

“SINS VOLUNTARY AND INVOLUNTARY”:  
JOHN OF DAMASCUS, NATURAL INTEGRITY  
AND THE MORAL VISION OF EASTERN ORTHODOXY.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

<i>Acta</i>	St. Augustine <i>Acta contra Fortunatum Manichaeum</i> .
<i>Amb.</i>	St. Maximus the Confessor, <i>Ambiguorum Liber</i> .
ANF	<i>Ante-Nicene Fathers</i>
CCSG	Corpus Christianorum, Series Graeca, Turnhout: Brepols, 1954–.
CSCO	Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Louvain: Secretariat de Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 1954–.
<i>Char.</i>	St. Maximus the Confessor. <i>Centuries on Charity</i> .
Chase	Frederic H. Chase, trans. <i>Saint John of Damascus, Writings</i> . The Fathers of the Church series, volume 37 (see bibliography).
<i>Dial.</i>	St. John of Damascus. <i>Dialectica</i>
ET	English translation
<i>Expos.</i>	St. John of Damascus. <i>Expositio fidei</i>
GOTR	<i>Greek Orthodox Theological Review</i>
<i>Haer.</i>	St. John of Damascus. <i>Liber de haeresibus</i>
Kotter	Bonifatius Kotter, OSB, ed. <i>Die Schriften des Joannes von Damaskos</i> , 5 vols., PTS 7, 12, 17, 22, 29, Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1969-88
Lampe	G.W.H. Lampe, ed. <i>A Patristic Greek Lexicon</i> . Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961, fifth impression 1978.
LXX	Septuagint Version
<i>Manich.</i>	St. John of Damascus. <i>Dialogus contra Manichaeos</i>
NPNF	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers</i> , series 1 and 2
PG	<i>Patrologiae Cursus Completus</i> . Ed. J.P. Migne, Series Graeca, Paris 1857-1866
PTS	<i>Patristische Texte und Studien</i> . Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1964–

<i>Qu.D.</i>	St. Maximus the Confessor. <i>Quaestiones et Dubia.</i>
SC	<i>Sources Chrétiennes</i> , Paris: Editions du Cerf
SVTQ	<i>St. Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly</i>
<i>Thal.</i>	St. Maximus the Confessor. <i>Quaestiones ad Thalassium.</i>
<i>Theol. Ch.</i>	St. Maximus the Confessor, <i>Theological Chapters.</i>
<i>TP</i>	St. Maximus the Confessor, <i>Opuscula Theologica et Polemica</i>

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis is to interpret a phrase that is repeated frequently in the liturgical texts of the Byzantine rite.<sup>1</sup> The phrase in question is one in which the Lord is asked, in the following language or some variation thereof, to pardon us every offence, “voluntary and involuntary” (*ekousia kai akousia*). Many western Christians today seem to be startled by this language. How can a sin be *involuntary*? Surely it belongs to the very nature of a “sin” that it be a *voluntary* act, or *deliberate* omission, contrary to a moral norm or divine law?<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless the phrase is a common one in Orthodox prayer texts, and has been for a very long time. The phrase appears several times in the fourth century work known as the *Apostolic Constitutions*.<sup>3</sup> There are numerous instances of the phrase being used in the earliest manuscript witness to the liturgy of the Byzantine tradition, dating to the eighth century.<sup>4</sup> It certainly appears in many more places in the modern printed liturgical books of the Byzantine Rite. All

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase “sins/offences voluntary and involuntary” is also found in the rites of other Eastern churches. I have constrained my project, however, within the bounds of the Byzantine tradition as it is realized today in the Orthodox and Catholic churches that follow this rite. (For sake of convenience I will refer to these generally as “Orthodox”). It is my assumption that much of my thesis would apply generally to the Christian East, but I could not confidently argue this case on the basis of my research.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Merrihew Adams, “Involuntary Sins,” *The Philosophical Review* 44 (January 1985): 3.

<sup>3</sup> E.g.: in a prayer for the faithful, *ANF* 7, 484; in a prayer for the dead, *ANF* 7, 498.

<sup>4</sup> *Codex Barberini Gr. 336* (Eighth Century), ed. Stefano Parenti and Elena Velkovska (Rome: CLV-Edizioni Liturgiche, 1995), 222. The instances I have identified are on the following pages of the Parenti edition: (a) 4, in the prayer of the Trisagion in the Liturgy of St. Basil; (b) 117, in the prayer at the clothing of a newly baptized person; (c) 169, prayer at the consecration of a church during the lighting of the lamps; and (d) 222, prayer at confession. This is not intended to be an exhaustive list.

this seems to indicate that we are dealing with a stereotyped phrase of great antiquity, liturgical durability and theological utility. In short, the desire to describe sins by the qualifiers “voluntary and involuntary” seems to suggest something very important at the heart of Orthodox belief.

I will attempt to uncover just what this important “something” is by interrogating the wider Orthodox tradition. In particular I will look at how this tradition understands that involuntary acts might contribute to a person’s sinfulness or sanctification. This is not, of course, the only way one might approach the problem. Another method might be to follow the history of the phrase itself, from the first instance of its appearance in liturgical texts. I have not attempted to do this, however, as it would require familiarity with original manuscript evidence beyond my technical abilities. I will restrict my study to some of the historical and theological connections to be found in the wider Byzantine tradition. While I believe this will yield important insights into the thought world called forth by the prayer texts, I must acknowledge that my conclusions must be subject, or at least capable of adapting, to the results of future scientific research into the origin and reception of those texts themselves.

My basic argument is that the notion of “involuntary sin” constitutes a window into the very heart of the moral vision of the Orthodox Christian tradition, including its distinctive concept of sin and, more significantly, the potential for human nature to attain to real and transcendent goodness. This understanding is based on an idea I wish to call the “integrity of the natural,” a phrase I have taken from Andrew Louth’s description of a key hermeneutical element in the theological and philosophical vision of St. John of Damascus. This notion of natural integrity

amounts to a belief that, “everything that is natural is good; what is evil is a distortion of the natural.”<sup>5</sup> I will argue that this idea runs like a seam through the bedrock of Orthodox theology, and that the phrase “sins voluntary and involuntary” is, as it were, a mineral trace revealing the presence of the ore. It helps us find a wealth of information about the Orthodox tradition, including how it understands the relationships between nature and grace, freedom and necessity, will and intellect, as well as the role of prayer, asceticism and canonical discipline in living out a distinctive moral and spiritual vision.

John of Damascus (d. 750 C.E.) is an obvious candidate to begin the investigation into these notions. He is recognized as an important, and relatively systematic, articulator of the great synthesis of Greek patristic theology undertaken by St. Maximus the Confessor (c. 580-662 C.E.). In order to set John’s thought in its proper context I will spend the following chapter setting out the main lines of the Maximian synthesis as it applies to notions of freedom and human willing. This will help shape our understanding of “involuntary sin” as the Orthodox tradition sees it. Three other figures will loom large in that discussion. I include the first, St. Augustine, not because his work directly influenced Greek patristic thought in this area, but in order that I might explicate that thought by contrast with a familiar voice from the Latin West. Augustine is especially interesting because he also developed a distinct view on “involuntary sin.” For Augustine, involuntary sin reveals that corrupt and fallen nature lacks the capacity for perfection. I will argue that the views of Maximus and Damascene suggest that their tradition understands things differently:

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<sup>5</sup> *St John Damascene: Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 138.

asking forgiveness for involuntary sin reveals the *capacity* of human nature *for* perfection irrespective of the Fall.

The other two figures to be discussed in the next chapter are the third-century pagan Neoplatonist Plotinus, and the mysterious Christian Neoplatonist known by modern scholars as Pseudo-Dionysius. These writers provided vital philosophical concepts, especially in terms of the unity between “being” and “energy” so essential for Damascene’s program of overcoming any vestigial dualism within Orthodox thought.

Later, I will engage Damascene himself, using two texts in particular: his *Dialogue Against the Manichees* and his epochal *Fountainhead of Knowledge*. I will show how Damascene was able to bring together various strands of patristic thought in service of his fundamental notion of the natural integrity. His battles against particulate heresies—Manichaeism, Messalianism and Origenism especially—were fought to uphold the essential goodness of human nature. **St. Damascene was absolutely opposed to Dualism** meaning the idea that there is something inherent in humanity that leads us away from God. **No! Human and divine Natures are fundamentally compatible through God’s mercy and grace.** This leads to a view of the human will as being “naturally” inclined toward the Good, while it must find a way of reaching the End of this inclination by a “gnomic” (that is deliberative) engagement with reality—including material reality. In this movement toward the Good a person may make many missteps, including involuntary ones. All these may be regarded as sins because their remedy is the same: above all prayer and ascetic discipline.

Finally, I will look at how this theological understanding shapes a distinctive vision for **human flourishing**, a vision that is at once both **moral and spiritual**. Looking in particular at some specific instances of “involuntary sins” identified as such in the Orthodox canonical tradition—miscarriage and participation in a necessary war—I will show that this way of thinking offers a genuinely “realist” ethical account that is relatively successful in respect of two fundamental goals. First, it helps explain the “good” in terms of a *telos* that, at the same time, transcends the person and is absolutely accessible to her. Second, it provides motivation in light of that *telos* to encourage virtue and discourage vice. In particular, I will show how the Orthodox notion of “involuntary sin” contributes to the development of conscience. It is a moral vision in which sensitivity to the good, a good discoverable through prayer, fasting and almsgiving, is more important than merely keeping the rules.

## CHAPTER 2

### INTEGRITY OF THE NATURAL AND THE HUMAN WILL

In this chapter I wish to set the scene for a description of Damascene's theory of the will and freedom by comparing it with the two basic accounts of the will that emerged from the patristic period. These might, for the sake of convenience, be labeled the "Augustinian" and "Maximian" views. In order to understand the latter, I will also discuss how Christian Neoplatonism expressed itself on questions such as freedom and necessity and what this means in terms of both voluntary and involuntary human acts. In the next chapter I will argue that Damascene worked very much within the Maximian tradition, sharing Maximus' own debt to the Christian Neoplatonism of Pseudo-Dionysius.<sup>6</sup> The principles inherent in this intellectual tradition have far reaching implications for John's entire anthropological and moral vision, including the place within it of a notion of involuntary sin. This will help anchor the overriding argument of this thesis that this concept lies close to the heart of the entire Orthodox view of the human potential for moral and spiritual flourishing.

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<sup>6</sup> Indeed, John occupies an important place in the transmission of this tradition to the Latin West via St. Thomas Aquinas. Thomas' famous definition of the will as "the rational appetite...proper to man" (*Summa Th.* Ia IIae q. 6) draws explicitly on Damascene who, in turn, is clearly dependent on St. Maximus the Confessor. The latter defines will (*thelēsis*) as rational appetency (*orexis logikē: Letter to Marinus, PG 91, 13A*), and thus a natural faculty of humanity (*physikē dynamis; PG 91, 276C*). Concerning Damascene's dependence on Maximus, see R.-A. Gauthier, "Saint Maxime le Confesseur et la psychologie de l'acte humain", in *Recherches de Théologie ancienne et médiévale 21* (1954): 51-97, esp. 52-57. See also the summary of the relevant scholarship in John Madden, "The Authenticity of Early Definitions of Will (*Thelēsis*)," in *Maximus Confessor*, eds. Felix Heinzer and Christoph Schönborn (Fribourg, Switzerland: Editions Universitaires, 1982: 61-79): especially at 62 and 78.

## Augustine and the Will

Augustine has been described as the “inventor” of the modern western concept of the will.<sup>7</sup> What characterizes this notion as it emerges from the Augustinian trajectory is that we mean by the “will” a capacity for “sheer volition” irrespective of what we know or feel concerning transcendent ends.<sup>8</sup> In other words what characterizes the will is the ability to choose to do wrong even when we know or feel it to be so. This is possible because the will precedes its objects and is sharply distinguished from them. This priority of the will seems to operate at the most basic ontological level, and it profoundly shapes any psychology based on this vision of the structure of human being.<sup>9</sup> Like any voluntarist theory, Augustine’s notion emphasizes the subject in the process of willing over other aspects, such as ends and means.<sup>10</sup> It is not

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<sup>7</sup> Albrecht Dihle, *The Theory of Will in Classical Antiquity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982). His conclusion is set out at p. 144: “Augustine was...the inventor of our modern notion of the will.” Hannah Arendt also called Augustine the “first philosopher of the will”: *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 2: *Willing* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978): 84-110. This view has been challenged, especially by James Wetzel, *Augustine and the Limits of Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) and Gerald W. Schlabach: “Augustine’s Hermeneutic of Humility: An Alternative to Moral Imperialism and Moral Relativism”, *Journal of Religious Ethics* 22 (no. 2, 2004): 299-330. Critics maintain that Augustine has a less voluntarist notion of the will than is often assumed, and that his thought is more in continuity with classical accounts positing a close link between will and reason. If so, the gap between the “Augustinian” and “Maximian” accounts will be greatly reduced, or even eliminated. The fact is that Augustine himself seems to have held to different accounts of the human will at various times. If David Bradshaw’s view on Augustine’s basically Platonizing ontological assumptions are correct, however (see below), it may be that Dihle’s opinion can be justified for very different reasons than he advances. Certainly the use of the label “Augustinian” to describe this Father’s account of the human will is justified in terms of the later tradition that invokes his authority, especially the voluntarist strains in some western medieval theology (notably that of Duns Scotus) and in the Reformation.

<sup>8</sup> Dihle, 20.

<sup>9</sup> “These three, therefore, the body that is seen, the vision itself, and the attention of the mind which unites both are clearly to be distinguished from one another, not only on account of the properties characteristic of each, but also on account of the difference in their natures.” Augustine, *De Trinitate* 11.2.2; McKenna, 318.

<sup>10</sup> W.F.R. Hardie, “Willing and Acting”, *Philosophical Quarterly* 21 (1971) 194-206.

surprising that Augustine's fame rests in part on his well-nigh invention of the genre of spiritual autobiography. The *Confessions* rings with the existential struggle of the authentic "I" to emerge from the claims of nature, of a single will to dominate the multiple impulses of the mind and body:

While I was deliberating whether I would serve the Lord my God now, as I had long purposed to do, it was I who willed and it was also I who was unwilling. In either case, it was I. I neither willed with my whole will nor was I wholly unwilling. And so I was at war with myself and torn apart by myself. And this strife was against my will; yet it did not show the presence of another mind, but the punishment of my own. Thus it was no more I who did it, but the sin that dwelt in me—the punishment of a sin freely committed by Adam, and I was a son of Adam.<sup>11</sup>

Corruption, Augustine argues elsewhere, does not arise primarily from evil acts. Rather these acts are themselves the fruit of the more profound evil, namely that of a corrupt will: "Our first parents fell into open disobedience because already they were secretly corrupted; for the evil act would never been done had not an evil will preceded it."<sup>12</sup> In his polemic against the Pelagians Augustine developed this teaching to emphasize that the human will has become so corrupt that there is no way it can, unaided by grace, emerge victorious from the struggle with nature.

[S]in is not natural; but nature (especially in that corrupt state from which we have become by nature "children of wrath") has too little determination of will to avoid sin, unless assisted and healed by God's grace through Jesus Christ our Lord.<sup>13</sup>

Augustine's assertion that sin is unnatural is important as much for what it says about nature as about evil. By "not natural" Augustine here is emphasizing that evil is contrary to *human* nature specifically, not to the nature of created things generally. We can take it as given that sin—for the post-Manichean

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<sup>11</sup> *Confessions* 8.10.22.

<sup>12</sup> *City of God* 14.13.

<sup>13</sup> *De perfectione iustitiae hominis* 2.3; *NPNF* i, vol. 5: 160.

Augustine—is also contrary to “nature” in its general sense. But what Augustine wants to emphasize is that sin outrages the natural by first corrupting a particular nature. It is precisely because he uses the term so narrowly that Augustine can speak of a corruption of nature so severe that our will loses the power to control the tendency to sin. And this narrow use of the word itself points to a fundamental aspect of Augustine’s metaphysics, namely his insistence on the unbridgeable ontological gulf that separates created natures from the uncreated. The human subject, a full participant in created nature, corrupts that nature by his evil willing. We will return to this point in the final section of this chapter.

### **Augustine and Involuntary Sin**

Malcolm Alflatt has demonstrated that Augustine’s pessimistic assessment of the weakness of the human will was shaped, at least in part, by his discovery in St. Paul’s epistles of the notion of involuntary sin.<sup>14</sup> He makes this explicit in the following statement in the *Retractions*, invoking the authority of Romans 7: “For this sin is to such an extent involuntary that [Paul] says, ‘what I will not, this I do.’”<sup>15</sup> Alflatt argues persuasively that Augustine’s discovery of this notion coincided with the debate held on August 28 and 29, 392 between himself and a leading Manichean named Fortunatus, the *acta* of which have survived.<sup>16</sup> Central

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<sup>14</sup> “The Development of the Idea of Involuntary Sin in St. Augustine,” in *Recherches augustiniennes* 10 (1975): 171-186

<sup>15</sup> *Retractions* 1.15.2; ET Sr. Mary Inez Bogan, *Saint Augustine, Retractions*, Fathers of the Church Series, vol. 60 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1968): 72-3.

<sup>16</sup> There is an ET in *NPNF* ii, vol. 4: 113-124.

to this debate was the Manichean claim that evil has a substantial existence. Fortunatus cited a number of Pauline texts in support of this dualist position, all pointing to the inherent conflict between good and evil within human beings.<sup>17</sup> At the beginning of this debate Augustine hewed closely to the position that, because evil exists only in a corrupt will, that there can be no involuntary sin: “he who sins, sins by free will.”<sup>18</sup> By the end of the debate Augustine found he needed to adjust his thinking in order to account for the Pauline passages his opponent threw at him. Unable to concede Fortunatus’ argument that Paul was speaking of a substantial evil at work in human flesh, Augustine had recourse to the notion of the persistence of *habit* to explain the human fall into “necessary” sin both as members of a race fallen in Adam and also as individuals suffering the effects of past choices.<sup>19</sup>

I say that there was free exercise of will in that man who was first formed. He was so made that absolutely nothing could resist his will, if he had willed to keep the precepts of God. But after he voluntarily sinned, we who have descended from his stock were *plunged into necessity*....

But each of us can by a little consideration find that what I say is true. For today in our actions, before we are implicated by any habit, we have free choice of doing anything or not doing it. But when by that liberty we have done something and the pernicious sweetness and pleasure of that deed has taken hold upon the mind, by its own habit the mind is so implicated that afterwards it cannot conquer what by sinning it has fashioned for itself.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> The most important passages cited were as follows. Ephesians 2:1-18, containing the words that human beings are “by nature children of wrath”. Galatians 5:17: “the flesh lusts against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh so that you may not do the things you will”. But the most significant passage cited was Romans 7:15-23. See Alflatt, 125-131.

<sup>18</sup> Alflatt 125, quoting *Acta* 17.

<sup>19</sup> Augustine’s recourse to a basically Aristotelian notion of the role of habit in shaping human willing has been noted by other scholars, e.g. Charles H. Kahn, “Discovering the Will: from Aristotle to Augustine”, in Dillon, J. M., and A. A. Long, editors, *The Question of "Eclecticism": Studies in Later Greek Philosophy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 234-259.

<sup>20</sup> *Acta* 22, Alflatt 129 and 130. My italics.

My purpose here is not to critique Augustine's solution to the problem posed by Fortunatus. It is simply to note the profound impact this solution had on his later teaching concerning the compromised freedom of the fallen human will. Of this corruption the experience of involuntary sin was clear evidence.

This was of a piece with the fundamentally pessimistic view Augustine was to take with respect for the human capacity for virtue, famously expressed in Book 19 of the *City of God*: "Our very righteousness, too, though true in so far as it has respect to the true good, is yet in this life of such a kind that it consists rather in the remission of sins than in the perfecting of virtues."<sup>21</sup> For Augustine the failure of human beings to escape from necessity, including the necessity of sinning, prevents them from attaining true virtue. It is important to note that Augustine was forced to acknowledge the reality of involuntary sin in a debate with a dualist. It may be that Augustine's position represents a partial accommodation of the dualist position regarding the corrupting power of evil. The same pessimism with respect to human nature that seems to have propelled Augustine into the Manichaean faith in his youth is evidently still present and shaping him as a catholic even as he struggles to escape from its theological and anthropological consequences. He shares with the dualist position a profound awareness of the *experience* of un-willed participation in evil.

