

HOW CAN WE BE NOTHING?: THE CONCEPT OF NON-BEING IN ATHANASIUS AND MAXIMUS THE CONFESSOR

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For Athanasius, non-being describes the original state of creatures, and the state that creatures return to when they are not sustained by God. 'Being' is a gift given to creatures. Sin, for Athanasius, is creaturely rejection of God and therefore rejection of being itself. This suggests that when we sin, humans fall into nothingness and cease to exist, leading to the implication that fallen human nature and personal sin should result in our immediate non-existence. In this paper, I describe Athanasius' position on non-being and sin, and then go on to look at how the theology of Maximus the Confessor may offer a means to understanding the difficulty implied in Athanasius' work. I look at how Maximus understands being to be transformative, and something into which humans grow. Perfect being, which is full communion with God, or absolute non-being are, through Christ, reserved for the time after this life on earth.

This paper concerns Athanasius' understanding of non-existence and how human beings relate to it and to God. This consideration is important because it sheds light on how we understand human rejection of God. Without a definite affirmation of the reality of human rejection of God, we have very little grounds to talk about human freedom and co-operation with God. One of the things Athanasius allows us to do, is to conceive of both the moment of creation and sustaining providence as pivotal, continuous relationships between the created order and the Creator. These relationships are broken by sin. In *On the Incarnation*, Athanasius poses the premise that: if creatures are brought forth out of nothing by the Word and sustained by him, then when creatures break from him and withdraw themselves from him, they reject being itself. To return to non-existence, or non-being, is thus a result of sin, of choosing to reject God. This paper is about how literally we can understand Athanasius' dedication to the idea that sinning returns us to a state of nothing identical to that we were first brought out of in Genesis. On the one hand, we need a strong affirmation of the reality of human choice to turn from God, but on the other, sin clearly does not result in an immediate lapse into non-being equivalent to that from which we have been brought forth, since we continue to go about our daily lives. To address this difficulty, I draw on the logic of Maximus the Confessor to think about how sense can be made of this seemingly paradoxical situation.

Before continuing I wish to clarify what is meant by the term ‘non-being’ or ‘non-existence’. In the passage on which I am focussing in *On the Incarnation*, Athanasius uses the term *μὴ εἶναι*.¹ The nuance of what he means by this is given by the context in which we find the term, rather than the precise terminology used. Athanasius uses *μὴ εἶναι* to describe the state of creatures before they were called into existence. Creation had no being, no existence; it was nothing. Before being called into being, we were nothing. When we reject God, we return to that same state, to absolute non-being. It is the doctrine of creation out of nothing that grounds Athanasius’ references to absence of being in this passage. This absolute nothingness, key to the Christian tradition, is what is referred back to by Athanasius when he talks of human loss of the knowledge of God, as we shall come to in a moment.

In the passages I refer to from Maximus, creatures are gifted being – *τὸ εἶναι*. In this paper, I argue that the way Maximus talks about the movement of creatures from *being* to *eternal well-being* can be useful for understanding Athanasius’ discussion of non-being. While I do not directly compare Maximus’ passages on non-being to Athanasius’ here, we do see Maximus use the same phrase as Athanasius elsewhere in a similar context. For example, in *Ambiguum* 29, Maximus clarifies a grammatical difficulty and concludes that by the phrase “Ὡς γὰρ ἀδύνατον εἶναι λέγομεν πονηρὸν εἶναι Θεὸν ἢ μὴ εἶναι”, we should understand that it is impossible for God to be evil, as well as impossible for God to not exist. Maximus writes that ‘καὶ στίξαι καὶ πάλιν ἄρξασθαι νοήματος ἑτέρου καὶ προσεπαγαγεῖν, ‘ἢ μὴ εἶναι’, ἀντὶ τοῦ ‘ἀνυπάρκτου εἶναι’, which in Constan’s translation reads ‘and so make the final clause the beginning of a new idea, so that “or not to be” means “or not to exist”’.² Unlike creatures, it is not possible for God ‘not to be’, which is ‘*μὴ εἶναι*’ the same term that Athanasius uses. We see this reiterated in *Ambiguum* 34, where Maximus writes that, ‘But all things that are “around” the essence do not disclose what the essence itself is, but what it is not, such as not being created, not having a beginning, not being finite, not being corporeal, and any other such things that are around the essence, and indicate what it is not, but not what it is’.³ Maximus uses the same phrase ‘what is not’ (*μὴ εἶναι*) to talk apophatically about what we cannot know about God and how this allows us indirectly to have a certain kind of knowledge of God. The use of *μὴ εἶναι* here is less terminological and reads more like a turn of phrase, as in ‘that which is not the case’, suggesting that *μὴ εἶναι* is not used to refer to ‘non-being’ in any capitalised or consistent way. However, the context of both these citations allows us to affirm that Maximus is aware of the usage that Athanasius provides of *μὴ εἶναι* referring to creaturely non-existence before creation. Thus, while I do not directly compare

¹ Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation of the Word* 4.5, in *Sources Chrétiennes*, ed. C. Kannengiesser, vol. 199 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1973).

