Maximus the Confessor, Dionysius the Areopagite, and the Transformation of Christian Neoplatonism

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Maximus the Confessor and Dionysius the Areopagite are two of the most important representatives of what is often called Christian Neoplatonism, yet each made markedly different use of Neoplatonic categories and concepts. To date, there are no major studies comparing their respective responses to later Greek philosophy, which, this paper argues, are aligned with their respective responses to Origenism. To examine this phenomenon, this paper studies the Confessor's systematic restructuring of the Neoplatonic cycle of 'remaining, procession, and return', which departs significantly from the forms this cycle takes in the *corpus Dionysiacum*. Maximus' doctrine of the *logoi*, including the centrality of the incarnate Logos to his metaphysics, is at once a radical critique of Origenism, a tacit dismissal of Dionysian hierarchies, and a comprehensive rethinking of Christian Neoplatonism.

Introduction

Maximus the Confessor (580–662) was active at a time when Greek patristic theology and Platonic philosophy had reached their greatest maturity, evident from the Confessor's own writings, in which theology and philosophy are intricately intertwined in a complex and far-reaching Christian metaphysics. A highly synthetic thinker, Maximus drew freely on a diverse body of philosophical and theological sources. His anthropology, for example, was largely inspired by the writings of Gregory of Nyssa (whom he invokes as an authority).[1] For his ascetic theology, he owed a tremendous debt to the work of Evagrius of Pontus (whom he never mentions by name).[2] His interpretation of Scripture closely followed the hermeneutics of Philo

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[1] *Cf. Ad Thalassium* 1.1 (CCSG 7:47); *Quaestiones et dubia* 19 (CCSG 10:17–18); and I.P. Sheldon-Williams, 'Maximus', in *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy,* ed., A.H. Armstrong (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 492: 'The universe of Maximus is that of Dionysius with a place found in it for the anthropology of Gregory of Nyssa.' Maximus' esteem for Nyssa did not prevent him from modifying some of the latter's signature doctrines, on which see: Paul Blowers, 'Maximus the Confessor, Gregory of Nyssa and the concept of "Perpetual Progress"', *Vigiliae Christianae* 46 (1992): 151–71; and Maximos Constas, 'A Greater and More Hidden Word: Maximos the Confessor and the Nature of Language', in *Maximos the Confessor: A European Philosopher,* ed. Sotiris Mitralexis (forthcoming).

[2] Maximus systematically modified Evagrius' theology, redefining, for example, the *logoi* of 'judgment and providence' (*cf. Ambiguum* 10.37 [DOML 1:207]), and introducing the Dionysian notion of 'ecstasy'

and Origen (as modified by the Cappadocians and Dionysius the Areopagite).[3] One could point to other theological influences as well, including Gregory Nazianzus, Nemesios of Emesa, Cyril of Alexandria, John of Skythopolis, Leontios of Byzantium, and, not least, the Definitions of the first five Ecumenical Councils, especially the Councils of Chalcedon (451) and Constantinople (553).[4]

Maximus' philosophical sources, on the other hand, have proven difficult to identify with any certainty, although many of his theoretical categories and concerns are consistent with the Platonizing Aristotelianism characteristic of contemporary schools and writers.[5] It seems clear, however, that Maximus derived his fundamental philosophical framework from the writings of Dionysius the Areopagite, and that it was within this framework that the various influences mentioned above interacted in a dynamic and in many ways unprecedented synthesis.[6] While several scholars have compared and contrasted various Dionysian themes with the thought of the Confessor, a full-length monograph on this subject remains a critical desideratum.[7] It is to be similarly regretted that, whereas the modern explosion of interest

into the highest stage of Evagrian spiritual ascent (*cf.* Polycarp Sherwood, *The Earlier Ambigua of Saint Maximus the Confessor and His Refutation of Origenism* [Rome: Herder, 1955], 124–54). On Maximus' revision of the *Chapters of the Disciples of Evagrios,* see: Maximos Constas, '"Nothing is Greater than Divine Love": Evagrios of Pontos, St Maximos the Confessor, and *the Philokalia',* in *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth: Studies in Honour of Metropolitan Kallistos Ware* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2016), 57–74.

[3] See Paul Blowers, 'Exegesis of Scripture', in *The Oxford Handbook of Maximus the Confessor,* ed. Pauline Allen and Bronwen Neil (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 253: 'Two [hermeneutical and exegetical] traditions were decisive to Maximus' formation as a biblical interpreter: first, the Alexandrian tradition of Philo and Origen, especially as appropriated and adjusted by the Cappadocian Fathers and by Ps.-Dionysius the Areopagite; second, and closely related, the eastern monastic tradition.'

[4] Other influences include Mark the Monk, the Makarian writings, Diadochos of Photike, and Clement of Alexandria; *cf.* Andrew Louth, 'The Sources of Maximus' Theology', in id., *Maximus the Confessor* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 19–32; and Melchisedec Törönen, *Union and Distinction in the Thought of St Maximus the Confessor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 14–15.