One of the things that prevents Augustine from falling back headlong into the dualist account of this experience is his intense subjectivism. In the passage from the *Confessions* cited earlier we saw how Augustine was at pains to disclaim

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<sup>21</sup> *City of God* 19.27.

the existence of “another mind” in the war for self-control, a battle that “did not show the presence of another mind, but the punishment of my own.”<sup>22</sup> In this civil war within the self it is the “I” which emerges damaged and corrupt. Yes, he seems to agree, evil is irresistible. But this irresistibility arises, not from the force of evil’s own substantial existence, but because *I have chosen* to give it this power through my participation in Adam’s fall and in the continued acquisition of vicious habits.<sup>23</sup> The descent into necessity is the first fruit of the Fall, and it is a descent that no natural power can reverse.

### **Nature and the Will in Maximus the Confessor**

In contrast to the Augustinian account of the will, in which the choosing “I” seems ontologically prior to any rational or natural end, the “Maximian” theory would rather see the will as a kind of *appetite for* transcendent ends, an appetite that draws the “I” into an experience of unity with the divine Source of being.<sup>24</sup> The exercise of free will on this view amounts to fulfillment of human nature by means of a deep integration

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<sup>22</sup> *Confessions* 8.10.22.

<sup>23</sup> It took some time for Augustine to reconcile the obvious logical difficulty this view presents, namely how Adam’s sin might both plunge his heirs into necessity while at the same time leaving their individual free wills sufficient scope to incur further guilt through habitual sins. Alflatt points to one such attempt in the treatise “On the Free Choice of the Will”, book 3, chapter 20 (see Alflatt 131 n.79). The problem of reconciling necessity and free will occupies much of Book 5 of the *City of God*, where Augustine seeks to resolve the problem by invoking the foreknowledge of God (5.9,10). This divine foreknowledge anticipates our individual sins which are, from that same divine viewpoint seen as consequences of the primordial sin of Adam, but from our viewpoint as a combination of fallen necessity and of our own ill will (ibid 14.11).

<sup>24</sup> “It is evident that when man’s will is in union with the principle of nature, he is not in a state of rebellion against God...when a man’s will functions in accordance with this principle it accords with God in all things.” *On the Lord’s Prayer*, ET in G.E.H. Palmer et al, *The Philokalia*, vol. 2 (London: Faber and Faber, 1981): 301.

of thought, feeling and act, integration leading to a movement (*kinesis*) of the whole self toward realization of its proper goal. This movement toward the good certainly involves choice, though it is not coterminous with it. Choice is not, as it seems to be for Augustine, an act of the sovereign and isolated will. Choice reflects how well our nature has been fulfilled, telling us not so much where we will go, morally speaking, but where we have been.<sup>25</sup> Our choices will be bad if—and only if—our nature is constrained by the disordered dispositions of our understanding, senses or emotions. Maximus frequently characterizes sin as *parabasis*, meaning error, mistaken direction, a stepping out of the right way.<sup>26</sup> Adam’s fall was the “ancient error” (*archaia parabasis*)<sup>27</sup> that, while certainly an act of sovereign freedom,<sup>28</sup> was above all a misdirection of the human’s potential for pleasure away from its proper object—God—toward objects of sense.<sup>29</sup> The dominant note here is not Adam’s ill will, but the tragedy of mistaking a lesser good for the greater. Sin is analogous more to blindness or weakness than to crime or negligence.

Where Augustine seems to emphasize the distinction between the will and its objects, Maximus stresses the unity between them. Lars Thunberg shows how Maximus’ theory of the human act begins with a “sensible imagination” (*orexis*

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<sup>25</sup> Being itself (*ousia*) is a potential (*dynamis*) requiring movement (*kinesis*) towards fulfillment: *Amb.* 65, *PG* 91 1392B. For Maximus the triad *genesis-kinesis-stasis* reflects the deep structure of reality (see Polycarp Sherwood, trans. *Liber Asceticus* (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1955): 72-73). It is a structure in which given reality strives always to move from being to well-being through fulfillment of its own natural affinities.

<sup>26</sup> E.g. *Thal.* 61.628A. See John Boojamra, “Original Sin According to St. Maximus the Confessor.” *SVTQ* 20 (no. 1-2 1976): 22.

<sup>27</sup> *Thal.* 47, *PG* 91 424B.

<sup>28</sup> *Thal.* 42, *PG* 91 405C.

<sup>29</sup> *Thal.* 64, *PG* 91 628.

*phantastikē*), whereby which the object corresponds already to the subject's desire. Augustine more severely separates the subject and object through the medium of *intellect*, rather than *imagination* conceived by Maximus as an act of the whole person including the senses.<sup>30</sup> For Augustine nature itself is implicated in the commission of sin in that it is ontologically preceded by, and corrupted through, the fallen will. For Maximus nature always remains good, and corruption enters only at the level of *how* that nature is realized by means of the "mode" (*tropos*) of the individual's opinions and deliberations (*gnōmē*).<sup>31</sup> While it is clear that *individuation* is itself an aspect of human nature (something Damascene will also later emphasize), *individuality* reflects the emergence of the gnostic will and is thus in a real sense contrary to nature. Christ, the perfect human, was possessed of a fully natural will, but completely lacked a gnostic will.<sup>32</sup> Maximus did not hold that the deliberating "I" is ontologically prior to the other aspects of the self, notably reason and the senses. Rather, the angst-ridden "I" emerges from the collapse of the authentic person for whom well-being is a *natural* goal (*telos*) and object (*skopos*) of being. "Naked" individuality, like the sin that produced it, is "contrary to nature." "With us" he says, referring to fallen humanity, the will is naked (*psilos*).<sup>33</sup> Nature provides the will with

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<sup>30</sup> Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator* (Copenhagen: C.W.K. Gleerup Lund, 1965): 232ff

<sup>31</sup> "The natural will (*thelēma physikōn*) is the essential desire of things corroborative of nature; the gnostic will is the self-chosen impulse and movement of reason to one thing or another" TP 14, PG 91 153A (ET in Sherwood, *The Earlier Ambigua*, 201). See also, Thunberg, 228-231.

<sup>32</sup> "[The Fathers] knew truly that as choice regards both, I mean the good and the evil, it pertains to those who can be moved: which to think, much more to say, of Christ—the very substance and source of good—is full of every impiety." TP 1, PG 91 33A (ET in Sherwood, *The Earlier Ambigua*, 203). See also *Opusc. 3* translated in Louth, *St. Maximus the Confessor*, 193-8. It has frequently been noted by scholars just how central Maximus' Christology is to his anthropology; e.g., Larchet, 123-4.

<sup>33</sup> TP 20, PG 91 236. Sherwood translates the whole passage thus: "And the human willing in our Savior, even being natural, was not nude [*psilos*] as with us, as neither was his humanity, since by the

that scope of operation without which it has no purpose.

Put more precisely, then, nature seeks an ontological integration of the whole person within which the will operates as a coordinating and unifying expression of the natural drive toward union with the divine Source of nature, i.e. growth in likeness to God. Unlike Augustine, Maximus teaches that the separation of the “I” from nature reflects the Fall and is caused by it rather than the other way around. It is for this reason that Christ, while remaining a unique and distinct person, overcomes the limitations of the gnostic mode of being and is thereby enabled to achieve the full measure of humanity, perfecting nature as the New Adam. Indeed, Christ is the proof that humanity by nature and origin (*genesis*) yearns for movement (*kinesis*) toward God as its final end and rest (*stasis*). Maximus applies to his Christology, and hence to his soteriology, the doctrine of *perichoresis* to describe the “active reciprocity”, as Thunberg puts it, of the divine and human natures.<sup>34</sup> This use of the notion of *perichoresis* is remarkable for its insistence on the absolute compatibility of the human and divine natures. As Aristotle Papanikolaou has noted (in relation to Vladimir Lossky’s appropriation of this insight of St. Maximus in the twentieth century), “*perichoresis* implies reciprocity and one wonders in what way the human nature is *perichoretic* in relation to the divine and if this affects the divine nature in

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union it was divinized to the limit, whence accurately sinlessness belongs to it. But ours evidently is nude and in no wise sinless on account of the deviation to this side or that—a deviation which does not alter the nature but diverts the movements, or speak more truly, exchanges its mode” (*The Earlier Ambigua*, 203-4).

<sup>34</sup> *Microcosm and Mediator*, 29-30. See also Vladimir Lossky, *Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (London, 1957): 146. Western Christian authors are beginning to appreciate the significance of the notion of *perichoresis* for understanding the Orthodox vision, e.g. Michael Keeling’s remark that “the celebration of the dance of the Trinity is ... the central motif of Orthodox thought and life” in *The Mandate of Heaven* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995): 190.

any way.”<sup>35</sup> Maximus’ own answer to this seems best expressed in his celebrated *Ambigua 41*. This is an extensive theological reflection on the statement by St. Gregory the Theologian that, in the incarnation of the Word, “the natures are instituted afresh.”<sup>36</sup> This means, says Maximus, that in Christ every division, including that between uncreated and created natures, has been overcome, “wholly interpenetrated [*perichoresis*] by God, and [becoming] completely what God is, except at the level of being.”<sup>37</sup> The divine nature is indeed “affected” by the Incarnation, not in the sense that it *suffers* change, but because the elimination of unnatural divisions between divinity and humanity is the final fulfillment of God’s will and the expression of his absolute freedom. But note: this divine freedom assumes and responds to the fundamental movement of human freedom as well. *Each* nature longs for the other. There is no real conflict of wills except in the *unnatural* postlapsarian human condition. If Augustine’s view as it were “sets up” the Fall through an inherent conflict between the divine command and the human response, Maximus’ view eliminates this conflict entirely on the level of nature.

The Augustinian view permits the possibility of a completely disordered will that *causes* bad acts.<sup>38</sup> There can really be no way for God to remedy such an evil will, except by forgiving it (or by imputing some external “righteousness” in spite of it). If the Maximian view holds, on the other hand, the proper response to an evil will is to

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<sup>35</sup> *Being With God: Trinity, Apophaticism, and Divine-Human Communion* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006): 108.

<sup>36</sup> The quotation from St. Gregory comes from a homily on the Feast of Lights (Christmas or Theophany), *PG* 36 348D.

<sup>37</sup> Louth, *Maximus the Confessor*, 158.

<sup>38</sup> This is especially so in his polemic against Pelagius, see Dihle, 130.

treat it primarily as a *symptom* of cognitive error, of the disordered senses or of emotional disturbance, any and all of which may be susceptible to correction by therapeutic intervention at various levels: *askesis*, education and, above all, divine illumination through prayer.

### **Maximus, Concupiscence and Involuntary sin**

It must be acknowledged that the sharp distinction I have drawn between the Maximian and Augustinian positions tends to break down as we move from theory to practice. John Meyendorf has noted that, “on the psychological and practical level Maximus was ... very close to the Augustinian position on sin and concupiscence.”<sup>39</sup> Maximus shared Augustine’s pessimism with respect to the capacity for human beings to overcome the effects of the Fall and to enjoy that perfect freedom for which they naturally longed. Maximus considered this to be possible only in the next life.<sup>40</sup> This world remains subject to the effects of the Fall, notably death, “the avenging power of suffering” as he calls it,<sup>41</sup> within which it is impossible completely to overcome the need to exercise deliberation (*gnōmē*) with its consequent possibility of error. Like Augustine, Maximus identified the process of procreation as the

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<sup>39</sup> *Christ in Eastern Christian Thought* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1975) :232, n.28.

<sup>40</sup> Jean-Claude Larchet, *Maxime le Confesseur, médiateur entre l’Orient et l’Occident* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1998), 121. See also Martti Voutilainen, “The Conception of Man in Byzantine Philosophy”, in *Byzantium and the North* (Helsinki, Finland: Finnish Association for Byzantine Studies, 1985): 145-151 at 149.

<sup>41</sup> *Thal.* 64, PG 91 628. He also makes this explicit in his commentary on the Septuagint rendering of Psalm 50:7, “in sin my mother conceived me.”

paradigmatic way to explain the way in which the Fall operates as a continuing corrupting force in human history by subjecting us to the necessity of the passions:

Since, after the Fall, enjoyment preceded natural birth for all men, no one enjoyed natural freedom from passionate generation belonging to this enjoyment: all by nature had to pay their due of sufferings, of which death is the conclusion; the way of freedom was completely impracticable to those who found themselves under the tyranny of unrighteous enjoyment and of just sufferings, and were naturally subjected to the very just death.<sup>42</sup>

The close connection between pleasure (especially sexual pleasure) and the passions means that Maximus comes close to Augustine in his understanding of fallen humanity's tendency toward sin.<sup>43</sup> Does this mean that Maximus shared Augustine's beliefs concerning involuntary sin? Is the tendency to sin *automatically*, as it were, a sign of the corruption of human nature?

On the one hand Maximus certainly shares with Augustine the language of concupiscence as an expression of God's righteous punishment. In addition to the passage cited above, Maximus writes in several places of the "habituation" (*hexis*) of humanity to an "internal impassioned disposition for material things."<sup>44</sup> This habit is described in his commentary on Psalm 50:5 ("in sin my mother conceived me") as a "judgment" (*katadikē*) against Adam and his progeny.<sup>45</sup>

On the other hand, as we have seen that Augustine wrestled with the notion of involuntary sin (especially as he discovered it in Romans 7 and Galatians 5) because

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid. The ET is Meyendorff's, *Christ in Eastern Christian Thought*, 141. The similarities between Augustine's notion of *concupiscentia* and Maximus' term *philautia* (selfish love) have been noted by scholars as among the few pieces of evidence that the Greek writer may have been familiar with his Latin predecessor. See Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator*, 251 ff. see also, G.C. Berthold, "Did Maximus the Confessor Know Augustine?" *Studia Patristica* 17 (1, 1982): 51-9.

<sup>43</sup> Larchet, 121.

<sup>44</sup> *Thal.* 65, PG 90 696, CCSG 22, 191-4.

<sup>45</sup> *Qu.D.*, CCSG 10, 138-9.

of the apparent conflict the idea suggested between freedom and necessity. The conflict was especially acute for Augustine on account of his metaphysical assumption of the sovereign will standing over and against nature. Maximus' very different metaphysical assumptions seem to have relieved him of a need to consider this conflict in the same way as Augustine. I have been unable to locate a passage in his writings where Maximus treats involuntary sin as a conceptual problem to be solved. The reason may lie in the fact that Maximus resolves the problem of free will and necessity by treating the emergence of any conflict as itself a product of the Fall. For Augustine the clash is really built in to the basic structure of reality in which there is an inherent potential for conflict between the divine and human wills. For Maximus no such divergence need exist. The natural state of humanity is one in which our wills perfectly coincide with the divine *logos* by which we are constituted; our current experience of necessity, of which concupiscence is a part, is not natural.

It would seem then that both fathers would regard involuntary sin as evidence of the effects of original sin. The difference lies in how they regard those effects. For Augustine sin corrupts nature and requires divine forbearance. For Maximus nature is thwarted, not corrupted, and must be healed by restoration to divine unity in Christ. Involuntary sin is thus not so much evidence of a depraved will as of the ignorance that clouds the human being as she strives to attain her natural *telos*.<sup>46</sup>

Another way of seeing this is to think of the difference in terms of Maximus' teaching on the gnostic will. It is through use of *gnōmē* that a person attempts to negotiate her way through the demands of necessity. The need to deliberate reflects a

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<sup>46</sup> *Thal.* 65, PG 90 696, CCSG 22, 191-4.

*failure* of the self, not the expression of a natural power. But this failure is not total. The gnostic will does not *replace* the natural will. Ontologically speaking only the natural will exists; the gnostic will is nature's freedom exercised through an inferior mode. It follows that, like the natural will itself, the gnostic faculty remains closely connected with the objects of choice rather than with the choosing subject.

It is worth noting an important clarification that Damascene made to Maximus' Christology.<sup>47</sup> John acknowledges that in Christ there *is* a single gnostic will. By this he means that any human being must settle upon an object (*to thelēton*) needed to fulfill its natural will.<sup>48</sup> If this inclination toward an object is rational (as in Christ it always is) then the gnostic will functions transparently as the means by which the natural will fulfills itself in freedom. That this is not really a contradiction of Maximus is evident from the fact that the latter clearly argues that the natural will moves towards free self-fulfillment. Thus, for instance, Maximus argues that "evil" is the defect "which prevents the powers inherent in human nature from acting in conformity with their aims."<sup>49</sup> Those aims are *natural*, meaning they are discoverable by a rational apprehension of one's own nature, but they require an engagement with objects in order to fulfill them.

Finally, it is important to note that, for Maximus, the proper mode for this self discovery is contemplation.<sup>50</sup> For Augustine it is, rather, an act of will. Maximus,

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<sup>47</sup> Louth, *St. John Damascene*, 139.

<sup>48</sup> *Expos.* 36; Chase, 251.

<sup>49</sup> *Thal.* prologue. *PG* 91 253B, Meyendorf 140.

<sup>50</sup> "A nature endowed with reason and understanding participates in the holy God by its very being, by its aptitude for well-being...and by the free gift of eternal being. In this way it knows God; and the things created by him...it knows by a perception of the ordered wisdom to be observed in creation.

unlike Augustine, can claim that the true recovery of nature, in which salvation consists, “depends on our will.”<sup>51</sup> Augustine would probably censure such a statement as Pelagian heresy. In a sense he reduces the self to the will; such a statement would therefore seem to Augustine to exclude the need for grace in the process of salvation. For Maximus, in continuity with his entire tradition, the Pelagian debate is largely beside the point. His non-reductionist anthropology secures the will as a principle of movement *within* the natural powers of the soul and body, not as a force separate from them. Our salvation “depends on the will” not in the sense that it excludes grace, but because the will operates to move nature toward the end grace sets before it, a movement that is possible only because nature receives its both its genesis in, and its motive force by, that same grace. On this view, involuntary sins are not ultimately signs of the persistence of necessity. They are temporary phenomena associated with the gnomonic mode of existence. Salvation in Christ means increasing release from every bond of necessity.<sup>52</sup>

### **Plotinus, *Energeia* and the Integrity of Nature**

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This wisdom exists in the mind as simple and without substance of its own.” Maximus, *Chapters on Charity* 4.24. ET in George C. Berthold (trans.), *Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1985): 64.

<sup>51</sup> Meyendorf, 150.

<sup>52</sup> Adam Cooper, *The Body in St. Maximus the Confessor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), especially in chapter 5, shows how radically Maximus sees the potential for human freedom even in the body.

The differences between the Augustinian and Maximian positions can also be seen from the point of view of a thesis recently advanced by David Bradshaw, centering on the distinction between the Latin and Greek understanding of the concepts of *esse* and *energeia* respectively.<sup>53</sup> Bradshaw argues that the Aristotelian metaphysical concept of *energeia*, the actualization of being, was received in very different ways by Latin and Greek philosophers and theologians of the Christian period, especially in its application to divine being.

Augustine, of course, was pivotal in shaping the western understanding of the relationship between God and the divine operations. Nothing so marked divine being (*esse*) as God's simplicity: "in the Godhead is absolutely simple essence, and therefore to be is there the same as to be wise...."<sup>54</sup> In this view divine operations, such as wisdom and creativity, are identical with divine being, a being absolutely still and unchanging. Bradshaw remarks that, "the most striking feature of Augustine's conception of being...is its static character...*esse* is not an act, but a condition."<sup>55</sup> This was Augustine's solution to a perennial problem in the tradition of Greek philosophy, namely that of the many and the one, how to conceive of the relationship between unity and multiplicity. Augustine's answer was to posit an impenetrable ontological wall fencing off the principle of singularity from the universe of diversity. As the creator of that universe, God could be present by means of his works. As creatures, we may be permitted to look over the ontological fence in the beatific

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<sup>53</sup> David Bradshaw, *Aristotle East and West: Metaphysics and the Division of Christendom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

<sup>54</sup> *De Trinitate* VII.1.2.

<sup>55</sup> Bradshaw, 224.

vision.<sup>56</sup> On Augustine's model there could be no real participation, in the philosophical sense, by creatures in the divine essence. To admit such would be to introduce duality into God's simple unity. The ontological fence always remains an absolute barrier, separating the uncreated unity from the created plurality. One of the consequences of this metaphysics is the maintenance of a sharp distinction between the divine will (identical with divine being) and the human will which, grounded in the world of multiplicity, remains separable not only from divine being but also from *human* being. It is not surprising, then, that Augustine should discover this distance from divine perfection within them under the mode of the involuntary. Human imperfection is, for him, built into the basic structure of reality.