² *Ambiguum* 29 (PG 91:1272D–1273A), in *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers: The Ambigua*, ed. and trans. Nicholas Constan, vol. 2 (London: Harvard University Press, 2014), 34–35.

³ *Ambiguum* 34 (PG 91:1288B) in *On Difficulties*, vol. 2, 66–67.

statements on non-being in Maximus and Athanasius, it is clear that there is at least some continuity in the way that the term ‘being’ (εἶναι) is being used by both theologians. We may therefore consider Maximus’ comments on being – well-being – eternal well-being (τὸ εἶναι – τὸ εὖ εἶναι – τὸ ἀεὶ εὖ εἶναι) which I go on to explain, as being applicable terms that can be added to Athanasius’ understanding of creaturely being and non-being.

Athanasius’ Understanding of Non-Being and Sin

For Athanasius, non-being describes the original state of creatures, and the state to which creatures return when they are not sustained by God. Being is a gift given to creatures. God causes and sustains their existence, continually granting them being, which is of God. Sin, for Athanasius, is creaturely rejection of God and therefore rejection of being itself. This implies that when we sin, humans fall into nothingness and cease to exist, leading to the implication that fallen human nature and personal sin should result in our immediate non-existence.

Athanasius explains that creatures are made out of nothing. He draws on Exodus 3:14 to say that *being* is gifted from God, since God *is*. Athanasius writes that in despising and rejecting God, humankind devised evil and

...received the condemnation of death with which they had been threatened; and from thenceforth no longer remained as they were made, but were being corrupted according to their devices; and death had the mastery over them as king. For transgression of the commandment was turning them back to their natural state, so that just as they have had their being out of nothing, so also, as might be expected, they might look for corruption into nothing in the course of time.⁴

Athanasius suggests that it is the act of rejecting God himself that brings about this change in human nature. In rejecting God, humans make a choice that results in eventual death and non-being. This is also apparent later when Athanasius writes that; humans, ‘having rejected things eternal, and, by counsel of the devil, turned to things of corruption, became the cause of their own corruption in death.’⁵ However, as Athanasius goes on to explain:

For if, out of a former normal state of non-existence they [humans] were called into being by the Presence and loving-kindness of the Word, it followed naturally that when men were bereft of the knowledge of God and

⁴ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 4.4, in *Athanasius: Selected Works and Letters*, trans. A. Robertson and ed. P. Schaff (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1987), 219.

⁵ *Ibid.* 5.1.

were turned back to what was not (for what is evil is not, but what is good is), they should, since they derive their being from God who IS, be everlastingly bereft even of being; in other words, that they should be disintegrated and abide in death and corruption.⁶

Here, Athanasius suggests that to be bereft of the knowledge of God, is to fall into non-being. If God *is*, then to turn away from him is not just to have a curse of mortality, as implied earlier, but to lapse into non-being and total absence of being. We can recall Psalm 104 where, ‘When thou takest away their breath they perish and are turned again to their dust. When thou lettest thy breath go forth they shall be made and thou shalt renew the face of the earth’ (Ps 104:29–30). The integrity of a creature’s existence is tied to the breath of God who goes out amongst them and creates and sustains them, and without whom, they are nothing.

Though Athanasius seems to attribute a corrupt and fallen life to humans who turn away from God, noting that they will eventually die and fall into nothing, his logic suggests that to be fallen, is to reject *being* itself. This is because (1) Athanasius gives importance to human choice, saying that we either choose to follow God, know him, and continuously share the gift of being from him, or we reject him and knowledge of him, making being foreign to us. And (2) if we refer back to my introductory remarks on what non-being is for Athanasius, we can immediately see that there is no minor way of rejecting being. We have being itself because it is gifted to us. If we refuse this gift, we return to the nothingness that was before creation was brought forth from it. If we take this understanding of sin to be valid, it would seem sensible to suggest that when humanity fell, or at any moment that we personally sin, we fall immediately into non-being, since we have chosen to alienate ourselves from *being itself*. My question is this: how can fallen human nature exist and *persist* if Athanasius is right that God is being and that to turn away from him is to choose non-being? How can we be nothing, when we clearly persist in our fallen lives and have a chance of redemption in Christ?

Maximus’ Understanding of Being and Completion

I think we can make sense of this difficulty by looking at the cosmic theology of Maximus the Confessor. Maximus describes the movement of the created cosmos in a triad that he calls creation – movement – rest (γένεσις – κίνησις – στάσις).⁷ This also corresponds to another triad that he uses to explain the ethical movement of the cosmos through humanity as its mediator: being – well-being – eternal well-be-

⁶ *Ibid.* 4.5.

