

Maximus the Confessor and the Metamorphosis of the Idea of Justice **

Abstract: The term “justice” appears infrequently in Maximus’ works; moreover, when used, it does not refer always to a social and psychological virtue. To my knowledge, the question of justice in Maximus underwent a metamorphosis, making for a largely unexplored subject which I wish to investigate below. I will study first the concept of justice from the perspective of the divine providence and then I will investigate its transfiguration in Maximus’ works. As this separation is only methodological, I will finish my analysis by pointing out the connection between the two paradigms.

Keyword: Maximus the Confessor, Justice, Divine Providence, Divine Economy, Deification.

I. The issue of divine providence (ἡ πρόνοια) present in the writings of Maximus that implies the notions of judgement (κρίσις) and justice (δικη) has been little studied until now (only Blowers 2012, 199-217 and Neil 2015, 235-49). As it is well known, the stoics have developed a very detailed theory about providence (Cicero 2010, 27-59; Laertius 2013, 560-61), a theory that Maximus could have assumed directly from their texts or, rather, indirectly, from the writings of the Bishop Nemesius of Emesa (Sharples 1983, 141-56). In turn, Maximus exerted a decisive influence on Isaac Commenus (Sebastocrator), for example, who wrote a study entitled *De providentia* (Steel 2012, 255-57).

From the beginning one must say that everything becomes intelligible in Maximus if one reads his works in an Christological key since the Logos Itself is the Proniator. For example, in *Quaestiones ad Thalassium*, 53, Maximus asserts that providence and judgement are the eyes of the Logos, and in the same writing, cap. 54, he speaks about providence and judgement as if they are two wings of the same Logos. More than that, in the same *Quaestiones ad Thalassium*, 55, Maximus says he who understood the value of the numbers discovers the providence of God (Van Deun 1992, 238).

* Research Department, Faculty of Philosophy and Socio-Political Sciences, “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași, Romania; email: fcristmareanu@gmail.com

** **Acknowledgement:** This article was supported by a grant of the Romanian National Authority for Scientific Research, CNCS-UEFISCDI, project number PN-III-P1-1.1-TE-2016-0259 (Scientific Director: Florin Crîșmăreanu), within PNCDI III.

Therefore, arithmology represents another way that people may follow in order to understand divine providence. In the end, “everything is number”, as it has been so frequently said in the Pythagorean School, traditions that enjoy a certain renewal in the era of the late Antiquity.

The theme of providence is strictly related to the purpose of creation. Creation does not represent the result of an originary fall, as one may discover this idea in the writings of Origen and Evagrius Ponticus, but it has been done with a purpose (σκοπός). In this sense, Maximus explicitly says that “For God’s judgment looks not on what is done but to the intention behind it” (Maximus 1985, 52). In another writing, the Saint Confessor asserts that “The purpose of divine Providence is to unity by an upright faith and spiritual love those who have been separated in diverse ways by vice” (Maximus 1985, 77). Creation from the infinite goodness of God (Maximus 1985, 75) subsists and is completed in Christ through the way towards deification, towards justice, towards the natural condition of men, as we may see in the following lines.

The connection between providence and deification (θέωσις), our natural, just condition, as one may observe from the mention made by Maximus, after the book of the prophet Isaiah (9, 5; 25, 1), of God’s Secret Council from eternity in *Quaestiones ad Thalassium*, 60, *Ambigua ad Iohannem* 10 and *Capita theologica et aconomica* II, 23 and 25, that does not sights out something else than our deification (Maximus 1985, 102). In other words, God’s Great Council decides the unsaid kenosis of the Son for our deification. Divine providence is indestructibly related, it is identical from a certain point of view with it, to economy (οἰκονομία), a word that might be translated through *incarnation, plan, design, administration, providence, responsibility, duties, compromise, lie, or guile* (Mondzain 2005, 13).