Greek patristic metaphysics proceeded very differently. In particular, this tradition understood the relationship between being (*ousia*) and activity (*energeia*) as one of continuity. Bradshaw shows how this tradition was shaped by the appropriation (especially by Pseudo-Dionysius) of a central element in Plotinian metaphysics.<sup>57</sup> This notion is what has been called the "theory of the two acts" which Plotinus explored primarily in *Enneads* V.1 and V.4. Plotinus perceived an ontological distinction between what beings *are* and what they *produce*. Thus, for example, fire *is* in its internal activity (*energeia tes ousias*) heat, and, in its external activity (*energeia ek tes ousias*), fire *produces* heat. Plotinus seems to have struggled to have found a way to accommodate the theory of the two wills to divinity, or as he

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 227.

<sup>57</sup> Plotinus (circa 204-270 C.E.) was an Alexandrian philosopher and contemporary of Origen. Although he was clearly not a Christian, much of his philosophical work (classified by modern scholarship as "Neoplatonist") was designed as an attack on gnostic systems of thought. See his entry in the *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Robert Audi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

called it, “the One.”<sup>58</sup> His solution to the problem prompted a highly original, even revolutionary, reflection on the nature of freedom.<sup>59</sup>

On the one hand Plotinus had to reject the notion that any “activity” attributed to the One might bring with it mutability or contingency.<sup>60</sup> On the other hand, Plotinus taught that the One was the ultimate source of all being, both as efficient and final cause.<sup>61</sup> Thus all being proceeds (*proodos*) from the One as efficient cause, and all being returns (*epistrophe*) to the One as the reason for their existence. Plotinus had to reconcile these two views of the One: transcendent and unchanging but, at the same time, the source of the immanent many through “emanation” and “reversion.” To this end he relied on a complex of ideas including, (1) that a being’s perfection “necessarily” involved external generation of its own likeness,<sup>62</sup> and (2) that the externalized likeness was a true image of the internal “form” (= *energeia*) of the prototype,<sup>63</sup> such that (3) the image could truly be said to participate in the original through its erotic attraction to its cause.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> See David Bradshaw, *Aristotle East and West* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2004), chapter 4 passim. Plotinus’ difficulty was, of course, an aspect of the perennial problem of the one and the many.

<sup>59</sup> Maria Luisa Gatti, “Plotinus: The Platonic tradition and the Foundations of Neoplatonism” in *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus* ed. Lloyd P. Gerson (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge) 1996 p.28.

<sup>60</sup> “Given this immobility in the Supreme, it can neither have yielded assent nor uttered decree, nor stirred in any way towards the existence of a secondary.” *Enneads* V.1.6.

<sup>61</sup> “[The One] is author at once of the existence of things and of their reasons, both produced at the one stroke.” *Enneads* VI.8.14.

<sup>62</sup> “The Intellectual-Principle stands as the image of The One, firstly because there is a certain necessity that the first should have offspring...in other words that there be something of its likeness as the sun’s rays tell of the sun.” (*Enneads* V.1.7)

<sup>63</sup> Bradshaw, pp.76-80.

<sup>64</sup> *Enneads* III.5, on Eros.

It was against this metaphysical backdrop that Plotinus offered a sustained reflection on freedom in *Enneads* VI.8. There he demonstrated how the One can be both absolutely free while at the same time “so to speak” subject to a kind of “necessity.” This “necessity” is in fact identical with the will to Good which is in turn the essence of the One.<sup>65</sup> In the One will and desire (which are each also *energeia*) coincide absolutely.<sup>66</sup> It would not be too much actually to *define* the internal activity of the One *as freedom* in the fundamental sense of self-creation and self-possession without any shadow of constraint. And yet, Plotinus said, the language of exposition still requires us to speak of a kind of “necessity” which as it were compels even God to be God, meaning *both* in terms of the inner dynamism of the One’s transcendent existence *and* in the procession of the One into expression in the first hypostasis, Intellect.<sup>67</sup>

The notion of declension of being was, of course, a Platonic commonplace. At this point one might have expected the Plotinian system to concede that the “necessary” implication of the One in a lower order of being demonstrated an ultimate determinism, at least in all *energeia* external to the One. What Plotinus proposed instead was much more subtle, namely that summarized in proposition (2) set out in above. All being produced by procession down the chain of being from the One was a true image of the prototype. If the prototype is absolute freedom, then the image must also, to the fullest extent possible, participate in that same freedom. Thus

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<sup>65</sup> *Enneads* VI.8.13. Plotinus emphasizes in this passage that in this area language lets us down. “We must be patient with language...everywhere we must read ‘so to speak.’”

<sup>66</sup> Gatti, p.29.

<sup>67</sup> See above, n.35.

we discover a fundamental tension in Plotinus' doctrine of procession. In one sense being is *drawn out* of the One: at each level the intense desire of what is lower for what is higher "compels" the higher to give.<sup>68</sup> Simultaneously, this gift is itself an external *energeia* reflecting the internal *energeia* of the One. The One is total love (*eros*)<sup>69</sup> and gives accordingly. A key word here is the Plotinian catchphrase *phthonos*, meaning freedom from envy, ungrudging.<sup>70</sup> Seen from the point of view of the higher, what drives this entire system downward is not really "necessity" but rather ungrudging love. It is only seen 'from below' that the declension seems to involve necessity, but even here it is a necessity mixed in the lower being with erotic desire for the higher; this is itself a participation in the divine *energeia*.

The full implications of this dynamic view of procession and reversion really come into view further on in the chain of being, with the emergence of individual souls. Here we confront the existential dilemma head on. There is a sense in which individuation is a "tragedy" because, as Georges Lerroux points out, "[Plotinus] sees the contradiction between two inescapable demands: the necessity of wishing for inferior existence and the impossibility of remaining in the intelligible."<sup>71</sup> Matter as it were demands the fall of the soul—and the soul partly desires the fall and partly dreads it. It is here that Plotinus seems most to want to distance himself from his

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<sup>68</sup> This is certainly true on the level of "illumination" (*Enneads* I.1.12), but Plotinus does not seem to be as clear when it comes to the level of pure ontology. Dionysius, on the other hand, is very explicit that even the "non-existent" desires the transcendent Good (e.g. *Divine Names* 4.7; ET in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987): 77-8). This does not so much seem to be a correction of Plotinus as a clarification.

<sup>69</sup>*Enneads* VI.8.15-16.

<sup>70</sup> E.g. "How then could the most perfect remain self-set—the First-Good, the Power towards all, how could it grudge or be powerless to give of itself...? *Enneads* V.4.7. The notion of divinity as ungrudging goes back at least to Plato, cf. *Phaedrus* 247A and *Timaeus* 29E.

<sup>71</sup> Georges Lerroux. "Human freedom in the thought of Plotinus" in *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus* ed. Lloyd P. Gerson (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge) 1996 p. 297.

Gnostic adversaries who thought that the tragedy could be solved simply by eliminating matter. For Plotinus, however, the “fall” into matter and the emergence of individual souls was much more complex; it reflected not simply the imposition of the irrational on the rational, but also the *compassion* of souls for the unsouled, of the higher for the lower, in other words a participation in Divine benevolence.<sup>72</sup> We should hasten to note that Plotinus is not so much concerned to argue for the sacredness of matter, but for the continuing sanctity of the Soul individuated in matter.<sup>73</sup> The descent of Soul into matter is, at least in part, a divine *energeia*. It was not evil that drew Soul into matter (for evil has no substance), but a misguided idea of the good. The way to recover the totality of the divinity of the many souls is not to wrench them from matter in the Gnostic manner, but to encourage their return to Unity through the Intellect, by purification, asceticism and virtue. This is the ethical vision of Plotinus: the aim of virtue is to allow souls to “see” more clearly. Leroux puts it well:

[O]ne cannot think in the same way about voluntary descent...and the liberty of re-ascension. These are in a manner of speaking, *two different freedoms*. While remaining voluntary, the descent is also necessary...Ascension, on the other hand, expresses the freedom of risk-taking, the sense of choosing or of making an effort, and is proportionately closer to a modern conception of freedom. Indeed, this liberty escapes from the determinism of the system since the soul must struggle to rediscover its purity, meaning not all souls will liberate themselves.<sup>74</sup>

These “two different freedoms” explain how both the descent of being and its ascent can be simultaneously voluntary and involuntary. The motive force in the

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<sup>72</sup> Plotinus writes of “an eternal law of nature...the movement of a being which in abandoning its superior is running out to serve the needs of another; hence there is no inconsistency or untruth in saying the Soul is sent down by God; final results are always to be referred to the starting-point, even across many intervening stages.” *Enneads* IV.8.5.

<sup>73</sup> In his attitude toward materiality, of course, Plotinus differs sharply from the Christian tradition.

<sup>74</sup> Leroux, p.299. My emphasis.

descent is the interchange of love and necessity. What drives the return, however, is a combination of love and the power of choice. Love in the descent provides the *voluntary* element as it drives the Soul toward what is involuntarily attracted to it. But on the ascent love is the *involuntary* element, compelling the Soul toward the Good on the fuel of the voluntary assent of the soul to the Good. We can also think of this in relation to the “two acts” theory. The inner *energeia* of a Soul is free in its descending motion but determined in its external *energeia* (there is only one kind of material form into which even its most loving and free descent can take it). In the ascending motion the situation is reversed. The Soul is internally oriented toward the Good as final cause, but is externally free to operate in accordance with that inner orientation or not. The ideal, then, is a correspondence between love as the internal *energeia* of the Soul (in the *image* of the One) and love as its external *energeia* (in *imitation* of the One). Perfection consists in being and producing love.

## Pseudo-Dionysius and the Vision of Carpus

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to prove the direct dependence of the Maximian tradition (including Damascene) on that of Plotinus.<sup>75</sup> But I am able to illustrate a close similarity of thought thanks to an especially graphic illustration contained in the writings of an author Maximus repeatedly cites from (or at times simply cribs), Pseudo-Dionysius. The specific work is the Areopagite's *Eighth Epistle*.<sup>76</sup> In this work, Dionysius recounts a vision in which a holy man named Carpus is shown a pair of sinners suspended precariously above a gaping chasm. The two are about to be devoured by a serpent. Carpus is given this insight into the state of mind of the imperiled sinners: "and they seemed to be on the point of falling, *partly against their will, partly by their will*; almost constrained by the evil, and at the same time *persuaded*."<sup>77</sup> Given the horrific description of what lies beneath these men it is difficult to imagine how they could be in two minds about their fate. But despite the terror beneath there is a part of each suspended sinner that actually wants to fall, or that is even *persuaded* of the desirability of the plunge.

It is difficult to imagine a clearer dramatization of what Plotinus saw as the "tragedy" of the descent of Soul. Carpus stands here for a traditional Greek belief in the inexorable pull of necessity. Inevitably the sinners must fall. Dionysius, however,

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<sup>75</sup> David Bradshaw points out (*Aristotle East and West*, especially at 207-212), that Damascene was heir to the notion of *energeia* as an externalization of essence (the Plotinian theory of the two acts). This was especially through the mediating work of Maximus. The latter saw that the entire edifice of orthodox Christology, anthropology and soteriology turned on a correct ontological grounding of divine and human *energeia*.

<sup>76</sup> Luibheid, 269-280.

<sup>77</sup> *Ep VIII.6*; I have altered Luibheid's ET which appears at 297.

shares the Plotinian sense that this motion toward doom is at least fueled by voluntary propulsion toward a misconceived good. Their fall is occasioned by a kind of misapplied exercise of their share of divine love. The sinners are not merely “constrained” by evil, they are “almost persuaded” by it. Their fall is not simply a function of inevitability; it is also a kind of expression of self, or at least of self-understanding.

There is more here, though, than a simply dramatization of Plotinian philosophy. What remains in the philosopher an unresolved tragedy becomes, for the theologian, altogether resolved. The key, of course, is the person of Jesus. In the vision Jesus descends into the very mouth of hell to reclaim the two sinners. This is only “so to speak” a response to necessity. Above all, the descent is a divine *proodos*, a manifestation of *eros* in the One who can say of Himself, “I am ready . . . to suffer.”<sup>78</sup> The fall of the men in this vision was voluntary only in part. Their genuine freedom of self-expression was mixed with real necessity. But the descent of Jesus is pure freedom with only the appearance of necessity. This freedom is pure not because Jesus chose to descend when he could equally have decided not to descend. The purity of the freedom comes from the fact that it is a fitting externalization of the internal *energeia* of the God Who is Love. It is this final victory of Love that resolves every hint of tragedy.

When placed in this context, then, the vision of Carpus in the *Eighth Epistle*, is not simply an insight into the way in which Jesus Christ operates within the lives of certain people. It is a vision of the basic pattern and structure of reality, of the

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

procession of Divine *energeia* driven by *eros* to uttermost *kenosis* in order to draw back to Itself all things according to their capacity. The descent of Jesus from his celestial throne, “stretching a helping hand...the angels, cooperating with Him”<sup>79</sup> is simply a summary in symbolic language of the entire Dionysian corpus. Like any good Neoplatonist, Dionysius expects the bewildered sinners, suspended half in and half out of hell, to see receive new insight from the descent of Jesus, the true Logos or Reason and to shake off their ignorance by grasping towards what they really yearn for. The light of Jesus’ presence will cure their ignorance and provide the strength that these sinners were looking for in their disordered search for freedom. Like a good Plotinian, Dionysius refuses to see the properly ordered exercise of human freedom as destructive of human autonomy. However the good to which they aspire is defined for them, the sinners are still required to make an investment of self in the process of ascent. And it is precisely here that Dionysius reveals that he is not simply a good Plotinian Neoplatonist but also a good Christian. The “Given” to which the sinners may now be assimilated is not simply an impersonal force of unity. It is the loving Creator by whom all being, life and wisdom have been drawn out of nothing. The proper exercise of freedom leads not simply to the perfection of nature in the sense that the human being finds his or her proper place within the impersonal cosmic order. It is the perfection of nature in the form of a personal response to a personal call, a love meeting Love. This is the difference human freedom makes.

These ideas will also be found in John of Damascus, expressed differently it is true, but nonetheless recognizable. Indeed the notion of reality as a kind of cosmic mechanism for the exchange of “energy” from divinity to humanity and back again is

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<sup>79</sup> *Ep* VIII.6.

basic to the how the Orthodox tradition understands such notions as *synergeia* and *theosis*, that is to say salvation itself. For Augustine, freedom and necessity remain opposed to one another. But for the Dionysian and Maximian tradition freedom and necessity are not distinct conditions but rather different operations or modes of spiritual movement. Descent into necessity is not a punishment, as it is for Augustine.<sup>80</sup> It is an integral part of that process of purification by which humanity is rendered ever more united to the God for whom it longs. It must follow from this that the involuntary is not separable from or irrelevant to the moral and spiritual enterprise—far from it! Self-fulfillment occurs not *in spite* of involuntary acts but by means of them, no less than by means of acts that are actually chosen. Conversely, involuntary sins are no less significant in their capacity to retard that process of self-actualization than are sins of the will. All of these spiritual raw materials, all our voluntary and involuntary experiences of life, are to be cast upon the consuming Fire of divine Love. Just *how* is one to do this? Damascene will help to answer this, as the next chapter will show. So too will the liturgical, ascetical and canonical disciplines discussed in the fourth chapter.

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<sup>80</sup> *Retractions* 1.15.2; Bogan, 72.

## CHAPTER 3

### NATURAL INTEGRITY IN JOHN OF DAMASCUS

St. John of Damascus explicitly draws on the work of St. Maximus the Confessor to frame his account of the human will and freedom. Indeed, so heavily does John draw on earlier writers, notably Maximus and the Cappadocians, that some scholars have regarded him as little more than an unoriginal recycler of the ideas of others. John Meyendorf, for example, proffered the view that, “there is no new creation in [Damascene’s work]; it is essentially a school manual.”<sup>81</sup> Certainly John’s more systematic approach is possible largely because of the profound synthesis already undertaken by Maximus, by which the latter drew together many of the strands of Greek patristic thought. I would argue, however, against this tendency to dismiss Damascene’s work as either a mere footnote to earlier patristic writers, or as a trial run for Thomas Aquinas. Before turning to examine John’s specific teaching on the will—and the consequences of this teaching for an understanding of involuntary sin—it is necessary for me to establish this argument by placing Damascene’s thought in its proper historical context. As we have seen, John is not afraid of correcting some of his predecessors’ ideas. The question of a gnostic will in Christ is the most important for this study. Furthermore, the very way Damascene planned and executed his project exposes aspects of his theological tradition that might otherwise have been obscured. Nowhere is this more evident than in the use he makes of nature, reason

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<sup>81</sup> *Christ in Eastern Christian Thought*, 153.

and philosophy to explicate his understanding of the true nature of human freedom and flourishing.

### **The Historical Context**

The best evidence indicates that John was born a subject of the Umayyad Caliphate which between 651 and 750 was based in Damascus.<sup>82</sup> This Islamic empire encompassed not only Muslims, but also numerous Christian subjects throughout Palestine, Syria and the entire Near East. A large majority of the Caliph's Christian subjects were dissenters from Byzantine orthodoxy measured in terms of the six synods recognized by that time in Constantinople as "ecumenical." Well beyond the reach of Byzantine political and military power, the various alternative versions of Christianity were permitted the same level of freedom of expression and worship as John's "Melkite" (i.e. shared with the kings in Constantinople) orthodoxy. Almost for the first time since the days of Constantine, Christians could not look to the state to enforce an official orthodoxy. Chalcedonian, dyothelite Christianity was therefore in sore need of a new and persuasive apologetic that would appeal as much to reasoned argument as to authority. It was just this apologetic purpose that shaped John's writings, both his explicitly polemical treatises and his masterpiece, the three-part *Fountainhead of Knowledge*.<sup>83</sup>

One of the reasons modern scholarship has tended to dismiss John is that he is frequently read through the lens of later, especially western, systematic theology. As

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<sup>82</sup> For John's biography, see Louth, *St. John Damascene*, ch. 1.

<sup>83</sup> Kotter, vols. 1, 4 and 2; ET in Chase.

Andrew Louth has argued, however,<sup>84</sup> John of Damascus is far more than the “first scholastic.” Read on his own terms, and with an understanding of the apologetic scope of his project, John emerges as a theologian of great subtlety and skill. Certainly he presented almost no new ideas<sup>85</sup>—like any patristic theologian he would have been horrified to have been accused of originality. Rather, he adapted the tradition to which he was heir in view of the pressing needs of his time and place. Though very much a Byzantine thinker, Damascene lived in a post-Byzantine society, and this political reality required him to think through his theological assumptions from the ground up. In particular it required him to support his doctrines with reasoned argument. And this in turn called forth from him a profound reflection on the role of human reason as the expression of divine reason, a reason, that is to say, grounded in nature.

### **Nature and Reason in Damascene’s Project**

The idea of the “integrity of the natural” is a golden thread running through Damascene’s work. It shapes his metaphysics, his Trinitarian and Christological theology and his anthropology—including, therefore, an accommodation within his thought of a notion of involuntary sin. In other words, Damascene’s thought reflects a radical sense of the unity of creation and the absolute rejection of any kind of dualism, whether in its explicit form in Manichaeism or the residual dualism present in, for

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<sup>84</sup> *St. John Damascene*, 37.

<sup>85</sup> “I shall say nothing of my own, but shall gather together into one those things which have been worked out by the most eminent teachers and make a compendium of them.” *Dial. proem*; 60-2, Kotter vol.1, 53; Chase, 6.

example, Origenist and Messalian thought. John was, above all, a radical monotheist and an adherent of the biblical notion of divine creation *ex nihilo*. What supports “nature” is not that it is self-subsistent but that it is *willed*. “Creation is a work of [God’s] will, it is not co-eternal with Him—which is because it is not of the nature of that which is produced from nothing to be co-eternal with that which is without beginning and always existing.”<sup>86</sup> This is, of course, a belief Damascene holds in common with all patristic theologians, including Augustine. As we have seen, however, in Augustine’s thinking we cannot experience God himself by understanding the divine will. What we encounter in creation is a work of God that is separate from the divine Simplicity. This inevitably builds into Augustine’s view of created reality a fundamental ontological gulf between the divine Will and created wills. What we find in Damascene, however, is that Greek view of the divine will as *energeia*, an externalization of God’s internal being. Being is externalized in act through the exercise of the will. The simplicity of the Divine Being is distinct from *but not necessarily opposed to* the diversity of created being.<sup>87</sup> In this respect,

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<sup>86</sup> *Expos.* 8; ET by Frederick Chase, S.J. in *St. John of Damascus, Writings*. (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1958), 179.

