sees a certain type of grief as a useful, instrumental good. Hence, a proper relationship with these two different types of temptation is necessary for progression in the spiritual life.

To describe the attitude of a Christian toward these two types of grief, Maximus has recourse to two key Scriptural passages, the Our Father and the Letter of James. In explaining the petition from the Our Father, “and lead us not to temptation,” he makes clear that the request is a plea to be delivered from the temptations of physical pleasure, the kind that one wilfully chooses and which damage the soul. In contrast, he cites the Letter of James, which seems to exhort the Christian to the opposite: “rejoice exceedingly, my brothers, whenever you experience many trials”<sup>37</sup>. While the two passages seem contradictory – one asking deliverance from and the other exhorting the wilful embrace of temptations – he puts the inner tension of Scripture at the service of his ascetical teaching. For Maximus, both Scripture passages are to be accepted. The Christian life requires a two-step move, a movement away from voluntary affliction of the soul and a movement toward involuntary affliction of the body. The coordination of these two movements produces perfection. Hence,

<sup>36</sup> *ad Thal.* 58 (CCSG 22, 37).

<sup>37</sup> James 1,2; cf. *Or. dom.* 6.

in the Our Father, the petition is aimed at distancing oneself from the temptations that we wilfully choose, while the Letter of James instructs the Christian to rejoice in the sufferings that come upon us involuntarily. Maximus uses these two passages to sketch the guidelines for Christian praxis concerning grief and suffering<sup>38</sup>.

Both the initial passage of 1 Peter and the Letter of James exhort the Christian to rejoice while suffering. This brings us to Thalassius's initial question about whether such an emotional state is possible. Maximus responds affirmatively. He argues that there is no experience of pleasure on Earth that does not have corresponding pain. The same is true with grief. If physical pleasure produces spiritual grief to the soul, then the converse is true: "Pleasure of the soul produces necessarily affliction (λύπη) of sensibility, that is pain (πόνος)"<sup>39</sup>. The Christian is aided in his physical experience of pain by the hope of resurrection. Having this hope, the Christian's soul is filled with "unspeakable joy"<sup>40</sup>. Hence, the memory of Divine revelation mutes our present experience of physical pain.

As described above, wisely discerned grief has a positive place in the ascetic life of a Christian, training the soul to receive spiritual joy. On this basis, does grief have a life or purpose beyond this temporal existence, or is it simply an emotional event that is useful as we pass through this life? Maximus allows for forms of grief that extend beyond the earthly realm. Writings dated relatively to the same period as *Ad Thalassium*, both *Letter 4* and *Questions and Doubts*,<sup>41</sup> discuss

<sup>38</sup> *ad Thal.* 58 (CCSG 22, 29-31).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* (CCSG 22, 35).

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Sherwood dates this letter rather early, prior to 626. Phil Booth and Marek Jankowiak date it before 642, "but it is impossible to be more precise". See "A New Date List of the Works of Maximus the Confessor", in *The Oxford Handbook of Maximus the Confessor* (Henceforth *OHMC*), Oxford, 2015, 38. Jankowiak and Booth date *Quaestiones et dubia* around the same time as *Ad*



grief as an eternal emotional reality belonging to the divinized, not just a temporary emotion that is useful in the training of Christian asceticism in this life.

In *Letter 4*, Maximus remains in exegetical territory, responding to John Cubicularius's question about godly sorrow (ἡ κατὰ Θεὸν λύπη) discussed in 2 Corinthians 7,10. The beginning of Maximus's letter indicates a positive appreciation of this emotion: "I rejoice and am glad, for throughout this entire letter, I find my blessed master suffering praiseworthy grief"<sup>42</sup>. He extols grief as the mother of the virtues<sup>43</sup>, and he who possesses it remains unperturbed by corruptible things and the attacks of the evil one<sup>44</sup>. He urges Christians to have a close association with grief, to "enclose it in the depth of their heart", "bind themselves to it indissolubly", or "bind it entirely to himself"<sup>45</sup>. Grief reminds the Christian of the reality of Divine judgment<sup>46</sup>. However, grief is not solely a human product. Maximus teaches that it is ultimately a gift of the Holy Spirit: "The Holy Spirit creates this grief, frequenting the hearts of the worthy"<sup>47</sup>.