⁷ E.g. *Ambiguum* 15 (PG 91:1220CD), in *On Difficulties*, vol. 1, 372–374; Cf. Polycarp Sherwood, *The Earlier Ambigua of Saint Maximus the Confessor and his Refutation of Origenism*, *Studia Anselmiana* XXXVI (Rome: Orbis Catholicus, 1955), 92–93.

ing (τὸ εἶναι – τὸ εὔ εἶναι – τὸ ἀεὶ εὔ εἶναι).⁸ In the act of creation (both the original moment and continued creation in all that is about us), God grants creatures *being*. In the movement that is gifted to all creatures, we have the capacity to move towards God. According to Maximus' interpretation, humans have been given the gift of rationality and free will, which enables us to choose to love on behalf of all creation. Ordinarily, this is a choice that brings all of creation into well-being, a choice that is creaturely acceptance of God. This paves the way for eternal well-being which is gifted through grace by God. This corresponds to *theosis*, of which we may have a foretaste in this life, but which is ultimately reserved for new creation after the death of this world.⁹ For Maximus, the fall and corruption of human nature is the human rejection of God, and therefore the loss of the ability to move towards this 'well-being', without which the cosmos cannot find its perfect end and rest (*telos*) in God. Christ restores this possibility, and human nature that partakes in Christ is restored in and through him (as is the rest of the cosmos that is completed in him as human and divine mediator).

The most significant part of this for our problem is that Maximus has quite a complex understanding of what being is. As implied in the triad creation – movement – rest, there is something incomplete about creation and the existence of creatures themselves that is not fulfilled until rest in eternal well-being. This understanding of being as something that can be transfigured and perfected, as something not yet complete, may also help us understand non-being as something not yet fully realised, but whose threat lingers with us. Through the opportunity we have in Christ, sin does not seem to result in an immediate lapse into nothing. Rather than wondering at what stage in sinning we might expect a lapse into non-being, we might rather consider at what stage we have truly attained real being. Maximus implies that we are not truly human until we have chosen to partake in well-being and are received into eternal well-being. Our communion with God is essential to our full-existence. We have not yet *become* fully human. Our calling, and God's will for each of us, expressed in the *logoi* of creation, is that we choose to move towards him and are received into full communion with him so as to become gods by grace. Through Christ, we have been given the opportunity in our lives on earth to choose whether we wish to receive God or reject him. Though we can have foretastes of rejecting God in our lives, and foretastes of deification in our lives, it is at the end of this time on earth that our choices to be reconciled to or to reject God have final weight.

Crucial to this is understanding the role Christ plays. Without Christ, the full immediate reality of which Athanasios speaks would be upon us. Because of Christ's incarnation, death and resurrection, however, we are granted the time needed to choose to live in him. In Maximus' words, we are granted the crucial stage of *movement*, of human choice to choose well-being, and time on earth to learn how

⁸ Maximus, *Ambiguum* 7 (PG 91:1073C), in *On Difficulties*, vol. 1, 86.

⁹ Maximus, *Ambiguum* 15 (PG 91:1220C), in *On Difficulties*, vol. 1, 372.

to love, to learn how to be human, and how to participate in what it means to be human.

An image which I found helpful for thinking about this kind of incomplete understanding of being, is the parable of the fig tree in Luke which continues to bear no fruit. The Gardener asks the Orchard Owner to give him one more year to try and cultivate the tree and encourage it to bear fruit (Luke 13:6–9). Though the tree is dead and refuses to bear fruit, it has a grace period by the intercession of the Gardener, which, through his love, may bring it new life. In this time, it is neither consigned to death, nor has its full fruit-bearing potential been realised. It is a tree, but it is not the fullest perfect expression of what was intended for it. Its life on earth with the Gardener will determine what it becomes of it in a year's time.

Ultimately, we still see in Maximus' work a dedication to Athanasius' clear distinction that rejection of God results in a return to the primordial nothingness from which creatures were created. By considering Athanasius' thought through Maximus' however, we can understand how this lapse back into nothing is reserved for the eschaton, where the grace period of human striving will determine the final rejection or reception of God by creatures.

Conclusion

A way of staying true to Athanasius' important understanding of sin as non-being and rejection of God is to marry it to Maximus' understanding of transformative being, of nature as always having been about a journey towards perfection through hypostatic choice. The fall as a corruption of human nature meant that the choice to participate in God and transfigure the cosmos was rejected by humans. In honouring that choice, humanity is granted Christ—the Gardener—who effectively suspends that ultimate fall into absence and non-being. Through him, we may again choose to live in transfigured human nature, participate in being, move towards well-being and may even be graced by the gift of eternal-wellbeing. Athanasius' 'sin as nothing' still exists, but is instead reserved until after that year of intercession in the orchard is done. We can both acknowledge non-being as mistaken creaturely movement that is given an opportunity for 'true being by participation' in the life, death and resurrection of Christ, and know that if a creature persists to reject life, it can only, at the end of time, fall back into the primordial nothingness that Athanasius describes.