<sup>87</sup> Joseph Farrell, *Free Choice in St. Maximus the Confessor* (South Canaan, PA: St. Tikhon’s Seminary Press, 1989) notes that for Augustine, drawing on pagan Neoplatonic assumptions, “simplicity” acts as a kind of ontological equal sign, so that, for example, God and Will must be exact synonyms. Any created will must, therefore, be ontologically separated from the Divine Will and, furthermore, separation and distinction necessarily presuppose *opposition*, albeit an opposition that may be overcome by grace. In the Christianized Neoplatonism of Maximus, however, *distinction* does not necessarily imply *opposition* because, for him, “simplicity” is not compromised by being ontologically united with its diverse emanations. The Logos is ontologically linked with the logoi; the latter do not merely imitate the former, they are real expressions of the being of the Logos (see Farrell, 136 ff, citing especially Maximus’ *Seventh Ambigua*). If I understand Farrell correctly, then the formulae  $God+Will=God$ , which would summarize Augustine’s thought would not adequately express that of Maximus. His notion would rather yield something like  $God+Will=God^1$ , where  $God^1$  is God in the mode of act (God-in-creation) as opposed to God in the mode of being. If this is correct, then it makes sense to see Maximus, and thus Damascene who follows him in this respect, as in harmony with the distinction between the Divine Essence and Energies that we see in the later medieval Byzantine theology, especially that of St. Gregory Palamas.

Damascene is testimony to the ability of orthodox Greek patristic theologians to resist the powerful intellectual undertow of dualism, something that for Augustine seemed much more difficult to avoid.

John was, therefore, very far from opposing Athens to Jerusalem. On the contrary, he drew heavily on the resources of Greek philosophy to shape a powerful intellectual case for seeing nature as a whole, and holy, reflection of divine creativity. This was not simply a tactical choice of intellectual weaponry. Damascene's entire project rested on his foundational assertion that the same Truth can be engaged by our rational and spiritual faculties. Flowing from the same Divine source, reason and the spirit are absolutely and radically compatible.

Nowhere is John's respect for philosophy more evident than in the introduction to his great tripartite work, the *Fountainhead of Knowledge*. Damascene makes it clear that for him all knowledge (*gnōsis*) is ultimately God himself: "let us approach that Teacher in whom is no falsehood and who is the truth. Christ is the subsistent wisdom and truth and in Him are all the hidden treasures of knowledge."<sup>88</sup> But if God is the goal and source of all *gnōsis*, access to Him can be found by many means, not only prayer and *askesis*, but also by the hard work of intellectual study:

Now the gate is the letter, but the bridal chamber within the gate is the beauty of the thoughts hidden behind the letter, which is to say, the Spirit of truth. Let us knock hard, let us read once, twice, many times. By thus digging through we shall find the treasure of knowledge and take delight in the wealth of it. Let us seek, let us search, let us examine, let us inquire.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> *Dial.* 1; Chase, 8. It is worth noting that several scholars, including Richter and Louth (see Louth *St. John Damascene*, 44) believe that this introduction is one of the few sections of the *Dial.* that spring entirely from John's own pen, as opposed to being compiled from other writers, notably Porphyry and Aristotle.

<sup>89</sup> *Dial.* 1; Chase, 8.

Surely this is why John begins his magisterial exposition of Orthodoxy not with a credal confession, but with 68 philosophical chapters, defining his terms and establishing the contours of dialectical reasoning. His optimism is profound. It is *by nature* that the human being is equipped with the means for knowing ultimate truths. The ascent to God is made not by flight from the world and from sense perception but *through* the world and our experience of it.

May those who happen upon this work have it as their purpose to bring their mind safely through to the blessed end—which means to be *guided by their sense perceptions up to that which is beyond all sense perception and comprehension*.... Thus if we apply ourselves in a meek and humble spirit to the attainment of knowledge, we shall arrive at the desired end.<sup>90</sup>

Time and again throughout his writings John returns to his fundamental definition of human nature as rational and intellectual.<sup>91</sup> Importantly, this definition applies to the whole human being, not simply to the “spiritual” or purely “intellectual” element. The material element is capable of participating in the moral and spiritual enterprise in accord with—or against—reason depending on its habits and virtues. It is impossible to overstate the importance for Damascene’s overall project, especially his moral vision, of this appropriation of a fundamentally Aristotelian theory of human acts. It is especially apparent in his use of Aristotle’s rich idea of states of virtue produced by practice (*hexis*),<sup>92</sup> and his related understanding of human activity (*energeia*) as a manifestation of a state of being. I will return to this discussion later in this chapter.

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<sup>90</sup> *Dial.* 1; Chase, 10. Emphasis added. Richter notes how this emphasis on attaining knowledge *through* the senses reveals both Damascene’s debt to Platonism and his departure from it; see Louth, *St. John Damascene*, 46-7.

<sup>91</sup> E.g. *Dial.* 41; Chase, 65 and *Expos.* 26; Chase 234-9.

<sup>92</sup> *Dial.* 58 (Chase, 90-2), “on habit and privation”, is directly dependent on Aristotle’s *Categories* X.

## “Human Nature”

First, however, we need to examine some of the anthropological pillars on which John builds his vision of human flourishing. Of these, the really load-bearing concept is that, while individual humans are composites of both material and spiritual elements, “human nature” itself is a unity.

Now even though men are said to have one nature, the individual man is not said to be of one nature. This is because, on the one hand, the one nature of man is said to be compound, since all the compound hypostases of men come under one species; whereas, on the other hand, the individual man is not said to be of one nature, since each human hypostasis is made up of two natures—soul and body, I mean—which it preserves unconfused in itself, to which fact the separation caused by death bears witness.<sup>93</sup>

This passage sheds light on the meaning for Damascene of what has become for contemporary scholars a troubling and highly debated concept, “human nature.”<sup>94</sup> Elsewhere John explains that “nature” (*physis*) is a specification of the notion of “being” (*ousia*) in that it refers to concretized existence made such through the “implanting” by God of an “unchangeable and immutable principle and cause and virtue...in each species for its activity.”<sup>95</sup> At first glance this would seem to bring John within the censure of contemporary critics that the notion of human nature is simply a means of defining (and therefore confining) *a priori* what it means to be a human being, including how one ought to behave. To some extent, of course, this is

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<sup>93</sup> *Dial.* 41; Chase 66.

<sup>94</sup> Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), xiii. A good summary of the issues can be found in Aaron Stalnaker, “Comparative Religious Ethics and the Problem of ‘Human Nature’,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 33 (no. 2, June 2005): 187-224, especially 194-197.

<sup>95</sup> *Dial.* 30; Chase, 55.

justified. John does indeed have a very “thick” notion of what it is to be *anthropos*. His theological anthropology is based on the assertion of an “unchangeable and immutable principle” of humanity which is quite distinct from the principle by which the existences of other “species” (such as beasts and angels) are organized. But it is important to understand precisely what kind of “principle” this is.

The key lies in Damascene’s insistence in the *Dialectica* that “nature” and “form” (*eidos*) are equivalent terms.<sup>96</sup> The principle of “nature” is above all a conceptual reality, a divine *idea* or *plan*. It is discoverable not so much by examination of empirical human beings as through apprehension of divine truths. The discovery is certainly a *rational* one, but it is not *scientific*. One does not discover humanity by dissecting human beings, either physically or metaphysically. Such analysis would yield only the constituent elements of an individual, the “soul” and “body” referred to above. One discovers humanity by encountering its “form” which is to say its existence in the mind of the Creator. One does not begin from the beginning, as it were, but from the end, the *telos*. The discovery of human nature is impossible without the discovery of God; anthropology is one of the chief tasks of theology.

This aspect of John’s teaching has much affinity with the theology of the Cappadocian Fathers, particularly St. Gregory of Nyssa who taught that human nature (“Adam”) is discoverable only from the point of view of the *eschaton* when the full measure of the human race has been brought into being. Gregory insists that, “[the] entire plenitude of humanity was included by the God of all, by His power of

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<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*: Chase, 56.

foreknowledge, as it were in one body.”<sup>97</sup> The point is not just that humanity is made up of a certain number of individual human beings, but that in order to uncover the meaning of human existence one must look forward, not backward or even to the side. John would contend that “human nature” is not simply the sum of its parts, the material and spiritual elements that make up each member of the human race, nor even the accumulation of those members themselves in some numerical sense. We do not discover what it means to be human from the ground up, as it were, as a collection of defining constraints; human nature is not a closed box from which there is no escape. On the contrary, participation in humanity is participation in God Himself, born in His image and invited to attain to His likeness.<sup>98</sup> The box is not closed, it opens into infinity.

This “principle” of humanity is thus “unchanging and immutable” not in the static way we understand the absence of change in the material world. Rather it is more like the unceasing dynamism of *perichoresis*, the mutual indwelling of the Divine Persons of the Trinity in Whom there is “one surge and one movement.”<sup>99</sup> Again, this notion is rational without being scientific. It corresponds to a kind of inner logic of human experience that needs to be articulated in terms of philosophy or, more precisely, philosophical theology.<sup>100</sup> What lies at the heart of this experience is that we find in reality an intrinsic unity and wholeness. Ironically, on the purely

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<sup>97</sup> St. Gregory of Nyssa, *de Opificio Hominis* (“On the Making of Humanity”) 17; NPNF ii, vol. 5.

<sup>98</sup> *Expos.* 26; Chase, 235. According to Meyendorf, “John ignores, as does the whole of the Greek patristic tradition, the notion of a static ‘pure nature’ (*Christ in Eastern Christian Thought*, 161).

<sup>99</sup> *Expos.* 14; Chase, 202.

<sup>100</sup> Or even poetry, Damascene being one of the foremost writers of hymns in the Byzantine tradition. See Louth, *St. John Damascene*, chapter 9.

natural level, this integrity is discovered above all when we become aware of its *disintegration*. It is for this reason that John concludes the passage quoted above by pointing to the phenomenon of *death*.

Death is always a tragedy for John because, by this separation, the material and spiritual elements that make up a person cease to participate in the *form* or *nature* of humanity. As we have seen the “composition” of a human being takes place not at the level of “nature” but of the subsisting individual, the *hypostasis*, because “it is logically impossible for constituent differences to exist in the same thing.”<sup>101</sup> The substantial elements are not “naturally” joined if by “nature” one looks here to the defining characteristics of each element, such as extension or its absence. Body and soul do not, of themselves, long for any kind of union.<sup>102</sup> It is only through an act of divine creative will that the material and spiritual elements are made to adhere in “one compound hypostasis” (*mian hypostasin syntheton*).<sup>103</sup> Human nature exists only insofar as it is realized in human beings, hypostasized by means of this divine composition. Death is thus an outrage not so much against “nature” seen in a purely scientific way, as against the divine will. Damascene’s attitude toward this tragedy is revealed most profoundly in the famous funeral hymns attributed to him (and which certainly are of a piece with his theological outlook.)<sup>104</sup> The following troparia are

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<sup>101</sup> *Dial.* 41; Chase 66.

<sup>102</sup> John would, of course, reject any notion of a primordial “fall” of spirit into flesh, such as one finds in the Gnostic, Manichean or even Origenist systems. The notion of any kind of “natural” attractive force between material and spiritual reality is contrary to his entire metaphysics.

<sup>103</sup> *Dial.* 44; Chase 69.

<sup>104</sup> The ascription of these hymns to John of Damascus is traditional and is to be found in the standard Greek *Euchologion*. Kotter’s edition is restricted to Damascene’s prose works. Louth does not express an opinion on the authenticity of these funeral hymns. The story of John’s composition of the troparia is found in the earliest Greek *vita*, published in Migne PG 94, 429-89. There seems little reason to

particularly relevant:

Fourth Mode: Your command which fashioned me was my beginning and my substance; for wishing to compose me as a living creature from visible and invisible nature, you molded my body from the earth, but gave me a soul by your divine and life-giving breath. Therefore, O Christ, give rest to your servant in the land of the living, in the tents of the just.

Plagal of the Second Mode: Truly most fearful is the mystery of death, how the soul is forcibly parted from the body, from its frame, and how that most natural bond of union is cut off by the will of God. Therefore we entreat you: Give rest in the tents of your just ones, him who has passed over, O Giver of life, Lover of humankind.

The *Fountainhead of Knowledge*, which begins with the human capacity for divine knowledge through experience of the natural world, ends with a final chapter on the resurrection of the body: “if death is defined as a separation of soul from body, the resurrection is the perfect rejoining of soul and body, and the raising up again of the dissolved and fallen animal.<sup>105</sup> John here repeats another of his bedrock convictions, namely that the body is not meant to be a principle of resistance to spiritual endeavor; it is rather intended by God to be a co-worker with the soul in the acquisition of virtue. The body is as much capable of the divine likeness (which means “likeness in virtue”<sup>106</sup>) as the soul:

Now, if the soul had engaged alone in the contest for virtue, then it would also be crowned alone; and if it alone had indulged in pleasures, then it alone could be justly punished. However, since the soul followed neither virtue nor vice without the body, it will be just for them to receive their recompense together.<sup>107</sup>

This is of capital importance for understanding the nature of the will.

Following Maximus the Confessor, Damascene locates the human will ontologically at the level of human *nature*. This means that the will relates to the *form* or *energeia*

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doubt that these texts are John’s own work. I have used, with some minor adjustments, the ET by Archimandrite Ephrem Lash found at [www.anastasis.org.uk](http://www.anastasis.org.uk).

<sup>105</sup> *Expos.* 100; Chase 401.

<sup>106</sup> *Expos.* 26; Chase, 235.

<sup>107</sup> *Expos.* 100; Chase 401-2.

of humanity. It is designed to be the mechanism by which that form is realized and liberated by means of human acts.

It is only against this background that we can approach John's apparently hyper-intellectualist account of the will. John certainly locates the will in the intellect, contrasting it with instinctual impulses of the lower faculties:

[P]roper to the rational and intellectual [nature] is free motion. Therefore, if the nutritive motion is proper to the vegetative life and the impulsive to the sensitive, then surely the free motion is proper to the rational and intellectual. But, freedom of motion is nothing else but the will.<sup>108</sup>

Unless we understand the significance for Damascene of the notion of human nature as formed by the divine *telos* we could easily mischaracterize this account of the will as pitting the mind against the body. The will is not, primarily, the means by which the soul restrains the recalcitrant flesh, but above all the means by which the whole human person realizes his or her authentic and natural self. We discover ourselves to be free upon realization of our "natural" desires; freedom is a kind of by-product of the soul's willed activity, or its necessary condition, rather than a separate faculty. Better still, it is a mode by, or a phase within, which we turn from the pull of necessity toward the freedom of ascent toward God. Although we can speak of "possessing" freedom, this does not mean freedom is a kind of accident in the way size and color are. These accidents may change, leaving the subject neither more nor less "real." But in the measure that I "have" freedom I "am" real; in speaking of freedom "is" and "have" merge in the same way that "being" and "willing" do, the verbs reflecting different modes of operation for a single ontological reality. The active soul is always free—free that is to "be". It is the passive soul, the soul being

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<sup>108</sup> *Expos.* 3.14; Chase, 298.

acted upon, the soul subject to “passion” that finds itself subject to constraint. This has profound implications for our understanding of how John might incorporate involuntary actions under the rubric of “sin.” For the time being, however, it is necessary to consider how he defended his basic philosophical and theological insight against the challenges of alternative modes of thought.

### **The Anti-Dualist Polemic and Involuntary Sin**

There are various ways in which Damascene tackles the challenge of dualism. One of the most accessible is his treatment of the Manichean heresy, which seems to represent for John the paradigmatic dualist position. He treats the Manicheans (relatively cursorily) in the second book of the *Fountainhead of Knowledge* (the treatise *de Haeresibus*),<sup>109</sup> but it is in his separate *Dialogue Against the Manichees* that we get to the heart of John’s radical adherence to the Biblical monotheism.<sup>110</sup> It is unclear to what extent Manichaeism survived in Damascene’s time as an organized sect, but certainly there were dualist movements in his time and these were a constant source of anxiety to the Byzantine theological mind.<sup>111</sup> John probably used the term Manichaeism as a general term for any system of thought that posited the existence of two eternally existing principles. Certainly this is the notion that defines the essential aspect of the heresy he describes in chapter 66 of *de Haeresibus*. The debate centers

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<sup>109</sup> *Haer.* 66; Chase, 127.

<sup>110</sup> For a summary of the *Dialogue* see Louth, *St. John Damascene*, 61-71.

<sup>111</sup> Louth, *St. John Damascene*, 64. The Paulicians in Anatolia were certainly active during John’s lifetime: see Janet and Bernard Hamilton, *Christian Dualist Heresies in the Byzantine World, c.650—c.1405* (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 1998).

on questions of theodicy: is evil “natural” or not? Another way of putting the same question is to ask whether the ground of evil is ontological or moral: is evil the product of being or will? Central to John’s argument in his *Dialogue Against the Manichees* is that evil is not “natural” but is produced by the wills of rational creatures, either angelic or human.<sup>112</sup> Significantly, the evil produced by human ill will in this life can be repented while that done as a result of demonic malice cannot be repented. We will return to this important point in our discussion concerning John’s polemic against the Origenists.

One of the central arguments in the *Dialogue Against the Manichees* is that multiplicity is necessarily subsequent to unity, that two comes out of one. Thus, in the discussion in the third chapter of the *Dialogue* over how the word *archē* (“principle” or “beginning”) is to be understood, Damascene says:

[W]e can speak of *archē* as that which is by nature first, as in the case of number. For if two exist, then one must necessarily be, whereas if one exists, two does not necessarily follow; for two is one plus one, but is not two. One is therefore the principle (or beginning) of two.<sup>113</sup>

John’s interlocutor in the *Dialogue* is allowed to state his opposing belief in the essential duality of reality, with eternally existing, and eternally opposed, divine and material principles.<sup>114</sup> Against Damascene’s argument for the unity and inherent goodness of all reality, the Manichee raises the central problem of theodicy, focusing in particular on how something created good (Satan) could become evil.<sup>115</sup> John’s

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<sup>112</sup> Louth, *St. John of Damascene* 68-9.

<sup>113</sup> *Manich.* 3.16. The ET is Louth’s, *St. John Damascene*, 66.

<sup>114</sup> *Manich.* 28. 1-22,

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

answer is that Satan, like all rational creatures, was created free and his fall is due not to necessity but to choice.<sup>116</sup> The origin (*archē*) of evil is not one of being but of will.

The Manichee's argument (or rather John's framing of that argument) now takes a fascinating turn. In effect he returns to the question of God's alleged unity and goodness. How, he asks, can an absolutely good God be the source both of creation and punishment? How can the same principle support both an eternal heaven and an everlasting hell? John's answer is that God is not the source of punishment at all. Hell is nothing but the fruit of *choice*. "God does not punish anyone in the future, but each one makes himself receptive to participation in God. Participation in God is delight, and lack of participation is punishment."<sup>117</sup> The implication is that the human being is not simply something ontologically given, with our response simply one of accepting or rejecting our existence as servants to the divine Will. If that were so, then that Will would be indeed the source of both light and darkness, of reward and punishment, of the bliss of the justified and the horror of the damned. But it is not so. The implication seems to be that human beings are not simply made, *they also cooperate in their own making*. The human will is not simply a tool of, or slave to, the divine Will. It is an image of that Will, capable of its own kind of creative act. Human beings are not simply made, they are also makers of themselves. Here again the notion of reality as *synergeia* is operative. What emerges in eternity is not a soul that is either "good" or "bad" according to the judgment of some external standard. What emerges is rather an artifact of choice, both of God's creative willing (always for the good) and our

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid, 69.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 44. 1-4; Louth *St. John Damascene*, 68.

own (for good or ill) This point is made in a passage toward the end of the *Dialogue* that deserves to be quoted at length.

In this life there is a certain economy and ineffable providence that calls sinners to conversion and repentance, but after death there is no longer change, no longer repentance, not because God will not receive repentance—for he cannot deny himself nor can he fail in compassion—but because the soul cannot change. . . . For what is punishment but the privation of what one longs for? According, therefore, to the analogy of desire, those who long for God rejoice, and those who long for sin are punished. And those who obtain what they long for rejoice in accordance with the measure of their longing, and those who fail suffer pain in accordance with the measure of their longing.<sup>118</sup>

In other words, we always end up getting what we ask for. The basic question is whether what we ask for is to be true to our ultimate yearnings or whether we prefer to ignore them. There is a remarkably modern ring to this theology. The difference between salvation and damnation for Damascene is not one of reward and punishment as much as authenticity and inauthenticity.