[5] Wolfgang Lackner, 'Studien zur philosophischen Schultradition und zu den Nemesioszitaten bei Maximos dem Bekenner' (PhD diss., Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz, 1962), was one of the first to identify and catalog these connections systematically; see now the thorough investigation by Pascal Mueller-Jourdan, *Typologie spatio-temporelle de l'Ecclesia byzantine: La Mystagogie de Maxime le Confesseur dans la culture philosophique de l'Antiquité tardive* (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

[6] *Cf.* Enzo Bellini, 'Maxime interprète de Pseudo-Denys l'Aréopagite. Analyse de l'*Ambiguum ad Thomam* 5', in *Maximus Confessor. Actes du Symposium sur Maxime le Confesseur, Fribourg, 2–5 septembre 1980,* ed. Felix Heinzer and Christoph Schönborn (Fribourg: Éditions Universitaires Fribourg, 1982), 37: 'Dionysios is an essential component of Maximus' theological synthesis, together with Evagrius, Origen, the Cappadocians, and Leontius of Byzantium'; and Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy: The Universe according to Maximus the Confessor,* trans. Brian Daley (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), 58: 'It would be a mistake to choose one of [Maximus'] intellectual worlds as the *real* one and to judge the rest by its standard. At best one can say this: inasmuch as Dionysius was historically the last and most comprehensive theological and spiritual phenomenon before Maximus, and insofar as he includes essential elements of his predecessors (Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and Evagrius) in his own thought, in a way that both corrects and surpasses them, his [*i.e.,* Dionysos'] insight can be accorded a certain preeminence in Maximus' intellectual ancestry.'

[7] Among the more important studies are: Polycarp Sherwood, 'Denys l'Aréopagite, IV: Influence du Pseudo-Denys en Orient. 4. Saint Maxime le Confesseur', *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité,* vol. 3 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1947), 295–300; Walther Völker, 'Der Einfluss des Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita auf Maximus Confessor', in *Universitas - Dienst an Wahrheit und Leben: Festschrift für Bischof Dr Albert,* ed. Ludwig Lenhart,

in Maximus the Confessor has largely coincided with the modern revival of interest in Neoplatonism—currently the 'fastest growing area of research in ancient philosophy'—the two have yet to enter into systematic dialogue.[8]

To be sure, comparing Dionysius and Maximus is a complicated venture. As arguably the most allusive and complex thinker (and writer) in the entire canon of Greek patristic literature, Maximus' use of the *corpus Dionysiacum* was equally allusive and complex. He held Dionysius in extremely high regard, considering him a leading and indeed inspired patristic authority.[9] Deeply sympathetic to the Christian Neoplatonism of Dionysius, Maximus likewise saw the world as a theophany of the divine, a manifestation of intelligible reality in sensible form. Yet he absorbed Dionysian vocabulary and conceptual structures not in reverential isolation, but in an animated and at times contentious conversation with his other sources and in conjunction with his own theological project. Possessed of a powerfully independent mind, Maximus drew slavishly on none of his philosophical or theological predecessors. To this rule Dionysius was no exception, and Maximus did not hesitate to modify, correct, and even suppress some of the signature features of the Areopagite's theology.[10]

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vol. 1 (Mainz: Matthias-Gruenwald-Verlag, 1960), 243–54; id., 'Der Einfluss des Pseudo-Dionysius auf Maximus Confessor', in *Studien zum Neuen Testament und zur Patristik. Festschrift für Ernst Klostermann zum 90. Geburtstag dargebracht* (Berlin, 1961), 331–50 (though oddly bearing the same title as the 1960 study, this study expands the comparative analysis into new areas); id., 'Zur Ontologie des Maximus Confessor', *Beiträge aus Theologie, Kirche und Geschichte. Festschrift Ernst Barnikol* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1964), 57–79; id., *Maximus Confessor als Meister des geistlichen Lebens* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1965), 14–19; 351–70; Ysabel de Andia, 'Transfiguration et théologie négative chez Maxime le Confesseur et Denys l'Aréopagite', in ead., *Denys l'Aréopagite et sa postérité en Orient et en Occident. Actes du Colloque International, Paris 21–24 septembre 1994* (Paris: Institut d'Études Augustiniennes, 1997), 291–326 (many of whose conclusions I do not accept); Agnieszka Switkiewicz-Blandzi, 'Notes About Denys Areopagite's *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* and its Influence on Maximus the Confessor's *Mystagogy*', *Studia Mediewistyczne* 34–35 (1999–2000): 56–70; and Vladimir Cvetković, 'Predeterminations and Providence in Dionysius and Maximus the Confessor', in *Dionysius the Areopagite between Orthodoxy and Heresy,* ed. Filip Ivanović (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2011), 135–56. My contribution to the *Oxford Handbook of Dionysios the Areopagite* (forthcoming) will focus largely on Maximus' reception and transformation of Dionysian theology.

[8] The quotation is from Pauliina Remes and Svetla Slaveva-Griffin, 'Neoplatonism Today', in *The Routledge Handbook of Neoplatonism* (London and New York: 2014), 1. Two scholars, Christophe Erismann and Torstein Theodor Tollefsen, have done much to bridge this disciplinary divide.

[9] Reflected in the rich and varied epithets Maximus bestows on him: ὁ πολύς (PG 91:1048A, 1052C); σοφός (1056C); θεῖος (1188A); θεοείκελος (1289A); θεόφρων (1213C; 1413D); θεηγόρος (1312D; 1313A; 1413A); θεοφάντωρ (1080B; 1260B; 1417B; *cf. Opusculum* 7 [84D]); *Opusculum* 8 [96C]); ibid.; 100b); ἅγιος (1056C; 1085A; 1213C; 1260B; 1285A; 1289A; 1312D; 1313A); μέγας (1048A; 1188A; 1188C; 1260B; 1285A; 1289A; 1312D; 1313A; 1413A; 1417B). Most of these adjectives qualify the title διδάσκαλος (*e.g.*, 1048A; 1049A; 1052A; 1054C; 1056B) (which Maximus also uses heavily for Gregory Nazianzus), usually in combination with either 'Dionysius' or 'the Areopagite' (*cf.* 1032B; 1080B; 1085A; 1188A; 1188C; 1213C; 1241A; 1260B; 1285A; 1289A; 1312D; 1313A; 1413D).

