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Passions and the Faculty of Will in Maximus the Confessor

Abstract: This article examines how St. Maximus the Confessor (580–662) understands the passions (πάθη) and how he relates them to human volition. It first outlines Maximus's basic account of what a passion is and how passions arise and operate within the human person. It then considers the main patterns by which passions develop and how they affect the powers of the soul. Finally, the article discusses the relation between intellect, will, and passions, with particular attention to Maximus's account of deliberation and moral responsibility (especially in connection with the gnostic will). Throughout, the focus remains on the ascetical horizon of Maximus's writings, where the disordered movements of the soul can be redirected through spiritual practice and grace.

Keywords: Maximus the Confessor, passions, will, gnostic will, Christian anthropology, Byzantine asceticism

Introduction

St. Maximus the Confessor (580–662), a great Byzantine Christian intellectual, left a rich theological legacy, though not in a systematically structured form (Meyendorff 1974, 37). Ascetical reflection is central to his work and is closely related to his dogmatic theology (*Opusc.*, PG 91, 69B–72B; Plested 2015, 164; Louth 2005, 34, 43–44). In this perspective, spiritual life involves purification and transformation that lead to love of God; this process presupposes the healing of disordered movements of the soul and the right use of the natural human faculties, sustained by ascetical struggle and divine grace, thus enabling the purified soul to know God more clearly (*Cap. car.* I 1–3, 6–11, 30–34, Ceresa-Gastaldo 1963, 50–52,

60; cf. Louth 2005, 33–34, 38–40; Sherwood 1955, 84–85).¹ For this reason, Maximus frequently returns to the theme of the passions and connects their healing with human volition (Louth 2005, 34–35; Sherwood 1955, 81). The problem of the passions occupies an important place in his thought.

Although Maximus did not compose a systematic treatise devoted exclusively to the passions, his dispersed remarks – together with the relevant scholarly literature – make it possible to present a coherent account of his approach. This approach was formed within monastic practice, yet its basic ascetical logic is not restricted to monastics and can be applied, in different ways, to Christian life more broadly (Plested 2015, 64; Bakker 2015, 533; Tympas 2014; Louth 2009, 119–21). Accordingly, the present study focuses on how Maximus describes passions as disordered movements of the soul and how he connects them with human volition.

The aim of this paper is to clarify Maximus’s account of 1. what passions are, 2. how they arise and develop, and 3. how they relate to intellect and will within the ascetical process of moral change. The paper begins with Maximus’s basic definition of passion and his description of the conditions in which passions emerge. It then sketches the main pattern by which passions multiply and form stable dispositions. Finally, it examines the interplay of intellect, will, and passion, and indicates how Maximus links moral responsibility to deliberation and choice, especially as these are described through the notion of the gnostic will.

1. The Passions and the Disintegration of Human Nature

1.1. The Nature and Origin of the Passions in the Fallen Human Condition

According to St. Maximus the Confessor, passion (πάθος) is “a movement of the soul contrary to nature, either toward

¹ The term passion refers not only to a specific passion itself, but also to the passionate part of the soul – the area related to human feelings and desires. It includes the soul’s emotional and appetitive faculties, through which impulses, inclinations, and movements toward what is perceived as good or evil arise (*QT I*, CCSG 7, 47–49).

an irrational attachment or toward an indiscriminate hatred, directed to something – or because of something – among sensible things” [Πάθος ἐστὶ κίνησις ψυχῆς παρὰ φύσιν ἢ ἐπὶ φιλίαν ἄλογον ἢ ἐπὶ μῖσος ἄκριτον ἢ τινος ἢ διὰ τι τῶν αἰσθητῶν] (*Cap. car.* II 16, Ceresa-Gastaldo 1963, 96). Maximus often describes the passionate movement as involving both a thought (λογισμός) and an image/representation. The representation itself can be a simple mental presentation of a sensible object (for example, wealth, honour, food), but when the mind engages it with disordered affect the movement becomes “passionate” in the strict sense (*Cap. car.* II 84, Ceresa-Gastaldo 1963, 134; II 16, Ceresa-Gastaldo 1963, 96; III 42–43, Ceresa-Gastaldo 1963, 162–64; IV 49, Ceresa-Gastaldo 1963, 214; II 68, Ceresa-Gastaldo 1963, 126; II 33, Ceresa-Gastaldo 1963, 108). Passions involve the whole person and affect all the powers of the soul – rational, irascible, and concupiscible [Πάντες οἱ ἐμπαθεῖς λογισμοὶ ἢ τὸ ἐπιθυμητικὸν τῆς ψυχῆς ἐρεθίζουσιν ἢ τὸ θυμικὸν ἐκταράσσουσιν ἢ τὸ λογιστικὸν ἐπισκοτίζουσι] (*Cap. car.* III 20, Ceresa-Gastaldo 1963, 150–52; cf. Ivanovic 2019, 116).² To avoid confusion, it is helpful to distinguish three elements that recur in Maximus’s descriptions of how passions become active:

- A subjective predisposition or habit within the soul (a “readiness” of the powers to move in a certain way), shaped by one’s manner of life and by repeated consent;
- An occasion provided by sensible reality, i.e., contact with external objects through sense-perception;
- Demonic exploitation, i.e., the intensification and distortion of images and suggestions that presses the soul toward consent.