Elsewhere in *Questions and Doubts*, Maximus discusses the permanence of grief in a series of two responses to questions posed to him. He first addresses the appropriateness of the grief that might assail Job:

*Thalassium*, before 633/634, rejecting Sherwood's earlier dating that depends on the Constantinopolitan vita that they both rejected. See "A New Date List", 29.

- 42 *Ep.* 4 (PG 91: 413A). See John Gavin, "*They are Like Angels in the Heavens*": *Angelology and Anthropology in the Thought of Maximus the Confessor*, Rome, 2009, 222-225. For Maximus's thought on grief in a larger monastic context, see Idem, "'The Grief Willed by God': Three Patristic Interpretations of 2Cor 7,10", in *Gregorianum* 91/3 (2010), 427-442.

43 *Ibid.* (PG 91: 413C).

44 *Ibid.* (PG 91: C-D).

45 *Ibid.*

46 *Ibid.* (PG 91: 416 A-D).

47 *Ibid.* (PG 91: 413 D).

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*Question:* Whether it is inadmissible for Job that grief (λύπη) would come upon him?

*Answer:* We say that Job became impervious to grief (ἀπαράδεκτον λύπης). For at the moment he piously performed the examination of created things and established in himself scorn for temporal things and love for eternal things, how at the transient sufferings which things naturally are prone to suffer on account of their change in state, could he not feel grief?<sup>48</sup>

Maximus develops his response into a conundrum. He lays out at the beginning that Job was impervious to grief, yet by the end admits a certain form of natural grief has to be permitted as the normal functioning of the human psyche. If we take Maximus at his word here, he simply reiterates Gregory of Nyssa, who opines that a “just and reasonable” grief has to do with the normal operation of human development. One will feel bites and pangs of sorrow from time to time, for such is the lot of temporal existence. However, these physical feelings are not to be confused with moral failure. However, his rhetorical question at the end of this passage leads to a more detailed response to the subsequent question:

*Question:* What, then? Did none of the saints experience grief? And why is it said, concerning many of the saints, that they did experience grief, as Paul also says, “I have continual grief”<sup>49</sup> and the rest?

*Answer:* The person who concerns himself with practical things, when the conscience striking, stabs him by means of illusions based in memory completely grieves a praiseworthy grief (λυπεῖται πάντως τὴν ἐπαινετὴν λύπην). But the one who has arrived at the measure of perfection exists beyond this. For one who has been enlightened through knowledge—having unfolded the intellectual aspect of the soul to God without division through smoothness of movement, and having acquired the inde-

<sup>48</sup> *Qu. d.* 128 (CCSG 10, 93).

<sup>49</sup> Rom 9,2.

scribable joy found in the continuous pleasure of divine beauty—how can he accept the sorrow that is opposed to this?<sup>50</sup>

Maximus advocates a laudable grief caused by the pricking of the conscience. Praiseworthy sorrow is concomitant with repentance from our former life and of our misguided temporal attachments. Yet Maximus raises his own objection. Grief is fine for Christians on the way to salvation, but what happens to this morally good grief when in possession of eternal goods? Does grief simply cease because the deprivation of temporal pleasures does not bother the saint since he has attained eternal life?

To respond to this, Maximus describes the form of grief that occurs in the “holy ones” and in God in the heavenly realm:

When the holy ones are said to grieve, it is in imitation of their master. For both sorrow and joy are ascribed to God, with respect to his providence. Grief on account of those perishing, joy on account of those being saved. The term “grief” is open and admits of multiple ways of being disposed. The sadness said to be among the holy ones is mercy, compassion, and an abundance of joy, when the fulfilment of the divine form is stored within and providentially distributed to things outside<sup>51</sup>.

Grief exists in heaven among the saints, not for their own sake but on “account of those lost,” that is, of sinners<sup>52</sup>. Hence the praise-

<sup>50</sup> *Qu. d.* 129 (CCSG 10, 94).