[10] Völker, 'Einfluss' (1960)*,* 244; id., 'Einfluss' (1961), 333; and id., 'Christi Verklärung auf dem Tabor in der Deutung des Maximus Confessor und des Gregorius Palamas', in id., *Scala Paradisi. Eine Studie zu Johannes Climacus und zugleich eine Vorstudie zu Symeon dem Neun Theologen* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1968), 316–27, at 317–19, rightly stressed the diversity of influences on Maximus, and the extent to which these were combined with Dionysian language and concepts, but he nonetheless argued (misleadingly, as

These modifications include extensive changes to the doctrine of procession and return; a reordering of the structure and divisions of being; a tacit rejection of 'hierarchy' (a key Dionysian term that Maximus never uses); and a new emphasis on the philosophical category of motion. These developments were motivated in part by Maximus' response to Origenism, but they were also a response to larger problems within Christian Neoplatonism. Central to this larger project was Maximus' signature doctrine of the *logoi*, which enabled him to place greater importance than Dionysius had on the role of the divine will in creation, and to establish the Incarnation as the central act of divine self-manifestation. In a critical move, explored in detail below, Maximus regrounded the cycle of procession and return directly in the person of the incarnate Logos.[11]

While there can be little question that Maximus' departures from Dionysius were prompted by his response to Origenism, this does not rule out the possibility that the *corpus Dionysiacum* was itself a self-conscious response to Origenism. In a forthcoming book, Ernesto Sergio Mainoldi argues persuasively that the writings attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite were produced by theologians working in the circle of the emperor Justinian, and were intended as a direct reply to questions concerning the hierarchical structure of the Church, the nature and person of Christ, and the problem of sixth-century Origenism (and Evagrianism), which included overcoming the philosophical legacy of pagan Neoplatonism. Mainoldi argues that the Dionysian writings aim to correct Origenist cosmology and eschatology, and in particular to replace a fluid angelology and anthropology with fixed hierarchies, disallowing any ontological confusion of natures, which was central to the Justinianic theological project.[12]

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it seems to me) for the ultimately heterogeneous nature of Maximus' work, in which one finds 'Dionysian islands' stylistically and intellectually adrift in a *mare Maximianum*.

[11] That these developments were motivated by Maximus' alleged 'Aristotelianism' has been disputed and remains under discussion. Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy,* 60–61, asserted that Maximus used Aristotle to correct and clarify Dionysius, and thus was a predecessor of Aquinas. Balthasar's views—which were subsequently promoted by a group of French Dominicans associated with the journal *Istina* (*i.e.*, Alain Riou, Jean-Miguel Garrigues, Marie-Joseph Le Guillou, Pierre Piret, and François-Marie Léthel [a Carmelite])—were criticized by Walther Völker, 'Zur Ontologie des Maximus Confessor', 57–79; followed by Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator,* 16–17; id., *Man and Cosmos,* 52–55; Larchet, *Divinisation,* 74–77, 267–69; id., *La théologie des énergies divines. Des origines à saint Jean Damascène* (Paris: Cerf, 2010), 331–42; and Marius Portaru, 'Classical Philosophical Influences: Aristotle and Platonism', in *The Oxford Handbook of Maximus the Confessor,* 130–33.

[12] *Cf.* Ernesto Sergio Mainoldi, 'Why Dionysios the Areopagite? The Invention of the First Father', *Studia Patristica* (forthcoming). I am thankful to the author for providing me with a copy of his work prior to publication. John Gavin, *'They Are Like Angels': Angelology and Anthopology in the Thought of Maximus the Confessor* (Rome: Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, 2009), also argues that the Dionysian worldview was a direct response to Origenism; *cf.* below, n. 52.

Maximus, Dionysius, and the Transformation of Christian Neoplatonism

As mentioned above, Maximus adopted the Christian Neoplatonic framework of Dionysius,[13] the central principles of which included the radical transcendence and immanence of God; the notion of being as a theophany; the cycle of remaining, procession, and return; along with a cognate theory of mind and language marked by strong aesthetic, affective, and erotic/ecstatic elements. Maximus' development of a number of trajectories from within this complex system set him apart, not simply from Dionysius, but from Neoplatonic metaphysics more generally.[14] To illustrate Maximus' modification of the Dionysian tradition, the remainder of this paper will focus on the changes he introduced into the foundational metaphysical process of remaining, procession, and return.

As is well known, late Neoplatonists described this process as a cycle comprising three distinct but inter-related moments: (1) the moment of 'remaining' (μονή) of the transcendent source or cause within itself; (2) the moment of the source's 'procession' (πρόοδος) in an outward stream of energy; and (3) the final moment of 'reversion' or 'return' (ἐπιστροφή) of the stream to its source. The Neoplatonists themselves were aware of various philosophical problems within this cycle. Christian thinkers in particular were concerned about its ontological monism and the reduction of God's generative and creative activity to automatism and necessity.[15] Maximus was perhaps the first to address these problems directly, and he did so by reorganizing and redefining each moment within the process.

Remaining (μονή)

Confronted with the statement that creatures had 'flowed down from above',[16] Maximus rejected the basic principle that incorporeal beings pre-existed in a state of primal unity with God, from which they descended and entered the sensible world.

