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Willing in St Maximos' Mystagogical Habitat: Bringing Habits in Line with One's logos

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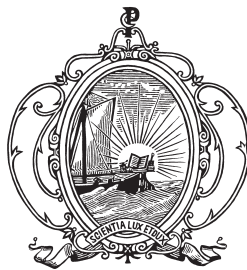
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PEETERS

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Willing in St Maximos' Mystagogical Habitat: Bringing Habits in Line with One's *logos*

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ABSTRACT

St Maximos the Confessor describes in his *Mystagogia* how deification is attained through the combination of 'personal mystagogy' and 'corporate mystagogy'. In the fifth chapter he analyses how the human soul functions and what role the pair intellect (*nous*) and reason (*logos*) play in striving towards, respectively, truth and goodness. St Maximos gives a prominent place to habits, also elsewhere in his works. A habit (*hexis*) seems to be short-cut of the full process of human willing which consists of more than ten steps, as described in his *Letter to Marinus* and the *Disputation with Pyrrhus*. A habit can be changed by making it conscious and here there seems to be an interesting parallel with modern cognitive therapy. Maximos associates habit with opinion (*gnome*) and disposition (*diathesis*) and these are ultimately connected towards one's personal *logos*. Discerning this *logos* is part of mystagogy.

The purpose of this article is to explore some points of contact between St Maximos the Confessor's teaching on the human will and modern psychology. St Maximos presents in his *Mystagogia* a well-known analogy between man and the church building. Its fourth chapter has the following title: 'How and in what manner the holy Church of God symbolically represents man and how it is represented by him as man.'¹ Maximos links nave with body, sanctuary with soul and altar table with intellect (*nous*). Moreover, he connects these couples with the three stages of a person's spiritual life or 'personal mystagogy' I would say: 'By means of the nave, representing the body, it proposes *ethical philosophy*, while by means of the sanctuary, representing the soul, it spiritually interprets *contemplation of nature*, and by means of the intellect of the divine altar it manifests *mystical theology*.'²

¹ At the congress the latest critical edition of the *Mystagogia*, by Christian Boudignon, became available: CChr.SG 69 (Turnhout, 2011).

² *Mystagogia*, ll. 268-72; trans. George C. Berthold, *Maximos Confessor: Selected Writings*, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York, 1985), 190 (modified, italics are mine). Maximos treats these three stages of 'personal mystagogy' more extensively in his four *Centuries on Love*, where he names them: *praktike*, *theoretike* and *theologike*, *CentCar* II 46 (PG 90, 992B-C).

The second part of the *Mystagogia* (chapters 8-24) comments on the *synaxis*, that is the Eucharistic liturgy or ‘corporate mystagogy’, as one could call it. Corporate and personal mystagogy share the goal of deification; Maximos stresses in the final chapter that they are closely connected. He exhorts his readers

to frequent God’s holy church (...) because of the grace of the Holy Spirit who is always invisibly present, but in a special way at the time of the holy *synaxis*. This grace transforms and changes each person who is found there and in fact remodels him in proportion to what is more divine in him and leads him to what is revealed through the mysteries which are celebrated.

So we find Maximos describing in his *Mystagogia* the ascetic and liturgical habitat in which he lived and worked. This environment fed the church father spiritually and intellectually and connected him to the past of the patristic heritage and the present of contemporary theological debates. In fact, one of his most original contributions to the patristic heritage, his teaching on the will, was prompted by the Monothelite heresy that was ravaging the Christian church and *oikoumene* during his exile in North Africa.

The fifth chapter of the *Mystagogia* gives an elaborate description of how the human soul functions. Its use of the pair moral wisdom (*phronesis*) and wisdom (*sophia*) is reminiscent of Aristotle.³ Maximos gives as his source, as throughout the *Mystagogia*, his spiritual elder (*geron*), who associates intellect (*nous*) with the contemplative power (*theoretikon*) and reason (*logos*) with the active power (*praktikon*) of the soul. Each member of the pair intellect and reason is represented as progressing towards its respective goal – in the case of intellect, truth; in the case of reason, goodness – through a succession of four qualities: intellect progresses through wisdom to contemplation, to knowledge, to enduring knowledge, which arrives at truth, while reason progresses through moral wisdom (*phronesis*) to action, to virtue, to faith, which arrives at goodness. Truth and goodness, together, lead us to the revelation of God. The intellect arrives in an unceasing movement at its term (truth) and reason ends its movement when it arrives at its term (goodness). The soul thus becomes ‘united to the God of all, imitating what is immutable and beneficent in his essence and activity by means of its steadfastness in beauty and its unalterable habit⁴ (*hexis*) of choice.’⁵ The goal of the five pairs is thus similar to that of two mystagogical movements mentioned above: deification or to rest in God.