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Note that this form of grief in the divinized does not necessarily abrogate divine justice. There is a tension in Maximian scholarship about the role of his eschatology, some arguing that he implicitly held some notion of the *apokatastasis*, others pointing out texts where Maximus speaks of “inexplicable torment” for those who have continually acted “against the grace of that which they were not worthy” during their life. Cf. *ad Thal.* 59 (CCSG 22, 55); *Amb.* 42 (PG 91: 1329A-B); *Amb.* 65 (PG 91: 1392C-D). For an examination of scholarship on Maximus’s eschatology, see Andreas Andreopoulos, “Eschatology in Maximus the Confessor”, in *OHMC*, 322-340, esp. 325-333.

worthy grief associated with one's own natural life and with one's own repentance is transmuted into a completely selfless expression of grief over the suffering of others. Specifically this form of grief "is in imitation of our Lord"<sup>53</sup>. Hence, as Gavin notes, "grief is an *actual participation* in the angelic and divine life, since it is the sense of loss that takes place even in God through his desire to see all of creation become one through divinization"<sup>54</sup>.

Maximus sees grief as having an eternal dimension to it, much like fear. It takes the form of mercy toward non-divinized humans. These two emotions differ in their object in the eternal realm. Fear retains God as its object and its inspiration of awe-filled wonder. Grief is centred on other human beings and is a partaking in the Lord's divine mercy for humanity.

Maximus offers a positive evaluation of a certain type of grief on the temporal level. He understands grief as beneficial when it deprives the body of physical pleasures. It educates the soul through detachment from the physical world to focus on the spiritual. Maximus thus frames this work of bodily renunciation as an essential element of Christian praxis that helps the soul to attain spiritual pleasures. Furthermore, grief extends to the eternal realm. Maximus holds the position that the divinized share in God's mercy and pity on those not saved. Thus Maximus describes God's experience of grief eloquently in his *Mystagogy*:

And if the poor man is God, it is because of God's condescension in becoming poor for us and in taking upon himself by his own suffering the sufferings of each one and "until the end of the ages"<sup>55</sup>, always suffering mystically out of goodness in proportion to each one's suffering. All the more reason, then, will that one be God who by loving men in imitation of God heals by himself in the divine fashion the hurts of those who

<sup>53</sup> *Qu. d.* 129 (CCSG 10, 94).

<sup>54</sup> Gavin, *They Are Like Angels*, 224. The author uses italics in the original.

<sup>55</sup> Mt 28,20.

suffer and who shows that he has in his disposition, safeguarding all proportion, the same power of saving providence that God has<sup>56</sup>.

Scholars have pointed to this passage as an example of Maximus's reasoning for why Christians in the world should perform merciful acts<sup>57</sup>. They have largely read this text as indicating grief as the experience of another's pain. However, Maximus's starting point is different. He requires first a realigning of the self, a wilful acceptance of involuntary grief that the world inflicts on us<sup>58</sup>. This training then allows human beings the opportunity to share in grief's other-centredness. The end result is the participation in the divine healing of those who suffer "by loving men in imitation of God".

Concerning the eternal status of grief, Maximus defines temporal grief as "absence of pleasure". In contrast, eternal grief, manifested as mercy, exists together with joy before the throne of God in the life of the saved. Maximus's vision of eternal life stretches the soul to accommodate emotions that in the temporal world are considered incongruent. Yet, Maximus teaches that Scriptural admonishments to rejoice while suffering help the Christian to understand how in this world two incompatible emotional states can co-exist. The culmination of this experience occurs in heaven, where participation in God's grief for the damned coincides with divine joy and the general will of God: the desire that all should be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth<sup>59</sup>.

<sup>56</sup> *Myst.* 24 (CCSG 69, 68).

<sup>57</sup> See Paul M. Blowers, "Pity, Empathy, and the Tragic Spectacle of Human Suffering: Exploring the Emotional Culture of Compassion in Late Ancient Christianity", in *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 18 (2010), 1-27; Susan Wessel, *Passion and Compassion in Early Christianity*, Cambridge, 2016, 172-204.

<sup>58</sup> For more on this concept, see Paul M. Blowers, "Aligning and Reorienting the Possible Self: Maximus the Confessor's Virtue Ethics", in *Studies in Christian Ethics* 26/3 (2013), 333-350.

<sup>59</sup> 1Tim 2,4.