

RETHINKING THE PROBLEM OF SEXUAL DIFFERENCE IN *AMBIGUUM* 41

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Maximus the Confessor's *Ambiguum* 41 contains some rather untypical observations concerning the distinction of sexes in the human person: there is a certain ambiguity as to whether the distinction of the sexes was intended by God and is 'by nature' (as the Book of Genesis and most Church Fathers assert) or whether it is a product of the Fall, while Christ is described thrice as 'shaking out of nature the distinctive characteristics of male and female', 'driving out of nature the difference and division of male and female', and 'removing the difference between male and female'. Different readings of these passages engender important implications that can be drawn out from the Confessor's thought, both eschatological implications and otherwise. The subject has been picked up by Cameron Partridge, Doru Costache and Karolina Kochanczyk–Boninska, amongst others, but is by no means settled, as quite different conclusions have been formulated. The noteworthy and far-reaching implications of Maximus' theological stance, as well as its problems, are not the object of this paper. Here, I am merely trying to demonstrate what exactly Maximus says in these peculiar and much discussed passages through a close reading, in order to avoid a double-edged Maximian misunderstanding—which would either draw overly radical implications from those passages, projecting definitely non-Maximian visions on to the historical Maximus, or none at all, as if those passages represented standard Patristic positions.

Maximus the Confessor's *Ambiguum ad Ioannem* 41¹ is mainly concerned with Maximus' fivefold cosmological division to be overcome by humanity through Christ, and contains a number of quite uncommon assertions concerning sexual difference, which may not seem to be in complete harmony with other passages in the *Ambigua*; for example, the assertion that the human person, following Christ, 'shakes out of nature the distinctive characteristics of male and female',² 'drives out of nature the difference and division of male and female',³ and 'removes the differ-

¹ Maximus the Confessor, *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers. The Ambigua*, ed. and trans. Nicholas Constas, vol. 2 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 102–12. 'The natures are innovated, and God becomes man.'

² (PG 91:1305C).

³ (PG 91:1309A).

ence between male and female.’⁴ Apart from the treatments of gender, marriage, and cognate themes by classic Maximian scholars such as Hans Urs von Balthasar and Lars Thunberg, and apart from Adam Cooper’s study⁵ dedicated to the Maximian concept of the body, three scholars have explicitly engaged this particular question, *i.e.* the challenge posed by the peculiarity of the passages in *Ambiguum ad Ioannem* 41: Cameron Partridge, in his dissertation ‘Transfiguring Sexual Difference in Maximus the Confessor’,⁶ Doru Costache in two articles,⁷ and Karolina Kochańczyk-Bonińska in a forthcoming book chapter.⁸ However, interpretations of what the Confessor exactly means in these passages differ considerably—and different interpretations entail different *implications*, some of which could be quite striking and of interest not only to Maximian and Patristic philosophical anthropology, but also to fields such as gender studies, as Partridge has demonstrated. In this short paper, I will simply attempt a close reading of these particular passages, without comparing them with other Maximian passages concerning gender and sexual difference.⁹

The big question is whether, in the context of Maximus’ vision, sexual difference will be eschatologically retained (albeit transformed) or abolished—this is a debatable question despite the clarity of Gal 3:28, which enumerates sexual difference among other social, not natural or ontological, differences (like slave and free, Jew and Gentile) which are not present in Christ. Another question is whether sexual difference is prelapsarian or lapsarian, *i.e.* natural or a corruption-related effect of the Fall; while Genesis 1:27 and 5:2 are quite clear on this, advocating the former, it is quite startling that this can be seen as a debatable question in Maximus.¹⁰

Concerning the context: *Ambiguum* 41 focuses mainly on cosmological and ontological themes. The following passage elucidates these:

⁴ (PG 91:1309D).

⁵ Adam G. Cooper, *The Body in St Maximus the Confessor: Holy Flesh, Wholly Deified* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁶ Cameron Elliot Partridge, ‘Transfiguring Sexual Difference in Maximus the Confessor’ (PhD diss., Harvard Divinity School, 2008).

⁷ Doru Costache, ‘Living above Gender: Insights from Saint Maximus the Confessor’, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 21, no. 2 (2013): 261–90; ‘Gender, Marriage, and Holiness in Amb. Io. 10 and 41’, in *Men and Women in the Early Christian Centuries*, Early Christian Studies 18, ed. Wendy Mayer and Ian J. Elmer, (Strathfield: St Paul’s Publications, 2014), 351–71.

⁸ Karolina Kochańczyk-Bonińska, ‘The Philosophical Basis of Maximus’ Concept of Sexes: The Reasons and Purposes of the Distinction Between Man and Woman’, in *Maximus the Confessor as a European Philosopher*, ed. Sotiris Mitralexis *et al.* (Eugene, OR: Cascade/Wipf & Stock, 2017).