After an *excursus* in the form of a lyrical *theorema* about the five pairs as ten strings of the spiritual (*noetos*) lyre being matched by the Ten Commandments and mystically attuned to Jesus the Saviour, Maximos introduces the terms

³ See *Nicomachean Ethics* 6.7; 1141a.

⁴ See Aristotle, who states that ‘ethical virtue comes about as a result of habit’, *Nicomachean Ethics* 2.1; 1103a.

⁵ *Mystagogia*, ll. 342-6; trans. G.C. Berthold, *Maximos Confessor* (1985), 191 (modified).

essence (*ousia*), potency (*dunamis*), habit (*hexis*) and act (*energeia*) in a very condensed exposition that has puzzled scribes and translators.⁶ He probably derived this terminology from Nemesios of Emesa, who explicitly refers to Aristotle in *On the Nature of Man*.⁷ Maximos uses these terms to comment on the nature of the movement from intellect via wisdom, contemplation, knowledge and enduring knowledge to truth and on the movement from reason via moral wisdom, action, virtue and faith to goodness. The essences of intellect and reason need to manifest themselves progressively in, respectively, truth and goodness, because 'faith without works is dead'.⁸ The habit of contemplation (*theoretike hexis*) and the habit of action (*praktike hexis*)⁹ play a pivotal role for a soul on its way towards God. Elsewhere Maximos also uses the term *hexis* in his descriptions of spiritual progress, as for example in 'a habitude (*hexis*) that mortifies unnatural passions while preserving virtue and knowledge'.¹⁰

So habits provide temporary stability and firmness¹¹ to the soul that stumbles and staggers on its way towards deification. When the goal is temporarily out of sight, good habits can keep the traveler on track. If the intellect is blinded and incapable of contemplation, its partner reason can lose itself in endless deliberations. This *aporia* is described by psychologist and philosopher William James: 'There is no more miserable human being than one in whom nothing is habitual but indecision, and for whom the lighting of every cigar, the drinking of every cup, the time of rising and going to bed every day, and the beginning of every bit of work are subjects of express volitional deliberation.'¹² Habits are thus very useful, because they are patterns of behaviour that have turned unconscious to use a modern psychological term that is not part of the patristic vocabulary. They therefore do not require full attention of intellect and reason.

Habits seem to be short-cuts of the full process of willing which consists, according to Maximos, of more than ten steps a human being has to go through if he or she acts fully rationally (consciously). He describes them to the deposed patriarch Pyrrhos during their theological disputation:

For that which is by nature rational has as its natural ability the rational appetite proper to it. This is called the faculty of will (*thelesis*) of the rational soul. It is according to this that we consider when willing, and in considering, we wish what we will. And

⁶ *Ibid.*, ll. 370-408.

⁷ Nemesii Emeseni, *De natura hominis*, ed. Moreno Morani (Leipzig, 1987), 39 (113.15-114.2).

⁸ *James* 2:26.

⁹ *Mystagogia*, ll. 310-3.

¹⁰ In the description of the intellect donning a 'sackcloth of repentance' (which Maximos identifies as *hexis*) in *Ad Thal.* 64, ed. Carla Laga and Carlos Steel, CChr.SG 22 (Turnhout, 1990), 207.338-40; trans. Paul. M. Blowers and Robert L. Wilken, *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ* (New York, 2003), 155.

¹¹ See also the conclusion of the the *Mystagogia* (l. 1224): 'firm habit of virtue'.

¹² *Talks to Teachers on Psychology* (Cambridge, MA, 1983), 48.

when willing, we also inquire, examine, deliberate, judge, are disposed towards, choose, initiate and use.¹³

I would say that a habit skips the steps of inquiry, examination, deliberation, judgement and goes straight to disposition (*diathesis*) or rather choice (of means: *prohairesis*).

