Living above Gender: Insights from Saint Maximus the Confessor

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Abstract: Sometimes, one finds in the Maximian corpus passages which reprimand gender, womanhood, marriage, sexuality and pleasure. Analyzing some relevant texts, mainly from his Ambigua, this article proposes that the Confessor did not dismiss gender-related themes. Drawing on Paul, Gregory of Nyssa and his own experience of holiness, Maximus was concerned with the misuse of gender in humanity’s sinful condition, and with its virtuous restoration. He worked within a holistic, realistic and spiritual framework, which led him to construe the spiritual lifestyle not as anabolishment of gender, marriage and pleasure, but as a dispassionate and compassionate experience of human life.

The reader of Maximus the Confessor’s works finds a discord between his at times chastising phraseology regarding gender, sexuality and pleasure, presented as sordid aspects of human nature, and his spiritual anthropology that generally depicts humankind, including married people, as called to a holy life. This tension denotes the complexity of his anthropological thinking, which cannot be reduced to either of the two sides. Whilst a reductionist approach leads to inevitable misinterpretations, like dismissing the Confessor’s musings on gender as unimportant within the context of his spiritual worldview, it is necessary to discern between his infrequent bursts of reprimanding phraseology and the actual content of the teaching. Such discernment is the task of this article, which aims to prove that whilst being primarily directed to a monastic readership, the Maximian corpus bears relevance to wider Christian milieus, thus sharing certain features in common with Byzantine hagiographical literature and its paradigms of holy life outside the monastic world.

Below, I shall explore a series of passages from the Book of Difficulties (better known as the Ambigua), in their immediate setting and with reference to themes in St. Paul and St. Gregory of Nyssa on which the Confessor obviously drew. Given the multilayered character of the Confessor’s writings, in addressing these texts my intention is not to ascertain the existence of direct connections between them—other than their

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having been authored by Maximus of course. I simply take them as glimpses of the complexity of his thinking on gender-related themes.

The analysis will progress first by considering a number of texts from Difficulties 7, 10 and 67 (the latter together with To Thalassius, 59), which rehearse themes from Gen 1-3 and Gal 3.28. The goal is to make sense of the occasional strident phraseology in the Confessor’s moralizing discourse, which, far from being unusual in Byzantine spiritual literature, cannot be taken as a consistent denial of gender-related aspects. Upon establishing that St. Maximus’ anthropological thinking, which developed within a broad cosmological narrative, was both holistic and realistic, I shall argue that even when depicting perfection in terms of a state above gender—identified as virtue—he never envisaged a schematized, literally asexual and disembodied human nature. To this end, I shall apply the famous distinction between the “existential mode” and “nature” to the state above gender, by which I hope to make clear that within his thinking the divine plan for humankind refers to our existential destination and not to our natural makeup. Furthermore, I shall utilize this distinction in association with the notion of realized eschatology, which in turn casts a new light upon the idea of a spiritually transformed humankind, in the here and now. The analysis will continue by examining two more notorious loci, in Difficulty 41 (considered together with the prologue of To Thalassius, Difficulty 42 and Chapters On Love, 2.30) and another passage from Difficulty 10. The goal is to highlight the Maximian contributions to a holistic spirituality, which built on the idea of the virtuous path as a transformative process with repercussions for gender-related aspects. Virtue will be discussed here from an existential and not an ethical viewpoint, as illustrating a lifestyle accessible to, and a common denominator for, all people. The article will

end by pointing out the significance of St. Maximus’s approach, which draws on the experience of holiness.

I shall argue that for the Confessor gender and sexuality were problematic only because their misuse caused tensions and addictions, preventing people from walking the path of holiness; likewise, that living above gender was for him not a spiritual victory over the gendered humankind, but instead represented the virtuous reorientation of the human energies toward dispassionate relationships; finally, that he considered dispassion as a steppingstone toward compassion for both celibate and married people.

ON EVE, ADAM AND BYZANTINE PEDAGOGICAL RHETORIC

Maximus’s depiction of the ascetic path is typical for the Byzantine monastic tradition, with its high spiritualizing standards and propensities. That said, since his personal journey exposed him to a variety of social contexts and his mind was set upon strong incarnational presuppositions, it comes as no surprise to find throughout his writings a realistic and nuanced concept of the spiritual life, meaningful beyond

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2 Also known, improperly, as Questions to Thalassius.
cloistral experiences. Christoph Schönborn\(^4\) and Bronwen Neil\(^5\) rightly observed that by reinterpreting the virtuous journey as culminating in compassion and community, the Confessor made the ideal of living spiritually relevant to wider milieus. We cannot ignore the precedence of this message over Byzantine hagiography, which abounds in examples of holiness from all walks of life;\(^6\) Alexander Kazhdan’s silence regarding the significance of the Maximian corpus for later Byzantine literature is unfortunate. Indeed, as we shall see below, although sharing in the ambiguities that characterized Byzantine society,\(^7\) along with addressing concrete aspects of life—like gender,

marriage, sexuality and pleasure—usually avoided by monastic authors,\(^8\) St. Maximus achieved a balanced synthesis of spiritual anthropology. The ultimate proof of this achievement is the acknowledgment, received during his lifetime, as a genuine father (abba) or spiritual guide, a fact illustrated by most of his literary productions which answer questions posed by various correspondents both from within and outside the monastic world.\(^9\) This synthesis was, and supposedly remains, relevant to any seeker of the authentic Christian experience, irrespective of gender and social status. This essay will show that this assessment withstands the scant examples of questionable phraseology that traverse the Maximian corpus.

To this end, I shall briefly discuss the Confessor’s portrayal of womanhood and sexuality, the latter in an implicit manner but nevertheless as a main issue, by analyzing the images and terms he used within two passages concerning Adam and Eve. Albeit a worthwhile topic, I cannot deal in detail with the phraseology of his moralizing discourse; this section is only meant to prepare us for the big question of whether there is more to Maximus’s views of gender than his at times appalling


Eve as a harlot

The reader can possibly be startled when, for instance, he or she incidentally finds in the Confessor’s works such downgrading expressions like the designation of Eve as a harlot (πόρνη), without her being indicated by name. The term occurs for instance in Difficulty 7. Addressing the paradise narrative, Maximus reiterated the factors that shape human life, namely, our capacity for free choice (αὐτεξούσιον) and desire or appetite (δρεξίν). More precisely he maintained that for Adam there were only two possibilities: either ascending to God, which would have led him to become “one spirit with him” (ἐν πνεύμα γενέσθαι, also θεός εἶναι χάριτι, “to be god by grace”), or the union with the “harlot” that would have caused him to become “one body with her” (ἐν σώμα γενέσθαι, also χοῦς γενέσθαι, “to become dust”). The choice for either of the two possibilities depended entirely on the human will, which in turn was conditioned by desire. The way in which St. Maximus phrased the two possibilities evoke the imagery of 1 Cor 6.13,15-16, by which, I assume, he suggested that the decision of Adam to follow Eve’s counsel was tantamount to preferring (προτιήσας) sexuality over the mystical and deifying experience. In other words, and beyond the immediate meaning of the text, in question was a certain lifestyle, not Eve as a person. The reprimanding of Eve was however a rhetorical device largely used at the time.