⁹ In this close reading, much is owed to Prof. Torstein Tollefsen (University of Oslo), Dr Sebastian Mateiescu (University of Bucharest), Dr Vladimir Cvetkovic (University of Belgrade), Prof. Christophe Erismann (Universität Wien/University of Lausanne), and Prof. Susumu Tanabe (Galatasaray University), with whom these passages were discussed in a recent Maximian workshop at the Halki Seminary on the island of Halki/Heybeliada (May 2016).

¹⁰ Cameron Partridge traces Gregory of Nyssa’s influence on Maximus insofar as this issue is concerned in the second chapter of his thesis. Cf. Partridge, ‘Transfiguring Sexual Difference in Maximus the Confessor’, 23–72.

The argument of *Amb.Io.* 41 develops in roughly five parts, namely, the prologue and the list of five divisions, which describe the whole of reality from the horizon of the created and the uncreated down to the human being (1304D–1305A); the project of the five unions, beginning from the narrowest point represented by humankind to end with the culminating synthesis of the created and the uncreated (1305A–1308C); the fall, its divisive nature, and the five syntheses accomplished by Christ (1308C–1312B)'; the factors that make unification possible (PG 91:1312B–1313B); and the interpretation of the initial Gregorian saying that serves as a pretext for the chapter (1313C–1316A).¹¹

The five cosmological divisions are: (a) the created-uncreated distinction, (b) the distinction between the intelligible and the sensible, (c) between heaven and earth, (d) between paradise and the inhabited world, and finally (e) the division into male and female.¹² These divisions are to be bridged by humanity after Christ in reverse order, so that the divine economy can be fulfilled.

In order for the proposed reading to take place, working definitions (not devoid of oversimplification) of key terms are in order:

- 1) For Maximus, the *logoi of natures* are the uncreated *wills, intentions, and utterances* of God for created beings.
- 2) *Substances* and *natures* are, of course, created, meaning that they belong to the second part of the first cosmological and ontological division.
- 3) *Nature* and *according to nature* mainly and usually refer to a creature's *prelapsarian* state. (The Fall, a basic ontological term for Maximian ontology, need not be historically understood here for Maximus' *Weltanschauung* to be coherent; after all, the Confessor comments that the Fall takes place *simultaneously* with the creation of the human being [ἀμα τῷ γενέσθαι]¹³).

The brevity of this paper dictates that only the crucial passages themselves be studied here: sexual difference is the *first* division to be transcended by the human person (it being the *last* cosmological division) after Christ who has first achieved this. In a tribute to the *Ambiguum*'s own logic, let us start from the last passage:

- 1) Thus He [Christ] united, first of all, ourselves in Himself through removal of the difference between male and female [διὰ τῆς ἀφαιρέσεως τῆς κατὰ τὸ ἄρρεν καὶ τὸ θῆλυ διαφορᾶς], and instead of men and women, in whom this mode of division is especially evident, He showed us as properly and truly to be simply human beings, thoroughly formed according to Him, bearing His image intact and completely unadulterated, touched in no way by any marks

¹¹ Doru Costache, 'Gender, Marriage, and Holiness in Amb. Io. 10 and 41', 360–61.

¹² *Ambiguum ad Ioannem* 41.1–2.

¹³ *Quaestiones ad Thalassium* 61 (PG 90:628AB).

of corruption [ἀνθρώπους μόνον κυρίως τε καὶ ἀληθῶς ἀποδείξας, κατ' αὐτόν δι' ὅλου μεμορφωμένους καὶ σώαν αὐτοῦ καὶ παντελῶς ἀκίβδηλον τὴν εἰκόνα φέροντας, ἥς κατ' οὐδένα τρόπον οὐδέν τῶν φθορᾶς γνωρισμάτων ἄπτεται].¹⁴

There is a distinction in Maximian thought between *difference* and *division*, in which certain differences will be eschatologically retained, but *not* as divisions. It is crucial to see that this is *not* what Maximus proposes here concerning the transcendence of sexual difference in Christ and, by extension, the eschatological state of humanity: it is the *difference*, διαφορά, itself that is removed, not merely the division. The second passage:

2) In this way [*i.e.* by becoming man by virgin birth], He [Christ] showed, I think, that there was perhaps another mode, foreknown by God, for the multiplication of human beings, had the first human being kept the commandment and not *cast* himself down to the level of irrational animals by misusing the mode of his proper powers—and so He drove out from nature the difference and division into male and female, a difference, as I have said, which He in no way needed in order to become man, and without which existence would perhaps have been possible. There is no need for this division to last *perpetually*, for in Christ Jesus, says the divine apostle, *there is neither male nor female* [Gal 3:28].¹⁵

Sexual difference, 'the difference and division into male and female' (τὴν κατὰ τὸ ἄρρεν καὶ θῆλυ διαφοράν τε καὶ διαίρεσιν—note the use of both 'difference' and 'division' together) *and not only* a misuse of that difference for post-lapsarian sexual reproduction, was 'driven out from nature' by Christ [τῆς φύσεως ἐξωθούμενος].