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[13] And not the philosophy of Aristotle, as many scholars have claimed; for discussion, see: Portaru, 'Classical Philosophical Influences', 133–36, who suggests that all talk of 'being' (or 'substance') in Maximus is subsumed in his doctrine of participation.

[14] Gersh, *Iamblichus to Eriugena,* 6, sees Maximus as the pivotal writer in the trajectory from 'Iamblichus to Eriugena', and argues that Christian writers modified this structure in such a way that Neoplatonic tropes are not useful as a framework for analyzing the Christian sources. This is debatable, but what is correct is the emphasis on the pivotal role played by Maximus in these developments.

[15] See for example, the remark of Gregory Nazianzus, *Orationes* 29.2: 'We shall not venture to speak of an "overflow of goodness" (ὑπέρχυσιν ἀγαθότητος), as one of the Greek philosophers dared to say, as if it were a bowl overflowing (κρατήρ τις ὑπερρύη), and this in plain words in his discourse on the First and Second Causes. We ought never to introduce the notion of involuntary generation (ἀκούσιον γέννησιν), as some sort of unrestrained natural secretion (περίττωμά τι φυσικὸν καὶ δυσκάθεκτον)' (SC 250:180, lines 18–22), the cited material possibly referring to Plato, *Timaeus* 41d; Plotinus, *Enneads* 5.1.6, or 5.2; and (for the 'bowl') an unknown Neoplatonic source. Maximus comments on passages from *Orationes* 29.2 in *Quaestiones et dubia* 105 (CCSG 10:79); *Ambiguum* 1.1 (DOML 1:7); and *Ambiguum* 23.1 (DOML 2:3).

[16] 'Flowing' or 'streaming' (ῥεῖν, ἀπορρεῖν) is the central metaphor for Neoplatonic emanation. In *Ambiguum* 7, Maximus was called on to explain Gregory Nazianzus' claim (in *Orationes* 14.7) that human beings are a 'portion of God that has flowed down from above (ἄνωθεν ῥεύσαντας)' (DOML 1:74–75).

Instead, Maximus argued that the state of 'remaining' was to be found, not at the beginning of the process, but at its end.[17] While Neoplatonic forms of remaining are found throughout the *corpus Dionysiacum*,[18] Dionysius' position on this question was ambiguous. His citation of John 14:23 (μονὴν παρ᾽ αὐτῷ ποιήσομεν),[19] for example, seems to posit remaining as a future condition, which would (if this was his intention) signal a fundamental restatement of the traditional Neoplatonic view.[20] The definitive change, however, was achieved by Maximus, who revolutionized the traditional notion, which he dismissed as a 'doctrine of the Greeks' (ἐκ τῶν ἑλληνικῶν δογμάτων).[21] In so doing, Maximus had, in the words of Stephen Gersh, 'undermined the most cherished principle of pagan and earlier Christian Platonism', namely, the 'placing of remaining before procession.'[22] This move, though often noted, had far-reaching implications for Maximus' eschatology and teleology, as well as for his understanding of protology, which have yet to be fully explored.[23]

Proceeding (πρόοδος)

Maximus also modified the second moment in the cycle, 'procession.' For Dionysius, the divine 'processions'—which he calls 'powers', 'participations', 'providences', 'manifestations', 'activities', and 'distributions' of God—signify the presence of God 'outside' his essence, which refers to God's causal presence in beings as their intelligible determinations.[24] Dionysius does not hesitate to speak of the divine processions as an 'overflowing outpouring of light' (ὑπερβλύζουσα φωτοχυσία),[25]

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[17] This is the great argument of *Ambiguum* 7 (DOML 1:75–141); *cf. Ambiguum* 20.3 (DOML 1:412, line 3), where μονή and ἵδρυσις likewise refer to a state obtained in the eschaton; *cf.* Gersh, *Iamblichus,* 221, who connects this new sense of 'remaining' with Maximus' anti-Origenist argument.

[18] *E.g.*, *Divinis nominibus* 2.8 (132, lines 10–16; 645C). Citations from Dionysius are from Beate Regina Suchla, Günter Heil, and Adolf Martin Ritter, eds., *Corpus Dionysiacum,* 2 vols (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1990–1991), citing page and line number(s), followed by the column number in PG.

[19] *Ecclesiastica hierarchia* 2.1 (68, line 21; 392A).

[20] See the discussion in Gersh, *Iamblichus,* 218–21.

[21] *Ambiguum* 7.2 (DOML 1:76). Note that the phrase ἐκ τῶν ἑλληνικῶν δογμάτων is also found in Justinian, *Edict against Origen*: 'He (*i.e.*, Origen) teaches that, in the resurrection, bodies shall rise having a spherical form; such is the foolishness and ignorance of this exegete of the doctrines of the Greeks' (*ACO* 3:204, line 12); *cf.* Gersh, *Iamblichus,* 219, n. 65: 'It is now generally accepted that Maximus is attacking the Origenistic doctrine of the primal henad. However, the implications of this critique go even wider than this, for the elements in the Origenistic cosmology which Maximus is keen to refute are precisely those which also characterize traditional pagan Neoplatonism.'

[22] Gersh, *Iamblichus,* 219–20.

[23] But *cf.* Nikolaos Loudovikos, *A Eucharistic Ontology: Maximus the Confessor's Eschatological Ontology of Being as Dialogical Reciprocity,* trans. Elizabeth Theokritoff (Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2010); and Paul Blowers, *Maximus the Confessor: Jesus Christ and the Transfiguration of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 221–24.