In this framework, sense-perception provides the occasion, but the decisive factor is the soul’s inner condition: passions do not arise simply because an external object exists, but because the soul’s powers respond to it in a disordered manner. In practice,

² Maximus maintained a schema concerning the soul and its parts which stands within the long philosophical and patristic tradition, according to which the human soul is threefold – reasonable (τὸ λογιστικόν), angry (irascible) (τὸ θυμικόν) and covetous (concupiscible) (τὸ ἐπιθυμητικόν). The views on the triple structure of the soul were already expressed by Plato and developed by the Fathers (Misiarczyk 2007, 70, 95–102, 107–8, 113–14; Konstantinovskiy 2015, 132–33; Kashchuk 2015, 219–25; Ivanovic 2019, 115–16).

the movement often begins when a sensible impression is received, retained in memory, and then presented again to the mind as an image; when the mind engages this image with disordered affect, the movement intensifies. Memory and imagination belong to the inner life of the soul: they are not “external factors,” even when they are stimulated by what is sensed. (*Cap. car.* II 74, Ceresa-Gastaldo 1963, 128; *Cap. car.* III 3, Ceresa-Gastaldo 1963, 144). Thus, the origin of the passions lies primarily in the inner state of the soul rather than in external objects

The “external” factor pertains to sensible objects outside the human soul and their representations. These sensible images can stimulate the previously mentioned internal inclinations, as the activity of inner dispositions manifests in response to the representation of external reality. Such representations serve as significant indicators of human control over passions, as many passions remain latent within the soul, only becoming apparent when triggered by corresponding external stimuli (*Cap. car.* IV 52–54, Ceresa-Gastaldo 1963, 216; *Cap. car.* I 84, Ceresa-Gastaldo 1963, 82; I 65, Ceresa-Gastaldo 1963, 74; III 51, Ceresa-Gastaldo 1963, 166; *QT* XVI, CCSG 7, 105–7; *Amb. Io.* 10, Constan I 2014, 324; cf. Thunberg 1995, 195–207). External impressions therefore reveal and activate dispositions that already exist within the soul.

We may also speak of a “preternatural” dimension insofar as demons exploit this ordinary psychological process. Maximus describes them as magnifying impressions and urging the mind toward emotional surrender; once the rational faculty is darkened, suggestions tend to pass into sinful consent and action (*QT* XLVIII, CCSG 7, 341; XLIX, CCSG 7, 357–63; *Cap. car.* II 68–69, Ceresa-Gastaldo 1963, 126; II 31, Ceresa-Gastaldo 1963, 106; II 18–20, Ceresa-Gastaldo 1963, 98–100). Demonic influence therefore intensifies the same inner process by which passions arise.

Following the Fall, human nature became more susceptible to the tyranny of the passions because its inner harmony was wounded, and this condition is transmitted through generation (*QT* LIV, CCSG 7, 449–51; XXI, CCSG 7, 127; cf. Bathrellos 2015, 287; Kočańczyk-Bonińska 2013, 298; Berthold 2015, 399). In this fallen condition the human person is drawn toward sensible and earthly

attachments. Yet Maximus makes clear that moral responsibility does not lie in the mere presence of such impulses, but in the way the soul responds to them – whether it consents to them or resists them. A key aspect of the fallen state is therefore a disorder in the exercise of the will. According to Maximus, the Fall wounded human willing, so that it no longer remains naturally aligned with the will of God (*Opusc.*, PG 91, 156C–157B). The central problem of the fallen condition is therefore the disorder of human willing.

Not only did human nature become more exposed to passions after the Fall; Maximus also states that these passions were introduced into the concrete condition of fallen humanity, attaching themselves especially to the appetitive powers of the soul – its irascible and concupiscible aspects [Τὰ πάθη ταῦτα, ὥσπερ καὶ τὰ λοιπά, τῇ φύσει τῶν ἀνθρώπων προηγουμένως οὐ συνεκτίσθη, ἐπεὶ καὶ εἰς τὸν ὄρον ἂν συνετέλουν τῆς φύσεως. Λέγω δέ, παρὰ τοῦ Νυσσαέως μεγάλου Γρηγορίου μαθὼν, ὅτι διὰ τὴν τῆς τελειότητος ἔκπτωσιν ἐπεισέχθη ταῦτα, τῷ ἀλογωτέρῳ μέρει προσφυέντα τῆς φύσεως· δι' ὧν, ἀντὶ τῆς θείας καὶ μακαρίας εἰκόνης, εὐθὺς ἅμα τῇ παραβάσει διαφανῆς καὶ ἐπίδηλος ἐν τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ γέγονεν ἡ τῶν ἀλόγων ζώων ὁμοίωσις] (*QT I*, CCSG 7, 47; cf. Kochańczyk-Bonińska 2017, 230). In this sense, passions do not belong to the original definition (ὄρος) of human nature but arise in connection with its fall from perfection. For Maximus, sin emerges when these passionate movements are accepted and acted upon. Human nature, being dynamic, allows such movements to develop over time. If a passionate impulse is not checked at an early stage, it can grow stronger, influence deliberation, and lead to consent; once consent is given, sinful action may follow. Maximus therefore describes a progression in which repeated consent strengthens disordered tendencies and makes them more firmly established (*QT XXI*, CCSG 7, 127–29; *QT LXI*, CCSG 22, 85–87; *Cap. car.* I 84, Ceresa-Gastaldo 1963, 82; *QT XVI*, CCSG 7, 107–9; *LA*, PG 90, 912A; cf. Thunberg 1985, 55–59). Thus, passions grow stronger through repeated consent and gradually form stable habits.

1.2. The Genealogy of the Passions

Maximus sometimes speaks of four basic affective movements that became dominant in the fallen condition – pleasure (ἡδονή), sorrow (λύπη), desire (ἐπιθυμία), and fear (φόβος). These correspond structurally to the four primary emotions discussed in Stoic philosophy, although Maximus integrates them into a Christian anthropological framework rather than adopting Stoic assumptions (*QT I*, CCSG 7, 47; cf. Bathrellos 2015, 281; Kochańczyk-Bonińska 2013, 298; Summerson 2021, 47; Nussbaum 1987). In this context, however, these four should not be confused with specific “passions” such as gluttony or vainglory. Rather, they function as general affective responses of the appetitive powers to perceived good and evil. More concrete passions and vices arise within this broader affective structure.