Like many other early Christian and Byzantine authors, the Confessor seems to have considered Adam as the main protagonist of the scriptural narrative, the first to be called to a holy life and a beneficiary of divine blessings. This understanding is summarized by a Byzantine hymn (οίκος) from the matins of the Sunday of Forgiveness, which affirms that paradise was “planted for Adam’s sake” (ὁ δὲ Ἀδὰμ πεφυτεύμενος). In turn, by way of the aforementioned insult the Confessor provocatively ascribed to Eve the role of a trickster figure who lured Adam far from God and into the labyrinth of sexuality. This approach, again, was not infrequent in Byzantine hymnody and preaching. For instance, a hymn (the fourth at the “Lord, I have cried out”) from the vespers of the same Sunday of Forgiveness refers to Adam

10 See PG 91:1092CD.
13 PG 91:1092D.
15 Cf. Τριώδιον (Αθήναι: Εκδόσεις Φώς, no year), 72; The Lenten Triodion, tr. Mother Mary and Archimandrite Kallistos Ware (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1978), 175.
as “beguiled by the words of a woman” (γυναικὸς τοῖς ῥήμασιν ἀπατώμενος), whereas the oikos referred to above mentions

paradise as closed because of Eve (διὰ τὴν Εὕαν κεκλεισμένος). A generation after the Confessor, the famous preacher and hymnographer St. Andrew of Crete explicitly accused Eve of destroying humanity’s opportunity to reach perfection, within a rhetorical context in which the Theotokos was construed as restoring that very possibility. Sharing in this tradition, Maximus branded Eve a prostitute because of her contribution in deterring Adam from the path of holiness.

A factor that may have led the saint to the labeling of Eve as a harlot, and which moreover inspired his use of the Pauline imagery, could be the influence (to my knowledge, not noticed by scholars) of a very popular story authored, according to tradition, by his own spiritual father, St. Sophrony of Jerusalem. I refer to the vita of Mary the Egyptian, who by her outrageous behavior as an Alexandrine adolescent embodied the infamous paradigm of the temptress, hedonistic and skilled in deception. The Confessor is likely to have appropriated aspects pertaining to this typology not just in this one instance but also when further tackling the ancestral fall, in Difficulty 10.28 to which I shall soon turn. This case of multiple associations was not isolated, fitting in the moralizing pedagogy common to other early Christian and Byzantine sources, as proven by Paul Blowers in his review of Maximus’s thinking and its antecedents in ascetic literature. Indeed, together with praising the virtuous, the Byzantines cultivated the pedagogy of shaming the sinners. For instance, the Great Canon of Andrew of Crete (a liturgical composition which incidentally, in its final recension, makes of St. Mary the Egyptian a protagonist in its own narrative) sought to gain similar moralizing effects when accusing king Solomon to be a “lover of harlots.” Contemporary researchers of the Maximian corpus should be mindful of the large use of such rhetorical devices in Byzantine monastic literature, mainly aimed at a male readership and meant to further motivate the commitment to the ‘angelic life’ of celibacy.

Eve as a spouse

16 Cf. Τριώδιον, 69; The Lenten Triodion, 169.
17 Cf. Τριώδιον, 72; The Lenten Triodion, 175.
19 On this writing and its authorship, see “Introduction” to Life of St Mary of Egypt, translated by Maria Koulí, in Holy Women of Byzantium (cited above n.7), 65-93, here 65-66.
21 Cf. Blowers, Exegesis and Spiritual Pedagogy, 28-73.
22 Cf. The Lenten Triodion, 225 (Tuesday of the first Lenten week, ode 7.5).
Elsewhere in the Book of Difficulties, and upon returning to the paradise narrative, the Confessor was reticent to castigate Eve. Specifically, in Difficulty 10.28 he employed a series of powerful metaphors, rendering the story of the fall as a radical change of lifestyle. This change consisted in an enthusiastic yet misinformed preference (“in the darkness of ignorance,” ἐν σκότει τῆς ἀγνωσίας) for earthly pleasures, instead of the “light of God” (τῷ Θεῷ φωτ]. By this existential shift, Adam “made death alive for himself throughout the course of this present age,” thus choosing an existence reduced to mere mortality. The same understanding of the ancestral sin as a priority given to the somatic side and mortality, reoccurred in the Great Canon, mentioned above. By contrast to the scornful approach of the previously analyzed passage, here the Confessor decided to present Eve, once more without naming her, as a “spouse” or “companion” (σύνοικος; lit. one inhabiting the same house) of Adam. For some reason, although Adam’s choice for a sensual life was again associated with his listening to Eve, the rhetorical invective against her seemed no longer appropriate. It becomes obvious that such excesses like calling Eve a prostitute cannot be treated outside their immediate context, and that very likely reproving Eve served as a pretext to address sexuality. What matters here though is the use of the term “spouse,” which may reveal an interest in the spirituality of the family and to which I shall return. Before that, however, an exploration of the theoretical presuppositions of this encompassing spirituality is in order. In the following pages, I turn to the theological, cosmological and existential parameters of the Maximian assessment of gender.

GENDER AS EMBRACED BY GOD

Moving further into the topic, it is noteworthy that alongside his rhetorical penchants Maximus did address aspects related to gender in a rigorous manner. Perhaps one of the most fascinating texts relevant to this theme, largely ignored, is Difficulty 67, which takes as a pretext the symbolic significance of the number twelve. A modern reader might be intrigued by such an approach, yet for those interested in researching what the saint really had to say, an analysis of like passages is unavoidable. The brief paragraph of interest begins by affirming that created things

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24 PG 91:1156C.
25 PG 91:1156D.
27 PG 91:1156D. Louth’s translation ignores the word συνοίκω (spouse, companion); cf. Maximus the Confessor, 126.
28 Lit. “he surrendered himself to sensation (αισθήμα), by the exclusive predisposition toward it” (PG 91:1156C).
29 PG 91:1401AB. See the whole chapter in PG 91:1396B-1405C. A translation into French is available in Saint Maxime le Confesseur, Ambigua, tr. Emmanuel Ponsoye (Paris and Suresnes: Les Editions de l’Ancre), 356-63; the passage under analysis can be found at 360.
30 For insights into Maximian arithmology, see Hans Urs von Balthasar, Cosmic Liturgy: The Universe According to Maximus the Confessor, tr. Brian E. Daley (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), 109-14; Blowers, Exegesis and Spiritual Pedagogy, 211-19; Despina D. Prassas, “Introduction” to St Maximus the Confessor’s Questions and Doubts (DeKalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010), 24-25.
move (κινούμενα) toward perfection, termed as motionless motion,31 following a trajectory framed by their original and final terms (ἄκροις, “ends” or “extremities”).32 Three scriptural references bearing explicit anthropological connotations illustrate the parameters of this trajectory. The first is from Gen 1.26 (LXX), which reads: “God said, let us make humankind according to our image and according to likeness.” The second is from Gen 1.27 (LXX): “God made humankind; according to the image of God he made it, male and female he made them.” The third is a paraphrase of Gal 3.28: “for in Jesus Christ there is neither male nor female.”

