

# Maximus the Confessor and John of Damascus on Gnostic Will (γνώμη) in Christ: Clarity and Ambiguity

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For years I have been perplexed as to why Maximus the Confessor, in his articulate christological formulations in the seventh century, ultimately decided that Jesus Christ, as fully human, had only a natural human will (θέλημα φυσική), and so forcefully ruled against the possibility that he also had a “gnomic” (or “deliberative”) will (γνώμη) in the manner of fallen human beings. In the words of Maximus’ own beloved predecessor, Gregory Nazianzen, “what is not assumed is not healed.”<sup>1</sup> Though not alone in this concern, I’ve made a regular pest of myself broaching this issue in numerous patristics conferences (most recently the 2011 Oxford Patristics Conference) anytime an essay on Maximus would even remotely touch on the matter. The answer I get represents a fairly hardened scholarly consensus. Accordingly, Maximus, in working out his understanding of the Chalcedonian definition, still required a certain asymmetry in the composite hypostasis of Christ, since it is the divine hypostasis of the Son who united with and divinized the humanity of Jesus. In this case only a “natural” human will could be truly deified, not a gnostic will prone to vacillation.

I agree with this consensus in general, and it has been strengthened all the more in an excellent recent study by Ian McFarland comparing Maximus’ doctrine of the will with that of Augustine. McFarland has cogently argued the plausibility of Maximus’ denial of γνώμη in Christ as a function of his strong sense that “natural” human will, as modeled in Christ, is not antecedently “constrained” by the will of the divine Creator but a manifestation of the gracious stability of human will in concert with deifying divine grace. Indeed, Christ has effectively liberated human willing from the disastrous illusion of “autonomy” that characterizes human existence after the fall.<sup>2</sup>

And yet Maximus’ ultimate denial of γνώμη in Jesus Christ came with a price, since γνώμη represents the freedom of the will that we fallen human beings actually experience, a freedom *of conscience* that is struggling to become conformed to the true “natural” freedom, or freedom-for-virtue, for which we were created. In my struggle to be fully satisfied with Maximus’ ultimate rejection of γνώμη in Christ,

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1 *Ep.* 101 (PG 37:181C).

2 Ian McFarland, “Naturally and by Grace: Maximus the Confessor on the Operation of the Will,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 58 (2005): 410-33.

I have turned to John of Damascus, who certainly revered Maximus and consistently deferred to his theological judgment, for possible help.

Let me set forth in more detail the grounds for my discontent. As is well known from Maximus' writings, *γνώμη* is a term that opened up a wide variety of meanings and connotations. At one point Maximus, echoed later by the Damascene, claimed to have discovered 28 different biblical and patristic usages of the word, depending on context.<sup>3</sup> Modern lexicons confirm the word's pliability, being variously translated "mind," "will," "purpose," "intention," "inclination," "opinion," "character," and more. But specifically in the seasoned philosophical discussions of human freedom and volition—a broad domain in which Christian writers were articulating precise definitions of the human *will* in relation to conceptions of the soul's deep-seated *desire* and directedness toward appropriate ends—*γνώμη* took on a somewhat more technical sense, though without initially forfeiting its semantic latitude.

Drawing firsthand from Nemesius of Emesa and secondhand from Aristotle,<sup>4</sup> Maximus (followed closely by John of Damascus later on<sup>5</sup>) had constructed a series of component phases through which human volition—*θέλησις*, understood in its native, natural sense as appetitive movement of the soul—translated into concrete action.<sup>6</sup> The will transitions from "wish" (*βούλησις*), expressing an appetite that is both rational and imaginative of those ends that are either within our power (*ἐφ' ἡμῶν*) or not; to the clustered phases of "inquiry" (*ζήτησις*), "consideration" (*σκέψις*), and "deliberation" (*βουλή* or *βούλησις*), where the reasoning soul, induced by an innate desire or appetite, scopes out a projected end; then to the phase of "judgment" (*κρίσις*), where reason determines the appropriate *means* to an end. At this point in the sequence, John Damascene inserts *γνώμη*, "inclination," which Maximus had already defined both as the "deep-seated appetency" (*ὄρεξις ἐνδιάθετος*) from which arises "choice" or else as a "disposition" (*διάθεσις*) toward ends within our power, on which we have "appetively deliberated." The next phase is climactic both for Maximus and John: "choice" or "decision" (*προαίρεσις*) itself, the ultimate composite of antecedent appetite, deliberation, and judgment, committing the soul to a course of action (a means to an end). The last two volitional phases, concomitant with *προαίρεσις*, are "impulsion" (*ὄρμη*), the *overall urge* which, with the mind's consent, moves the soul from wish, through choice, to action; and finally "use" (*χρησις*), the executed action itself, "using" the things that have been the objects of our internal thoughts, thus completing moral ownership of one's choice and deed.