Maximus explains that passionate movements begin in the appetitive powers – irascible and concupiscible – through sense perception, and only subsequently involve rational deliberation. When these lower powers operate without proper guidance, they disturb the clarity of the rational faculty (*Amb. Io.* 10, Constatas I 2014, 320–22, 158–68; cf. Bingaman 2012, 145). The misuse of the rational power then consists in ignorance and folly, just as the misuse of the appetitive powers consists in hatred and intemperance [Καὶ τῆς μὲν λογιστικῆς δυνάμεως παράχρησις ἐστὶν ἀγνοσία καὶ ἀφροσύνη· τῆς δὲ θυμοειδοῦς καὶ ἐπιθυμητικῆς, μῖσος καὶ ἀκολασία. Χρῆσις δὲ τούτων, γνῶσις καὶ φρόνησις, ἀγάπη τε καὶ σωφροσύνη· εἰ δὲ τοῦτο, οὐδὲν τῶν ὑπὸ Θεοῦ κτισθέντων καὶ γεγονότων ἐστὶ κακόν] (*Cap. car.* III 3, Ceresa-Gastaldo 1963, 144; cf. I 67, Ceresa-Gastaldo 1963, 74). The root of this distortion, according to Maximus, is ignorance of God (ἄγνοια τοῦ θεοῦ), which follows from the Fall and affects the way reality is perceived. From this ignorance arises a disordered inclination toward sensible pleasure, which becomes structured by self-love (φιλαυτία) – a disposition diametrically opposed to the love of God (*QT, Introductio*, CCSG 7, 31–37; *Epistola II*, PG 91, 397A–B; cf. Summerson 2021, 40–43; Sherwood 1955, 83; von Schönborn 1982). Maximus frequently identifies self-love as the starting point of the passions [Ἀρχὴ μὲν πάντων τῶν παθῶν, ἡ φιλαυτία] (*Cap. car.* III 57, Ceresa-Gastaldo 1963, 170); [Πρόσεχε σεαυτῷ ἀπὸ τῆς μητρὸς τῶν κακῶν φιλαυτίας] (*Cap. car.* II 59, Ceresa-Gastaldo

1963, 122; cf. *Epistola* II, PG 91, 396D; Berthold 2015, 405; Ivanovic 2019, 126–31; Thunberg 1995, 161–62, 231–33, 243–46; Hausherr 1952). Although he sometimes connects self-love with ignorance as a deeper condition and even calls ignorance the “mother of all evils”, he usually presents φιλαυτία as the main inner disorder from which all particular passions arise [εἰς τὸ πῦρ τῶν παθῶν ἀποτελεῖ τὴν ἄλογον καὶ ἀνόητον τῆς ἀγνοίας ἕξιν, τὴν πάντων μητέρα τῶν κακῶν] (*QT* XVI, CCSG 7, 107–9). Thus, self-love becomes the inner root from which the passions grow.

At a more specific level, Maximus describes three “first and most general” passionate thoughts (οἱ πρῶτοι καὶ ἐμπαθεῖς καὶ γενικώτατοι τρεῖς λογισμοί): gluttony (γαστριμαργία), avarice (φιλαργυρία), and vainglory (κενοδοξία). These are called “general” not because they are identical with the four basic affective movements mentioned earlier, but because many other vices develop from them in recognizable patterns. Thus, gluttony gives rise to fornication (πορνεία), avarice to greed (πλεονεξία), and vainglory to pride (ὕπερηφανία). Other vices – anger, resentment, envy, sloth, slander – are linked to these roots within the moral psychology Maximus sketches (*Cap. car.* II 59, Ceresa-Gastaldo 1963, 122; III 56–57, Ceresa-Gastaldo 1963, 170; II 8, Ceresa-Gastaldo 1963, 92). In this way φιλαυτία is described as an irrational attachment to bodily existence. The point is not that bodily life itself is evil, but that when it is given first place in a disordered way, it leads to many other distortions and passions [Φιλαυτία δέ ἐστιν ἡ πρὸς τὸ σῶμα ἄλογος φιλία· ὁ ταύτην ἐκκόψας, συνέκοψε πάντα τὰ πάθη τὰ ἐξ αὐτῆς] (*Cap. car.* III 57, Ceresa-Gastaldo 1963, 170; cf. III 8, Ceresa-Gastaldo 1963, 146: ὁ ἔχων αὐτὴν ἔχει πάντα τὰ πάθη). Thus, the “genealogy” of passions can be described on two levels: (1) the broad affective framework (pleasure, sorrow, desire, fear) and (2) the concrete pattern of *logismoi* and vices that grow from self-love as a stable disposition. These patterns show how particular passions develop from a common root.

Maximus also notes that pride (ὕπερηφανία) represents the extreme form of this development, insofar as it directly affects the rational faculty and distorts discernment (*Cap. car.* III 57, Ceresa-Gastaldo 1963, 170; *QTLXIV*, CCSG 22, 221). Sloth (ἀκηδία), by contrast, is described as particularly destabilizing because it

weakens all the powers of the soul and produces paralysis in action (*Cap. car.* I 67, Ceresa-Gastaldo 1963, 74). These vices therefore represent especially destructive forms of passionate disorder.

The overall result of such disorder is a confusion of value: sensible goods are treated as ultimate, and the hierarchy of ends becomes inverted. Maximus can describe this condition metaphorically as a fall below the dignity of the divine image, yet the underlying anthropological claim is that the powers of the soul are misdirected, not destroyed (*QT Introductio*, CCSG 7, 35–37, 9–13; *QT XIV*, CCSG 7, 99; *QT I*, 47. Cf. Summerson 2021, 41; Cooper 2015, 372–75; von Schönborn 1982). Thus, the problem lies not in the faculties themselves but in their disordered orientation.