Even though habits like lighting a cigar are performed unthinkingly, the actor is responsible for his or her acts. They come forth out of a disposition and Maximus therefore distinguishes them from impulsive actions (which seem short-cuts of the willing process as well):

In the latter case the man did not deliberately choose the sin either before committing it, or afterwards; on the contrary, he is deeply distressed that the sin has occurred. It is quite different with the man who sins through force of habit (*hexis*). Prior to the act itself he was already sinning in thought, and after it he is still in the same state of mind (*diathesis*).¹⁴

St John Damascene, in his description of Maximus' teaching on the will, identifies *diathesis* and *gnome*,¹⁵ so it seems proper to devote now attention to the typically Maximian teaching on the gnostic will. This is what Fr Andrew Louth writes about gnostic willing:

With fallen creatures, their own nature has become opaque to them, they no longer know what they want, and experience coercion in trying to love what cannot give fulfilment. For, in their fallen state, rational creatures are no longer aware of their true good, which is God. Various apparent goods attract them: they are confused, they need to deliberate and consider, and their way of willing shares in all this. Maximus calls this willing in accordance with an opinion, or intention, or inclination (the Greek word for all these is *gnome*). Such 'gnomic' willing is our way or mode of willing, it is the only way in which we can express our natural will, but it is a frustrating and confusing business.¹⁶

So the problem with human willing in a fallen world, with which Maximus associates gnostic willing, seems either excess of reasoning (endless deliberations), or faulty reasoning, or lack of reasoning (bad habits). These are of course psychological ailments from which humanity has been suffering for ages and which it is still trying to cure. Richard Sorabji indicates, for example, that 'modern cognitive therapy has many things in common with Stoic therapy' and quotes William James' maxim 'we do not cry because we are sad, but are sad because we cry.'¹⁷ Indeed, thoughts and feelings seem to call forth each other in habitual patterns. The Italian psychiatrist Roberto Assagioli, who is listed

¹³ PG 91, 293B-C.

¹⁴ *CentCar* III 74 (PG 90, 1040C); trans. G.E.H. Palmer, *Philokalia* (1981), 95.

¹⁵ *Expos.* 36, 77-80.

¹⁶ *Maximus the Confessor* (London, 1996), 61.

¹⁷ *Emotion and Peace of Mind: From Stoic Agitation to Christian Temptation* (Oxford, 2000), 2-3.

(along with James, Carl Gustav Jung and Abraham Maslow) as a pioneer of so-called transpersonal psychology,¹⁸ describes the unconscious compounds of mutually reinforcing thoughts, feelings, attitudes, images and acts in a chapter entitled 'The Skillful Will: Psychological Laws.'¹⁹ I am inclined to associate *gnome* with such a compound.

Opinions, attitudes, inclinations, feelings, habits *etc.* can be changed. This is what modern cognitive therapy tries to enact in a rigorously scientific way: it first makes a habit conscious and then changes it. Fr Alexis Trader explains in *Ancient Christian Wisdom and Aaron Beck's Cognitive Therapy: A Meeting of Minds*²⁰ that the cognitive therapy of Beck aims at more than changing habitual behaviour (which is the goal of behaviour therapy); it tries to adjust person's faulty ('maladaptive') way of thinking. In this passage, where he typically juxtaposes a modern psychologist and an ancient church father, Fr Alexis describes how the sources of habits can be made conscious:

In cognitive theory, metacognition refers to 'thought about a thought' in which a person examines and evaluates his personal theories and hypotheses about himself, others, and his world, thereby regulating his core schemata, assumptions, and rules. Beck views metacognition as a cognitive system designed to consciously control and sometimes override primitive thinking that characterizes the rest of the animal kingdom. In a strikingly similar vein, St Anastasius of Sinai once observed that man differs from beast by virtue of his ability to consider, to decide, and to will, thereby overruling the instinctual reactions that he shares with other living creatures.²¹

The many quotations from Maximos Fr Alexis gives in his book show that there are interesting parallels and that cognitive therapy may play a complementary role to traditional guidance by a spiritual elder (*geron*). However, apart from the difference in vocabulary, he stresses *passim* another important difference: the absence of God in cognitive therapy. This type of psychotherapy may help to correct reasoning, behaviour and their interplay with feelings, but there is still the possibility of remaining stuck in human deliberations. In terms of the *Mystagogia*: reason/*praktikon*/moral wisdom has to be accompanied by *nous/theoretikon*/wisdom. Fr Andrew Louth underlines this in *St John Damascene*, while discussing John's rendering of the Maximian teaching on human psychology. He quotes Iris Murdoch: 'Freedom is not strictly exercise of the will, but rather the experience of accurate vision which, when this becomes appropriate, occasions action. From this point of view, deliberation is what we

¹⁸ See John Rowan, *The Transpersonal: Spirituality in Psychotherapy and Counselling* (London and New York, 2005), 27-47.