[24] Powers = *Divinis nominibus* 2.7, 11.6; participations = *Divinis nominibus* 2.5, 2.7, 5.5; processions = *Divinis nominibus* 1.4, 2.4, 2.11, 5.1, 5.2; providences = *Divinis nominibus* 1.8, 5.2; manifestations = *Divinis nominibus* 2.4; activities = *Caelesti hierarchia* 13.3–4, 15.6, *Divinis nominibus* 9.9; distributions = *Divinis nominibus* 2.5, 2.11.

[25] *Divinis nominibus* 4.6 (150, line 2; 701A); *cf.* id., Ep. 5.1 (162, line 5).

along with other metaphors of diffusion and radiation, which could imply that creation came about by necessity. However, Dionysius' emphasis here is more likely on the non-substantial character of these processions as a deliberate rejection of Neoplatonic self-subsisting 'henads' (intermediary entities).[26] Maximus adopts some of the same language and imagery, but for him the 'processions' are no longer the self-diffusing activities of a generic First Principle, but rather the multiplication of the One Logos into a plurality of *logoi*.[27] In this way, Dionysius' attempt to eliminate intermediaries by locating the source of multiplicity within the First Principle was transformed by Maximus, who identified the source of procession with the person of the Logos. While this is not exactly the sort of 'Christological corrective' that some scholars have posited,[28] it nonetheless marks a significant Christological reframing of both Dionysian thought and the Neoplatonic tradition more generally, for it was a massive reinscription of the Dionysian worldview within the framework of the Confessor's Christocentric cosmology.[29]

Hierarchy

Before turning to the final moment in the process, it will be helpful to consider a particular feature (or product) of procession, namely, hierarchy, which brings to light a pivotal difference between Dionysius and Maximus. In Neoplatonism, the outward procession of the First Principle generated a hierarchical structure of being composed of distinct levels of super- and subordination, the existence and activity of whose lower, inferior levels were contingent on the contemplation and imitation of their superiors. For Dionysius, who coined the word 'hierarchy', procession is

[26] *Cf. Divinis nominibus* 5.2 (181; 816C); *Divinis nominibus* 11.6 (221–23; 953B–956B); and the discussions in Gersh, *Iamblichus,* 48–55, 223–25; and Golitzin, *Mystagogy,* 73–79. According to Gersh, ibid., 21, there is 'no evidence that pagan thinkers understood emanation as anything other than an automatic and unwilled process. Yet Dionysius retains most of the language and metaphors but without implying actual ontological emanation, or the idea of the divine being diffused out into gradations.'

[27] *Ambiguum* 7.15 (DOML 1:95); *cf.* de Andia, 'Transfiguration et théologie négative', 293–328, who posits a distinction between Maximus' essence/activities ontology, and Dionysius' ontology of hyperousios/ousia. Though not without minor parallels in the *corpus Dionysiacum* (*e.g., Divinis nominibus* 5.8), Maximus' doctrine of the *logoi* finds greater parallels in Origen, Evagrius, and Plotinus, 'On Providence', *Enneads* 3.2–3, where the *logoi* are parts of one cosmic Logos; *cf.* Radek Chlup, *Proclus: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 13; and Lloyd P. Gerson, 'Plotinus on logos', in *Neoplatonism and the Philosophy of Nature*, ed. James Wilberding and Christoph Horn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 17–29.

[28] Here I am thinking in particular of the supposedly 'Palamite Christological corrective'; on which, see: Alexander Golitzin, 'Dionysius Areopagites in the Works of Saint Gregory Palamas: On the Question of a "Christological Corrective" and Related Matters', *SVTQ* 46 (2002): 163–90, who considers the idea 'an illusion, a scholarly invention', and a 'scholarly phantom', for which he faults the academic reduction of Dionysius to Neoplatonism (p. 86).

[29] This process can already be seen in Maximus, *Quaestiones et dubia* 173 (CCSG 10:12), which demonstrates strong dependence on Dionysius, looks forward to the doctrine of the *logoi* developed in the *Ambigua to John*, and shows that already at this early stage Maximus was fusing Dionysian metaphysics with Christology.

likewise inseparable from the production of a hierarchical order of intermediary beings,[30] so that even the activity of the angelic orders is frequently expressed in terms of providence and procession.[31] Each particular order and level of the hierarchy is thus a force that reveals, turns, and leads the lower levels back to their source in God.[32] At the same time, these ordered rankings constitute impenetrable boundaries between levels of reality that were firmly set and could not be transgressed.[33]

Maximus, on the other hand, never uses the word hierarchy.[34] In place of vertiginous Dionysian verticality, Maximus' doctrine of the divine *logoi* generates something akin to a non-spatial model, in which presence and dependence are collapsed—like 'stars vanishing at the appearance of the sun'[35]—into the immediate and dynamic continuum of Logos, *logoi*, and beings.[36] This new model also found expression in a novel ordering of reality, not into Dionysian hierarchies, but into the five divisions of being described in *Ambiguum* 41. Here the primary division is into uncreated and created natures, which are transcended and unified in the person of the incarnate Logos.[37] Consistent with this reconceptualization of the Dionysian universe, movement across these new ontological boundaries was surprisingly simple and depended on the freely determined capacities of each participant. The most striking example of this is Maximus' account, in *Ambiguum* 20, of Saint Paul's upward passage (*cf.* 2 Cor 12:2–4) through all the angelic orders, terminating in a condition of absolute immediacy with God, beyond all negation, boundary, and

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[30] *Cf. Divinis nominibus* 4.15 (161; 713AB); *Caelesti hierarchia* 9.2 (36–37; 257C–260B); and Chlup, *Proclus,* 65.