Passions, therefore, affect the emotional, intellectual, and practical dimensions of human life. They are dynamic processes rather than static states. Nevertheless, their development is not automatic. Even within the fallen condition, the decisive factor remains the person's deliberation and consent. The will retains the capacity either to reinforce passionate movements through assent or to restrain them through resistance and reorientation.

2. The Relationship Between Intellect, Will and Passions

2.1. Intellect and Will within the Disordered Condition of the Soul

As noted above, Maximus describes the activation of passions as a process in which sensible impressions, inner dispositions of the soul, and (in some cases) demonic suggestions converge and intensify one another. In the fallen condition this process unfolds within the interplay of the soul's rational and appetitive powers and is facilitated by the loss of their original coordination after the Fall (Nichols 1993, 202; Kočańczyk-Bonińska 2013, 298). Accordingly, Maximus treats ascetical struggle as a restoration of order: the rational principle in the soul must again exercise governance over the appetitive movements (*Amb. Io.* 10, Constatas I 2014, 158–60; *QT XLIX*, CCSG 7, 355–57). Thus, ascetical practice aims to restore the proper order of the soul's powers.

Maximus affirms that the intellect (νοῦς) is the faculty naturally ordered to contemplate divine truth, whereas reason (λόγος) has a practical and discursive function, guiding concrete human action toward the good (Myst. V, CCSG 69, 20–22; cf. Myst. V, CCSG 69, 25–28; Amb. Io. 10, Constan I 2014, 152–54). In Maximus’s perspective, reason is not opposed to intellect but serves it: it articulates and shapes what the intellect apprehends, and thus it participates in the formation of virtue. In this context Maximus can describe love as the most universal virtue and reason as the power that gives it concrete form [Γενικωτάτην οὖν τῶν ἀρετῶν φασιν εἶναι τὴν ἀγάπην, τὴν δὲ ταύτης ποιητικὴν γενικωτάτην τῆς φύσεως δύναμιν φασιν εἶναι τὸν λόγον] (QT LX, CCSG 7, 269). For this reason, Maximus can speak of the sphere of the intellect as the “place” of virtue, knowledge, and fear of God [Τόπος δὲ τοῦ νοῦ ἐστὶν ἡ ἀρετὴ, καὶ ἡ γνῶσις, καὶ ὁ φόβος τοῦ Θεοῦ] (LA 18, PG 90, 925C); [Τόπος ἅγιος καὶ ναὸς Θεοῦ ὁ νοῦς ὑπάρχει τοῦ ἀνθρώπου...] (Cap. car. II 31, Ceresa-Gastaldo 1963, 106). In this way intellect and reason cooperate in the formation of virtuous life.

In the fallen state, however, the intellect is distracted from its proper orientation and becomes absorbed in sensible concerns; the passions thus “bind” the rational power to the senses, deepen ignorance, and invert the natural order in which the rational should govern the appetitive (QT XVI, CCSG 7, 107, 38–109, 93; XVII, CCSG 7, 113, 31–42; Cap. car. II 16, Ceresa-Gastaldo 1963, 96; I 35, Ceresa-Gastaldo 1963, 60; III 35, Ceresa-Gastaldo 1963, 160; IV 45, Ceresa-Gastaldo 1963, 212). This disorder affects not only cognition but also the coordinated operation of the soul’s other powers (QT XLVIII, CCSG 7, 341; cf. QT I, CCSG 7, 47; XII, CCSG 7, 93; XXI, CCSG 7, 127; LXI, CCSG 22, 85–87; Cap. car. IV 77, Ceresa-Gastaldo 1963, 228; III 70, Ceresa-Gastaldo 1963, 176; III 56, Ceresa-Gastaldo 1963, 170; cf. Bathrellos 2015, 287; Kočańczyk-Bonińska 2013, 298; Berthold 2015, 399). Thus, the passions disturb the proper functioning of the whole soul.

Closely related to the intellect is will (θέλησις), which Maximus describes as a rational and vital appetite (ἡ λογικὴ ὄρεξις, λογικὴ τε καὶ ζωτικὴ) (Opusc., PG 91, 21D and 13A; cf. Thunberg 1995, 222–26). In this sense, Maximus speaks of the natural will (θέλημα

φυσικόν) as an essential inclination that belongs to a nature as such [Θέλημα φυσικόν ἐστίν, οὐσιώδης τῶν κατὰ φύσιν συστατικῶν ἔφεσις] (*Opusc.*, PG 91, 153B). Natural willing, therefore, is not yet a personal decision among alternatives; it signifies the basic capacity and tendency of a rational nature toward what is in accordance with nature (*DP*, PG 91, 292B–D; *Opusc.*, PG 91, 53C–56D; cf. Madden 1993, 194–95). This provides the ontological ground for human freedom and responsibility, since a rational nature is also described by Maximus as naturally self-determining (αὐτεξούσιον) [εἰ φύσει λογικὸς ὁ ἄνθρωπος· τὸ δὲ φύσει λογικὸν καὶ φύσει αὐτεξούσιον; εἰ δὲ αὐτεξούσιος φύσει, θελητικὸς ἄρα φύσει ὁ ἄνθρωπος] (*DP*, PG 91, 304C). Yet moral action is expressed not simply by natural inclination but by concrete choice.