“Every good Christian will have to be an economist” (Mondzain 2005, 38). Scientific literature defines at least two complementary senses of the word economy: firstly, Christological economy, the Incarnation of the Word, that is the Son of God is understood as “an economy of the Father”, and, secondly, economy as providence understood as a divine plan that guides creation from the beginning until the end. The two aspects are complementary because “God’s economies encompass everything that the incarnational economy will redeem the whole universe. If this economy disappears, everything disappears” (Mondzain 2005, 36). On the other side, Gilbert Dagron appreciates that it

is necessary to go beyond summary definitions and see in the economy a well-constructed concept. Despite certain striking formulations, a fine rhetorical dressing, and some moral connotations, the notion remains blurred. Above all it is purely negative because it is satisfied to merely note and accept a definitive disjunction between ideal standards and a social space over which they henceforth have no hold [...]. If the notion of economy had a positive content,

we would have a real confrontation of ideas, a dialectic; but as the concept is empty, we only have two poles between which a sort of equilibrium is established. (Dagron 1990, 1-18; Mondzain 2005, 11)

Faced with such hard-to-understand statements as they come from the side of an excellent connoisseur of the Byzantine spirituality, Marie-José Mondzain captures in an excellent manner the falsity of G. Dagron's assumptions when he asserts that "To talk of an 'empty concept' or a 'negative concept', however, in relation to a term that in Christian texts refers both to the incarnation and Christ himself cannot but cause us some surprise" (Mondzain 2005, 11).

In *Ambigua ad Iohannem*, 60, for example, Maximus approaches the problem of the relation between "economy" and "theology". His spiritual father, the Patriarch Sophronius of Jerusalem (560-638), pleads for a clear distinction between theology and economy:

It is well and greatly pleasant for all those faithful to announce the one through the other, and to guard in an unmingled manner the showing of each of one. Even if the reasons of the Trinity are announced through the voices of economy, even if the words of economy are said through the theological announcements of the Trinity – because the Word is known as One from the Trinity, who has taken upon Him the human economy and saved the entire flutter of men –, but this is made through the means of distinct meanings and appellatives and through own means, so that from here a mixture and an interference to be born between "theological" and Trinitarians announcements and multiple "economic" appellatives because of the descending to us, the humbles of God the Word. (*Homily on the Annunciation*, Migne 1865, 87(3), 3221)

Maximus, the main follower of Patriarchs Sophronius' struggle with the heresies of the time, could not neglect this fundamental distinction, since his thought is a Christological, economical one by far, because only οἰκονομία „thought ensures the cohesion of the divine plan for the whole of the universe from its beginning until the end" (Mondzain 2005, 36). In the words of Maximus, from the *Capita X*, 20, "we, the ones who are so cared for, have to be grateful because, even if those that are arranged for us by providence presume difficulties, the ending is a happy one".

II. Following the Evagrian tradition (present especially in his youthful writings), we observe in Maximus, besides the virtues of the body, like fasting, vigils, sleeping on the ground, service to others, manual labor, the following hierarchy of the virtues of the soul: love, forbearance, meekness, self-mastery, prayer (Maximus 1985, 55). In *Ep.* 2, we find the same hierarchy adding gentleness, humbleness, benefaction, charity, kindness, peace and joyfulness. As one may observe, in the list of the aforementioned virtues present in the first writings of the Confessor, justice is not to be found among them.

Starting from the three parts of the soul: concupiscent (ἐπιθυμητικὸν), irascible (θυμοειδές) and rational (λογιστικὸν), found in Plato (1991, 106-10) we observe the three virtues: temperance, courage and wisdom (Mureșan 2000, 193-96). To these one may add justice that crowns the other ones. The Greek philosopher asserts that

in truth justice was, as it seems, something of this sort; however, not with respect to a man's minding his external business, but with respect to what is within, with respect to what truly concerns him and his own. He doesn't let each part in him mind other people's business or the three classes in the soul meddle with each other, but really sets his own house in good order and rules himself; he arranges himself, becomes his own friend, and harmonizes the three parts, exactly like three notes in a harmonic scale, lowest, highest and middle. And if there are some other parts in between, he binds them together and becomes entirely one from many, moderate and harmonized. (Plato 1991, 123)

The register is valid for Aristotle as well, who considers that "justice is the most excellent of the virtues" (Aristotle 1991, 68).

The platonic tetrad of virtues: temperance, courage, wisdom/ prudence and justice, is to be found as well in the Maximian writings (Maximus 1985, 58). Therefore, we do not have reasons to doubt the fact, verifiable through texts, that Maximus knew well the Platonic tradition (Plato 1991, 294) that considers the soul to be simple, immortal (*Opuscula theologica et polemica* I, Migne 1865, 91(3), 20) but, at the same time, threefold: concupiscent, irascible and rational (Maximus 1985, 42).