To make sense of this choice of scriptural texts (very likely inspired by their use in Gregory of Nyssa together with the latter’s opinion that humanity is marked by the image of God from beginning to end)33 one should

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extremities as referring to an existential mode that transcends the categories of male and female, whereas the middle term explicitly focuses upon gender. In his own words, “the extremities and the middles are unequal (ἀνίσων), since the latter contain the [categories of] male and female whereas the former do not contain them (ὡς τῶν μὲν τὸ ἄρρεν ἔχοντων καὶ τὸ θῆλυ, τῶν δὲ μὴ ἔχοντων).”

The significance of the trilogy

Before addressing this existential mode that transcends gender categories, we should consider more closely the significance of the trilogy. One can

surmise from the above that the saint construed the three verses as delineating three facets of humankind’s journey, very likely applicable to any particular history as well. The goal of this teleological, or eschatologically conditioned, trajectory is the full actualization of our ‘iconic’ potential (cf. Gen 1.26 LXX), the way it has been intended by God. True, when taken at face value this trilogy may be read as a sequence of three chronological stages, yet this is not the case. The origin is neither a particular moment in time nor a temporal beginning endowed with ontological density, which pertain to the concrete reality designated as middle. The origin is an active cause or a factor, i.e. God’s intention and action, which shapes the very existence of creation and finds expression in the constitutive principles (λόγοι) of created beings. In Difficulty 67 and just a few paragraphs before our passage, the cause or origin is neither something nor sometime, it is someone, “Jesus, the Lord and God of all (τὸ ὅλων).” This understanding of the origin does not allow for the Origenizing two-stage creation, a notion I shall soon address. Correlatively, human finality, i.e. the full actualization of our God-given potential, should not be seen as a chronological third stage either, although it is not deprived of eschatological connotations. Whilst the purpose is fully attained only beyond current circumstances, it cannot be reduced to the afterlife or the eschaton. Our finality points to a qualitative leap, an existential transformation to be achieved by human beings whilst still in the “middle,” as we shall see immediately.

This aspect emerges in Maximus’s conviction that the saints attain holiness and are deified by participation in God’s life in the here and now; thus they reveal the content of what it means to be in the image and likeness of God. Considering this evidence, we can infer that he construed finality in

37 PG 91:1401B.
38 Although he addressed the theme of the virtuous renewal in this life, Daley interpreted the origin and the end in Nyssen as landmarks of a linear process, eschatologically finalised. Cf. Brian E. Daley, “The Human Form Divine’: Christ’s Risen Body and Ours According to Gregory of Nyssa,” Studia Patristica 41 (cited above n.33), 301-18, esp. 313-15. I hope that my comments make clearer the patristic idea of a realised eschatology, where the end, or rather finality, cannot be reduced to the afterlife.
39 See e.g. Chapters on Theology, 1.8 (PG 90:1085C); Mystagogy, 1 (PG 91:665AB); Difficulty 41 (PG 91:1305C). Cf. Christou, “Maximos Confessor on the Infinity of Man,” 263.
40 PG 91:1400BC.
41 Cf. Book of Difficulties (Ambigua ad Thomam), prologue (PG 91:1032AB-1033A; CCG 48:3.6-4.29). For an English version of the passage, see Maximus the Confessor, Ambigua to Thomas, Second Letter to Thomas, intro., tr. and notes by Joshua Lollar, Corpus Christianorum in Translation 2
terms of what we call today a realized eschatology, as the foretaste of deification, an existential state pertaining to the age to come yet experienced within this very life. Together with its ascetic correspondents, the virtues, deification is what wraps up the whole process by unifying the origin and the purpose, as illustrated by To Thalassius, 59. The passage describes deification as “the undivided state (ἀδιάστατος) pertaining to the pure union of origin and finality (τῆς ἀκραίφως ἀρχής τε καὶ τέλους ἐνότης) in those that are being saved.”42 Although the text does not mention the implications of this state for gender, it is not difficult to see its usefulness, since it mentions the “extremities” of the trilogy under consideration. This last point brings us back to the state undefined by gender categories, which cannot be dissociated from the theme of the trilogy or its simplified version, namely, the twofold creation.

The relevant passage from Difficulty 67 does not openly address the ramifications of our trilogy. Nevertheless, just as with the prologue of To Thalassius discussed below, one can presume that along the lines of this brief and cryptic text St. Maximus suggested a challenge for human beings, a challenge intrinsic to the triadic pattern and the teleological trajectory sketched by it. Given that our finality is to attain the state of “neither male nor female,” in all likelihood people are called to address gender in a spiritual manner, both as humankind and human beings. We shall see later that, without entailing a suppression of the sexual functions, as usually depicted by hagiography,43 this manner corresponds to an existential state no longer characterized by a passionate approach to, and the prioritization of, gender. The evidence of the saints who attain in the here and now this state of serenity, which displays divine features, led the Confessor to believe that the original intention of God concerning humankind was for it to adopt a Godlike lifestyle or the theandric existence,44 which transcends the boundaries of our gendered nature.45 Inaugurated by Christ, and again the matter is not explicitly worded, the theandric state has to be reiterated on a personal level through the baptismal renewal and the virtuous life. This is entailed by the use of Gal 3.28, which represents the canonical exegesis of baptism in the Byzantine rite. Before moving any further with the analysis of Difficulty 67, we should note once again that the Confessor’s idea of a dispassionate and deified life as

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42 Cf. To Thalassius, 59 (PG 90:609AB; CCG 22:53.147-55.148; see also 53.143-46). Further down (PG 90:613D; CCG 22:61.268-69), the Confessor mentioned the bond between origin and finality, proposing that finality is anticipated by the origin and, likewise, that finality reveals the content of the origin. Thus, “searching for his own finality (τέλος), man finds his origin (ἀρχή), which happens to naturally dwell within finality” (φυσικῶς ἐν τῷ τέλει τυγχάνονται). (See the whole discussion of this topic in PG 90:613D-616A or CCG 22:61.255-63.292).


44 A clear affirmation of both humankind’s origin and finality as consisting in divine humanity, and as realised in Christ, is in To Thalassius, 60 (PG 90:621ABC; CCG 22:75.33-77.63).

constituting human finality draws on the Nyssen’s ruminations on the genderless character of the image of God in us, and the related topics.46 This nexus is relevant to our analysis and deserves further attention.