#### *Involuntary sin.*

It is worth pondering at this point what the implications of this theology might be for an understanding of the concept of involuntary sin. We have seen how Augustine came to understand the experience of unwilled sin as a consequence of divine wrath. Measured against the external standard of God's sovereign will, we have been found wanting on account of our participation in Adam's voluntary sin. It is this judgment that has decreed our being subject to every necessity, including the necessity of sin. This way of accounting for freedom and necessity in the moral sphere is based on a fundamental ontological division between being and willing, a kind of moral dualism that accommodates in some way the concern to explain the

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 75. 5-9, 17-24; Louth *St. John Damascene*, 69. Louth makes the point that this doctrine is essentially that of Maximus the Confessor, see *Quaestiones ad Thalassium* 59 (CCSG 22, 55).

persistence of evil that lies behind the more radical metaphysical dualism of the Manichean movement and others like it.

It should be clear by now that Damascene's way of looking at involuntary sin must be founded on a significantly different basis. For him, being and willing might be ontologically *distinguished*, but any *division* between them emerges only in consequence of the ontological catastrophe of sin. In the proper order of things willing is simply the free expression of being-in-itself according to the mode proper to being-in-the-world. This is why, in the *Expositio fidei*, Damascene can so easily distinguish "act" (*energeia*) from "passion" (*pathos*) according to whether they are "according to nature" (*kata physin*) or not (*para physin*).<sup>119</sup> Only those movements which are truly "according to nature" can be described as "acts." All movements, including very energetic ones which are nonetheless "contrary to nature", can only be truly described as "passions." Health and disease are thus distinguished according to whether they promote or frustrate nature: a regularly beating heart is an "act", but a palpitating one is a "passion."<sup>120</sup> It must surely seem, then, that Damascene would distinguish virtue from vice in a similar way: not on the basis of choice, but rather on the basis of whether these movements accord with nature or are contrary to it. As we will see in the following chapter, John makes this point explicit in his discussion of the "law of God" and the "law of sin" in chapter 95 of the *Expositio fidei*. The essence of sin, then, would not be that it is produced by choice, whether of an individual's choice to transgress or of God's choice to punish humanity by making it

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<sup>119</sup> *Expos.* 36-37; Kotter vol. 2, 87-94; Chase, 246-253.

<sup>120</sup> *Expos.* 36; Kotter vol. 2, 88; Chase 247.

subject to involuntary sin. Sin seems to present itself rather as evidence of some failure of nature to realize itself according to the mode of personal existence. Sin reflects not so much a disordered will as a collapse of the authentic self. The failure is one of that capacity to participate in the creation of the self to which the human being is called through creation in the divine image.

### **Neoplatonism**

That Damascene does indeed view all sin, including the involuntary kind, as a sign of natural disorder is further shown when we ponder even more deeply the influence on his thought of Christian Neoplatonic ideas. Once again we must return to a consideration of what is for John a foundational concept: that unity must be ontologically prior to diversity.

This argument is by no means original to Damascene. It goes back at least to Pythagoras, but it was especially exploited by Plotinus and other Neoplatonists including Pseudo-Dionysius.<sup>121</sup> John uses the argument frequently in support of his monotheism, not only in the *Dialogue Against the Manichees* but also in the *Fountainhead of Knowledge*, particularly his chapter on the demonstration of that there is one God and not several, which begins with quotations from the Decalogue (Exodus 20:2-3) and the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4) and concludes with this appeal,

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<sup>121</sup> Louth, *St. John Damascene*, 67.

“besides all this [i.e. the scriptural arguments], it is naturally necessary that the originating principle of duality be unity.”<sup>122</sup>

Here the debt that Damascene, and the tradition he represented, owed to the Christian Neoplatonism of the Dionysian corpus becomes especially clear. Through the Dionysian texts the Orthodox theological tradition was able to appropriate some fundamental philosophical notions that supported the biblical cosmology received from the Hebrew scriptures. Foremost among these were (1) the notion of evil as having no ontological reality,<sup>123</sup> and (2) the Plotinian idea of freedom as fulfillment of nature, an idea relying on the “theory of the two acts” as we saw in the previous chapter. The major difference between Christian and Pagan Neoplatonism lay in the fact that, for pagan philosophers, absolute unity was *both* a metaphysical *and* epistemological reality; multiple souls existed “necessarily” in relation to the One, and the distinction between created and uncreated had no real significance in their system.<sup>124</sup> The fundamental correction Pseudo-Dionysius makes to Neoplatonism is his insistence on the direct creation by God of all being.<sup>125</sup> We do not become one with God by folding back into a fundamental ontological abstraction, but by gracious participation in the divine and creative Energy. This had immense consequences for the theology of will, because it was precisely the divine Will—not ontological

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<sup>122</sup> *Expos.* 1.5; Chase 172-3.

<sup>123</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, *Divine Names* 4.19; ET by Colm Luibheid, *Pseudo-Dionysius the Complete Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987): 84-5.

<sup>124</sup> I am following here the classic account given by Vladimir Lossky in the first chapter of his *The Mystical Theology of the Christian Church* (translated by the Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Serge. Cambridge and London: James Clarke & Co, 1957). See also Andrew Louth, *Denys the Areopagite* (Morehouse Barlow: Wilton, CT) 1989, pp.84-5.

<sup>125</sup> *Divine Names* 2.11; Luibheid, 66-7.

necessity—that provided the ground of all being. Being is not “necessary” in the sense that God is constrained to create. The *energeia* of creation realizes the creative impulse that is, in a sense, God himself. Being must be seen, not as necessary, but as an artifact of divine freedom, a freedom that is simultaneously of *being* and of *doing*.

We have noted how Augustine attempted to find a place within his own Neoplatonic outlook for the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, finding it necessary to emphasize divine Simplicity by positing an unbridgeable gulf between Creator and creatures. One consequence of this was Augustine’s tendency to see Trinitarian relations as analogous to psychological states.<sup>126</sup> The Dionysian solution, on the other hand, enabled Christian philosophy to appropriate a fundamental tenet of Greek Trinitarian theology, developed especially by the Cappadocian Fathers, whereby the source (*archē*) of the Divine Life was seen to be a personal, i.e. *hypostatic*, act.<sup>127</sup> Maximus the Confessor crafted from this solution a definition of will as the appetite of rational nature for self-fulfillment, a phenomenon grounded in and analogous to the Trinitarian relations.<sup>128</sup> Where Augustine in *de Trinitate* works from the bottom up, seeking in human psychological experience “vestiges” of the Trinity, the Maximian and Dionysian tradition tends to work from the top down, understanding the Trinity as the basic reality in which all other realities participate.<sup>129</sup> Again, the

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<sup>126</sup> Farrell, 208-9.

<sup>127</sup> John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985): 86.

<sup>128</sup> Louth, *Maximus the Confessor*, 60. This is also one of the main theses advanced by Farrell, *Free Choice in St. Maximus the Confessor*, especially his conclusions at 177-194.

<sup>129</sup> “And again, the many [rational principles] are in fact one [Rational Principle] existing without confusion by virtue of all things being offered up to Him through Him Who is their enessentialization and enhypostization, God the Logos of the Father, Who is the source and cause of all things.” Maximus, *Seventh Ambigua*, in Farrell, 136.

Augustinian position emphasizes the distance separating Creator from creatures, while the Greek approach stresses their unity.

The tradition Damascene inherited was thus radically opposed to any form of dualism. All being had its origin in the hypostatic love of the Father, a love that was not “necessary” but free, i.e. willed. It is significant that John began his major work not with a metaphysical assertion, but with a statement of about how we know anything, namely by means of divine illumination.<sup>130</sup> The principle of being and the principle of knowing were absolutely identical for John. It followed that the proper *response* of creatures as existing and rational was equally identical (as we *are* so should we *do*), and the faculty by which this response could be coordinated was the will. This is the practical application of the two act theory. To the extent that creatures failed to direct their will toward fulfillment of their nature, this was a consequence of some disruption to that natural order. This is the significance of the distinction between “willing” and “how one wills.” The former belongs to nature, the latter depends on judgment or opinion (*gnōmē*) and so is fallible.<sup>131</sup> The perfect human being, Christ, was therefore possessed of a fully human will in consequence of his assumption of human *nature*, but He did not exercise that will through the mode of deliberation and judgment, of weighing means and ends. Growth in virtue, to the extent that it amounts to growth in conformity to Christ, must mean learning to exercise one’s natural will in accordance with the principle of natural integrity, rather than by the mode of *gnōmē*:

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<sup>130</sup> “Nothing is more estimable than knowledge, for knowledge is the light of the rational soul.” *Dial.* 1.1; Chase, 7.

<sup>131</sup> *Expos.* 3.14; Chase 297.

Now asceticism and the labors connected with it were not intended for the acquisition of virtue as of something to be introduced from outside, but for the expulsion of evil which has been introduced and is against nature—just as the steel’s rust, which is not natural but due to neglect, we remove with hard toil to bring out the natural brightness of the steel.<sup>132</sup>

It is clear that John, together with Maximus before him, viewed the whole tradition of monastic asceticism through the lens of this basic “integrity of the natural.” In this tradition there was no real distinction between the ends of liturgical prayer, growth in moral virtue and mystical spiritual experience. The “active” and “contemplative” dimensions of Christian life were simply different aspects of the same process. It is impossible from this standpoint to speak of Orthodox “spirituality” separately from morality or even sacrament and liturgy. It follows that one ought not to speak of “sin” and “righteousness” as though they concerned a body of legal rules external to the moral subject. It is a short step to conceiving of sin as any kind of check on spiritual self-fulfillment, whether chosen or not. I will expand on this basic insight in the following chapter.

Damascene combated dualism by formulating a concept of natural integrity in which moral collapse and existential failure are essentially the same thing. The philosophical and theological system he inherited gave him the intellectual resources to develop a moral and spiritual vision entirely coherent with his metaphysical principles. This certainly sheds light on how Damascene would have understood the liturgical formulae of his own tradition and their frequent references to “sins voluntary and involuntary.” It remains only to see how this view would ultimately win the day in the Greek Church against some of its principal intellectual rivals.

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid; Chase 303.

## Origenism and Messalianism

The Greek patristic tradition was by no means unanimous in teaching the “integrity of the natural.” Two alternative approaches in particular cast long shadows, namely Origenism and Messalianism. Although both systems of thought had their open partisans, they are better thought of as intellectual tendencies rather than as organized movements. Byzantine monasticism, with its innate distrust of the body and the physical passions, provided fertile ground for these ways of addressing the apparent conflict between matter and spirit. It is precisely for this reason that Damascene took pains to argue against what he saw as these dangerous distortions of the Christian tradition.

It is impossible in this short study to do justice to the complexity of either Origenism or Messalianism. The latter is a particularly difficult body of thought to summarize on the basis of the historical evidence.<sup>133</sup> Damascene himself is one of the major historical witnesses to the content of Messalian belief, devoting a comparatively lengthy chapter in *de Heraesibus* to the subject.<sup>134</sup> My justification for treating Messalianism and Origenism together can be reduced to the simple inclusion within that chapter of the following opinion that John treats as characteristic of the Messalian position: “evil is natural.”<sup>135</sup> For my purposes it matters little whether or not this is a fair description of Messalian belief; my aim is to highlight the

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<sup>133</sup> Dom Columba Stewart, *Working the Earth of the Heart: The Messalian Controversy in History, Texts and Language to AD 431* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1991) 2-3.

<sup>134</sup> *Haer.* 80; Chase 131-137.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid*; Chase 132.

significance for Damascene of any attack he perceives on the inherent goodness and unity of “nature.” It is precisely the same kind of attack John detects in Origenist thought, as witnessed by his condemnation of the “raving” opinion that the human soul and body were created separately.<sup>136</sup> There were, of course, many differences between the Origenist and the Messalian positions with respect to nature, and especially to the human body and the efficacy of the sacraments. But both had something in common. St. Jerome noted in the fourth century that both seemed to accept the possibility that the human soul might be perfected through the conquest of evil passions.<sup>137</sup> Until that conquest was secured, however, the human being remained a slave of necessity. Freedom required that the passionate element within the human being should be eliminated. For Messalians this seemed to require a victory over the spirit of evil in possession of the mind and body, while for Origenists the evil seemed to be materiality itself. In both cases, human freedom requires the elimination of a significant part of the “natural” human experience. For the Origenists this seems to have included the body *in toto*. For the Messalians it seems to have led to contempt for many aspects of material existence, including social and ecclesial structures that depend on that existence.<sup>138</sup> Just how differently John of Damascus saw the nature of the spiritual struggle requires some explanation. For the sake of simplicity I have

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<sup>136</sup> *Expos.* 12; Chase 235.

<sup>137</sup> Stewart, 41-2.

<sup>138</sup> At least these are the elements Damascene chooses to highlight. For example: “[the Messalians] avoid manual labor...they are especially inhuman in their treatment of the poor...they have a contempt for churches and altars...they persuade fathers and mothers to neglect the rearing of children...they...receive with alacrity slaves running away from their master, and sinner coming to them without any absolution, without priestly sanction....”, *Haer.* 80; Chase 133-5.

chosen to focus particularly on the Origenist problem, as it seems to shed the most light on John's alternative argument.

### *Origenism*

Origen's thought was, like Damascene's, shaped in large measure by the need to reconcile the problem of freedom and determinism. Drawing largely on Stoic and Platonic thought,<sup>139</sup> Origen's basic proposal involved sharply distinguishing corporeal from incorporeal being, with freedom restricted to the latter. His was a highly intellectualist account: in its earthly existence the soul possesses a rational faculty by which a human being is able to assess each encounter with forces outside the soul (including the "passions"), both good and evil. Those forces are conceived as presenting "images" (*phantasiais*) to the reason to be either accepted or rejected on the basis of the mind's understanding of the Good.<sup>140</sup> Framing his explanation largely in terms of the Pauline distinction between the "will of the spirit" and the "will of the flesh,"<sup>141</sup> Origen conceives of the volitional faculty as above all the movement of pure reason in the face of irrational compulsions and constraints.<sup>142</sup> Later Evagrius of Pontus (ca. 345-399), was to exploit the same basic approach in building his detailed

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<sup>139</sup> B. Darrell Jackson, "Sources of Origen's Doctrine of Freedom," in *Studies in Early Christianity: Doctrines of Human Nature, Sin and Salvation in the Early Church*, edited by Everett Ferguson (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993): 4-9.

<sup>140</sup> "So it happens that, since there are in the nature of reason possibilities of contemplating good and evil, by following out which and contemplating them both we are led to choose good and avoid evil, we are worthy of praise when we devote ourselves to the practice of good, and of blame when we act in the opposite way." *De Principiis* 3.1; ET in *On First Principles*. Ed. & trans. G.W. Butterworth. (New York: Harper Torchbooks (Harper & Row), 1966): 158-9.

<sup>141</sup> Romans 8:9. Origen *De Principiis* 3.4; Butterworth, 233 ff.

<sup>142</sup> "When the sensitiveness of the soul has grown duller through its subservience to the passions of the body, it is weighed down by the mass of its vices and becomes sensitive to nothing refined or spiritual." *De Principiis* 3.4; Butterworth, 236.

psychology for use by desert monastics. Evagrius, more explicitly than Origen, relied on the Platonic idea of the tripartite soul. According to this model the rational faculty was charged with the task of controlling the two irrational, appetitive faculties rather like a charioteer had to reign in his horses.<sup>143</sup>

Whichever models particular authors preferred, the Origenist tradition conceived the exercise of the will as primarily an internal and contemplative phenomenon, albeit with obvious external consequences.<sup>144</sup> This account was shaped as much by fundamental metaphysical assumptions that drew a sharp distinction between the purity of eternal, intellectual substances and the inherent corruption of material substances. This tradition was not concerned to find a place for freedom in any place except the soul's rational faculty, because it was only there that it found real ontological stability. It was content to ascribe necessity and determinism to materiality and embodiment; these were the result of the Fall, not of God's creativity. Where God worked, namely in the realm of mind and soul, there freedom reigned.<sup>145</sup>

It may be that this Origenist trend posed a greater challenge to Damascene and his tradition than the explicit dualism of Manichaeism. The intellectualist stance of Origenism was appealing in that it explicitly preserved divine sovereignty over all reality, albeit by regarding materiality as purely ephemeral. Human freedom was preserved, but only as the means by which pure intellects could achieve their yearned

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<sup>143</sup> The metaphor of the chariot was a famous one, found first in Plato, *Phaedrus*, 245b-246d (49). See Špidlik, Tomáš. *The Spirituality of the Christian East: A Systematic Handbook*, trans. Anthony P. Gythiel (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1986): 102-3.

<sup>144</sup> "Now living things are moved from within themselves." Origen, *De Principiis* 3.1; Butterworth, 159.

<sup>145</sup> *De Principiis* 1.4; Butterworth, 40-41.

for release from embodiment. What the Origenist tradition could not do, however, was affirm the inherent goodness of all creation. It bore too much Hellenist baggage, consigning vast areas of human experience—including the engagement with our physical selves—to a Hades of determinism. If theologians were to truly accommodate the radical anti-dualism discussed above they would need to find an alternative model to Origenism.

Maximus found the very model he was looking for in the Antiochian tradition, particularly as it was mediated through the work of the fourth century author, Nemesius of Emesa. John also incorporated Nemesius' anthropology into his work, most notably in the second book of the *Expositio fidei*.<sup>146</sup> Essentially, Nemesius constructed his anthropology within an Aristotelian framework in which the close connection between body and soul was respected. This had clear implications for how the will was to be conceived. It could only operate within the total human construct, not merely seated above the body, but ruling from deep within it. "The classical teachers of ethics had made ethics comparable with equitation, with the soul as horseman and body as mount. Nemesius sees that what we have to do with is more like a centaur than man and mount."<sup>147</sup> Three aspects of Damascene's theology stand out as reflecting this Aristotelian correction, as we may call it, to the Origenist strain in Greek theology.

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<sup>146</sup> "John's presentation of what is essentially Nemesius's teaching was destined to be very influential. The problems with which it is grappling ... would seem to be the legacy of Origenism." Louth, *St. John Damascene*, 124-5.

<sup>147</sup> William Telfer (trans. & ed.), *On the Nature of Man, Cyril of Jerusalem and Nemesius of Emesa* (Library of Christian Classics, volume 4. London: SCM Press, 1955):210.

The first is his understanding of the human being as microcosm in the Antiochian sense as a “bond” (*syndesmos*) uniting physical and spiritual reality. The human being is “a sort of miniature world within the larger one...a compound, an eye-witness of the visible creation, an initiate of the invisible creation...earthly and heavenly...halfway between greatness and lowliness.”<sup>148</sup> The human being is thus a kind of divine emissary, called upon to enter deeply into physical reality with a view to its penetration by and raising up to its divine Source. This can only be achieved by allowing the freedom enjoyed by the intellect to penetrate deeply into material reality, thereby liberating it to achieve its natural fulfillment by means of the virtues. This all depends on the human will: “[the human] having the power to persevere and progress in good with the help of divine grace, as well as having the power to turn from virtue and fall into vice, God permitting because of the freedom of the will.”<sup>149</sup>

The second aspect follows from the first. The human *body* no less than the human *soul* is a field on which the will really can go about the work of virtue. It is precisely as *embodied* that human beings are able to engage in the work of repentance, something which, as we have seen, is not something of which pure spirits are capable.<sup>150</sup>

The third aspect is the extensive discussion in which Damascene, drawing heavily on Nemesius, carefully distinguishes between voluntary and involuntary

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<sup>148</sup> *Expos.* 2.12; Chase, 235.

<sup>149</sup> *Expos.* 2.12; Chase 235-6.

<sup>150</sup> *Expos.* 2.3; Chase 206.

actions.<sup>151</sup> Any action originating in the body is defined to be “voluntary” while anything forced upon the person from without is “involuntary.” Even when a person is apparently constrained by external factors (such as a sailor in a storm who must throw cargo overboard or else allow the ship to sink) one cannot call the choice to act a completely involuntary one. Physical reality always has a vote, as it were, in determining actions. The effect of this teaching is to secure for the body a real, that is not a merely illusory, role in the working of the will. The will, although it is an intellectual capacity, must always work in and through the body. This is not because the will is, in the Origenist sense, imprisoned within a material shell, but rather because that material reality is brought to life and grows into the divine likeness by means of its cooperation with the will.