Maximus therefore distinguishes the natural will from free choice (προαίρεσις), which concerns matters of action (περὶ γὰρ τῶν πρακτῶν ἢ προαίρεσις) and can be directed well or badly (καλή καὶ κακή) (*Opusc.*, PG 91, 20C, 24B; cf. *Ep.* 1, PG 91, 368C; Hupalo 2020, 219). He defines choice as a deliberative desire regarding what lies within human power (ἡ δὲ προαίρεσις – ὄρεξις βουλευτική τῶν ἐν ἡμῖν). What is chosen (προαιρετόν) is what has been judged through deliberation (τὸ ἐκ τῆς βουλῆς κριθέν) (*Opusc.*, PG 91, 13A–B).³ In this sense, προαίρεσις (choice) is the expression of γνώμη (deliberative will). Γνώμη means human personal, deliberating will – the inner capacity by which a human being weighs different options and inclines toward one of them in order to reach a goal (*Opusc.*, PG 91, 16B–17C; cf. Bathrellos 2004, 149; Cooper 2015, 366–68).⁴ So

³ Maximus defines βούλησις as a form of will pertaining to specific matters (*Opusc.*, PG 91, 21D–24A). This faculty is characterized as a desire belonging solely to the intellective faculty (*Opusc.*, PG 91, 13A–B), an insightful appetite (*Opusc.*, PG 91, 16B; cf. Berthold 2010, 66–67; Farrell 1989, 99; Bathrellos 2004, 122).

⁴ Maximus articulates the full progression from willing, through free choice, to acting. The rational creature, by nature, possesses as its innate capacity the rational appetite – what is also called, as noted above, the will of the intellective soul. This soul first desires, then reasons, and having reasoned, it wills. From there, the motion unfolds in ordered steps: the one who wills begins to seek; the one who seeks begins to consider; the one who considers begins to deliberate; the one who deliberates renders judgment; the one who judges chooses; the one who chooses is impelled; and the one who is impelled, at last, acts (*Opusc.* PG 91, 21D–24A; *DP*, PG 91, 293B–C; cf. Madden

free choice shows how an individual personally exercises the will in concrete decisions.

2.2. The Gnostic Will, Personal Deliberation, and *Tropos*

Maximus draws a conceptual distinction between the natural will (θέλημα φυσικόν) and the gnostic will (θέλημα γνωμικόν / γνώμη), locating deliberation and personal decision-making at the level of the latter. He can therefore describe γνώμη as an inner desire concerning what lies within human power, from which choice proceeds [τὴν γνώμην εἶναι φασιν ὄρεξιν ἐνδιάθετον τῶν ἐφ' ἡμῖν, ἐξ ἧς ἡ προαίρεσις] (*Opusc.*, PG 91, 17C). In this context Maximus defines the gnostic will as a self-determined movement of thought toward either of two alternatives [Θέλημα γνωμικόν ἐστίν, ἡ ἐφ' ἐκάτερα τοῦ λογισμοῦ αὐθαίρετος ὁρμή τε καὶ κίνησις] (*Opusc.*, PG 91, 153B). In fallen human experience this mode of willing is often accompanied by hesitation and inner conflict, since the true good is no longer perceived with clarity and the person is drawn toward competing ends (Meyendorff 1974, 38; Louth 2005, 58–60; Mitralaxis 2017). For Maximus, the gnostic will is thus not a neutral synonym for will in general but a term that highlights the personal and deliberative modality of willing characteristic of embodied and historically situated human agents. It is precisely through this human capacity that the passions become active, and are either restrained or indulged (*DP*, PG 91, 308C, 292B–293A; *Opusc.*, PG 91, 53C, 192B–C; *Amb. Th.* IV, CCSG 48, 14–18; *QT* XVII, CCSG 7, 113; cf. Madden 1993, 194–95; Farrell 1989, 124; Meyendorff 1974, 38; Thunberg 1995, 220–243; Louth 2005, 59–62; Cooper 2005, 368; Bingaman 2015, 123–25; Bathrellos 2015, 297). Notably, Maximus was the first in the history of dogma to use the term gnostic will (γνωμικὴ θέλησις) as a defined theological-philosophical term. This is one of the most significant contributions to terminology in the Christian tradition (Meyendorff 1975, 137; Farrell 1989, 119, 122;

1993, 195; Farrell 1989, 99–100). It is important to note that Maximus the Confessor's account of this process reflects both continuity and development in relation to earlier anthropological models – particularly those of Aristotle, the Stoics, and Nemesius of Emesa, who may be regarded as his intellectual predecessors in this domain (Farrell 1989, 101–7; Bathrellos 2004, 127; Mantzanas 2017).

cf. *DP*, PG 91, 312B). Thus, the gnostic will designates the personal and deliberative mode of human willing.

Maximus also links this discussion to his distinction between *logos* and *tropos* (τρόπος). At the level of the *logos* of nature there is no intrinsic contradiction between the soul's powers; the disorder appears at the level of *tropos*, that is, the concrete mode in which a person enacts and "uses" the powers of nature in time. Hence the moral and ascetical problem is not that human nature as such is defective, but that the personal mode of its exercise becomes unstable and self-directed. For this reason, Maximus can say that γνώμη is properly called "in our power" because it is a mode of use, not a principle of nature.

He closely linked the notion of gnostic will to the concept of *tropos* (τρόπος), which he employed to describe the mode or manner of existence – the concrete way in which a being enacts or actualizes its nature. In anthropological terms, *tropos* signifies the soul's disposition shaped through habituation – the acquired orientation by which each human person directs his/her desires either toward God or away from Him, that is, either yielding to the passions or striving toward their purification and redirection [Καὶ διὰ τοῦτο ἐφ' ἡμῖν καὶ γνώμη προσφυνῶς λέγεται, τρόπος οὓσα χρήσεως, οὐ λόγος φύσεως· ἐπεὶ καὶ ἀπειράκις μετέβαλεν ἡ φύσις] (*DP*, PG 91, 308C; cf. *Amb. Th.* V, CCSG 48, 24; I, CCSG 48, 7; *Opusc.*, PG 91, 361B; Jackson 2025, 120; Heidegerken 2021, 58–59). Thus, *tropos* means the concrete way a person lives and uses the powers of the soul.