**Insights from the Nyssen’s anthropology**

Scholars are right when they trace back to St. Gregory of Nyssa the source of the Maximian musings, and it would be a truism to demonstrate here this affiliation. In establishing this link, however, the consensus projects upon the Confessor a mistake related to Nyssen’s notion of gender and the image of God in us. More specifically, there are scholars who ascribe to Gregory the mythological, Origenizing notion of a two-stage creation of humankind, first immaterial and asexual, and later gender-marked.47 This interpretation is based on the reading of On the Making of Man 16 in terms of a chronologically sequential creation. When considering the last lines of the chapter—a summary of the whole discussion—one discovers however that far from suggesting the addition of gender to a supposedly sexless existance, the text introduces an explanation48 meant to prepare the discussion of human multiplication irrespective of the fall. Rather than depicting a chronological two-stage creation of humankind, chapter 16 ponders the twofold structure (κατασκευή) of the human being,49 which consists of its psychosomatic makeup and the image of God in us. Verna Harrison demonstrated this understanding in a peremptory way.50 The Nyssen took this double structure to be the very constitution of the human being, which as a midpoint between divine and animal is a mixed being.51 Human complexity represents in fact the main theme of Gregory’s treatise, as suggested by its original title (Περὶ Κατασκευῆς Ἀνθρώπου, On the Structure of the Human Being; the translation of the title as On the Making of Man is misleading, since κατασκευή is not “making” as “creation” but as “makeup.”


52 Περὶ Κατασκευῆς Ἀνθρώπου, On the Structure of the Human Being; the translation of the title as On the Making of Man is misleading, since κατασκευή is not “making” as “creation” but as “makeup.”
Nyssen nevertheless showed that the divinely shaped aspect of our nature—the image of God in us—cannot be confused with the gendered, biological side.\(^\text{53}\) Regarding the permanence of the two sides pertaining to human nature, Sarah Coakley observed: “Gregory’s gender theory […] does not claim to obliterate the binaries that remain culturally normative, but seeks […] to find a transformative way through them.”\(^\text{54}\) These nuances are very relevant to our topic.

Contrary to what some scholars committed to the two-stage theory believe,\(^\text{55}\) the Confessor likewise expressed no interest in such a mythologizing explanation, which would betray a dependence on Origen’s concept of the initially disembodied human nature, disavowed by both fathers.\(^\text{56}\) I shall return to this aspect. What matters here is that the two-stage theory runs parallel to their thinking. They never mistook God’s intention (ἀρχή) concerning humankind for a first chronological phase in the creation of a bodiless and/or asexual humanity. The same goes for their understanding of our finality in terms of a metaphorically genderless or virtuous state. Indeed, we shall see immediately that they stood against any temptation to accredit the eschatological humankind as literally divested of gender.

**Virtue as the state above gender**

Returning to the Confessor’s approach to the state above gender as implied by the trilogy and illustrated by Gal 3.28, *Difficulty* 67, even without directly disclosing it, points to a simple solution which transpires when the passage is read in the broader context of the *Book of Difficulties*. For instance, in *Difficulty* 7 we find an acknowledgment of Christ as the paragon of virtue: “the essence [οὐσία] of all virtues is our Lord Jesus Christ.”\(^\text{57}\) As the “essence of all virtues,” Jesus embodies a standard relevant to all humans. Considered together with *Difficulty* 67, which speaks of our transformation in Christ in the indirect means of the Pauline verse, the assertion leads to the conclusion that the state above gender—“in Jesus Christ there is neither male nor female”—corresponds to the virtuous lifestyle. This solution, likewise inspired by the Nyssen,\(^\text{58}\) is better articulated elsewhere in the *Book of Difficulties*.\(^\text{59}\) With or without this aspect being clearly stated, it ensues that the saint did not indulge any mythologizing eccentricities like a literally genderless humankind. This is an aspect of which one can make more sense in light of the Maximian distinction between the existential mode (τρόπος τῆς ὑπάρξεως) and nature (φύσις). Whereas nature is

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\(^{57}\) Cf. *Difficulty* 7 (PG 91:1081D).


\(^{59}\) Cf. *Difficulty* 41 (PG 91:1305C).
conditioned by its reason to be (λόγος τοῦ εἶναι) and preserved invariable, the existential mode depends on human free choice. Just a few pages before our text, Difficulty 65 makes use of the trilogy being-wellbeing-eternal wellbeing, where nature corresponds to “being” and the virtuous lifestyle, as an existential mode, to “wellbeing,” the outcome of a right choice. 60 By applying this distinction to our topic it occurs that the state above gender does not signify our ontological makeup, our nature; rather, it refers to the virtuous lifestyle, an existential mode designed as the destination of humankind and freely opted by the saints. Consequently, and given the invariability of nature, this existential mode affects the function of gender without eradicating it.

Before moving any further, we should add that Maximus’s solution referring to virtue must have drawn also on the fact that the Church never differentiated between masculine and feminine worthiness. Saints of both genders, celibate as well as married, attain the same states of perfection, virtue (like the state of deification discussed above) acting like a unifying principle and as their common denominator. 61 Given his familiarity with the experience of holiness, the Confessor undoubtedly bore such a thought in mind, an insight that matches the general Byzantine conviction that men and women are spiritually equal. 62 This conviction was not changed by the fact that, in time, the number of acknowledged female Byzantine saints diminished in contrast with the early Christian centuries. 63

One aspect remains obscure in the analyzed text from Difficulty 67, namely, the omission of a straightforward affirmation of Christ as relevant to all human beings. Although the answer might be implied in Maximus’s paraphrase of Gal 3.28, and the earlier statement concerning Jesus as the “cause” (τοῦ αἰτίου) and “restorer” (ἀποκαθιστάμενος) of all, 64 it is not my intention to elucidate this issue here. Suffice it to say that this aspect is treated elsewhere in the Book of Difficulties; 65 in a chapter just as significant for our purposes as this one. This other passage, from Difficulty 41, contains the already familiar paraphrase of the Pauline verse and approaches the topic in a similar manner. Since the two texts complement each other, as we shall soon see, one can ascertain that the conclusion regarding Christ’s universal relevance stands for both. Given the broader textual evidence 66 we can surmise that for our saint what Christ accomplished in his paradigmatic life is both the goal ascribed to humankind,

61 Difficulty 67 (PG 91:1397C) presents the four cardinal virtues as unified into “the encompassing and most general virtue” (τὴν κυθόλου καὶ γενικωτᾶτην ἀρετὴν). See also Maximus’ Letter 2: On Love (PG 91:393C-396C; ed. Louth, Maximus the Confessor, 86). Cf. Thunberg, Microcosm and Mediator, 309-12.
63 For a headcount of saintly women, see Talbot, “General Introduction,” x-xi; the information is borrowed by Connor, Women of Byzantium, 85-86.
64 PG 91:1400BC.
65 Cf. Difficulty 41 (PG 91:1309AB and 1309D-1312A).
66 Cf. Difficulty 41 (PG 91:1308CD and 1309CD). See also Difficulty 42 (PG 91:1321AB); To Thalassius, 22 (PG 90:317B-320A).
irrespective of gender, and the manner in which this goal can be attained by all, i.e. the virtuous lifestyle. Far from maintaining an aversion toward gender, the Confessor

remained a faithful disciple of the Pauline tradition (as shown by his many references to Gal 3.28)\(^67\) and presented the human journey as fulfilled in the Christian—metaphorically genderless—identity. He articulated this identity as a virtuous, existentially transformative lifestyle, not a literal escape from our gendered condition. Two more points should be made on the state between the extremities, namely, the gender division.