What links these three aspects is that they each delineate an extremely optimistic moral vision, in which the ultimate destiny, the *natural* destiny, of the human body is to enjoy a maximum amount of freedom. The paradigm for this freedom is, of course, Christ himself, whose possession of a completely fulfilled natural will completely broke down all physical constraints, even the most fundamental, death itself. Free from the threat of death and corruption, Christ had no need to deliberate in order to direct his human body in every virtue and good deed. At stake in the Christological debate in which Damascene was engaged was his entire anthropological vision.

## Conclusions

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<sup>151</sup> *Expos.* 2.24; Chase, 253-5. Nemesius’ treatment is in turn heavily reliant on Book 3 of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*.

The notion that Greek patristic thought is essentially contemplative and Platonizing, in contrast to the active and Aristotelian West has become a far too convenient scholarly stereotype. For example:

The Eastern Christian tradition has tended to resolve its moral problems in spirituality and asceticism....There is little trace of any Aristotelian principles in Orthodox ethics. We see no internal human principles for adjudicating actions, no sense of human function *qua* human, no real interest in practical reason (*phronesis*), no forms of human goodness other than what God imparts.”<sup>152</sup>

As I have shown this is far from being the whole story. Stung by Origenism, Messalianism and, even more profoundly by Manichaean dualism, Maximus and his intellectual successor John of Damascus drew on a variety of scriptural, theological and philosophical resources to explicate a fundamental vision of human flourishing. This vision, founded on the inherent goodness of all creation, insisted that the human will was the means not to liberation of the soul from physical forces but rather the liberation *by* the soul of those very forces, for the complete fulfillment of the natural potential of both body and soul. The spiritual and ethical consequences of this vision are profound. The vision demands a total program of prayer, *askesis*, moral living and deep charity for all Christians. In this vision the best insights of Neoplatonist philosophy, Cappadocian personalism, Antiochian social teaching, Aristotelian anthropology and monastic psychology are drawn together to challenge each person to accept the high destiny of divinization in Christ.

Partly on the basis of his understanding of involuntary sin, Augustine can legitimately be seen as a pioneer of a modern notion of the will as an expression of the ego apart from reason and separate from nature. Western thought would have to

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<sup>152</sup> David E. Pratt. *Three Problem Areas in Eastern Orthodox Ethical Theory: Aristotle, Virtue Ethics, Moral Vision*. (STL Thesis, Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley: Berkeley, CA, 2002): 23.

travel through an even more sweeping “turn to the subject” before arriving via Kant and his heirs at an increasingly radical isolation of the self from nature and practical reason. But in Augustine it is certainly possible to see the beginning of a process in which the relationship between God and humanity is defined primarily in terms of a conflict of wills, with human fulfillment ultimately consisting in submission to the divine will over and against the impulses of nature.

Orthodox Greek patristic thought in the tradition embodied by Maximus the Confessor and John of Damascus suggests a significantly different account. For Maximus the Confessor and John of Damascus, on the other hand, involuntary sin reflects a failure not of the *ego*'s struggle for authenticity, but *nature*'s. This idea stresses the unity of the whole person and the integration of nature and the self. It is an anthropological vision that relies on the essential harmony between the divine and human wills, a continuity grounded in the reception within human nature itself of the divine image. Obedience to God is seen here not so much as curbing the impulses of nature as freeing them to attain their natural and, therefore rational, ends. I have argued that this alternative vision will see the persistence of involuntary sin not as evidence of the depravity of human nature, but of its *capacity for perfection*.

As we have seen, this “perfection” is best understood as a kind of ontological “completion” rather than as a moral achievement. We participate in our own making both by our choices (voluntary sin and voluntary virtue) and by how we suffer in our struggle against necessity (involuntary sin and involuntary virtues). Perfection is, therefore, the end and goal of a whole life, embracing not only moral choices but also the development of habits of thought and behavior through askesis and prayer (or by

their opposites). Involuntary sin could be regarded not as proof a person's slavery to necessity or evil habits, the imprisonment of the "I" within the rebellious flesh, but rather as a measure of the distance separating the person from all that she wants to be—and, in Christ, can become.

## CHAPTER 4

### IMPLICATIONS FOR A MORAL VISION

In the past two chapters I have attempted to show how the theological anthropology developed in the tradition within which John of Damascus operated sought to include both voluntary *and* involuntary aspects of behavior within its account of human flourishing. My aim has been to lay bare some of the more important intellectual strategies adopted by Orthodox patristic writers in this effort. Underlying these strategies seems to be a holistic vision of existence in which the relationship between human subject and objects of experience is seen to be one of continuity, reciprocity and union, rather than (as for Augustine) discontinuity, opposition and separation. To Maximus the Confessor in particular is owed the idea that this relationship is coordinated by the natural will, seen not as a faculty of choice but as the means by which human nature achieves union with the proper objects of its deepest existential desires. Damascene clarified this position by noting that earthly existence requires that the natural will settle upon concrete objects for its realization. This ensured that that Orthodox anthropology remains grounded in a vision of unity between human nature and the various worlds in which it operates (material, intellectual and spiritual). This vision was secured by the Neoplatonic theory of the two acts, a concept that was capable of accounting ontologically for natural integrity on the basis of the erotic generation of reality as form or *energeia* from a single divine Source. This in turn opened up a resolution of the problem of freedom and necessity in which these were

seen, not as opposing states, but as phases in a single ecstatic movement of love and return. Damascene seized upon these various strands of thought to present this vision with great acuity. One of his major strategies was to contrast the Orthodox account with opposing notions of human existence which saw a certain opposition between the human subject and objects of experience (including the body), especially when that opposition was conceived as one of combat. This critique underlies his treatment of thought systems as diverse as Manichaeism, Origenism and Messalianism.

From all these elements surfaces a truly remarkable anthropological vision. The human being as *syndesmos* is formed as a unity of material, intellectual and spiritual realities, thereby sweeping up even necessary and involuntary experience into the great movement of divine freedom. It is not surprising that, in this vision, anthropology is closely related to Christology. In a profound sense, the vision of human existence grounded in the integrity of nature is a *theandric* vision and, for this reason, an *eschatological* vision as well. The human experience repeats the pattern seen by Carpus in the vision of Pseudo-Dionysius discussed in chapter 2. Christ *persuades* the soul of the possibility of escaping necessity by *uniting* himself to the soul within the very jaws of death. Upon this divine-human *synergeia*—Christ descending, the human ascending by grace—is founded a vision of absolute freedom, in which the subject finds all of nature available as raw material in the theandric work of crafting a lived response to God’s creativity. In this vision, nature, including the body, need not impose involuntary constraints on the perfection of human life. It is a vision in which any failure of self-realization as *saint* constitutes a tragedy worthy of the name ‘sin,’ and this is so whether that failure is chosen or not.

## Moral Vision, Competing Views

While this is undoubtedly a vision for human *being*, can we justifiably also call it a *moral* vision? Is the vision so bright that its very luminosity hides how best to realize it? How, in other words, can an anthropology that locates the primary motive force for human actions in nature—and supernature—rather than in choice help us to make moral decisions? If we are responsible equally for our involuntary movements as much as for our voluntary ones, what point is there in even thinking about how best to work through moral dilemmas?

The problem here parallels that of contemporary ethical theories which rely heavily on the notion of vision in shaping moral thought. The recovery of moral realism is one of the great aims of these theories. Thus, for example, Iris Murdoch, adopting the phrase of Simone Weil that the human will “is obedience not resolution,”<sup>153</sup> argued against the tendency of Anglo-American moral philosophy to concentrate so heavily on the human agent as a moral decider apart from the world within which the agent acts.<sup>154</sup> This criticism goes beyond the debates within the western philosophical (and moral theological) tradition itself over competing models of ethical reasoning. From the realist perspective, all the various approaches dealt with in a typical textbook on Christian ethics will share a common preoccupation with individual moral agents. Deontological systems may require the agent to seek

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<sup>153</sup> Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970): 40.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

instruction from normative sources or imperatives in formulating moral responses. Various other approaches will seek to broaden moral thinking to consider relationships, consequences of actions and other elements in structuring proportionate responses to moral problems. But whether the subject is conceived in terms of “natural law,” Barthian obedience to divine command, H. Richard Niebhuur’s “responsible self,” Charles Curran’s “relationality-responsibility model” or any other such distinct approach, what seems to unite all these is that basically Augustinian notion of the distinct and individual “I” measuring herself against the world of possible choices. On the other hand what the realist position seeks to do is, in Murdoch’s remarkable phrase, “unself” the self.<sup>155</sup> The realists seek to reverse the Cartesian revolution in ethics whereby the “I” stands as the center of the circle of experience. What they seek instead is to return Truth, Beauty and Goodness to that place around which the “I” may resume its proper orbit.

Naturally the realist vision entails a new look at the notion of individuality. This is a task that many contemporary Orthodox theologians have willingly accepted. Among the most notable of these has been Christos Yannaras, who has found that his basically Maximian inheritance can fruitfully be explored with the help of ideas in modern continental philosophies, especially Heidegger’s notion of being-in-the-world.<sup>156</sup> Like Murdoch, Yannaras is dismissive of any rule or principle-based ethic. For him, “the question of ethics takes as its starting point the freedom of morality—

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid, 84.

<sup>156</sup> A fundamental aspect of Yannaras’ moral thought is the distinction between “individuality” and “personhood”, see *The Freedom of Morality*, 22-24. He discusses the relationship between his thought and that of Heidegger in *On the Absence and Unknowability of God: Heidegger and the Areopagite*, translated by Haralambos Ventis, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2005).

freedom from any schematic valuation of utilitarian pre-determination.”<sup>157</sup> A similar attitude toward ethical systems can be found in a variety of contemporary Orthodox thinkers. Vigen Guroian, for example, emphasizes the theandric nature of Orthodox moral realism as a way of re-considering the place of moral norms within this tradition:

Christ’s rules and commandments are obligatory not because he is in authority whose reason and purpose are external to us, but because they belong as virtue to the total character of him who shares the same ontological status with us as human being in whom that humanity has reached full maturity.<sup>158</sup>

The fact that moral realists, Orthodox among them, must account for the role of *rules* in their tradition points to a major difficulty that this position faces. How is one to negotiate the disjunction between moral vision and individual agents? Is this vision obligatory *per se*, or does it obtain its attractive power from a shared consensus? For a consistent Platonist like Murdoch this is answerable in terms of the transcendent power of the ideal Good. We have seen, however, that the traditional Orthodox view as enunciated by John of Damascus owes too great a debt both to Christian revelation and Aristotelian moral reasoning to be satisfied with a purely Platonist resolution of this issue. The Good cannot simply absorb all around it without obliterating any real notion of evil, virtue as moral striving and vice as moral failure, all of which are essential to Orthodox thought.

The work of Stanley Hauerwas illustrates the difficulty of resolving this tension. Hauerwas, with his emphasis on the importance of moral vision, may be numbered among the realists. But Hauerwas has also an important emphasis on moral

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<sup>157</sup> Yannaras, *The Freedom of Morality*, 15.

<sup>158</sup> Vigen Guroian, *Incarnate Love: Essays in Orthodox Ethics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002): 45.

character, by which he means essentially the “self.” “Nothing about my being,” he has written, “is more ‘me’ than my character.”<sup>159</sup> Hauerwas has been justifiably criticized for emphasizing both moral vision and moral character without really explaining how these relate to one another.<sup>160</sup> On the one hand a strong moral vision seems to attract, while at the same time the individual must strive (obviously against competing attractions) for virtue and against vice in the work of shaping a distinctive character. In the light of this study we might express this criticism in terms of an attempt by Hauerwas to marry a basically Augustinian individualism with a Maximian realism. Hauerwas himself, drawing explicitly on the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, has sought to resolve the tension by conceiving of moral vision in terms of shared consensus, or “narrative.”<sup>161</sup> It seems to me, however, that this may simply obscure the tension rather than resolve it. While the attempted compromise certainly makes room for the Augustinian “I” in Christian ethics—albeit an “I” now turned into an “Us”—what is left of the realist element begins to look less “real” and more the manufactured aspirations of the traditional “self” in conjunction with other selves.

Moral vision then, when understood from the realist perspective, remains a puzzle for many western Christian thinkers who are far from ready to genuinely unself the self. Moral vision is a term much bandied about today, but with great imprecision. Among some conservative authors the term seems to be used primarily

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<sup>159</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1975): 203.

<sup>160</sup> See, for example, Gene Outka, “Character, Vision and Narrative.” (*Religious Studies Review* 6:2, April 1980): 110-118.

<sup>161</sup> See Hauerwas’s “A Retrospective Assessment of an ‘Ethics of Character’: The Development of Hauerwas’s Theological Project” in *a Hauerwas Reader* (Durham, NC & London: Duke University Press, 2002): 75-89, esp. 81.

as a way of shoring up traditional rule-based ethical systems.<sup>162</sup> Hauerwas's project makes more artful use of the concept, but does not seem to me to successfully escape the pull of western individualism. A thoroughly vision-centered ethical thinking seeks to explain how moral agents are attracted from within, as it were, rather than propelled by force of an a ruling and external law, even if that law is dressed up as "narrative". David McNaughton sums up the situation with particular clarity:

[T]he realist line of thought suggests...the only way of arriving at correct moral conclusions in new cases will be to develop a sensitivity in moral matters which enables one to see each particular case aright. Moral principles appear to drop out as, at best, redundant and, at worst, a hindrance to moral vision.<sup>163</sup>

What is especially useful about McNaughton's articulation of the this position is that it reminds us that realists are no less concerned with solving concrete moral dilemmas than those who prefer an ethic founded on rules, social contract or other theories. I would argue that traditional Orthodox teaching on the nature of human being, and the implications of this teaching for an understanding of the human will and morality, provides an example of a genuinely Christian morality that can survive, if not the absolute destruction of the idea of "moral principles," then certainly their radical demotion. I would not claim that in Orthodoxy moral principles have simply "dropped out". But, at least for many Orthodox, normative principles occupy a relatively unimportant part of the moral landscape. They are primarily seen as landmarks for beginners.

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<sup>162</sup> E.g. David F. Wells, *Losing Our Virtue: Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision* (Grand Rapids, MI: Erdmans, 1998).

<sup>163</sup> David McNaughton, *Moral Vision: A Introduction to Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1988): 62.

It turns out that one key to understanding this position is the notion of “involuntary sin” which lies at the heart of this study. The anthropology within which this concept makes sense is one in which human beings remain intensely involved with objects of experience at every level. Far from disappearing into a featureless luminosity, the Orthodox moral vision is one in which the human person emerges with every line and distinctive mark intact.

To sum up: the realist position as I have condensed it, and as it is exemplified in much of the Orthodox tradition I have been discussing, holds that moral *principles* are far less important than moral *sensitivity* in shaping of moral *choices*. This notion of “sensitivity” might prove a more useful idea than that of “conscience” as the latter has become understood in contemporary ethical thought. If I am correct in thinking that the Orthodox tradition stands on the side of moral realism, then we ought to find that the tradition accepts the existence of some mechanism for fostering moral sensitivity. I believe that I can demonstrate at least several such practical mechanisms: prayer, asceticism and canonical observance. In the rest of this chapter I will treat the first two very briefly and the second at rather greater length. I will begin by turning once again to the writings of John of Damascus.

### **Sensitivity, Conscience, Prayer and Asceticism**

We have seen that Damascene deals with the “voluntary and the involuntary” in the anthropological section of the *Expositio fidei* (chapters 26-44) rather than in the, rather brief, moral section (chapters 92-95). It follows that my application of this anthropology to the notion of “involuntary sin” in the previous chapter has been by implication. But in the section of his moral chapters headed “On the Law of God and the Law of Sin”<sup>164</sup> we find Damascene dealing quite explicitly with sin as a phenomenon that may be either willed or not. What makes this section of the *Expositio* especially interesting is that what lies at its center is not really the idea of sin, but of conscience (*syneidēsis*) and its role in the moral life. Damascene’s views on the nature and function of conscience support the conclusions I reached in the previous chapters concerning how the integrity of nature calls—and equips—human beings for the fullest measure of freedom from natural constraints.

Ironically, the first impression one has of the section is that Damascene actually denies the possibility of involuntary sin: “sin results from the Devil’s suggestion and our own unconstrained and free acceptance of it.”<sup>165</sup> This impression is misleading, however, for a little later on John explicitly speaks of sinning “even though I do will the law of God and love it and do not will (*mē thelonta*) to sin.”<sup>166</sup>

It seems that what Damascene means by “unconstrained and free” acceptance of sin is not of the sin itself, but of the “deception” (*planē*) and “persuasion” (*peithō*) of the “law of sin” operating through the “desires of the flesh” and the “softness of

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<sup>164</sup> *Expos.* 95; Kotter vol. 2, 222-3; Chase, 388-9.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid*; Chase, 388.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid*; Chase 389.

pleasure.”<sup>167</sup> One is immediately reminded of the vision of Carpus and of the sinners partly persuaded by the illusion of evil. It is not in fact the *sin* that is willed, but the false good offered by the demons working through the undisciplined aspects of the self. Although John does not say it explicitly, it is not unreasonable to assume he means that an unwilled sin is, in a technical sense, “unconstrained and free” because, as he argued in his chapter on “the voluntary and the involuntary,” what distinguishes these on the philosophical level is whether the movements arise within or without the subject’s physical body.<sup>168</sup> In other words, all passions that find an outlet in any kind of bodily movement are “unconstrained and free” in a physical sense, even though in a moral sense they are “against the will.” The will—and here he surely means the natural will—is always seeking the good, the “law of God,” even if, as it operates in the objective world through deliberation (*gnōmē*), the will is misled by the insinuating deceptions of the “law of sin.”<sup>169</sup>

In this way of thinking, *conscience* is not so much an inner human faculty for shaping choices as it is the presentation to the consciousness of the “law of God” for which the human being longs by nature. Damascene defines conscience as the “law of

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid. The scriptural passage that lies behind this chapter is, of course, Romans 7:23. One cannot help but note how Damascene’s training in biblical exposition produces conclusions very different from those of Augustine after his debate with Fortunatus.

<sup>168</sup> *Expos.* 38; Kotter, vol. 2, 94-6; Chase, 253-5.

<sup>169</sup> An interesting study, well beyond the scope of this work, would be to compare this notion of conscience and its relationship to the “natural will” with the Thomistic contrast between conscience and *synderesis*. Could it be that in Aquinas we see an attempt to recover something of the Greek patristic tradition from the fundamentally Augustinian assumptions of his contemporaries, including the more voluntarist Bonaventure? Certainly for many Greeks, of whom Damascene is my exhibit A, the conscience is less an exercise in “practical reason” than the means by which nature, when set free from the constraining limits of error, achieves fulfillment and authenticity. Thomas may be arguing for something similar when he famously defines “conscience” as the “application of knowledge to activity” (*Summa Theologiae* I, q. 79, art. 13.). In framing this definition Thomas explicitly cites Damascene’s definition of conscience as the “law of the mind.”

the mind.”<sup>170</sup> Everything we have seen concerning John’s philosophical presuppositions should caution us against regarding this “law of the mind” as an abstract moral dictate discoverable by the rational intellect after the manner of Kant’s categorical imperative. Rather, he seems to mean by this phrase that the conscience is an imprint within human nature of the divine *energeia* or form of the transcendent Good, the “law of God.” Certainly the relationship between the two “laws” is far from static. In the best Neoplatonic tradition the connection is one of dynamic attraction and interpenetration. God’s law “enters into” (*epibainō*) the human mind (*nous*).<sup>171</sup> Admitted almost, one might say like a lover, to the *nous*, this “law” (*nomos*) “attracts” (*ephelkō*) the *nous* to Itself and “spurs it on” (*nyttō*) to conscious action. It follows that the conscience is fundamentally attracted to the *energeia* of God’s law, “rejoicing” (*synēdō*) in it,<sup>172</sup> and finding itself frustrated in the search for it only by the miasma thrown up by demonic deception and the counterfeit goods of the flesh.

Lying at the root of this account of conscience is, of course, John’s guiding principle of the integrity of the natural. And, as we have seen, this vision of human flourishing in accordance with nature is also a theandric vision. Damascene concludes chapter 95 of the *Expositio fidei* with a reminder that the final way to that sensitivity so necessary for a life of virtue is union with the incarnate Christ through the Holy

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<sup>170</sup> *Expos.* 95; Kotter, vol. 2, 222; Chase 388.

<sup>171</sup> Chase translates the Greek for “enter into” as “acts upon”, which seems too weak. Lampe’s entry for *epibainō* indicates the word is used several times in the Dionysian corpus, implying that it belongs in the lexicon of Christian Neoplatonism and its notion of *eros* as *the* metaphysical motive force. Cf. Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite, *Divine Names* 4.11-16; Luibheid, 80-83.