[31] *Cf. Caelesti hierarchia* 8.2 (34–35; 240C—241C); *Caelesti hierarchia* 15.1 (50–51; 328A–328C); and *Caelesti hierarchia* 15.6 (55–56; 333D–33DB).

[32] And is thus an ἀνάγωγος καὶ ἐπιστρεπτικὴ δύναμις (*Caelesti hierarchia* 15.5; 55, line 11; 333B); *cf.* Golitzin, *Mystagogy,* 140–43.

[33] Chlup, *Proclus,* 21–24; *cf.* the difficulties Dionysius had in explaining the prophet Isaiah's description of a seraph engaging in activities on a level not properly its own, *Caelesti hierarchia* 13.1–4 (46–49; 300B–308B).

[34] The words 'hierarchy' and 'hierarch' are attested in the prologue and chap. 9 of the *Mystagogy* (CCSG 69:6, line 55; 38, line 620): the latter is a simple reference to a bishop, and the former occurs when Maximus cites the title of Dionysius' *On the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy.* For Maximus, the more flexible category of θέσις effectively displaces the function of hierarchy; *cf.* Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator*, 63; and Constas, DOML 1:486n31. Blowers, *Maximus the Confessor,* 111, is generally correct but understates the matter, noting that: 'Maximus interprets the Dionysian "hierarchies" with an emphasis less on their scaled ontological structure per se than on their instrumentality for conveying the intimate presence of the Logos even to the least of created beings.'

[35] *Ambiguum* 7.12 (DOML 1:93).

[36] Note that Dionysius at times appears to approach such a view: 'Jesus (*i.e.*, the *incarnate* Word) is the source and perfection of all hierarchies' (*Ecclesiastica hierarchia* 1.2; 65, lines 20–21; 373B).

[37] *Ambiguum* 41.2 (DOML 2:103–105). Here Maximus is indebted not to Dionysius but to Gregory of Nyssa, and, in a sense, is rejecting the hierarchies of Proclus for the immediacy of Plotinus; *cf.* Chlup, *Proclus,* 16–29; Frederic M. Schroeder, *Form and Transformation: A Study in the Philosophy of Plotinus* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992), 45–56. Gavin, *Angelology and Anthropology,* 102–103, states that, for Maximus the 'ontological order of creation depends less on a [Dionysian] hierarchical structure, and more upon the ordering of the *logoi* of divine providence and judgment united in the *Logos.* The structure of the cosmos emerges from the divine desire to become "immanent" in the Incarnation, eliminating the need for the strict scalar chain of being.'

limit.[38] Dionysius, on the other hand, avoids the Pauline verse in question, as well as any suggestion of upward movement through the hierarchy, which would problematically transgress, and allow a more perfect union with, the very divine activity that established creatures in their fixed locations within the hierarchy.[39]

Returning (ἐπιστροφή)

With respect to the final moment of 'reversion' or 'return', the Confessor once again departed from the traditional view. Maximus' decision, noted above, to place 'remaining' at the *end* of the process was a radical shift that required a corresponding redefinition of the final moment of return. Rational creatures, and through them the entire created order, were now seen in terms of their final goal, which was no longer understood as a mere return to the beginning, but rather as an ontologically unprecedented union with God in a final, eschatological, and divinizing consummation. As a result, the eternal recurrence inherent in the cycle of procession and return was largely displaced by a dynamic linear movement, with a new emphasis on movement in time towards eschatological fulfilment.[40] This was a highly innovative development,[41] and is reflected in Maximus' avoidance of the technical term 'return' (ἐπιστροφή), which he never uses.[42] In one passage, he uses the word in its adjectival form, 'revertive' or 'convertive' (ἐπιστρεπτική), coupled with a second adjective, 'inductive' or 'guiding' (χειραγωγική), qualifying the words ἀναφορά and πρόνοια, which together have replaced ἐπιστροφή. It is significant that this passage occurs in Maximus' most important statement about the one Logos being many *logoi* according to 'procession' (πρόοδος) and the many *logoi* being one Logos according to the movement of 'return' (ἀναφορά).[43]

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[38] *Ambiguum* 20.5 (DOML 1:417); *cf.* Marius Portaru, 'Gradual Participation according to St Maximus the Confessor', *Studia Patristica* 68 (2013): 281–93, who argues persuasively for a 'transposition of Dionysian participation through hierarchy' into what he calls the 'territory of personal experience', which is essentially a shift away from fixed ontological categories to the role of freedom in the divinization of rational creatures.

[39] As noted by Gavin, *Angelology,* 208–209.

[40] For the impact of this new emphasis on Maximus' understanding of history and language, see: Constas, 'A Greater and More Hidden Word', cited above, n. 1.

[41] According to Gersh, *Iamblichus,* 243–45, the Christian treatment of motion presents 'many points at which real innovations are made, especially in connection with Maximus' use of motion and rest', and that 'the fullest elaboration of [the theory of creaturely motion] occurs in Maximus' *Ambigua…*which seems to have resulted from Maximus' own reflections on a particular philosophical problem and goes back to no previous source.'