From this perspective, passions may begin in the appetitive dimension, but their moral completion depends on the response of the rational and volitional powers: whether the person deliberates and assents, or resists and redirects the movement. The gnostic will is therefore the site where the passions are either reinforced through consent or weakened through refusal, and where the person's *tropos* is gradually reshaped toward conformity with what is in accordance with nature and ultimately toward God.

3. Redirection of Passions

3.1. Reordering Personal Deliberation Through Virtue

Since Maximus connects the moral activation of passions with deliberation and consent, the ascetical task concerns, above all, the mode in which the person wills and chooses. In his terminology, what is at stake is not a change in the *logos* of human nature but a healing of the *tropos* of willing, so that personal deliberation (γνώμη) may come to accord with what is in accordance with nature and, ultimately, with God. Within this horizon Maximus frequently sets Christ as the decisive point of reference. In Christ the human will is fully present and active, yet it is never characterized by the hesitation and conflict that mark fallen human deliberation. Maximus explains this by saying that Christ does not have a gnostic will. A gnostic will is a way of willing that involves personal deliberation, uncertainty, and forming opinions about what is good; this kind of willing assumes ignorance or doubt. Since Christ, as the incarnate Son of God, fully knows the good, such uncertainty cannot exist in him. At the same time, this does not weaken or limit his real human nature, which he fully assumed (*Opusc.* PG 91, 156C–165B; cf. Steenberg 2006, 237–41; McFarland 2005, 417–20; Louth 2005, 59–60). The Christian, by contrast, seeks – through repentance, virtue, and grace – to heal the instability of deliberation so that willing and acting may gradually become more unified and God-directed.

Maximus describes this practical work in terms of virtue and the courageous struggle of the gnostic will against the “law” of disordered habit [ἡ γνώμη γενναίως διὰ τῶν ἀρετῶν τὸν δυσμαχέστατον τῆς φύσεως κατηγωνίσαστο νόμον] (*Amb. Io.* 10, Constatas I 2014, 216). In this setting he contrasts the tyranny of passions (ἡ τῶν παθῶν τυραννίς) with the state of love and impassibility as the goal of ascetical life (ὁ τέλειος ἐν ἀγάπῃ, καὶ εἰς ἄκρον ἀπαθείας ἐλθὼν) (*Cap. car.* II 30, *QT XLVIII*, CCSG 7, 341; cf. *QT I*, CCSG 7, 47; *XII*, CCSG 7, 93; *LXI*, CCSG 22, 85–87; *Cap. car.* IV 77, Ceresa-Gastaldo 1963, 106). Yet the “overcoming” of passions should not be framed as the destruction of the soul’s powers, but as their purification and right orientation. Love is therefore described

not merely as one virtue among others but as the integrating form of the virtues, since it gathers the energies of the soul into a unified movement toward God [Ψυχὴ ἐστὶ καθαρά, ἢ παθῶν ἐλευθερωθεῖσα καὶ ὑπὸ τῆς θείας ἀγάπης ἀδιαλείπτως εὐφραينوμένη] (*Cap. car.* I 34, Ceresa-Gastaldo 1963, 60); cf. *Amb. Io.* 6, Conostas I, 2014, 74; Nichols 1993, 182, 202; Summerson 2021, 48; Berthold 2015, 410; Blowers 1996, 57–85; Bathrellos 2015, 301). This struggle gradually restores the proper unity of the will.

In order to describe how personal willing becomes internally coherent, Maximus employs the notions of relative unity (σχετική ἔνωσις) and relative distinction (σχετική διαφορά) of the will. The former denotes the convergence of divergent deliberative impulses (γνώμαι) into a single orientation of willing; the latter denotes their fragmentation into conflicting inclinations. In this sense, spiritual progress may be described as a growing concordance of choice (προαίρεσις) with what the natural will tends toward by nature (*Opusc.*, PG 91, 152C-D; cf. *Opusc.*, PG 91, 213B). Thus, enslavement to passions is not an ontological necessity but a condition sustained by disordered use; it can be weakened and healed through the right use of deliberation, supported by ascetical practice and grace.

3.2. Transformation of Passionate Energies and the Path to Deification

When the soul's rational power is restored to its governing role, the appetitive faculties (irascible and concupiscible) can return to their proper function. In such a condition the intellect initiates and directs their movements in accordance with right reason; Maximus can therefore speak of these faculties as “sound and free from deception” (ὕγιεῖς καὶ ἀνεξαπατήτους) when they are no longer dominated by disordered impressions (*QT XLIX*, CCSG 7, 355–59; cf. *QT III*, CCSG 7, 55–59; Ivanovic 2019, 117). Maximus accordingly insists that ascetical change does not consist in the extinction of desire as such, but in the reorientation of the soul's energies. In this sense he can say that “even the passions become good” (καλὰ γίνηται καὶ τὰ παθή) when they are redirected and used in accordance with nature (*QT I*, CCSG 7, 47–49). What changes

is not the created faculties themselves – which are good – but the disordered mode of their movement.

This reordering concerns the whole person. When the powers of the soul are gathered into a single God-directed orientation, love emerges as the “offspring” of their unified convergence [Οὐκοῦν τῆς κατὰ τὸ αὐτὸ περὶ τὰ θεῖα συναγωγῆς τε καὶ ἐνώσεως τῶν ψυχικῶν δυνάμεων, τουτέστι τῆς λογικῆς καὶ θυμικῆς καὶ ἐπιθυμητικῆς, ἡ ἀγάπη καθέστηκε γέννημα] (QT, CCSG 7, 353–55; cf. *Cap. car.* III 98, Ceresa-Gastaldo 1963, 190; Ivanovic 2019, 116–18). Within this unified movement Maximus can describe the generation and preservation of virtue as a synergy of contemplation and action, in which intellect and reason cooperate: contemplation tends toward truth, and practical reason, through virtue and faith, tends toward the good (*Amb. Io.* 10, Constatas I, 2014, 150–52; *Myst.* V, CCSG 69, 21). In this way the passions are not merely “suppressed” but become noble (καλὰ οὖν, ὡς ἔφην, ταῦτα τυγχάνει) through right use and through the discipline of taking thoughts captive in obedience to Christ (QT I, CCSG 7, 47–49; cf. Berthold 2015, 410–11; Summerson 2021, 47–48). Thus, the person’s life becomes directed toward God.