What concerns us is the climactic moment of choice (*προαίρεσις*) itself and more specifically the deep internal relation that Maximus and John establish

3 *Disp. c. Pyrrho* (PG 91:312B-C); cf. John of Damascus, *De fide orth.* 3.14 (PG 94:1045B).

4 See the detailed analysis of R.-A. Gauthier, "Saint Maxime le Confesseur et la psychologie de l'acte humaine," *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale* 21 (1954): 51-100.

5 *De fide orth.* 2.22 (PG 94:944C-945B).

6 In what follows I am referencing Maximus, *Opus. theol. et pol.* 1, PG 91:12C-16C; *Disp. c. Pyrrho*, PhG 91: 293B-C); and John of Damascus, *De fide orthodoxa* 2.22 (PG 94:944A-945C). For detailed analyses, see Gauthier; also Lars Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator: The Theological Anthropology of Maximus the Confessor*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chicago: Open Court, 1995), 218-30; Jean-Claude Larchet, *La divinization de l'homme selon Maxime le Confesseur* (Paris: Cerf, 1996), 135-41; Joseph Farrell, *Free Choice in St. Maximus the Confessor* (South Canaan, PA: St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, 1989), 95-109.

between γνώμη and προαίρεσις as expressing the crux of human free will in both its *appetitive* and *rational* dimensions. At one point Maximus even equates “prohairesic” (προαιρετικόν) and “gnomic” (γνωμικόν) will.<sup>7</sup> In earlier works pre-dating his deep involvement in the Monothelite controversy, Maximus had thoroughly exploited the meaning of γνώμη, depicting it as the particular or hypostatic freedom of individual creatures in their voluntary motion toward God. On the one hand, there is in the cosmos the “structural” or teleological motion (κίνησις) of created beings toward the Creator’s stability, manifested in souls’ natural desire for God and the “natural will” belonging to all created natures. On the other hand, there is that active *appropriation* of freedom, what we learn or know *experientially* as freedom, the very freedom which, though stunted by the fall,<sup>8</sup> has been renewed through baptism<sup>9</sup> and comes to fruition in virtuous choices. Γνώμη is the latter: our “willing surrender” (ἐκχώρησις γνωμικῆ) to God’s activity in us,<sup>10</sup> the conforming of our inclinations and choices, by grace, to the “natural will” that is already predisposed toward God.<sup>11</sup> The very purpose of the incarnation, argues Maximus at one point, is to draw human γνώμη, together with all of human nature, to Christ and his deifying love,<sup>12</sup> such that the ultimate, transfigured state of the cosmos would be characterized by no “gnomic” variance within the universe of individual created beings.<sup>13</sup>

The upshot is that γνώμη, as freedom formed and leavened by experience in the face of the consequences of the fall, plays an enormous role in Maximus’ doctrine of the spiritual progress of the Christian.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the Christian is called to a “divine and angelic γνώμη,” as Maximus indicates in his *Chapters on Love*,<sup>15</sup> and eschatologically to a “gnomic and prohairesic transformation,” as he projects in his *Commentary on Psalm 59*.<sup>16</sup>

What further amplifies this portrait of gnomic will is precisely the *christological* application of it that Maximus would later retract, with John again

7 *Opus. theol. et pol.* 1 (PG 91: 28D). See also Demetrios Bathrellos, *The Byzantine Christ: Person, Nature, and Will in the Christology of St. Maximus the Confessor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 148-9.

