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AN EXISTENTIAL MODEL FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF
SAINT MAXIMUS THE CONFESSOR

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Abstract

By taking a brief look at the history of human thinking, we find that people are constantly preoccupied by existence. From the perspective of cosmological models, one can even speak of their philosophical and scientific history. In Greek theology, Saint Maximus the Confessor is the author of an existential model that integrates both the cosmological and the anthropological dimensions. Its particularity consists of the fact that it describes the fundamental stages of existence in terms that are found in the Platonic and Aristotelian philosophies. This vision is permeated by the pre-Christian Greek philosophical tradition in which Saint Maximus found elements compatible to Christianity. His existential model is based on the Christian revelation expressed in philosophical and theological concepts, with an obvious tendency for objectivity. The three coordinates of Saint Maximus' existential model are *existence - the good existence - the eternal existence*. The fundamental concepts of Saint Maximus' existential model that determine the quality of the human way of living are nature, power, energy, movement, and free will. More specifically, the way in which the formation of good habits is described by reference to the rationale of human existence reflects a hermeneutical capacity that synthesizes Aristotle's Nicomachean ethics and Christian ethics. For this reason, Saint Maximus' existential model can be a reflection base for contemporary philosophy and anthropology.

Keywords: existence; theological model; philosophical perspectives; Aristotelian terms;

1. INTRODUCTION

In *Ambigua*, the intention of Saint Maximus the Confessor (580-662) to theorize an existential model according to a paradigm that expresses the origin, the ontological development and fulfilment of rational beings is quite clear. Based on divine revelation, this existential route is explained through hypotheses that turn into theses. St. Maximus explains the terms of the existential triad in a relational and gradual way, advancing to formulations that predominantly assimilate ontological philosophical terminology in complete harmony with the theological argumentation.

By establishing the ontological difference between the Creator and the creature, St. Maximus demonstrates that rational beings are necessarily moved ($\tau\alpha$ λογικά και κινεῖται πάντως) from the beginning to their purpose ($\acute{\omega}\varsigma$ ἐξ ἀρχῆς κατὰ φύσιν), for the fact that they exist ($\delta\iota\alpha$ τὸ εἶναι), to their

final purpose (πρὸς τέλος), according to their own will (κατὰ γνώμην), to good existence (διὰ τὸ εὖ εἶναι). The existence (τὸ εἶναι) being the gift of God, the ever-good existence (τῷ ἀεὶ εὖ εἶναι) is in turn the reward He gives as a result of their movement towards their purpose, and the good existence (τὸ εὖ εἶναι), is the result of the effort of moving in accordance with their reason to be. The rationale of being (τοῦ εἶναι λόγον) originating in God, the eternal existence depends on its awareness (*Ambigua I*, 7). At this stage of the conception of the existential model, the components of the triad are related to the concepts of beginning - purpose, essence, movement, wilful choice and rationality. Identity of Origin - Purpose - God is the key association of concepts underlying the fulfilment of human existence in relation to Him.

The identification of the three existential levels (εἶναι - εὖ εἶναι - ἀεὶ εἶναι) with the general modes of creation (καθολικὸς τρόπος) clarifies the use of nature's works (φυσικαῖς ἐνεργείαις). The observation that, by following nature's rationale (λόγον τῆς φύσεως) which leads to its Cause (τὸν αὐτῆς αἴτιον), one can acquire the true existence (τὸ ὄντως εἶναι) highlights the understanding reached by the saints of existence as contemplation of the accessible ratios of God, while emphasizing the idea that assuming it requires practice (*Ambigua I*, 10).

The relation between the general modes of creation and the levels of existence (making - existence, γένεσις - τὸ εἶναι; Baptism - good existence, βάπτισμα - τὸ εὖ εἶναι; Resurrection - eternal existence, ἀναστάσις - τὸ ἀεὶ εἶναι) expresses an approach inspired by the Christological work of the recovery of the world through God. St. Maximus considers the ways of man's movement, according to or contrary to the reason of existence (τὸ εὖ - τὸ φεῦ εἶναι) as being determinative of the types of existence that he can voluntarily acquire. The level of eternal existence is distributed according to the criterion of personal assumption of the received existence. St. Maximus insists that the continuity of existence and the persistence in God or not depends on the type of skill (ἐξίς) formed voluntarily, (*Ambigua I*, 42). The demonstration in *Ambigua I*, 65 constitutes the synthesis of the stages that configures the existential model of St. Maximus the Confessor. The three levels of existence are related to anthropo-ontological triads (being/ nature - will - grace/ οὐσία - προαίρεσις - χάρις; power - energy - rest/ δυνάμις - ἐνεργεία - ἀργία) which emphasize that receiving the eternal existence depends fundamentally on the way in which the data of nature is accessed and on the constant movement towards the cause of eternal existence. These references from *Ambigua I* (ΜΑΞΙΜΟΥ, 1863), corroborated, reveal the intention of St. Maximus the Confessor to propose a new way of interpreting the concept of existence.