**Further notes on gender**

First, considering the Confessor’s notion of difference, Damien Casey affirmed that the saint borrowed an aversion toward multiplicity from Neoplatonism, and could not maintain an appreciation for gender division.\(^68\) I do not intend to discuss here aspects of the Neoplatonic tradition. Casey’s assessment of the Maximian concept of diversity however finds support neither in the passages previously analyzed nor in contemporary scholarship.\(^69\) Maximus never envisaged an ontological obliteration of differences in the process of spiritual transformation, not even eschatologically, as confirmed by Paul Blowers.\(^70\) The state above gender should not be confused therefore with the *tertium genus* of either androgyny or eunuchism. In fact, the relevant paragraph from *Difficulty* 67 concludes by showing that both the extremities and the middles are grasped by the “creative and embracing” divine energy (*ποιητικὴ τε καὶ περιεκτικὴ ἡ θεία ἐνέργεια*).\(^71\) This statement is crucial. Fully embraced by God, our gendered

condition, together with the differences and inequalities pertaining to it, do not constitute obstacles for attaining the Godlike state.

Second, even though Hans Urs von Balthasar reached a positive understanding of Maximus’s attitude toward gender and discovered further support for it in the

\(^{67}\) The observation belongs to Cooper, *The Body in St Maximus the Confessor*, 209. For similar patristic interpretations of the verse, see Harrison, “Gregory of Nyssa on Human Unity and Diversity,” 336; Kari Kloos, “‘In Christ There is Neither Male nor Female’: Patristic Interpretation of Galatians 3:28,” *Studia Patristica* 39 (Leuven-Paris-Dudley: Peeters, 2006), 239-44.


he suspected a reticence behind the saint’s articulation of the “sexual synthesis” (as he termed the latter’s approach and which he generally viewed as central to Maximian thinking). According to von Balthasar, gender and sexuality were for the Confessor “overloaded by the tragedy and the despairing dialectic of original sin,” thereby precluding them from any constructive role in the spiritual journey. There is certainly some truth in this assessment and indeed Maximus could not have spoken of a “final and fulfilling meaning” of sexuality. Nevertheless, I agree with Adam Cooper that this attitude originated neither in a monastic embarrassment nor in some metaphysical propensities. There is no obsession with the ancestral sin in Maximus either, since he contemplated reality from the vantage point of Christ’s mystery. From where, then, did his reluctance originate? Building on Paul’s mystical anthropology, the Confessor was convinced that ultimately gender and the sexual aspects associated with it—nature, as it were—could not define the identity and experience of people who have been spiritually transformed. Panayotis Christou, from whose words I derived the phrase ‘above gender,’ rightly observed that Maximus construed the virtuous state as a good “above nature” and “a surpassing of nature.” This understanding corresponds to the famously enigmatical saying of a fourth century hermit, Amma Sarra, “according to my nature I am a woman, but not according to my thoughts,” which hints to the genderless character of holiness. The following analysis will further substantiate these observations.

LIVING ABOVE THE GENDER DIVISION

The Confessor addressed the theme of the analyzed passage from Difficulty 67 already, and less cryptically, in Difficulty 41, in a chapter that can be considered a ‘narrative of everything’ characterized by soteriological overtones. The relevant paragraph, explicitly dealing with gender, refers to the fifth polarity/division and respectively to the first unification/synthesis within the whole of reality. To understand the significance of this discussion, a brief description of the narrative is in order.

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72 Cf. von Balthasar, Cosmic Liturgy, 199-200.
73 See e.g. Cosmic Liturgy, 199.
74 Cf. Cosmic Liturgy, 204. Schönborn (“Plaisir et douleur dans l’analyse de S. Maxime,” 278) tacitly rectified this understanding by mentioning the possibility of (sexual) pleasure to be transfigured.
75 Cf. Cosmic Liturgy, 204. For similar observations regarding Nyssen’s anthropology, see Karras, “Sex/Gender in Gregory of Nyssa’s Eschatology,” 366.
76 Cf. Cooper, The Body in St Maximus the Confessor, 212.
77 Cf. von Balthasar, Cosmic Liturgy, 66.
79 Cf. The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection, tr. with a foreword by Benedicta Ward (Kalamazoo and Oxford: Cistercian Publications and A. R. Mowbray, 1975), Amma Sarra 4 (at 230). This is a far more appropriate description of the genderless character of virtue than the later hagiographical notion of the manly spirit of holy women; cf. Kazhdan, A History of Byzantine Literature (850-1000), 308. Sara’s saying can serve as an indirect refutation of a statement by Talbot, “General Introduction,” xii, that in the case of Mary the Egyptian the spiritual journey depicted “the female body virtually sexless.” Mary’s own conscience as a woman denies Talbot’s assertion; see e.g. Life of St Mary of Egypt (cited above n.19) 12 (ed. Kouli, 77).
80 PG 91:1304D-1313B.
For Maximus, reality is not homogenous but rather features five dynamic polarities that encompass all the strands of being. The polarities unfold as follows: the first consists in the ultimate ontological rift between uncreated and created; the second refers to the heterogeneity of the created domain, which includes the intelligible/unseen and the sensible/visible; the third is within the visible realm, and refers to the spheres of the sky and the earth; the fourth distinguishes on earth the inhabited land, or civilization, and paradise, or the spiritual experience; and the fifth is the anthropological, gender-marked division. A range of tensions is embedded in the five divisions, the last of which summarizes microcosmically the architecture of,

and the strains pertaining to, this complex reality. In the narrative, the polarities represent as many existential challenges addressed to the human person, which appears as the ecosystemic agent called to manage the various levels of reality by making good use of them, in continuity with the divine plan, thus bringing them to coherence. According to von Balthasar: “In […] a sexually divided humanity, the differentiation and multiplicity of the world, which has progressed to an extreme degree, takes its first turn toward unity.”

Indeed, the Logos assigned to humankind the providential-like task of overcoming all divisions by activating the divine principles that pervade everything. To accomplish this task humankind had to adopt a theocentric lifestyle (the whole unifying journey is actually represented as an ascent to God, εἰς θεόν), which corresponds to the λόγος or principle of things. This lifestyle, of which I have spoken more in the previous section, is the virtuous one, and plays the role of a catalyst for the grand unification of


81 Von Balthasar, Cosmic Liturgy, 199. It is unfortunate that in his very insightful study of the Confessor’s idea of unification, Stanjevski (“Une anthropologie à la base d’une pensée religieuse,” 409-28) made only tangential references to gender and inter-human relations. Such an incidental reference occurs at 416. Stanjevski returned to the topic at 424-25, maintaining that the gender division played a secondary role in Maximus. Consequently, he simply jumped to the next four syntheses. The topic of the soul and body, taken as central by the article in question, is mentioned only in passing by the Maximian text considered here (cf. PG 91:1309C and 1312A), as a cosmological metaphor for the union of the visible and invisible, and not as a theme of the five syntheses.