¹⁹ *The Act of Will: A Guide to Self-Actualisation and Self-Realisation* (London, 2002), 46-65. Assagioli discerns almost exactly the same steps in human willing process as Maximos (*ibid.* 135-89).

²⁰ New York, 2011.

²¹ A. Trader (2011), 109.

fall back on when our vision is clouded or confused: it is a measure of our *lack* of freedom, not the signal exercise of freedom.’²²

The objects of contemplation during the second stage of personal mystagogy are the *logoi* of creation, which seem to be more solid than ephemeral thoughts and feelings. Lars Thunberg says that their contemplation ‘belongs to the work of the Spirit in man’s sanctification and deification. This intellectual process is not separated from the spiritual growth but integral part of it. The outward impressions suggest the *λόγοι* of things to an attentive soul, so that they – and the Logos in them – may be spiritually contemplated.’²³ The *logoi* are thus not only the principles of things but also of human beings.²⁴ In fact, each person has his or her own *logos*, a unique plan that is part of God’s enduring master-plan for the *oikonomia* of creation.

A natural question for a person is then: ‘What is my *logos*?’ or in less theological parlance: ‘What is the purpose of my life?’ Here the solid ground turns out to be an abyss, because each person’s *logos* is a mystery, just as the *Logos* is ultimately unknowable. Maximus makes the parallel explicit in *Ambiguum* 71, where he explains a passage from Gregory Nazianzen quoting *Ps.* 41:8 (LXX) (‘Abyss calls to abyss in the noise of your cataracts’):

Every intellect (*nous*), because of its invisible nature and the depth and multitude of its thoughts, is to be compared to an abyss, since it passes beyond the ordered array of the phenomena and comes to the place of intelligible reality. Or again, when in faith by the vehemence of its movement it passes beyond what is fitting, and comes to rest in itself, in every way fixed and unmoved, because it has passed beyond everything, then it necessarily calls upon the divine wisdom, which to the understanding is really and truly the unfathomable abyss.²⁵

The ineffable depth of a human being is stressed in *Discerning the Mystery: An Essay on the Nature of Theology* by Fr Andrew Louth: ‘The reasoning that lies behind our actions is usually implicit, as Newman puts it, and can only rarely be made explicit. The desire to make all reasoning explicit manifests “a dislike of an evidence, varied, minute, complicated, and a desire of something producible, striking, and decisive”’: such a desire is really irrational, as it fails to understand the realities of human behaviour and action.’²⁶

While approaching the mystery of God and that of ourselves we are trying to discern the *Logos* and our own *logos*. In the middle of the way we are supported

²² (Oxford, 2002), 168.

²³ *Microcosm and Mediator: The Theological Anthropology of Maximus the Confessor* (Chicago and La Salle, 1995), 78.

²⁴ See also Andrew Louth, ‘St Maximus’ Doctrine of the *logoi* of Creation’, *SP* 48 (2010), 77–84.

²⁵ PG 91, 1408D–1409A; trans. A. Louth, *Maximus* (1996), 164. See Jean-Claude Larchet, *La divinisation de l’homme selon saint Maxime le Confesseur* (Paris, 1996), 150–1, 176–7.

²⁶ (Oxford, 1983), 139.

by our habits which give us stability when our vision is still blurred and we risk losing ourselves in deliberations. The compound of habit (*hexis*) and accompanying opinion (*gnome*) and disposition (*diathesis*)²⁷ can be changed by making it conscious, as is done in modern cognitive therapy. I intend to expand the analysis of this and other parallels between Maximos and modern psychology elsewhere.

²⁷ See *Ad Thal.* 64; CChr.SG 22, 235.759-60, where the three terms are mentioned together.

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