<sup>172</sup> Damascene’s Greek pun is untranslatable: the conscience (*syneidēsis*) rejoices (*synēdetai*) in the law of God.

Spirit. “It is,” he concludes, “impossible to observe the commandments of the Lord except by patience and prayer.”<sup>173</sup>

And so we come to the importance of prayer and asceticism in the moral life. The vision of human flourishing presented in this brief section of the *Expositio fidei* depends on sensitivity to the call of the One for which the soul truly desires. The “law of God” does not present itself as propositions, but as a Lover. And conscience, the “law of the mind,” responds not by deductive reasoning, but by loving actions. It is true that Damascene does not argue that the attractive power of the “law of God” exhausts the moral enterprise. This *nomos* may indeed be expressed by the many *nomoi* or moral principles with which sacred scripture abounds and which may, in many cases, be reached also by the power of natural reason. But if there is indeed a “natural law” theory at work in this section it is, as we have seen elsewhere in this thesis, one in which nature looks forward to a final fulfillment and union with transcendent Good, rather than one in which nature acts as a principle of moral restraint. This is why it is so necessary to bring the more unruly aspects of that nature, especially the critical reason and the physical body, under a form of discipline or *askesis* necessary to release the unrealized potential locked away within each human being. It is easy to see how Damascene might endorse McNaughton’s view that a genuine moral sensitivity is far more important than knowledge, or even observance, of ethical principles.

### **Moral Sensitivity and the Canons**

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<sup>173</sup> *Expos.* 95; Kotter, vol. 2, 223; Chase, 389.

Turning to the Orthodox canonical tradition, it could well be argued that in this body of legislation we find exactly the kind of devotion to normative principles that prevents Orthodoxy from manifesting a truly “realist” moral vision. Acts 15 records that the apostles established regulations regarding Christian dietary practices. Following this precedent, numerous authoritative statements have emerged from the Orthodox tradition seeking to regulate many aspects of life, including not only matters of cult, but also sexual practices, rules against killing and violence and so forth. The Council of Trullo (692) provides an especially rich seam of canonical moralizing, touching on such issues as clergy living with women (canon 5), running an inn (canon 9), charging interest on a loan (canon 11), gambling (canons 24, 50), a general ban on theatrical performances (canon 51), marriages to close relatives (canon 54), consultations with fortunetellers (canon 56), training of prostitutes (canon 86), adultery (canon 87), furnishing drugs for an abortion (canon 91) and many others.<sup>174</sup> Other canonical sources, especially the so-called “canonical epistles” of St. Basil the Great and other patristic authors, contain many specific moral directives on these and other topics.

It must be admitted that there is a tendency within the Orthodox tradition itself to view the canons as forming a kind of moral “code,” albeit a relatively inefficient one that could do with some “improvement” along the lines of western legislative

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<sup>174</sup> These canons, along with the whole body of canonical writings generally received by modern Orthodoxy, can be found in the collection known as the *Pedalion* or *Rudder*, compiled originally by St. Nicodemus the Hagiorite in 1800, with several subsequent republications and added layers of commentary. The ET used here is that of D. Cummings published by the Orthodox Christian Education Society in 1957. For a good overview of St. Nicodemus and the compilation of the *Pedalion* see John Ericson, “On the Cusp of Modernity: The Canonical Hermeneutic of St. Nikodemus the Hagiorite (1748-1809)” *SVTQ* 42.1 (1998): 45-66.

models. Christos Yannaras is especially scornful of this way of thinking.<sup>175</sup> But it must be admitted that the tendency is quite old, going back at least as far the medieval commentators whose collections conflated ecclesiastical canons with the *nomoi* of imperial legislation.<sup>176</sup> If this tendency were indeed the dominant one in the interpretation and application of the canons within Orthodoxy then my argument with respect to the significance of Damascene and his theological tradition in shaping the Orthodox moral vision would certainly suffer, and may even collapse. Legalism in the canonical tradition would sit ill with a vibrant anthropological vision that holds to the possibility of overcoming all involuntary constraints in the fulfillment of the theandric potential of human being.

Fortunately, however, there is enough evidence from within the canonical tradition itself to counter the opposing tendencies that seem to press in under western influences.<sup>177</sup> For this reason most Orthodox writers would insist that canons are not instances of legal positivism at work within the ecclesiastical institution. They are not seen legal principles imposed ‘from above’, but rather as re-articulations of the fundamental faith of the Church. Canons are not authoritative commands; they are irruptions of the same “law of God” that Damascene saw reflected in the “law of the mind.” They are a divine-human *synergeia* made visible in the language of jurisprudence or ascetical counsel. As Ericson puts it:

“Canon”...suggests an absolute and universal rule or standard as old as the Church itself and handed down as part of traditions. In his “canonical epistles” St. Basil the

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<sup>175</sup> *Freedom of Morality*, 188-193. For a similar view see Lewis J. Patsavos, “Ecclesiastical Reform: At What Cost?” *GOTR* 40.1-2 (1995): 1-10.

<sup>176</sup> John Ericson, “The Orthodox Canonical Tradition,” *SVTQ* 27.3 (1983): 155-167.

<sup>177</sup> Yannaras, *Freedom of Morality*, 188, esp. n.21.

Great constantly refers to the canons as “what we have learned from the ancients,” “what we have been taught,” or “what the fathers have handed down to us.... To be sure, a canon may have to be restated or reformulated from time to time in view of particular circumstances, but that does not mean that it was “made,” whether by St. Basil or any other “legislator.” “It was a rule of the universal Church and had always been so. It had been observed everywhere since the time of the apostles...after that it was simply ‘found.’”<sup>178</sup>

Or, as Lewis Patsavos put it more succinctly, “holy canons are temporal expressions of eternal truths.”<sup>179</sup> A canon is therefore “absolute and universal” not in its *form*—which is historically contingent and always requires interpretation or “management” (*oikonomia*) in application—but insofar as it participates in transcendent Truth.<sup>180</sup> A canon is therefore a kind of guide; the original Greek word is drawn from the building sciences, meaning a plumb line used to determine a straight line.<sup>181</sup> Thus a canon is a tool to be used in the crafting of a life in accord with the design, or *telos*, of the Gospel. Stanley Harakas emphasizes that canons are not to be understood as “heteronomous, externally imposed norms, unrelated to the goals and purposes of human nature.”<sup>182</sup> Rather, they are laws discovered within by a conscience rendered sensitive to the truth of faith.

Church canons are not, then organizing principles for ecclesial polity and moral observance. An apt metaphor might be to think of the Orthodox canonical

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<sup>178</sup> Ericson, “The Orthodox Canonical Tradition,” 160.

<sup>179</sup> “Ecclesiastical Reform,” 1. Patsavos is in turn quoting Russian Orthodox theologian Nicholas Afanasiev.

<sup>180</sup> Canon 102 of the Council in Trullo provides the classic canonical text setting out how all penitential canons ought to be applied according to *oikonomia*. The primary metaphor is that of a physician applying the best therapy to a patient, thus “offering a treatment suited to the sin in question.” See *Pedalion*, 409. See also Emilianos Timiadis, “Focusing on True *Metanoia* Rather than on Penitential Canons” in *Greek Theological Review* 40.1-2 (1995):97-115.

<sup>181</sup> Ericson, “The Orthodox Canonical Tradition,” 160.

<sup>182</sup> Stanley Harakas, *Wholeness of Faith and Life: Orthodox Christian Ethics, Part One, Patristic Ethics* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1999): 93.

tradition as a kind of fossil record in which is preserved evidence of precisely that kind of moral vision that “realists,” as McNaughton describes them, would seek to set up. It is a vision in which human perfection is fostered by an emphasis on sensitivity over principles. Among the most important fossil finds in this rich moral bedrock are specific canons dealing with “sins” that are most definitely “involuntary.” Even the medieval organizers of the canons into something like a “code” would emphasize that canons are primarily there for the spiritual growth of Christians in freedom. The fourteenth century author, Matthew Blastares, for instance introduced his *Syntagma* by writing that the canons show “a way to eternal life, are a reward and a gift of God, a dogma of noble and God-bearing men, a new covenant of the Church, and a correction of voluntary and involuntary sins.”<sup>183</sup>

I believe that examination of these canons yields important evidence for how the Orthodox understanding of involuntary sin has affected the practical life of ordinary believers and, consequently, helps us see how this understanding supports the overarching concern of Orthodox moral theology to form *sensitive* as opposed to merely *principled* moral agents. It is also these very canons that, by their nature, support the argument that the canonical tradition cannot be an attempt to draft a moral code dictating moral behavior, but rather a manifestation of Orthodox confidence in the integrity of nature and the possibility of securing a true and lasting freedom from necessity and constraint.

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<sup>183</sup> ET by Patrick Viscuso, *A Byzantine Theology of Marriage: the ‘Syntagma kata stoicheion’ of Matthew Blastares* (Ph.D. thesis, School of Religious Studies, Catholic, University of America, 1989): 40.

Of the many possible candidates for more detailed examination, I have chosen to look at two specific canonical traditions. The first deals with the canonical and liturgical consequences for an Orthodox mother who has suffered a miscarriage. The second has to do with the participation of Orthodox soldiers in unavoidable armed conflicts.

### **Miscarriage, Sexuality and Necessity**

The 22<sup>nd</sup> canon ascribed to St. John the Faster provides tersely: “a woman who involuntarily expelled a baby through miscarriage, receives her penance [i.e. is excluded from Holy Communion] for a year.”<sup>184</sup> This is certainly a lesser penance than that prescribed for women who deliberately procure an abortion, for whom the Faster prescribes a penance of three to five years.<sup>185</sup> But the very classification of an entirely involuntary miscarriage as a sin is a strange, even shocking, notion for modern westerners. The shock may be compounded by the discovery within the Orthodox liturgical tradition of a specific service of prayer for a woman who has “cast out” (*apoballetai*) a fetus, whether by deliberate abortion or by involuntary miscarriage. In either case the prescribed prayer is the same:

O Master, Lord our God...do thou thyself according to thy great mercy, have mercy on this thy handmaid who today is in sins, having fallen into the killing of a person, whether voluntary or involuntary, and has cast out that conceived in her. And forgive her iniquities, whether voluntary or involuntary, and preserve her from every diabolical snare, and cleanse her defilement, heal her suffering, and grant unto her health and strength of soul and body, O Lover of Mankind; and guard her with a shining Angel from every assault of invisible demons; yea, O Lord, from diverse inward travail befalling her; and by thy abundant mercy, rouse her humbled body,

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<sup>184</sup> *Pedalion*, 945.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid*, 944.

and raise her up from the bed on which she lies. For we have been given birth in sins and transgressions, and all are unclean before thee, O Lord....<sup>186</sup>

If the purpose of Church canons and liturgical praxis were simply to impose a moral code it would be difficult to imagine a more flagrant breach of purpose than to conflate miscarriage and abortion as breaches of that code. The full implications have proved embarrassing to some modern Orthodox writers who could generally be regarded as “legalists.” These include (at least on this point) the editors of the *Rudder* who include a footnote to canon 22 of the Faster advising, “pregnant women ought to exercise great care not to lift any (heavy) weights,” together with other more or less eccentric suggestions for avoiding a miscarriage.<sup>187</sup> Others, such as the pre-revolutionary Russian commentators cited in the St. Tikhon’s Seminary translation of *The Great Book of Needs*, offer more pastorally useful advice to priests on how to distinguish between miscarriage and abortion in apportioning penances and offering the prayer service for forgiveness. They insist that, in practice, the reason for reading the prayer over woman who has miscarried is solely for, “the consoling of [her] conscience.”<sup>188</sup> This seems to display a better understanding of the moral vision lying behind this tradition, and it is a point to which I will return below.

Miscarriage is a particularly interesting example of an “involuntary sin” identified as such in the Orthodox tradition. It straddles two large classes of human

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<sup>186</sup> I have consulted the Greek text published by Goar (*Euchologion sine Rituale Graecorum*, Venice, 1730, reprinted Graz: Akademische Druck- U. Verlagsanstalt, 1960) from an eleventh century Grottaferrata manuscript. The text is found in the modern Greek *Euchologion* and Slavonic *Trebnik*. The ET used here is that in *The Great Book of Needs*, published by St. Tikhon’s Monastery, South Canaan, PA: St. Tikhon’s Seminary Press, 1998, vol. 1, pp. 16-18.

<sup>187</sup> Husbands, for example, are told to avoid sleeping with their pregnant wives, lest the “poor husbands become murderers.” *Pedalion*, 945-6, n. 2.

<sup>188</sup> *The Great Book of Needs*, vol. 1, 18.

experience in which individuals are frequently acted upon rather than being themselves actors. These are, on the one hand, sexuality and, on the one other, forms of violence. Miscarriage is seen as a kind of sexual manslaughter, just as abortion is a sexual murder. In this section I will treat the issue from the perspective of sexuality, turning to the question of violence area in the final section of this chapter, and from a different angle.

My research has not turned up an academic study on the canonical and liturgical treatment of miscarriage. There is, however, a considerable body of scholarly work treating the attitude of Greek patristic and Byzantine authors to questions surrounding female sexuality and childbirth generally. Much of this work naturally relies for its evidence on canonical and liturgical texts.<sup>189</sup> Scholarship here tends to look at the extent to which the Orthodox Church imported notions of ritual cleanliness from the Levitical tradition and/or pagan cultural sources. Although patristic authors tended to insist that Old Testament purity laws were abolished under the Christian dispensation,<sup>190</sup> early liturgical texts and other writings leave us in no doubt that women were expected to separate themselves from the liturgical assembly for a period after childbirth and, in many places at least, during their menstrual cycle.<sup>191</sup> The history of these practices is quite complex. In third and fourth century

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<sup>189</sup> A useful work in this regard by a contemporary Orthodox scholar is Valerie Karras' doctoral dissertation, *The Liturgical Participation of Women in the Byzantine Church* (Ph.D. thesis, School of Religious Studies, Catholic University of America, 2002).

<sup>190</sup> Peter J. Tomson, "Purity Laws Viewed by Church Fathers and Jesus," in *Purity and Holiness: The Heritage of Leviticus*, eds. M.J.H.M. Poorthuis & J. Schwartz (Leiden, Boston & Köln: Brill, 2000): 73-91, at 74.

<sup>191</sup> G.L.C. Frank, "Menstruation and Motherhood: Christian Attitudes in Late Antiquity," *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 19.2 (1993):185-208.

Antioch, for example, ecclesial authorities condemned this as a falling back into a Jewish way of thinking.<sup>192</sup> In Medieval Byzantium, on the other hand, canonists generally preferred the views set forth in the canonical epistle ascribed to a third century bishop of Alexandria, St. Dionysius.<sup>193</sup> That these commentators registered complaints about the presence of menstruant women in the liturgical assemblies of their day (though sometimes separated physically within the church building) indicates that in practice their preferred canonical strictures were not being observed to the letter.<sup>194</sup> Similar tensions emerge in the tradition with respect to the segregation of women postpartum. The liturgical evidence reflects a move toward language of “purification” by the tenth and eleventh centuries, contrasting with earlier churching rituals in which the emphasis was on the introduction of the child, rather than reintroduction of the mother, into the liturgical assembly.<sup>195</sup> Scholars have frequently noted a double standard operating behind these canonical and liturgical traditions in which the notion of ritual impurity tended to be applied strictly when it touched female sexuality, but not when it was male sexuality that was in question.<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> Such is the attitude found in Antiochian sources such as the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, the *Apostolic Constitutions* and in the homilies of St. John Chrysostom. See generally, Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988): 146 ff.

<sup>193</sup> *Pedalion*, 713-724.

<sup>194</sup> Balsamon (twelfth century) in particular complains of the non-observance of what he regards as the traditional discipline. See Robert Taft, “Women at Church in Byzantium: Where, When—and Why?” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 52 (1998): 27-87, at 50.

<sup>195</sup> Karras, *Liturgical Participation*, 123-132.

<sup>196</sup> Thus, for example, the late Byzantine canonist Matthew Blastares, applied anti-Levitical patristic writings to male ejaculants, while insisting on the exclusion of menstruant women from the sacraments. See Patrick Viscuso, “Purity and Sexual Defilement in Late Byzantine Theology,” *Orientalia Christiana Periodica*, 57 (1991): 399-408.

All this is complicated by the fact that modern scholarship on the Levitical notion of impurity tends to treat it as quite distinct from moral questions: “it is not sinful to be ritually impure, and ritual impurity does not result directly from sin.”<sup>197</sup> Underlying this judgment, however, is one in which a “sin” must be a free moral choice. It is interesting, therefore, that patristic authors seem to have collapsed into a single concept the notions of impurity and sin. That is why, for example, the author of *Didascalia Apostolorum* argued *against* applying the Levitical principles:

For if you think, O woman, that in the seven days of your flux you are void of the Holy Spirit, if you die in those days, you will depart empty-handed and without hope. But if the Holy Spirit is always in you, without any hindrance you keep yourself from prayer and from the Scriptures and from the Eucharist.<sup>198</sup>

It may be that the development of an idea of “involuntary sin” helped shape the later Orthodox consensus which was able (as the author of the *Didascalia* apparently was not) to find some accommodation for a notion of “impurity” that constrained a person’s spiritual freedom without actually depriving them of the Holy Spirit entirely. Certainly this seems to be the idea behind the canon and prayer service relating to miscarriages, especially given the pastoral application of the latter “for the consolation of the conscience.” The fact that such canons were applied in many different ways according to varying situations is consistent with this view as it conforms to the general principle of *oikonomia* by which canons and canonical penalties are to be applied with a view to personal spiritual growth in freedom and not on the basis of legal strictures. A Levitical notion of “purity” would have to be

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<sup>197</sup> Jonathon Klawans, “Idolatry, Incest and Impurity: Moral Defilement in Ancient Judaism,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic and Roman Period*, 29 (N 1998): 391-415 at 393.

<sup>198</sup> Quoted in Karras, 98.

applied strictly. But when seen as “sin,” as a personal obstacle to spiritual growth, there is room to fashion a remedy on an individual basis.

It might still be objected that a miscarriage, not to mention natural processes like menstruation and a healthy childbirth, can in no way be seen as constraints on spiritual freedom. The Greek fathers would almost unanimously disagree with this objection. Nearly every patristic author venerated by the Orthodox Church considered human sexuality to be a postlapsarian phenomenon, that is a fall away from original freedom and into necessity.<sup>199</sup> Many thought the same of gender itself. St. Gregory of Nyssa, for example, taught that, before the Fall, Adam, “used the helpmeet given him only for his delight, as Scripture signifies when it said that ‘he knew her not’ till he was driven out from the garden, and till she, for the sin which she was decoyed into committing, was sentenced to the pangs childbirth.”<sup>200</sup> In his treatise *On Virginity* Gregory builds on this foundational point, piling up the evidence linking sexuality to necessity and death. This implicates sexuality as a force leading humanity away from its true potential for perfect freedom in the divine image. What characterizes life in the divine image is one in which human fecundity is manifested in moral and spiritual ways rather than through the mode of biology. In a striking exegesis of 1 Timothy 2:15 (“women shall be saved through childbearing.”), Gregory reads the Apostle as *discouraging* physical childbearing:

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<sup>199</sup> St. John Chrysostom’s views were typical: “After being fashioned, man remained in paradise and there was no reason for marriage. Man did need a helper, and she came into being; not even then did marriage seem necessary... They lived in paradise as in heaven and they enjoyed God’s company. Desire for sexual intercourse, conception, labor, childbirth and every form of corruption had been banished from their souls.” *On Virginity* (hereafter: Chrys. *Virg.*) 14.3; Sources Chrétiennes (SC) 125, 140-1; ET in Sally Rieger Shore (trans.), *On Virginity; Against Remarriage* (New York and Toronto: Edward Mellen Press, 1983), 21.

<sup>200</sup> St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, 12.4; SC 119, 416-21; NPNF ii.5, 358.