85 Cf. PG 91:1305B.
reality. The fact that virtue is explicitly mentioned twice in our passage should not be taken therefore as incidental. The text presents the “divine virtue” (θείαν ἀρετήν) as an existential mode above gender for both males and females, and uses the phrase “in what concerns virtue” (κατ᾽ ἄρετήν) to designate the angelic-like status of those who undertake the spiritual, unifying ascent. Furthermore, virtue emerges through the expression “leading a holy life” or “leading a life befitting the saints” (ἁγιοπρεποῦς ἀγωγῆς), where it signifies a presupposition of the unification of paradise and the inhabited world. The strong emphasis on the role of virtue, as a lifestyle befitting the saints, in the process of unification illuminates

the message of the previously analyzed passage from Difficulty 67, and confirms the experience of holiness as the underlying factor of the entire Maximian spiritual anthropology.

The process of unification is supposed to unfold in the reverse order of the five divisions, as follows: first, the pacification of humankind by virtuously overshadowing the gender division; second, the earth synthesis of the inhabited land and paradise, effected by a holy life; third, the bridge between earth and sky, again by a virtuous lifestyle similar to the angels; fourth, the unification of the visible and invisible aspects of created reality, by reaching the same knowledge as the angels; and fifth, the perfect communion of the created and the uncreated, achieved in love. I cannot discuss here in detail more than the first, anthropological synthesis.

Given humankind’s centrality within the universe, the unifying journey through the various levels of reality begins with the most immediate, the split between male and female (ἄρσεν and θῆλυ; the terms are taken from Gen 1.27 LXX). Before we proceed any further with the analysis, it is useful to restate that for St. Maximus the issue in Christian anthropology did not consist in the gender division as such, since the gendered humanity is “embraced” by God. In line with the argument of Difficulty 67, discussed above, Difficulty 41 acknowledges a gendered humanity which exists in such a way—within the confines of the “middle” as it were—from its beginnings as a species. Since the triadic pattern underlying Difficulty 67 does not reappear in this case the point is even stronger, humankind being taken in this context simply as gendered with no other qualification. This observation stands although sometimes the saint maintained that God’s original plan concerning our birth did not refer either to sexuality or the pleasure associated with it. It is possible that in such instances the birth of which he was thinking was the spiritual regeneration (like in John 1.12-13). What is of interest is that this was not his overall teaching on the matter, as we shall see below.
Sexuality and pleasure

Contrary to the opinion of Jean-Claude Larchet,92 sexual intercourse and the related pleasure could not be seen as problems. Maximus observed in the prologue of To Thalassius that the ancestors were not forever prohibited from tasting the fruit of pleasure, and Thunberg is right when identifying the pleasure referred to here—and elsewhere in the Maximian corpus—as primarily the sexual one.93 The relevant passage94 maintains that the ancestors were advised to patiently postpone the experience of pleasure until they had reached equanimity, by the practice of virtue and participation in divine grace (διὰ τῆς ἐν χάριτι μετοχῆς), i.e. a state of serenity and stability (ἀπάθειαν καὶ ἄπειρωσιν). Only by attaining such a state could they have tasted the fruit of pleasure with spiritual maturity—or divinely—and not merely in a human fashion (ὡς θεὸς ἄλλ᾽ ὡς ἅνθρωπος), therefore avoiding an addiction that makes one oblivious to the spiritual journey. One could infer that the saint did not consider either pleasure in general or sexual pleasure in particular as evil, and that he did not see physical pleasure as altogether absent from the paradisal experience and the spiritual life. Christoph Schönborn reached similar conclusions in his analysis of the prologue.95 Beyond the strangeness of the Confessor’s hypothesis of a paradisal reproduction, referred to by various scholars,96 a metaphor by which he seems to have implied the dispassionate disposition of saintly married couples (see the next section), it emerges that he nurtured the utmost respect for the God-given way of human love and multiplication. A few pages after the text considered here, Difficulty 42 addresses the topic within an explicit defense of the sanctity of marriage: “If marriage is evil (ei γάρ κακὸς ο ἡμώος), certainly the law of natural generation (ὁ κατὰ φύσιν τῆς γενέσεως νόμος) is also [evil]. And if the law of natural generation is evil, the one that made nature (ὁ τῆν φύσιν … πεποιηκὼς) and gave it its law of generation is [evil] as well.”97

Given the perception of Maximus as exhibiting reticence towards gender, sexuality and pleasure, expressed e.g. by von Balthasar as we have seen above, the prospect of his positive approach to such aspects seems surprising and one can expect scholars to want to circumvent them. For instance, exploring an early Maximian work (Chapters...

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93 Cf. Thunberg, Microcosm and Mediator, 377.
95 Cf. Schönborn, “Plaisir et douleur dans l’analyse de S. Maxime,” 276-78, 281-83. See also Thunberg, Microcosm and Mediator, 157-59, 376-77.
96 Cf. Thunberg, Microcosm and Mediator, 381; Larchet, “Ancestral guilt,” 27; Cooper, The Body in St Maximus the Confessor, 208-12. For a refutation of the mythologising interpretation of Nyssen’s idea of an angelic-like mode of reproduction, see Behr, “The Rational Animal,” 239-45.
on Love, 2.17 and 2.33), Blowers observed: “Maximus’s treatment of sexuality and marriage […] does not venture significantly beyond the ascetical tradition in which he stood—a tradition that sought to sublimate sexual passion in the conjugal relationship.” Likewise, Thunberg noted how although the faculties of anger and desire, wholly transfigured, are preserved intact in those spiritually renewed, “sexual intercourse will not remain.” Thunberg did not specify his ambiguous “will not remain,” which may be taken as referring either to current circumstances or an eschatological state, or both. Reading his statement in context however, it seems that he was hinting to a spiritual state reached in this life, an interpretation which otherwise fits well both with the saint’s interest in the monastic experience and the examples of unconsummated marriages praised by Byzantine hagiographers. Larchet’s, Blowers’s and Thunberg’s precautions notwithstanding, I propose that the saint did not exclude marriage, sexuality and pleasure in principle—not even when, following the Nyssen, he suggested an angelic-like, supernatural mode of procreation in paradise. This matter cannot be properly discussed without being aware that for him the paradise narrative signified more than the experience of one given couple. The Confessor and the Byzantines saw the scriptural account as a parable meant to decipher the reader’s own circumstances, referring to the spiritual life in general and not to a topological detail pertaining to the past or the future.

For example, returning to his rendition of Gen 3 in Difficulty 10.28, to which I referred above, he concluded by pointing out that what happened to the ancestors corresponds to our experience with life and death. In its Byzantine reading therefore, the paradise narrative fulfills a broader hermeneutical function and should not be seen exclusively as the story of Adam and Eve, and their extraordinary setting. It follows that the paradisal metaphors veiling the Maximian ruminations on gender cannot be taken literally as though the spiritual life excludes sexuality and pleasure. The reader may remember that the prologue of To Thalassius suggests the possibility of a serene experience, characterized by an equanimity that precludes all selfish misuse and addictions. To his credit, Thunberg touched upon these aspects in his comments on Difficulty 48 (PG 91, 1364B-D), aptly pointing out the Maximian appreciation for procreation. For some reason however, he did not see the relevance of his discovery for the topic of gender, sexuality and pleasure.