This movement culminates in communion with God (τῷ Θεῷ τῶν ὅλων ἐνοῦται) and is expressed, at the level of personal agency, as a stable disposition of choice toward the Good [διὰ τῆς ἐν τῷ καλῷ παγίας καὶ ἀμεταθέτου κατὰ τὴν προαίρεσιν ἕξεως] (*Myst.* V, CCSG 69, 23). As virtues take root – knowledge and prudence, love and temperance – the powers of the soul come to operate rightly [Χρῆσις δὲ τούτων (τῆς ψυχῆς δυνάμεων), γνῶσις καὶ φρόνησις, ἀγάπη τε καὶ σωφροσύνη· εἰ δὲ τοῦτο, οὐδὲν τῶν ὑπὸ Θεοῦ κτισθέντων καὶ γεγονότων ἐστὶ κακόν] (*Cap. car.* III 3, Ceresa-Gastaldo 1963, 144; cf. IV 45, Ceresa-Gastaldo 1963, 212). Thus, this inner transformation opens the way to deification.

Deification (θέωσις), in this framework, denotes participation in God in a manner proportionate to the creature, and is described by Maximus in terms of knowledge united to love and peace (*Myst.* V, CCSG 69, 28; cf. Larchet 1996, 638–40). It is therefore best presented not as a rhetorical culmination but as the theological horizon within which Maximus interprets ascetical transformation (Thunberg 1995,

429–32). Thus, deification means sharing in God through knowledge, love, and peace.

3.3. Communal Implications of the Healing of the Passions

Maximus's account of transformation includes the body as well as the soul: bodily life too is destined to participate in sanctification, and sensation can become an instrument for perceiving created goodness in a purified way. In this sense the body may serve the soul in the generation of virtue [ἀρετῶν κατέστησας μητέρα πολύτιμον] (*Ep. ad Thal.*, CCSG 7, 17; cf. Bathrellos 2015, 287; Corrigan 2009, 113–32). Yet this transformation is not merely individual.

Passions estrange persons from God and from one another, and thus have social consequences: envy, greed, vainglory, and related vices damage communion and generate conflict. Conversely, the reorientation of the soul's energies toward love contributes to restored interpersonal relations. Since love of God is inseparable from love of neighbour, ascetical renewal becomes the ground of genuine communion. Accordingly, Maximus describes the “way of truth” as the path that restores communion and leads those who walk in it to stand before the Father purified from passions (*Cap. car.* IV 81–82, Ceresa-Gastaldo 1963, 230; IV 56, Ceresa-Gastaldo 1963, 218; IV 36–38, Ceresa-Gastaldo 1963, 208–10; *Ep.* II, 401D–404A; cf. Bathrellos 2015, 297; Thunberg 1985, 94–97; Thunberg 1995, 281–84, 387–88; Nichols 1993, 179–80; Hupalo 2020, 218–19; Hausherr 1952, 57–63; Papanikolaou 2013, 242–43; Bingaman 2015, 82, 120–23). In this way personal purification and social reconciliation are closely connected.

The analysis has shown that, for Maximus the Confessor, the transformation of the human person concerns the right use of the will and the reordering of the passions. Nature itself is not changed; rather, the way in which its powers are exercised is corrected. When deliberative willing (γνώμη) comes into harmony with what is in accordance with nature, the passions can be redirected toward the Good. Maximus understands this process within the broader framework of communion with God and deification. The purification of the passions therefore affects not

only the individual's inner life but also his or her relationships with God and with others.

4. Towards Maximus: Patristic and Ascetical Context

4.1. Earlier Ascetical Traditions

Maximus is not the first Christian author to speak of the purification and redirection of passions. His treatment draws on earlier Jewish, Christian, and philosophical traditions that emphasize self-love as a root of vice and the role of the rational power in governing passionate movements (Thunberg 1995, 239–42; Nichols 1993, 126; Bathrellos 2015, 287; Blowers 1992, 4–6; Berthold 1982, 51–59). In particular, Maximus stands in continuity with Evagrius of Pontus (345–399), adopting the tripartite division of the soul and the conviction that the powers capable of passion are not evil in themselves but become disordered through misuse.⁵ Ascetical practice, on this view, aims not at the annihilation of these powers but at their purification and right direction.⁶ Evagrius's emphasis on demonic provocation and on *logismoi* as spiritually charged processes also forms an important background for Maximus's synthesis (Louth 2005, 35–38; Chrysavgis 2004, 185; Misiarczyk 2007, 70, 95–115, 123–34; Konstantinovskiy 2015, 133; Nieścior 1996–97, 105–33; Sinkiewicz 2006a, xxv; Casiday 2013, 175–76, 179, 36–37; Tobon 2022, 93).⁷ Within this ascetical framework,

⁵ Maximus also reaffirmed pedagogical techniques that can be inferred from Evagrius's chapters, integrating them into his own ascetical and spiritual synthesis (Kalvesmaki 2016, 269).

⁶ Evagrius was followed above all of Origen and of Gregory of Nyssa in this aspect (Ramelli 2015, xvii; Sinkiewicz 2006a, xxvi–xxxii; 2006b, 66–73; Corrigan 2009, 74–75, 96–97).