Every one knows that the propagation of mortal frames is the work which the intercourse of the sexes has to do; whereas for those who are joined to the Spirit, life and immortality instead of children are produced by this latter intercourse; and the words of the Apostle beautifully suit their case, for the joyful mother of such children as these “shall be saved in childbearing”.... Truly a joyful mother is the virgin mother who by the operation of the Spirit conceives the deathless children.<sup>201</sup>

These are views with which Damascene agreed completely. In Chapter 97 of the *Expositio fidei*<sup>202</sup> John teaches that the virginity is both the original state, and eschatological destiny, of the human being; God created gender in view of the Fall in order to secure the continuation of humankind according to a merely biological mode; the command to “be fruitful and multiply” is ideally understood as an encouragement to spiritual growth. He concludes this chapter by reminding us of traditional patristic teaching: “marriage is good for those for whom continence is impossible, but virginity is better because it increases the fecundity of the soul and offers prayer to God as a reasonable fruit.”<sup>203</sup>

How does this mesh with the notion of the integrity of the natural? For Damascene and his tradition gender and sexuality were not really natural, or rather they were an admixture of authentic human nature with an alien animality. They reflect what Yannaras has called the “biological hypostasis” of humanity as opposed to the “hypostasis of personhood.”<sup>204</sup> These conflicting hypostases are not ontological substances or states, but rather “modes of existence”<sup>205</sup> just as in Damascene’s theology our earthbound lives are constrained by the need to negotiate conflicting

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<sup>201</sup> Ibid, 13.3; SC 119, 430-31; ET in NPNF ii.5, 359.

<sup>202</sup> Kotter, vol. 2, 227-230; Chase 293-397.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid.

<sup>204</sup> *The Freedom of Morality*, 19.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

goods according to the mode of deliberation (*gnōmē*). Our gendered existence, then, represents a temporary accommodation of the human being to material and biological necessity that falls short of the perfect freedom from all constraint for which we *naturally* aspire. But by the standards of true human nature, that is the theandric and eschatological life towards which human beings are propelled by their natural will, gender and sexuality will pass away: “for in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.”<sup>206</sup> As Nona Harrison puts it, “divine likeness, virtue and unity in Christ will fully determine the character of eschatological human existence.”<sup>207</sup> It is this eschatological existence that determines the Orthodox moral vision.

Sexuality “happens” to people; it is a passion. It is the involuntary nature of sexuality that leads the Orthodox tradition to treat so many of its necessary manifestations as sins: because they are also manifestations of necessity. It may be that this treatment leads some to a guilt complex over their sexuality. If so, this is a frustration of the canonical and liturgical project and most definitely not its purpose.<sup>208</sup> This is illustrated by the tradition surrounding miscarriage. The service is for “the consolation of the conscience” of the woman. It is a *response* to that sense of sorrow, loss and guilt characteristic of the trauma of miscarriage, there is certainly no intent to cause these emotions. The intent seems to be to take that psychic raw material and turn it into fuel for spiritual growth. The tradition recognizes that these feelings are actually the movements of the human soul searching for ultimate

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<sup>206</sup> Matthew 22:30.

<sup>207</sup> Nona Verna Harrison, “Male and Female in Cappadocian Theology,” *Journal of Theological Studies*, New Series, 41.2 (1990): 441-73, at 451-2.

<sup>208</sup> Yannaras, *The Freedom of Morality*, 38-40.

meaning amid the senselessness of biological forces. Miscarriage is, in a literal sense, a brush with death—so in more or less intense ways are all manifestations of the biological hypostasis. These are signs of all that the Orthodox anthropological and moral vision is *not*, but they are also opportunities for reminding Orthodox believers of what that vision *is*, and of disciplining them to claim it. Essential elements of this discipleship are *metanoia*, patience and prayer.

### **Violence, Warfare and Necessity**

St. Basil the Great deals at some length with a number of questions of Christian discipline in his epistles. Several of these letters were divided up by later commentators into 92 “canons.”<sup>209</sup> I will conclude this chapter by considering in particular those numbered canons 8, 11 and 13, all of which touch on the subject of Christians involved in violence against others.

Canon 8 is of particular interest in that it deals in some detail with the difference between voluntary and involuntary killings. Basil considers a number of possible scenarios, ranging from angrily throwing an axe or a club at someone to throwing a similar implement against a wild animal but accidentally hitting a human being. He considers corporal punishment that inadvertently results in death, violence in the course of robbery or military aggression, inadvertent deaths caused by love potions or abortifacients. He carefully categorizes each case as voluntary, involuntary or mixed. Damascene, as we have seen, will do something similar in chapter 38 of the *Expositio fidei*, drawing largely on Basil’s younger contemporary Nemesius of Emesa.

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<sup>209</sup> *Pedalion* 771-864.

Nemesius, as we have also seen, follows very closely Aristotle's teaching in this regard as it is set out at the beginning of Book III of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

Following Aristotle, Nemesius and Damascene together regard both compulsion *and* ignorance of particulars as the two possible causes for an involuntary action. Basil, on the other hand, does not mention external compulsion as a cause of the involuntary, but only what the Aristotelian tradition would call "ignorance," such as of the unknown presence of a man behind the bush who is accidentally struck by a rock cast at a wild animal. Basil nonetheless agrees with Aristotle on the question of whether a "passion" such as anger renders an action involuntary (the answer is generally no.)<sup>210</sup> It is highly improbable, of course, that Basil would have disagreed with Aristotle's proposition that compulsion may also be a cause of involuntary acts. Basil's concern in this letter is more to give examples of the harder cases rather than to make definitions. He is therefore more interested in the psychic condition of the agent. Intent is one factor to be considered, but so is what a reasoning intelligence might foresee by way of consequences of an act, as well as the agent's emotional state. Thus a heavy blow that kills constitutes a mostly voluntary murder because common sense tells one of the dangers inherent in the use of weapons. An angry husband who strikes his wife dead is also guilty of voluntary murder regardless of whether he formed an intent to kill. Basil, like Aristotle, regards anger as much a weapon as swords, whips and clubs. It should be used with caution.

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<sup>210</sup> If, explains Aristotle, a person is angry or drunk and acts out in that state we might say he acts "in ignorance" but ignorance is not the "cause" of the act. Anger or intoxication might be said to be the cause, but these are nonetheless blameworthy. *Nicomachean Ethics* III.1.14.

There is one significant respect in which both Damascene and Basil differ from Aristotle. The latter explicitly excludes involuntary actions from the moral sphere: “virtue...is about feelings and actions...they receive praise or blame if they are voluntary, but pardon, sometimes even pity, if they are involuntary.”<sup>211</sup> We have already noted that Damascene holds us responsible for even unwilled actions done under the influence of “law of sin” within the soul.<sup>212</sup> The whole point of Basil’s discussion in canon 8 is that it makes way for subsequent suggestions on how the clergy ought to apportion penances for specific behaviors, including involuntary ones. Thus in canon 11 Basil suggests (coincidentally!) a canonical penalty of eleven years for involuntary killing.

One reason for this difference may be that when it comes to questions of responsibility Aristotle is concerned with *virtues* rather than discrete acts. Basil is concerned in this epistle with the latter, while it is likely that Damascene is speaking of both. However, I doubt that the distinction between *aretē* and *hamartia* is significant in terms of responsibility in this context.

Far more significant is the whole question of moral vision. For Aristotle ethics is a highly practical discipline having at its aim the maximizing of human well-being or happiness (*eudaimonia*). He begins the *Nicomachean Ethics* with a lengthy discussion of what this happiness is, how it might be obtained and in what way it is limited.<sup>213</sup> There is, of course, no question of a *theandric* or *eschatological* dimension to human happiness. In this way of thinking it makes sense to exclude the

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<sup>211</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics* III.1.1.

<sup>212</sup> *Expos.* 95; Kotter, vol. 2, 222-3; Chase 388-9.

<sup>213</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics*, I.1.

truly involuntary from ethics. Why worry about something over which one has no control? For the Christian authors, however, ethics is ultimately a search not for a natural, practical *telos*, but for a supernatural and transcendent union with Divinity. Patristic authorities were certainly willing to accommodate Aristotle's method of moral reasoning within their ethical teaching in order to render their teachings accessible on a practical level. But they never forgot, nor did they allow their audiences to forget, that the ultimate end of ethical behavior was not a pagan philosophical self-fulfillment, but a grace-filled transcendence of self.

The purpose of Basil's epistle, then, is not to lay down a practical guide regarding when violence and killing is or is not justified. It is to ensure that Christians are rendered more sensitive to the way in which their actions, whether chosen or not, lead toward or away from the evangelical vision he preached. This purpose is most clearly revealed in canon 13 which deals with the specific case of Christian soldiers fighting "in defense of sobriety and piety." Basil states here that these combatants are not to be called "murderers" but that nonetheless they should be excluded from communion for three years. The reason? They are not "clean-handed."<sup>214</sup>

Basil may here be attempting a gentle course correction in the canonical discipline of the Church of his own time. Less than a generation from the Constantinian compact with Christianity, St. Athanasius had taught that to "destroy the enemy" in battle was "lawful and praiseworthy."<sup>215</sup> Basil seems to have wanted to

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<sup>214</sup> *Pedalion*, 801.

<sup>215</sup> *Epistle to Amun*, NPNF iv, 556-7. Interestingly this remark was a casual one, intending to give an example of how the morality of acts depends on the circumstances. Athanasius' main point was that *natural* use of human bodily functions and excretions, including sexual ones, were perfectly legitimate. It was only when the body and its systems were used contrary to nature that we find sin entering into

bring the question of imperial warfare back within the Christian vision. Violence may be necessary in defense of the good, but this does not mean it can be regarded as a good. Necessary violence, like necessary bodily excretion, is tainted by its manifestation of necessity. Christians must remain sensitive to the vision to which they aspire: perfect peace in a union without division in Christ. Basil implies that canonical discipline must always contain a call toward this vision, rather than satisfy itself with a practical management of merely earthly realities.

There is an active debate today within the Orthodox Church over the extent to which it is a co-heir with the west to the Augustinian notion of a “just war.”<sup>216</sup> Many contemporary Orthodox theologians would agree with Stanley Harakas that their patristic heritage excludes the just war theory.<sup>217</sup> War on this view can only ever be regarded as a “necessary evil.”<sup>218</sup> “Thus in a strict sense [the Orthodox Church] cannot speak of a ‘good war,’ or even a ‘just war.’”<sup>219</sup> This certainly seems to be the view taken in Basil’s epistle and from that into the canonical discipline of Orthodox *praxis*. The phrase “necessary evil” seems especially appropriate in light of the case I

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the picture. Overall, this tends to support the “integrity of the natural” emphasized by other patristic authors.

<sup>216</sup> One proponent for something approaching a western-style “just war theory” in Orthodoxy is Alexander Webster: *The Pacifist Option: The Moral Argument against War in Eastern Orthodox Theology* (San Francisco: International Scholars Publications: 1998). In 2003 the *SVTQ* devoted a number to this question, with a number of scholars, including John Breck and David E. Pratt expressing disagreement with Webster’s position (these articles are included in the bibliography, below). One recent hierarchical statement on the issue is contained in chapter VIII of the Moscow Patriarchate’s “Basis of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church”, Jubilee Bishops’ Council of the Russian Orthodox Church, August 13-6 2000, Moscow (ET online at <http://www.mospat.ru/index.php?mid=188>). The Moscow document generally supports Webster’s argument, although it does state expressly that “war is evil.”

<sup>217</sup> *Wholeness of Faith and Life: Orthodox Christian Ethics*. Part 1, *Patristic Ethics* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1999): 153-8.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid*, 154.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid*, 157.

have made for regarding the notion of “involuntary sin” as a window into the anthropological and moral vision of the Orthodox tradition. Within this tradition natural integrity is the enemy of necessity and constraint. Human nature is designed for freedom, for complete and authentic fulfillment of its deepest desires. Anything that frustrates this growth in freedom is an evil, a missed mark, a sin.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSIONS

The discomfort with command-based morality is far from confined to Orthodox ethical thought. H. Richard Niebhur, for example, famously argued that the deontological model impoverished ethics by enshrining as its main symbol “man-under-law.” Better the image of “man-the-maker” which enables us to:

understand our human wretchedness, self-contradictoriness, and alienation as *hamartia*, the missing of the mark, rather than transgression of the law. Sin is not quite so much lawbreaking as vice; it is the perverse direction of the drives in man, or of his will in general, towards ends not proper to him.<sup>220</sup>

For Niebhur, however, the “self” remains central to the response-analysis theory of morality he champions; his remains a line of thought very much within the Augustinian mode. Nonetheless this notion of “man-the-maker” is a useful one for understanding the Orthodox moral vision and the anthropology that supports it. It is a vision that begins with the classical notion of human life as something crafted according to the design of nature. But when nature has been held up to the light of the incarnate Christ it is found to reveal a design far more extraordinary than pagan philosophy could conceive. Transfigured by theandric *energeia*, human nature is revealed to be made for complete freedom through unity with the Source of freedom. It is a freedom that not even the fate-bound gods of Olympus could achieve. Indeed scaling that mountain would be exactly the wrong way to find that freedom. It has already been given, wrapped up in the human body ready to be liberated by concrete

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<sup>220</sup> *The Responsible Self* (New York, Evanston & London: Harper & Row, 1963):131

actions that support spiritual union of the whole person, body and soul, with Divinity. In a word, freedom lies not on some intellectual or existential Olympus but in the human life well-crafted from the raw materials of every-day reality. It bears repeating: the notion of *synergeia* tells us that we are not simply made; we cooperate in our own making through the pursuit of virtue by discipline, a pursuit which leads ultimately to the union with God, *theosis* in which there is nothing but freedom.

In this vision anything that leads away from freedom and toward necessity constitutes a turning from the final goal. And any such turning is a “sin” even when the turning is out of our hands and beyond the current power of our wills to prevent. Such turnings, “involuntary sins,” must still be repented, prayed over, brought to the light through the acceptance of canonical discipline. None of this is to burden us with a sense of failure, but to respond to the awareness of failure we already feel, and to lead us to even greater repentance, prayer, patient discipline. We must, in short, be made sensitive to the need for growth so as not to fall back, like the sinners in Carpus’ vision, into the gaping maws of the freedom’s final death.

Such at any rate is how I see that Orthodox vision from the perspective of the writings of St. John of Damascus, especially considered in light of the polestar of his thought, the “integrity of the natural.” It is at the same time a *moral* and a *spiritual* vision, because in it the moral and spiritual parts of the human being form an integral whole. The great enemy of Damascene’s thought is dualism. He fought it under many guises, Messalianism, Origenism and others. He opposed any attempt to apply an intellectual scalpel to cut away the body from the soul, for the body is *essential* to the work of the soul. The body, in all its gross earthiness, is the way in which the

intellectual and spiritual resources of the human composite work (in cooperation with God), choice by moral choice and step by ascetical step, toward reclaiming all of creation for its ultimate End. This is a scriptural principle, and Damascene owed a special debt to the Antiochian patristic tradition for keeping it theologically alive in the face of various dualist tendencies.

He also found the same idea in his Neoplatonist heritage as he received it from Maximus the Confessor and Pseudo-Dionysius. These also helped reveal the metaphysical mechanism that made possible this creative *synergeia* and which offers a resolution to the problem of freedom and necessity. The key here was the Plotinian “theory of the two acts” and its consequences for the understanding of *energeia* as the externalization of being. All of reality could be conceived as a kind of cosmic energy exchange in which the divine yearning (*eros*) to liberate what is bound fuels the corresponding yearning in the material for freedom. This reciprocal yearning shows that freedom and necessity need not be opposite states, but rather phases in a single movement, a demonstration made concrete in the theandric reality of Jesus Christ and in the eschatological union the saints enjoy with him. This encourages us to regard necessary “sins” as we should any other intrusion of non-freedom: a kind of ontological friction without which there can be no spiritual movement.

What, then, in the end have I proved? I would argue that I have at least shown how the notion of “involuntary sin” is consistent with this remarkably optimistic vision for human flourishing in Christ. It is a vision in which the human capacity for perfection does not end at the borders of the voluntary, but through various elements including prayer, patience, repentance, *askesis*, observance of canons and other forms

of submission to spiritual discipleship, even the parts of human experience currently off-limits to the will can become part of the crafted life. Above all, awareness of these continued frustrations of the “natural will” for the Good can deliver the deep moral and spiritual sensitivity necessary to that craft.

I also think that I have shown the role the notion of involuntary sin might play in helping us understand how Orthodoxy can be said to have a “natural law” tradition. If by natural law is meant the idea that nature constrains human beings by various “hardwired” commands, then the only way involuntary sin could be understood would be as Augustine did: as a sign of the fundamental corruption of that wiring. There would be no point in designing canonical or liturgical responses to such corruption. Involuntary sins would simply be evidence of a nature incapable of perfection, of a nature in need of some extraordinary and super-natural force to effect repairs. If, on the other hand, nature retains its integrity, then involuntary sin might show not the *incapacity* of nature for perfection, but rather its *capacity*, albeit a capacity not yet realized. If that is so, then there is indeed reason to respond to such sin by prayer, penitential canon, liturgy and so forth. If Orthodoxy has a “natural law,” then, it looks forward to a final realization of nature in all its integrity. It is a notion of nature leading us on, not keeping us back. The frequent unease one frequently encounters in Orthodox writers with what is generally meant in western thought as “natural law” seems justified by this accommodation within their tradition of the notion of involuntary sin.

What have I *not* shown? I am especially conscious of having not addressed two questions in particular. The first is whether the Orthodox tradition knows any

meaningful distinction between the notion of “evil” and that of “sin.” Is all evil the result of sin? Is, for example, our undergoing the passion of a hurricane a form of “involuntary sin?” This strikes one as a very strange notion indeed, but it also seems to be a logical extension of Damascene’s Aristotelian understanding of the “involuntary” as arising out of external force. Furthermore, the Orthodox liturgical tradition tends to suggest that natural disasters (a highly significant phrase in light of this study!) are indeed ultimately due to human failure. The service to be read in time of earthquake, for example, assigns responsibility for the disaster to human failings: “the earth is wounded because of us who abide in evil.”<sup>221</sup> This suggests, for example, that the notion of involuntary sin may prove important areas where human beings share responsibility among themselves, such as the environmental crisis. It may also be a way of thinking about a whole range of political and social ills, “corporate sins,” if you like, where it is difficult to measure individual guilt against societal responsibility. It may be that seeing prayer, *askesis* and personal conversion, as at least among the needed responses to such evils may help correct a tendency to assume that since “it’s not my fault” there is no point doing anything in the face of violence, famine, economic injustice and so forth. Evil of this magnitude and ubiquity can render merely principled people hopeless. *Sensitive* people, however, may continue to work for change using another kind of energy than a sense of what is merely “practical.”

The second unanswered question is this: if sin can be “involuntary” can it ever be truly “voluntary”? In this question we hear echoes of an ancient debate. Can a person truly in possession of knowledge of both universals and particulars ever

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<sup>221</sup> *Great Book of Needs*, vol. 4: 170.

choose to do the wrong thing? Socrates would say no; Aristotle seems to think otherwise.<sup>222</sup> What would Damascene say? I think, he would agree with Socrates. The natural will is integrated with Divine Nature and yearns for it. Nothing can extinguish this yearning, and anything that takes us away from it is ultimately an error. But an adequate answer to this question, and the implications of that answer, deserves far more analysis than I can give here.

Finally, returning to the question of what this study has achieved, I believe that I can at least claim to have demonstrated how dangerous any kind of dualism is to the Orthodox moral and spiritual vision. By this I do not mean only the coarse dualism of the Manichee. Any division of reality into opposing camps will render nature dis-integrated. Here is the principal complaint Orthodoxy seems to have with Augustine who was unable to conceive of a final and ontological union between the “I” he knew himself to be and the God in whom he longed to rest. A moral union, yes—aided by grace—but not, for Augustine a “union without confusion” that Orthodoxy holds to be the ultimate end of all human being in Christ.

This quarrel is not simply between Orthodoxy and Augustine, or even Orthodoxy and the West. The tendency toward dualism remains strong *within* the Orthodox Church throughout its history. It is why, for example, Damascene found it necessary to engage polemically with various species of dualist thought. The current criticism by Orthodox theologians of legalism in canonical interpretation, or an individualistic attitude to Church membership are also necessary expressions of this

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<sup>222</sup> Virtues are not all instances of prudence, says Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1144b.18). In other words, true imprudence is really possible; we really can choose to act against self-interest. This does not seem compatible with Damascene’s views on the natural will and the “law of God” being the “law of the mind.”

very important work of exposing and eliminating dualism. It may be that in this a renewed reflection of the notion of involuntary sin along the lines of this study may also contribute to maintaining the Orthodox tradition firm in its vision of natural integrity and the union of Creator with creation.

I have not shown, in other words, what all Orthodox believers mean when they ask for forgiveness of their sins, both voluntary and involuntary. But I have shown, I think, what it can reasonably be thought that their tradition is asking them to mean.

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