A virtuous and compassionate life, above gender

The above remarks facilitate a proper understanding of the gender synthesis. We have seen that problematic for the Confessor was not our gendered constitution; instead, it

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102 Cf. Difficulty 10.28 (PG 91:1156C-1157A).
103 Cf. Microcosm and Mediator, 405; cf. also 378-79.
was the ignorance of people concerning the true significance of gender within God’s intention for humanity, and the consequent abuse of it. Taking on the Nyssen’s musings on gender before and after the fall, 104 Maximus believed that by a misinterpretation that leads to the passionate misuse of their potential, 105 gender, sexuality and pleasure become chaotic and destructive. 106 Together with losing their significance, they detract the human person from its quest for a spiritual life and open the endless spiral of selfish love (φιλαυτία). 107 Selfish love and its associated aspects amount to a failure of the human being on a personal level,

a failure accompanied by existential, ontological and cosmological repercussions. St. Maximus believed that by walking the sinful path people do not just undermine their individual existence; they actually become noxious to the human race, the earthly ecosystem and the universe. This message is clearly conveyed by the text under consideration.

After being created, the human being did not move as would have been natural towards the unmoved one, its proper origin (and I mean God). Instead, it freely and mindlessly moved against nature and towards the things beneath it, over which it has been ordered by God to govern. Thus, by abusing (παραχρησάµενος) the natural power bestowed upon it from the making, it pushed towards separation (διαίρεσιν) the things that were united rather than bringing to union (ἕνωσιν) the differentiated ones… 108

The natural processes of separation, decay and death, inherent to all beings that have a beginning and an end, are further catalyzed by human failures; our wrong choices affect the wellbeing of the creation, although not its very nature. In this context, living virtuously and reaching serenity, 109 are the antidote for the divisions intensified by selfish propensities and addictions. Gender and all its related aspects should therefore be redeemed in each one’s life by a contemplative reinterpretation and correct usage, in harmony with the divine intention concerning humankind 110 and consequent to the

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104 The observation belongs to Vladimir Lossky, Orthodox Theology: An Introduction (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1978), 76-77.

105 Cf. Difficulty 41 (PG 91:1308C and 1309A).


108 Difficulty 41 (PG 91:1308C; the version of Louth, Maximus the Confessor, 156, is problematic). See also To Thalassius, prologue: “thus the one nature [of humankind] came to be cut into inordinate fragments and those of the same nature eat each other like crawling beasts” (PG 90:256B; CCG 7:33.269-72). Cf. Difficulty 10.28 (PG 91:1156C-1157A); Difficulty 45 (PG 91:1353C); To Thalassius, prologue (PG 90:257; CCG 7:33.265-92). Cf. Hausherr, S.J., Philautie, 88-90; Larchet, La divinisation de l’homme, 196-97, 199-201.

109 Difficulty 41 (PG 91:1305C). Lit. “through the most dispassionate reference to the divine virtue”.

110 Cf. Thunberg, Microcosm and Mediator, 402-3.

Cf. Thunberg, Microcosm and Mediator, 380-81; Cooper, The Body in St Maximus the Confessor, 213.
salvific work of Christ, Christ’s earthly life, the paradoxical condition of the Virgin-Mother, and in various degrees the achievements of the saints, supremely illustrate this restorative trend.

Virtue brings one to personal renewal and fulfillment, and through the regeneration of the human being it contributes to the pacification of all the levels of reality, including gender interactions, as shown by the references to virtue and a holy life in the passage of interest. We have seen earlier that this renovation is possible given that virtue both reveals and actualizes the fundamental definition or the natural principle (λόγος τοῦ ἐξωτικοῦ) of humankind, which corresponds to the most general λόγος of creation. By tapping into this principle, virtue unifies the various aspects of reality.

What matters is the fact that the virtuous experience leads to a new vision of reality, as a contemplative aspect, and a behavioral shift, as a practical aspect. In the case of gender, this approach consists in prioritizing “the primary principle” (τὸν προηγούμενον λόγον) of our creation, which makes possible the contemplation of the particular categories of male and female through the general category of humankind. Only thus can one transcend the narrow and divisive character of the gender feature (κατὰ τὸ θῆλυ καὶ τὸ ἄρσεν ἵδιοτητα), so that any person appears as “simply a human being” (ἄνθρωπον μόνον). This vision precludes both tensions and discriminations on account of the gender division. That said, the transfigured relationships, beyond violence, addictions and selfish urges, are not to be understood as an obliteration of our gender particularities. This aspect is emphasized further down in the chapter. Upon exploring the significance of Christ’s mediating ministry, Maximus presented the gender features (κατὰ τὸ ἄῤῥεν καὶ τὸ ἰδίοτητα) as overshadowed by the fact of people being seen as simply human beings (ἄνθρωπος μόνον), beyond their makeup as men and women (ἀντὶ ἀνδρῶν καὶ γυναικῶν). This looks like a mere repetition of the above. Nevertheless, the passage replaces the singular ἄνθρωπον μόνον (“simply a human being”) of the

113 Cf. Difficulty 41 (PG 91:1313C).
114 Cf. Difficulty 10.51 (PG 91:1204D-1205A). See also To Thalassius, 64 (PG 90:716CD; CCG 22:223.577-83). Blowers, “The Dialectics and Therapeutics of Desire,” 440-41, adds to this list the angelic ranks.
117 Cf. Difficulty 41 (PG 91:1305C).
118 Difficulty 41 (PG 91:1305C). Lit. “regarding the female and male feature.”
119 Difficulty 41 (PG 91:1305C). Lit. “solely a human being.” Again without reference to gender, see Larchet, La divinisation de l’homme, 582-89.
121 Cf. Difficulty 41 (PG 91:1309D-1312A).
122 Lit. “regarding the differences between male and female.”
previous paragraph by the plural ἀνθρώπους (“people”). This important difference shows that our personal uniqueness and gender remain unhindered

by the spiritual life, even though their function from this point onwards changes. In an earlier writing, the Confessor wrapped this teaching up whilst discussing the benefits of a virtuous and dispassionate life for the social exercise in general.

The one who is perfect in love (τέλειος ἐν ἠγάπῃ) and has advanced to the limit of dispassion (ὕπαθείας) knows no difference [...] between male and female. But having risen above the tyranny of the passions (τῶν παθῶν τυρρανίδος) and looking to the one nature of people (τὴν μίαν φύσιν τῶν ἀνθρώπων), regards all equally and is equally disposed toward all. 123

We should not expect more insights from St. Maximus into the nature of the spiritual transformation, beyond these relational aspects. For him, altruistic love or compassion is impossible without undertaking ascetic purification or walking the virtuous path—this pure love representing the ‘positive’ side of the otherwise ‘negative’ aspect of asceticism. 124 The compassion resulting from the ascetic effort, mentioned from the beginning of this article, should be seen as the ultimate goal of the Maximian elaborations on the existential mode above gender or above nature, and as the driving force behind the entire process of unification. Although the immediate purpose of these musings might have been to assist both male and female ascetics in their spiritual struggles, they can be generalized for the married life as well, as we shall see below.