⁷ The Evagrian tradition reflects a shared ascetic experience regarding the passions with that of Macarian, even though their respective lists differ in both the number of elements and the terminology employed. While the roots of Evagrius's schema of the passions can be traced to the New Testament and the thought of Origen, it was Evagrius who undertook a systematic ordering and classification of the passions (Horycha 2019, 421–51; Misiarczyk 2007, 96–97, 107–8; Chrysavgis 2004, 183; Ramelli 2015, xv, xix).

the role of human choice becomes especially important. The concept of choice would later be developed more fully by Maximus within the framework of his ascetic theology (Neil 2004, 3–5). Thus, Maximus develops earlier ascetical insights within a more systematic theological framework.

Maximus's ascetical vocabulary also reflects a tradition of terminological clarification. Authors such as Pseudo-Macarius (4th century) and Mark the Monk (5th century) contributed to a more precise distinction between stages and elements of spiritual struggle (e.g., suggestion, thought, passion), and such distinctions were further developed in Palestinian and Sinaitic ascetic milieus (Horyacha 2025b, 228–32; Horyacha 2025a, esp. 171–77, 180–81, 183–86; Grzywaczewski and Nieścior 2019, 5–13; Kamczyk 2021, 505–22; Nieścior 2021, 537–51; Czyżewski 2020, 523–36). References to Maximus's *Syriac Life* should be used cautiously, but they may still indicate the kind of ascetic environment in which such precision was cultivated, namely the monastic community of the Old Lavra in the Judean desert near Bethlehem (*Vita Syriaca* IV–V, Brock 1973, 315), where he likely acquired precisely this kind of ascetic knowledge.⁸ This context helps explain the technical precision of his ascetical language.

Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (5th–6th century) also provided Maximus with conceptual resources for describing the dynamism of creation and the movement of return to God (*exitus–reditus*). Within this framework passionate energies are not treated as mere obstacles, but as powers capable of purification and integration into the soul's ascent (Dionysius Areopagita, *De Coelesti Hierarchia* II 4, Heil and Ritter II 2012, 13–15; Conostas 2022, 222–40; Schäfer 2006, 14; Thunberg 1995, 193–94; Tatakis 2012, 79–81; cf. Wear and Dillon 2007, 51–72, 117–29; Louth 2005, 31–32; Louth 1993). This perspective allows Maximus to interpret the passions within the broader movement of return to God.

⁸ The view that Maximus's monastic formation took place in Palestine rather than in Constantinople is further supported by modern scholars (Jankowiak 2004, 175–78; Booth 2014, 143–50).

Maximus also echoes broader patristic concerns about the social destructiveness of vice, themes familiar for example from John Chrysostom (c. 347–407), who emphasizes the communal damage caused by anger and related passions (Szczur 2022, 196–97, 213). In this way his teaching on the passions also reflects a wider patristic concern for the moral health of the Christian community.

4.2. A Contemporary Voice: John Climacus

John Climacus (c. 579–649) represents a related ascetical tradition influenced by Evagrian ideas. Although his presentation is less systematic, he shares with Maximus the view that passions arise from self-love and become morally significant through voluntary consent; for this reason, they should be redirected rather than simply eliminated (Chrysavgis 2004, 183–86, 190–92, 204–5; Ware 1982, 17–19, 59–66; Ramelli 2015, xix). This background helps place Maximus's emphasis on deliberation and moral responsibility within a broader ascetical tradition.

4.3. Maximus's Distinctive Terminological Contribution

Within this tradition Maximus offers a particularly explicit account of willing and moral agency, especially through his introduction and technical use of the notion of the gnostic will (θέλημα γνωμικόν). By distinguishing between natural and gnostic willing and linking this distinction with *logos* and *tropos*, he explains how the disorder of the passions is not a defect of nature as created, but a problem of the personal way in which its powers are used. Ascetical transformation, therefore, concerns the healing of this mode. In the Monothelite controversy, Maximus defended the teaching that Christ possesses a true human will. By doing so, he also clarified that the hesitation and inner conflict typical of fallen human willing do not belong to Christ, but arise from the wounded condition of human life. At the same time, this implies that the human will is capable of healing, freedom, and victory over the passions.

Conclusion

This study has examined how Maximus the Confessor relates passions to human willing. It has argued that Maximus does not treat the passion-capable powers of the soul as evil in themselves, but as energies that become disordered through misuse and can be healed through virtue, ascetical practice, and grace. The analysis has also shown that Maximus's distinction between natural and gnostic willing helps to explain human freedom, personal choice, and moral responsibility in consenting to or resisting the passions, as well as the gradual transformation of a person's way of life. Finally, the discussion has indicated that the purification of passions has interpersonal implications, since love of God is expressed as love of neighbour and contributes to restored communion.

Namiętności i funkcja woli u Maksyma Wyznawcy

Abstrakt: Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie rozumienia natury namiętności oraz ich związku z wolą w pismach św. Maksyma Wyznawcy (580–662). W pierwszej części omówiono definicję namiętności oraz warunki ich powstawania i działania w człowieku. Następnie przeanalizowano główne schematy ich rozwoju oraz wpływ, jaki wywierają na poszczególne władze duszy. Kolejna część dotyczy relacji między intelektem, wolą i namiętnościami, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem koncepcji ludzkiego wyboru i odpowiedzialności moralnej Maksyma Wyznawcy, zwłaszcza w odniesieniu do tzw. woli gnośnicznej (γνώμη). W perspektywie ascetycznej skłonność ku namiętnościom nie jest traktowana jako coś ontologicznie złego, lecz jako poruszenia, które mogą zostać uporządkowane i ukierunkowane poprzez właściwe użycie woli oraz praktykę cnót.

Słowa kluczowe: Maksym Wyznawca, namiętności, wola, wola gnośniczna, antropologia chrześcijańska, ascetyzm bizantyjski

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