The ontological terms used by Saint Maxim in the argumentation of the existential tripartite project are also found in Aristotle (Aristotle, 1933, Plato, 1942), but also in Saint Dionysius the Areopagite (ΔΙΟΝΥΣΙΟΥ, 1857). St. Maximus selects from Aristotle the concepts that define human nature (Aristotle 1926) structurally and fits them into his existential paradigm in a new way meant to create an important premise for the dialogue between Philosophy and Theology.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Although the references to the existential triad are found in the main works on the theology of Saint Maximus the Confessor (Balthasar, 1947, Sherwood, 1955, Thumbert, 1995), this subject was not analysed distinctly. For this reason, research into this tripartite existential paradigm that emerges in *Ambigua I* may be a starting point for its deepening. The components of this existential model require a deeper investigation due to the anthropological implications it implies (Larchet, 1996). The theory of rationales integrated into the conception and the development of the multi-levelled Maximian existential model is closely united with their meaning which are revealed gradually as it is assumed. The interest of this study lays in the structure of the maximal existential project, and its novelty lays in the connections established between the divine given and its spiritual purpose.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of this study is to highlight the existential model of St. Maximus the Confessor in which his synthetic spirit can be observed at the level of the terminology he uses. It seeks to bring back to the attention of the philosophers a great author who managed to translate in ancient Greek terms the wisdom of the theological vision of existence. The main questions that arise in this regard are:

- What has favoured the assimilation of the concepts of Plato and Aristotle into the Maximian existential model?
- Can we see in the myth of Er, the soldier of the Republic of Plato, a reference compatible with Christianity?
- What are the ultimate consequences of the proposed model?
- Can we talk about a philosophical re-evaluation of the Maximian existential model?

4. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study seeks to highlight the anthropological perspective based on responsibility, which St. Maximus the Confessor devised on the basis of divine revelation, and transposed it through philosophical terminology. The relationships established between ontological and anthropological concepts indicate an interdependence between the way of living and the quality of existence (Christou, 1982). The importance given to the human ontological given and the explanations are not limited to the present, space-temporal, life but opens to eternity. Maximian explanations contain possible solutions to contemporary crisis situations, which often ignore their biological given and their spiritual potential. They stimulate the will to improve human thinking and humanity by greatly elevating the cause and purpose of existence. The rationality of the Maximian perspective and the argumentation technique indicate a high level of reflexivity that invites to dialogue with modern philosophy. Knowing the subject matter addressed by St. Maximus the Confessor is a way for modern man to rediscover his modernity.

The present research seeks to highlight the fact that the investigation of the data that allowed the appropriation of important ontological terms of anthropological relevance from ancient Greek philosophy indicates an effort to adapt them to the Christian existential vision and a flexible theological mentality. St. Maximus's selection of the philosophical vocabulary is based on the revealed perspective he is trying to explain. It proposes to analyse from different angles the concepts that make up the Maximian existential model, and the re-composition of the overall vision of human existence, from the reason of its pre-existence in its cause to its fulfilment.

5. RESEARCH METHODS

This study is based on a research method focused on investigating working hypotheses and reconstructing the existential model of St. Maximus the Confessor. The research of hypotheses can lead to new perspectives on the way in which the modern man relates to life. Also, the reconstruction of the Maximian existential model is necessary for the author's global conception of existence.

The study of the existential model of St. Maximus also implies the analysis of the type of argument he uses. Maximian ideas are often presented in a hypothetical way, not exposed without demonstration. The study of the argumentation of the hypotheses advanced by St. Maximus the Confessor constitutes a critical research into the premises of his thoughts and interpretations.