For some exegetes, "la question éthique traverse l'œuvre de Maxime. On la trouve dans les *Capita de caritate* à connotation fortement monastique. Elle est aussi largement présente dans le *Capita theologica et oeconomica* ou elle est articulée à l'étude de la nature et à la théologie. Elle en représente la porte d'entrée. Elle est enfin la visée fondamentale des *Quaestiones ad Thalassium*" (Van Deun & Mueller-Jourdan 2015, 445). I have observed that, probably, under the influence of the Origenist-Evagrian tradition, the Platonic virtues dominate, especially, in the Maximian youth writings (*Capita de caritate, Epistula II, Liber asceticus*). Here are a few examples through which Maximus valorizes the three faculties of the soul theorized by Plato and the virtues that lead the soul towards justice, the state of perfection to which the soul tends:

1. "The soul is moved reasonably when its concupiscent element is qualified by self-mastery, its irascible element cleaves to love and turns away from hate, and the rational element lives with God through prayer and spiritual contemplation" (Maximus 1985, 77).

2. "If you want to be just, assign to each part within you what it deserves, that is, to body and soul. To the rational part of the soul give spiritual reading and meditation and prayer. To the irascible part give spiritual love, which is opposed to hate. To the affective part give temperance and self-

mastery. To the bodily part give food and clothing, and only what is necessary” (Maximus 1985, 80).

3. “Curb the irascible element of the soul with love, weaken its concupiscible element with self-mastery, and give flight to its rational element with prayer, and the light of your mind will never be eclipsed” (Maximus 1985, 84).

4. Moreover, for Maximus, contrary to an interpretation that we frequently encounter:

The vices, whether of the concupiscible, the irascible, or the rational element, come upon us with the misuse of the faculties of the soul. Misuse of the rational faculty is ignorance and folly, of the irascible and concupiscible faculty, hate and intemperance. Their right use is knowledge and prudence. If this is so, nothing created and given existence by God is evil. (Maximus 1985, 61)

The exercise of the three Platonic virtues corresponding to the powers of the soul leads us to the fourth one, *justice*, the crowning of the other three ones, as follows from the *Mystagogy* of Maximus: “Now nothing is either so fitting for justification or so apt for divinization, if I can speak thus, and nearness to God as mercy offered with pleasure” (Maximus 1985, 211; Maximus 2011, 68: “Οὐδὲν γὰρ οὔτε πρὸς δικαιοσύνην οὔτω ῥάδιόν ἐστιν, οὔτε πρὸς θέωσιν, ἴν’ οὔτως εἶπω, καὶ τὴν πρὸς Θεὸν ἐγγύτητα καθέστηκεν ἐπιτήδειον, ὡς ἔλεος”). Firstly, our attention is drawn to the identification of *justice* and *deification*, which is not at all accidental. Interpreting this fragment from the *Mystagogy*, some exegetes consider that ethics (where justice is a fundamental theme) and deification are „étroitement interconnectées” (Van Deun & Mueller-Jourdan 2015, 445). More than that, “la divinisation est en un sens certifiée par l’éthique et l’horizon politique et social qui en découlent” (Van Deun & Mueller-Jourdan 2015, 445). From a Christian perspective, deification is a state that must be acquired by the soul. If, for Plato, justice “would be a certain health, beauty and good condition of a soul” (Plato 1991, 124), in the writings of Maximus the ontological register is changed, probably, starting from the passage present in *Malachi* 4, 2 „the sun of righteousness”, he speaks about „God, the intelligible *sun of righteousness*” (Maximus 2014, 247). Taking these aspects into consideration, *mutatis mutandis*, we may assume that the deified man is a healed man, healthy, just, but, who cannot become like this only by his own powers, but only through a conjoint work with Divine Grace. In this sense, Christ was explicit: “apart from me you can do nothing” (*John* 15, 5).

The Maximian idea from *Mystagogy* may have suffered the influence of Origenian tradition. What is Christ for us if not the model (*παράδειγμα*) that one has to follow (*Opuscula theologica et polemica*, Migne 1865, 91(3), 80)? In this sense, Origen speaks at a certain moment about those who “become capable of receiving Christ afresh in his character of the righteousness of

God (cf. 1 Cor. 1: 30)” (Origen 2013, 49). Only Christ is righteous, we may become righteous only by participating in Christ, therefore becoming parts of the divine nature.