[42] Maximus uses ἐπιστροφή only to describe moral and not ontological conversions to God; *cf. Chapters on Love* 1.13 (ed. Aldo Ceresa-Gastaldo, *Massimo Confessore, Capitoli sulla carità* [Rome, 1963], 54); *Myst.* 9 (CCSG 69:38, line 622); *Ad Thalassium* 49 (CCSG 7:353, line 48); *Ad Thalassium* 57 (CCSG 22:23, line 31); *Ad Thalassium* 64 (CCSG 22:225, line 616); *Ambiguum* 10.26 (DOML 1:188, line 10); ibid., 10.37 (DOML 1:207, line 18); ibid., 10.66 (DOML 1:258, line 1).

[43] *Ambiguum* 7.20: 'The one Logos is many *logoi* and the many are One. According to the creative and sustaining procession of the One to individual beings, which is befitting of divine goodness, the One is many. According to the revertive, inductive, and providential return of the many to the One—as if

In a recent analysis of this passage, Vladimir Cvetković has pointed out that Maximus' language here refers to two agents.[44] The adjective *χειραγωγική* points to the active role of divine providence, guiding and directing rational beings towards their proper end. The noun *ἀναφορά*, on the other hand, is the liturgical movement and self-offering of rational beings to God.[45] Nikolaos Loudovikos had already identified what he rightly described as the eschatological and eucharistic character of the Confessor's ontology.[46] Cvetković makes a similar move, but with greater emphasis on Christology: 'By offering themselves to God, human beings follow the example of God, who by taking human nature, offered himself to the world.' In the word *ἀντιστροφή*, which Maximus also uses as a substitute for *ἐπιστροφή*,[47] Cvetković sees the same reciprocity between the divine and the human, what the Confessor called the 'paradigmatic exchange that makes God man and man God.'[48] There is a precedent for such reciprocity in Dionysius, in the opposite yet converging movements of inferiors to superiors, and of superiors to inferiors, mutually attracted and united together by the motive force of love.[49] This reciprocal exchange of humanity and divinity brings us back to the perfect

to an all-powerful point of origin, or to the center of a circle pre-containing the beginnings of the radii originating from it—insofar as the One gathers everything together, the many are One' (*πολλοὶ λόγοι ὁ εἷς Λόγος ἐστὶ καὶ εἷς οἱ πολλοί· κατὰ μὲν τὴν ἀγαθοπρεπῆ εἰς τὰ ὄντα τοῦ ἑνὸς ποιητικήν τε καὶ συνεκτικὴν πρόοδον πολλοὶ ὁ εἷς, κατὰ δὲ τὴν εἰς τὸν ἕνα τῶν πολλῶν ἐπιστρεπτικήν τε καὶ χειραγωγικὴν ἀναφοράν τε καὶ πρόνοιαν, ὥσπερ εἰς ἀρχὴν παντοκρατορικὴν ἢ κέντρον τῶν ἐξ αὐτοῦ εὐθειῶν τὰς ἀρχὰς προειληφὸς, καὶ ὡς πάντων συναγωγός, εἷς οἱ πολλοί*) (DOML 1:100–103); cf. *Ambiguum* 14.4: *ἀναγαγοῦ καὶ ἐπιστρεπτικῆς προνοίας* (DOML 1:361), which is a direct citation from *Caelesti hierarchia* 15.5 (55, line 11; 333B).

[44] Vladimir Cvetković, 'The Transformation of Neoplatonic Notions of Procession (*proodos*) and Conversion (*epistrophe*) in the Thought of St Maximus the Confessor', in *The Ways of Byzantine Philosophy*, ed. Mikonja Knežević (Alhambra: Sebastian Press, 2015), 171–84.

[45] Dionysius does not use the word *ἀναφορά*, but cf. *Caelesti hierarchia* 13.3: *ἐπὶ Θεὸν μὲν ὡς αἴτιον ἀναφέρουσιν* (46, lines 9–10; 304A). Compare also the liturgical language of *Ad Thalassium* 51.4, 6: 'Through the mediation of the intellect, creation brings to God, as if they were offerings (*δῶρα προσκομίζουσαν*), the spiritual principles of knowledge…When we bring (*προσκομίζοντες*) to the Lord the spiritual principles we have discerned in creation, we bring Him offerings (*δῶρα προσφέρομεν*), for by nature He has no need of any of these things. For we do not bring (*προσκομίζομεν*) the principles of beings to Him as if He were in need of them as others would be, but rather so that we might, on behalf of all his creatures, praise Him in song (*ἀνυμνήσωμεν*) for all that He has given us' (CCSG 22:397, lines 43–45 and 63–71); and the cognate passage in *Ad Thalassium* 54.25 (CCSG 22:461–63, lines 326–35).

[46] Loudovikos, *Eucharistic Ontology*, cited above, at n. 23.

[47] *Ἀντιστροφή* is a grammatical-logical term that refers to the conversion or exchange of a subject for its predicate, which Maximus has seemingly ontologizied, not unlike the original grammatical meaning of the logos/tropos distinction, as well as the original grammatical sense of *διαστολή*; cf. Jonathan Barnes, 'Ammonius and Adverbs', in *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy: Aristotle and the Later Tradition*, ed. Henry Blumenthal and Howard Robinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 145–63; and Antonio Cacciari, 'From Grammar to Theology: History of a Word. On *Διαστολή* and Related Terms in Origen and in the Origenian Tradition', in *Origeniana decima: Origen as Writer*. Papers of the 10th International Origen Congress, Krakow, Poland 31 August–4 September 2009, ed. Sylwia Kaczmerek and Henryk Pietras (Leuven: Peeters, 2011), 39–60.