The consistency of the analyzed passages from Difficulty 41, Chapters on Love, 2.30, and Difficulty 67, all alluding to Gal 3.28, is inescapable. All these texts refer to the divine intention regarding humankind as a challenge to attain a Godlike existential state—above gender—without our humanity, and bodily life, being annulled. One can safely infer that alongside the paradisal metaphors used by Maximus to depict perfection, there can be discerned within his thinking a realistic appraisal of human existence. I turn now to another passage from the Book of Difficulties, which specifically addresses married life.

TWO WAYS TOWARDS THE ONE GOAL

I shall briefly refer here to another forgotten text, the passage in Difficulty 10.31a, 5125 that depicts Moses and Elijah as illustrating the two ways of the spiritual life, namely, marriage and celibacy. This depiction crowns everything that has been discussed so

125 Cf. PG 91:1161D.
far. Difficulty 10 is the longest chapter in the entire Maximian corpus, treating a large amount of topics and scriptural illustrations on the path of perfection, which makes difficult any attempt to summarize it in just a few words. Within the economy of the chapter, prominence is ascribed to Christ’s transfiguration on Tabor, the context of interest showing Maximus’s effort to explore the implications of this event.

Our passage presents Moses and Elijah side by side with Christ on the mountain, and begins with the following general comment: by revealing their presence the Lord initiated the apostles into the “mysteries of marriage and celibacy” (τά κατὰ τὸν γάμον καὶ τὴν ἀγαμίαν μυστήρια). Hence, the two prophets symbolically represent the potential of both marriage and celibacy, or monasticism, as spiritual pathways, since Moses was not “prevented by marriage (διὰ γάμου) from becoming a lover of the divine glory” and Elijah “remained completely pure from any marital relationship (γαμικῆς συναφείας).” Very significant is the concluding note that through the two prophets Christ mystically declared both ways, i.e. marriage and celibacy, as valid paths leading to him. Nevertheless, this is true only for those whose lives are governed by reason (λόγῳ) and unfold according to divine laws (νόμους), by virtuous living that is.

Virtue features again implicitly as a ‘logical’ (from λόγος) means to achieve a perfect life. Approached reverently, in accordance with the divine wisdom and intention, both existential states, i.e. marriage and celibacy, are conducive towards participation and fulfillment in Christ. Far from favoring either of the two ways, the saint believed in the possibility of walking the spiritual path irrespective of gender and social circumstances. What matters here is that, irreducible to the unconsummated marriages glorified by Byzantine hagiographers, the spiritual experience of holy couples (whose famous illustration, after the Confessor’s time, was the ninth century vita of Philaretos of Amnia) is as valid as that of the most secluded hermits. Furthermore, although the text does not explicitly refer to it, given all the above we can surmise that the experience of these holy couples does not entail a suppression of the aspects pertaining to the gendered condition of their members. What makes marriage sacred is not its being deprived of pleasure; it is the prioritization of the spiritual pursuits, like in the example of Moses. This conclusion may clarify the significance of using the term σύνοικος or “spouse” in Difficulty 10.28, discussed earlier: Adam and Eve were supposed to become a holy couple yet failed by drowning in the abyss of pleasure.

There is nothing new about celibacy and the monastic life in this very brief passage. Nevertheless, the endorsement of marriage as a spiritual pathway by a monk is once again surprising, although I hope that the previous sections attenuated the reader’s astonishment. And in fact, the Confessor’s attitude builds upon a venerable tradition.

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126 Cf. PG 91:1125D-1137C, 1160C-1169B.
128 For more on the Maximian concept of marriage, see Cooper, The Body in St Maximus the Confessor, 208-18. Unfortunately, Cooper ignores the passage from Difficulty 10.31a.5.
of the positive assessment of marriage as a spiritual way of life, which can be traced back to Christ and the Pauline tradition. What matters, again, is that the main drive behind Maximus’s realistic acknowledgment of our gendered nature is his exposure to the experience of holiness, including holy couples.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The Confessor’s concept of gender and the related themes, such as marriage, sexuality and pleasure, represent a less appreciated yet meaningful contribution to Christian anthropology. I pointed out that, along with drawing on Gal 3.28 and the Nyssen’s musings on Gen 1.26, his holistic vision of humankind represents an intellectual transcription of the experiences of the saints. Consequently, I showed that the experience of holiness functions throughout his writings like a hermeneutical key, which enables the reader to give a personally meaningful interpretation to the paradise parable (Gen 2-3) and the imagery of eschatological perfection, a key without which Maximian anthropology cannot be freed from the suspicion of mythologizing. Furthermore, and related, I pointed out that the same

experience of holiness allowed Maximus to avoid being entrapped by the theme of a two-stage creation, in which matter he was clearer than Nyssen (however, a detailed comparison between their respective approaches was not intended here). Technically speaking, Maximus escaped the trap of the two-stage theory by using a famous trilogy, depicting the human journey in terms of origin, middle and finality, where the origin represents the divine intention concerning humankind and the finality the perfection to which all humans are called, irrespective of gender. This is in fact where the experience of holiness plays a significant role, deciphering the content of finality as realized eschatology, i.e. a foretaste of states that pertain to the age to come. The major lesson of St. Maximus in this point is that, like with the finality, the paradisal imagery appears as a metaphor of the culminating experience of the saints, possible in this very life.

This interpretation makes the Confessor’s teaching relevant to wide audiences, for alongside presenting gender as “embraced” by God it primarily maps not the eschatological future, but the parameters of a transformative journey in the here and now, which can be undertaken by each and every one of us. I showed in this context that it is precisely the experience of holiness that enabled Maximus to articulate his spiritual anthropology as pointing to an existential mode attainable by all, irrespective of gender. Moreover, I highlighted his identification of the notion of perfection above gender with the experience of spiritual rebirth and the virtuous lifestyle. This identification made possible the Confessor’s construct of a spiritual anthropology that, far from unrealistically denying gender, was able to appreciate marriage, sexuality, human multiplication and pleasure. True, given the monastic formation and interests

of the author such topics are not very well represented in the Maximian corpus, not to mention the fact that sometimes they are depicted in gloomy colors. In this regard, however, I argued that alongside the experience of holiness as a key to the system, the reader should be aware of the rhetorical pedagogy pertaining to Byzantine spiritual literature, which employed a variety of devices meant to stir in the reader the desire for both a dispassionate and compassionate life, as illustrated by the saints. All these ramifications make Maximus’s insights worthwhile in our own context, where gender and the related aspects are usually addressed outside the prospect of a spiritual transformation.

What remains unclear is what St. Maximus meant by attaining dispassion within couples, whilst he suggested that holy couples could enjoy bodily participation. It would be hazardous to look either for explicit answers within, or to infer possible answers from, the writings of a monastic author. Significant as they could be for a spirituality of married life, such answers should be looked for elsewhere. It suffices that the Confessor offered various angles on the gender-related aspects that no longer appear as antagonistic with the spiritual pursuits.

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