The investigation of classical Greek philosophical sources containing concepts and perspectives compatible with Maximian thinking is part of the comparative study necessary to the understanding of the author.

6. FINDINGS

As a theologian open to philosophy, St. Maximus does not impose axioms, but hypotheses that he rationally demonstrates. The novelty of the existential model of St. Maximus the Confessor consists in the design of an existential path through which man can develop his ontological given from his cause. At the vocabulary level, the relationship between theology and philosophy can be seen through the identification of the cause with God, in which we find the reasons for everything there is.

Another finding as a result of the comparative research of sources is that not only in terms of terminology, but also in terms of the overall vision of perpetual existence, there are important similarities between St. Maximus and Greek philosophy. The myth of Er with which Plato concludes the Republic (Plato, 1942) transmits a series of ideas through which the author expresses his conception of human existence as something that does not end with death. Although he wrote in a non-Christian context, Plato

spoke of the resurrection and of the reward according to people's actions on earth. The criterion for receiving eternal happiness and/or unhappiness is the quality of ethically distinct human actions. These ideas express an impressive perspective on the belief of the ancient world in eternal existence, which is a natural continuation of the earthly one. If Plato chooses to express his vision of existence through a myth, St. Maximus the Confessor prefers a reasoned discourse to make known not his personal conviction, but an existential perspective of the revealed Christian faith. The similarity of Plato's ideas in the Republic with those of the Maximian existential model in *Ambigua I* indicates a close approximation of the concept of existence. The compatibility of Plato and St. Maximus with regard to the way of assuming existence and accepting it as a divine reward according to good or bad living can be the premise to the intimate research of the philosophical vision and of the implications of the Christian existential model proposed by St. Maximus.

Although he did not specifically conceptualize his existential model, but used it for hermeneutical purposes according to various theological contexts, St. Maximus had the intention of making it known in various phases culminating in an integrative, synthetic, formulation. Its positive character results from the emphasis placed on the fulfilment of man as a result of an act of self-understanding. Through this model, St. Maximus wanted to present the framework of human spiritual development from a Christian perspective, showing how the natural given of the flesh should be used in the quest of inheriting God. The prospect of missing the fulfilment of existence occupies a second and more didactic place. It is mentioned more in terms of accountability towards the power naturally received by man to move closer to God. Saint Maximus greatly emphasizes the prospect of man's fulfilment in God as a result of exercising his free will through the formation of good habits in which His purposes are found. From this point of view, the Maximian existential paradigm can constitute a basis of reflection for psychology as it is marked by a strong motivational character, insisting on the fulfilment of the purpose of human life. The idea of human fulfilment through the use of the nature of its intrinsic qualities is intended to encourage acceptance of the given existential path. The concept of existence as a gift is meant to give a sense of security, and rediscovering it in the terms of Saint Maximus can help balance many people who do not know where they come from and where they are heading to.

Through its paradigm, St. Maximus can offer a therapeutic solution to anguish as it demonstrates convincingly that everything that exists has a meaning. He proposes a model of ascendant existence that pre-exists in God, and leads to the eternal existence in His love. Fundamental to St. Maximus' thinking is the statement according to which the existence as a gift from the Master is not intended for dissipation but for eternal support. The anthropological implications of these ideas are obvious as man is essentially linked to existence, and its quality depends on understanding and choosing the way it is going.

7. CONCLUSION

Theologian and philosopher, Saint Maximus remains a voice open to the dialogue between theology and philosophy. The model of tripartite existence conceived by St. Maximus the Confessor can be a starting point to be taken into account for interdisciplinary academic dialogue. He is the expression of the translating into the ontological, philosophical concepts of the existential Christian way, which is explained according to the divine revelation, and therefore he remains open to philosophical hermeneutics. He is the expression of positive and dynamic Byzantine patristic existentialism, which exploits human potential through education in complete freedom. Discussed in comparison with the existential humanist models of the 20th century, the Maximian paradigm offers not only a concrete answer to the meaning of human existence, but also a way to learn, understand and fulfil it. The Christian existential model built by St. Maximus, through its structure, remains open to philosophical and theological approaches, being the expression of a synthesis in which the voices of patristic tradition and those of philosophy developed in the same cultural space of dialogue and harmonization are heard.

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