[48] Cf. *Ambiguum* 10.9: 'For they say that God and man are paradigms of each other, so that as much as man, enabled by love, has divinized himself for God, to that same extent God is humanized for man by His love for mankind' (DOML 1:165).

[49] *Divinis nominibus* 4.10 (154; 705C), noted by Ysabel de Andia, *Henosis: L'Union à Dieu chez Denys l'Aréopagite* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 141–42.

equilibrium of the Neoplatonic metaphysical cycle, but with a difference, for it is now tightly coiled within the person of the incarnate Logos.

Conclusion

Comparing and contrasting the work of Dionysius the Areopagite and Maximus the Confessor is a complicated task. That the work of both writers resists systematic summary or facile closure has led to a range of interpretations that are often mutually contradictory. This problem is particularly acute in the case of the *corpus Dionysiacum,* inasmuch as the author's anonymity encourages virtually limitless speculation concerning his philosophical and theological antecedents, orientation, and intentions. While some, for example, have argued that he was a pagan writer, concealing his views behind a thin veneer of Christianity, others contend that he was a Christian writer appropriating Greek philosophy (and likely a pagan convert to Christianity). Or that he was a pantheist, or to the contrary made a categorical distinction between God and creation. Again, while some are convinced he was a Monophysite theologian, others are equally convinced that he was a dyophysite Chalcedonian; still others contend he was an Origenist, a crypto-Origenist, or an anti-Origenist, and so on.[50]

With respect to Dionysius' philosophical lineage, there is little doubt that he was directly influenced by the writings of Proclus (d. 485 AD), but we have no such certainty regarding Maximus' relationship to the philosophical schools and traditions of the seventh century. If Dionysius reflects the Neoplatonic philosophy taught in Athens and Alexandria from around the fourth to the sixth century, Maximus appears to be much less closely aligned to any particular school or tradition, and all attempts to tie him to one have proven inconclusive. It does seem clear, however, that Maximus derived his Neoplatonism, not simply from Dionysius, but from many other intermediaries, even if Dionysius was the major source of influence. Thus, whereas Dionysius was the principal figure in a continuum of philosophical influence, he cannot be isolated as the sole determining source or factor.

Maximus' handling of the Dionysian tradition was largely governed by his rejection of the Origenist doctrine of the fall of immaterial souls from a timeless union with God, with whom they had reached a state of satiety. Against this doctrine, Maximus articulated a radically different cosmology and anthropology, according to which creaturely movement was not the result of a primordial fall, but the natural capacity of the creature to advance towards God. Central to Maximus' transformation of Origenism was not simply a rearrangement of Origen's metaphys-

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[50] In a summary of 'Principal Conjectures for the Identity of Ps.-Dionysius in Chronological Order', Ronald F. Hathaway, *Hierarchy and the Definition of Order in the Letters of Pseudo-Dionysius* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1970), 31–35, lists 22 different possible candidates, ranging in date from AD 129–544. Since the work of Hathaway, several more candidates have been added to the list.

ical syntax, but a complete redefinition of its fundamental grammar. That is, not simply a rearrangement of the triad *stasis-kinesis-genesis* into *genesis-kinesis-stasis*, but a redefinition of what each of these states means.[51] Maximus surely realized how the three moments in the Neoplatonic cycle closely corresponded to the Origenist account: 'remaining' was the primal state (*stasis*) of the henad, 'procession' was the fall (*kinesis*) and the advent of material creation, while 'return' (*epistrophē*) was the spiritual ascent beyond the sensible world.

If we accept the notion that Dionysius' immutable hierarchies were a response to Origenism, they offered an ontologically stable universe in contrast to a fluid metaphysical system in which individual identity and corporeality were the results of a pre-cosmic fall, to be dispensed with in a gnostic ascent towards immateriality.[52] Maximus of course accepted the ontological stability of the Dionysian universe, but reoriented it in his teleological and eschatological vision of the incarnate Logos as the beginning and end of the cosmic drama. If Dionysius' concern was to stabilize Origenian flux, Maximus' concern was to establish the primacy of the end, the goal (*telos*) of creation in the Logos, because Dionysius had not made a clear and definitive break with the entrenched cycle of remaining, procession, and return, which Maximus completely reconfigured. Though an ordered and stable cosmos remained, the rigid hierarchies were no longer central, since now it was the desire of the Logos, through the *logoi*, to be immanent in creation, Scripture, Incarnation, and in every human soul, that eliminated the need for mediating hierarchies.

We read Maximus' work with an ear for Dionysian resonances, which are resoundingly there, but there is also dissonance. While the resonances indicate where the two meet and converge, the dissonant notes reiterate that Maximus' engagement with Dionysius was a creative one, attuned to a different set of problems, requiring him to innovate the modes of Dionysian doctrine without altering their principle of being.

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[51] Set forth in *Ambiguum* 7.6–14 (DOML 1:81–95); and *Ambiguum* 15.5–7 (DOML 1:365–71).

[52] In other words, precisely the doctrine that was condemned by the Council of 553: 'If anyone says that from the state of angels and archangels originates that of the soul, and from that of the soul that of demons and human beings, and from that of human beings angels and demons originate again…let him be anathema', trans. Richard Price, *The Acts of the Council of Constantinople of 553,* vol. 2 (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009), 284–285 (= canon 5); note that of the Council's 15 canons, 9 of them (canons 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10, 11, 13, and 14) are concerned in different ways with questions of ontological instability and the obliteration of bodies, identities, and matter itself in the eschaton.