I tend to believe that only a few examples of the Scripture and of the Holy Services of the Church may shed a ray of light over the above mentioned passage:

1. “the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them” (*Solomon’s wisdom* 3, 1); “the righteous live forever, and their reward is with the Lord; the Most High takes care of them” (*Solomon’s wisdom* 5, 15).

2. “Your people shall all be righteous; they shall possess the land forever” (*Isaiah* 60, 21)

3. *The righteous* will pass into “eternal life” (*Matthew* 25, 46), that is the deified ones; or “the spirits of the righteous made perfect” (*Hebrews* 12, 23).

4. “I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance” (*Luke* 5, 32).

5. “Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (*Matthew* 13, 43); and in the *Psalms* we encounter many times the sentence “the upright in heart” (*Psalms* 7, 10 *et passim.*).

6. The Deacon, during the Holy Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom says: “Wisdom! Let us attend. Let us listen to the Holy Gospel” (The Romanian version of this fragment includes the word “righteous” in the calling and an exact translation will sound like this “Wisdom, ye righteous, let us listen to the Holy Gospel”). Of course, this calling does not speak about our vertical position while standing on our feet, but about a state, a *righteous* one, that we should all acquire.

Therefore, having in mind the aforementioned examples, we tend to believe that the interpretation of righteousness encountered in the Maximian *Mystagogy* is not a theoretical one (strictly discursive), that places righteousness in a certain hierarchy of virtues, but rather a mystagogical, practical, liturgical one.

III. From what it has been shown in the rows above we may draw the following conclusions:

1. The link between divine providence and righteousness appears in a fragment from *Quaestiones ad Thalassium*, 60:

With a clear view to this end, God created the essences of created beings, and such is, properly speaking, the terminus of his providence and of the things under his providential care. Inasmuch as it leads to God, it is the recapitulation (*ἀνακεφαλαιῶσις*) of the things he has created. (Maximus 2003, 124)

This may signify that righteousness may be interpreted as well as a state of rest (*στάσις*) present in the Maximian anti-Origenist triad: beginning

(γένεσις), movement (κίνησις), rest (στάσις). What is interesting is that righteousness, the state of one being deified that is “ever-moving rest” (ἀεικίνητος στάσις – Maximus 1990, 53) is identified explicitly by Maximus with “joy” (ἀπόλαυσις). In the place of righteousness one may find, as well, the virtue of virtues: love that, in this situation, is interchangeable with righteousness.

2. For J. Rawls, “Justice is the first virtue of social institutions” (Rawls 1971, 3). Though in Maximus’ writings, unlike Plato’s *Dialogues*, justice does not represent neither a “social virtue”, nor a “psychological virtue” (Vlastos 1971, 123). For the Confessor, righteousness does not represent a social virtue, because it is not understood as a reward: “There is a vanity that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people who are treated according to the conduct of the wicked, and there are wicked people who are treated according to the conduct of the righteous. I said that this also is vanity” (*Ecclesiastes* 8, 14). Therefore, as we understood from Maximus’ texts, in the divine plan righteousness is not a reward given by God for a set of deeds committed by a human person at a certain time, but the natural condition of man, as he has been made by the Creator, “in His image and according to His likeness” (*Genesis* 1, 26), deified. After the fall this condition has been lost, through sins the mirror of the soul became darker and man needs to struggle in order to regain the Edenic condition. In a certain sense, righteousness may also be called as “the most excellent of the virtues” mentioned by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Aristotle 1991, 68).

3. As it is known, Maximus will receive, right after his death as a martyr in the year of 662, the name of Confessor, and a passage from Saint Paul’s Epistle to the Romans quoted by Maximus himself during his trial (*Disputatio inter Maximus et Theodosium Caesareae Bithyniae*) leads us in believing that as his mouth confessed for salvation, so his heart believed for justice: “if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved” (*Romans* 10, 9-10).