While this difference and division does not need to last perpetually, it *is/was* part of humanity's *nature*, and not simply a post-lapsarian consequence.

3) This is why man was introduced last among beings—like a kind of natural bond mediating between the universal extremes through his parts, and unifying through himself things that by nature are separated from each other by a great distance—so that, by making of his own division a beginning of the unity which gathers up all things to God their Author, and proceeding by order and rank through the mean terms, he might reach the limit of the sublime ascent that comes about through the union of all things in God, in whom there is no division, completely shaking off from nature, by means of a supremely dispassionate condition of divine virtue, the property of male and female, which in no way was linked to the original principle of the divine plan concerning human generation, so that he might be shown forth as, and become solely a human being according to the divine plan, not divided by

¹⁴ *Ambiguum ad Ioannem* 41.9.

¹⁵ *Ambiguum ad Ioannem* 41.7.

the designation of male and male (according to the principle by which he formerly came into being), nor divided into the parts that now appear around him, thanks to the perfect union, as I said, with his own principle, according to which he exists.¹⁶

Now the reference is to humanity and the human person, after Christ—not Christ himself. Let us try to ‘unlock’ this:

- 1) Man [is to] *completely* shake off from nature...the property of male and female¹⁷ (the property, *not only* the *division* retaining a *difference*),
- 2) which in no way was linked to the original principle of the divine plan concerning human generation,¹⁸
- 3) so that he might be shown forth as and become solely a human being according to the divine plan,¹⁹
- 4) not divided by the designation of male and male,²⁰
- 5) according to the principle by which he formerly came into being.²¹

The property of male and female *is* a part of nature, which is to be ‘shaken off’ by mankind following Christ. By ‘nature’ Maximus usually refers to the pre-lapsarian state as well.

This part of nature was (2) not foreseen (a) in the *logos* of humanity’s nature/substance—meaning that God did *not* intend for sexual difference to exist *at all* and this would be a product of the Fall (contrary to Genesis, that is)—OR (b) *was* foreseen, but *not* in the *logos* of human *generation*. Could this mean that only human *generation*, *i.e.* sexual reproduction, is post-lapsarian, sexual difference itself being pre-lapsarian? The phrasing in (2) suggests the latter, which would be much more mild, scriptural and ‘mainstream’ than the former. *However, this changes in (3)*: here, divine intention (*θεία πρόθεσις* for humanity, practically synonymous with the humanity’s *logos*) determines human persons *without the very property of male and female*, not only without their sexual reproduction. One objection could be that *θεία πρόθεσις* in (3) refers to God’s providence and economy and *not* to humanity’s *logos*. But this is not the case, as is made apparent in the phrasing of (5): there, the extinction (‘completely shaking off/πάντη ἐκτιναξάμενος’) or rather non-existence of sexual *difference* (as we end up with *ἄνθρωπον μόνον*), and not only of sexual reproduction at the level of the *logos* of humanity, *καθ’ ὃν καὶ προηγουμένως γεγένηται*—*i.e.*, not only in an eschatological perspective, but a past reality pertain-

¹⁶ *Ambiguum ad Ioannem* 41.3.

¹⁷ Κατὰ τὸ θῆλυ καὶ τὸ ἄρσεν ιδιότητα πάντη τῆς φύσεως ἐκτιναξάμενος.

¹⁸ Τὴν μηδαμῶς ἡρτημένην δηλαδὴ κατὰ τὸν προηγούμενον λόγον τῆς περὶ τὴν γένεσιν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου θείας προθέσεως.

¹⁹ ὥστε δειχθῆναι τε καὶ γενέσθαι κατὰ τὴν θεϊαν πρόθεσιν ἄνθρωπον μόνον.

²⁰ τῇ κατὰ τὸ ἄρσεν καὶ τὸ θῆλυ προσηγορίᾳ μὴ διαιρούμενον.

²¹ καθ’ ὃν καὶ προηγουμένως γεγένηται λόγον.

ing to humanity's coming into being. Does the property of sexual difference exist at the level of *nature* (as (1) and the other passages would indicate), but not at the level of *logos of nature*, and if yes, how?

Conclusion

As we can see, the problem here is that Maximus, an indispensable Confessor for the Christian Churches, “not only asserts that sexual difference itself (and not only sexual division or reproduction) will not endure the eschata,” thus going beyond standard interpretations of Gal 3:28, but he also goes on to assert that the differentiation between male and female is not even part of humanity's *logos of nature*, of God's prelapsarian (or rather a-lapsarian) will and intention for humankind—quite contrary to Genesis.

The most noteworthy implications of this theological stance (and, apart from Patristic and philosophical anthropology, I name gender studies as an example), as well as its problems, are not the object of this paper. Here I am simply trying to demonstrate *what does Maximus exactly say* in these peculiar and oft-discussed passages, in order to avoid a two-edged Maximian misunderstanding—which would either draw overly radical implications from those passages, projecting definitely non-Maximian visions on the historical Maximus, or none at all, as if those passages represented standard Patristic positions.