References

- Aristotle. 1991. *The Complete Works of Aristotle*. Revised Oxford Translation. Vol. 1-2. Edited by Jonathan Barnes. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Blowers, Paul. 2012. “On the ‘Play’ of Divine Providence in Gregory Nazianzen and Maximus the Confessor.” In: *Re-Reading Gregory of Nazianzus: Essays on History, Theology, and Culture*, edited by Christopher W. Beeley, 183-201. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press.
- Cicero. 2010. *De Natura Deorum Libri Tres*. Vol. 2. Edited by Joseph B. Mayor and J. H. Swainson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dagron, Gilbert. 1990. “La règle et l’exception. Analyse de la notion d’économie.” In: *Religieuse Devianz. Untersuchungen zu sozialen, rechtlichen und theologischen Reaktionen auf*

- religiöse Abweichungen im westlichen und östlichen Mittelalter*, edited by Dieter Simon, 1-18. Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann.
- Laertius, Diogenes. 2013. *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*. Edited with Introduction by Tiziano Dorandi. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Maximus the Confessor. 2014. *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers: The Ambigua*. Edited and translated by Nicholas Constas. 2 Vols. London: Harvard University Press.
- Maximus Confessor. 1985. *Selected Writings*. Translation and notes by George C. Berthold. New-York: Paulist Press.
- Maximus the Confessor. 1999. "Disputatio inter Maximus et Theodosium Caesareae Bithyniae." In: *Scripta saeculi VII vitam Maximii Confessoris illustrantia*, edited by Pauline Allen and Bronwen Neil, 73-151. Turnhout-Leuven: Brepols (CCSG 39).
- Maximus the Confessor. 1991. "Expositio orationis dominicae." In: *Maximi Confessoris opuscula exegetica duo*, Edita a Peter Van Deun, 27-73. Turnhout: Brepols (CCSG 23).
- Maximi Confessoris Mystagogia una cum Latina interpretatione Anastasii Bibliothecarii*. 2011. Edita a Christian Boudignon. Turnhout: Brepols (CCSG 69).
- Maximi Confessoris Quaestiones ad Thalassium: una cum latina interpretatione Ioannis Scotti Erivgenae iuxta posita I (Quaestiones I-LV)*. 1980. Ediderunt Carl Laga et Carlos Steel. Turnhout: Brepols (CCSG 7).
- Maximi Confessoris Quaestiones ad Thalassium: una cum latina interpretatione Ioannis Scotti Erivgenae iuxta posita II (Quaestiones LVI-LXV)*. 1990. Ediderunt Carl Laga et Carlos Steel. Turnhout: Brepols (CCSG 22).
- Migne, J.-P. 1865. *Patrologiae Cursus Completus. Series Graeca*. Paris: Migne.
- Mondzain, Marie-José. 2005. *Image, Icon, Economy. The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Mureșan, Valentin. 2000. *Comentariu la Republica lui Platon*. București: Metropol.
- Neil, Bronwen. 2015. "Divine Providence and the Gnostic Will before Maximus." In: *The Oxford Handbook of Maximus the Confessor*, edited by Pauline Allen and Bronwen Neil, 235-49. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Maximus the Confessor. 2003. *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ. Selected Writings from St. Maximus the Confessor*. Translated by Paul M. Blowers and Robert Louis Wilken. New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press.
- Origen. 2013. *On First Principles*. Translated by G.W. Butterworth. Notre Dame (Indiana): Ave Maria Press.
- Plato. 1991. *The Republic*. Translation and notes by Allan Bloom. New York: Basic Books.
- Rawls, John. 1971. *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Sharples, Robert W. 1983. "Nemesius of Emesa and Some Theories of Divine Providence." *Vigiliae Christianae* (37): 141-56.
- Steel, Carlos. 2012. "Maximus Confessor on *Theory* and *Praxis*. A Commentary on *Ambigua ad Johannem VI* (10) 1-19." In: *Theoria, Praxis, and the Contemplative Life after Plato and Aristotle*, edited by Thomas Bénatouil and Mauro Bonazzi, 229-57. Leiden/Boston: Brill.
- The Holy Bible*. English Standard Version (ESV). 2001. By Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.
- Van Deun, Peter. 1992. "La symbolique des nombres dans l'œuvre de Maxime le Confesseur (580-662)." *Byzantinoslavica* (53), 237-42.
- Van Deun, Peter, Mueller-Jourdan, Pascal (avec la collaboration de Basile Markesinis). 2015. "Maxime le Confesseur." In: *La théologie byzantine et sa tradition (VI^e - VII^e s.)*. Tom I/1, sous la direction de Carmelo Giuseppe Conticello, 375-514. Turnhout: Brepols.
- Vlastos, Gregory. 1971. "Justice and Happiness in the Republic." In: *Plato. A Collection of Critical Essays*, 111-39. New York: Anchor Books.