8 On the pejorative meaning of γνώμη in connection with the fall, see e.g. *Ad Thal.* 21 (CCSG 7:127-9); *ibid.* 42 (CCSG 22:285); *ibid.* 61 (CCSG 22:89); *Or. dom.* (CCSG 23:55, 69); *Amb.* 4 (PG 91:1044A).

9 *Ad Thal.* 6 (CCSG 7:69-71). Cf. John of Damascus, *De duabus vol.* (PG 95:180B).

10 *Amb.* 7 (PG 91:1076B), trans. Paul M. Blowers and Robert L. Wilken, *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ: Selected Writings from St. Maximus the Confessor* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003), 52.

11 *Or. dom.* (CCSG 23:61). Cf. Philipp Gabriel Renczes, *Agir de Dieu et liberté de l’homme: Recherches sur l’anthropologie théologique de saint Maxime le Confesseur* (Paris: Cerf, 276-7): “Le γνώμη est donc l’instance dont l’homme dispose afin de contribuer volontairement à ce que son mouvement se dirige, avec la grace de Dieu, vers son but divin, la divinization...” (p. 276).

12 *Ep.* 2 (PG 91: 396C, 404C); cf. *Cap. car.* 1.71 (PG 90:976B-C) on how ἀγάπη reconciles the individuated γνώμαι of creatures.

13 *Ad Thal.* 2 (CCSG 7:51).

14 *Cap. car.* 3.25 (PG 90:1024B-C); 4.90 (1069C); *Lib. Asceticus* (PG 90:953B); *Amb.* 10 (PG 91:1116B); *ibid.* 7 (1073C); *Ad Thal.* 64 (CCSG 22:233); *Opus. theol. et pol.* 4 (PG 91:57A-B) See also John Meyendorff, “Free Will in Saint Maximus,” in Andrew Blane, ed., *The Ecumenical World of Orthodox Civilization* (The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1974), 74-5.

15 *Cap. car.* 3.80 (PG 90:1141B).

16 *Exp. in Ps.* 59 (CCSG 23:3).

following his lead. Maximus in some of his earlier works had openly attributed γνώμη (and προαίρεσις as well) to Christ. Most strikingly in his *Commentary on the Lord's Prayer*, he ascribed γνώμη to Christ in expounding how the Savior restored human nature to itself in the context of the Passion. Specifically, Christ's gnomic will demonstrated no vacillation at the prospect of the cross, only the pure resolve that effectively conquered the natural fear of death by "using" that fear virtuously.<sup>17</sup> Maximus depicts Christ as the utterly unique model in which γνώμη and προαίρεσις<sup>18</sup> are already incorruptible and thoroughly conformed to the natural desire and natural will. In him all the stages of deliberation and choice noted above are operative in perfection.

Maximus' "great reversal," however, began in the Monothelite controversy in the 640s, when, having tolerated the different nuances of gnomic will, he settled on the exclusively pejorative definition of it as the fallen and ambivalent will which could not possibly have been functioning in Christ's composite hypostasis. The reversal was gradual. As late as 642 Maximus was still ostensibly contemplating a perfected γνώμη in Jesus, but by the mid-640s he had definitely excluded it, both in his *Opuscula* and in his *Disputation with Pyrrhus*. We are helped here by the excellent recent monograph on Maximus' Christology by Demetrios Bathrellos, which outlines the fuller reasons for his reversal, and confirms the fairly broad scholarly consensus of which I spoke earlier.<sup>19</sup> Capital in Maximus' mind is the fact that γνώμη is a particularized "mode" of willing,<sup>20</sup> grounded in an individual human hypostasis. In Christ, however, there is no such hypostasis; there is only his *composite* hypostasis, the hypostasis of the divine Son perfectly united to Jesus' humanity, within which "particularized" human choices and acts come about solely through his natural human will (θέλημα φυσική), which is completely deified.<sup>21</sup> Maximus illustrates this with respect to a cherished biblical text, the account of Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane, to which he repeatedly turned during the Monothelite controversy. The deified natural will, not γνώμη, is the subject of the "Agony" prayer and the agent of concurrence with the will of the Father. This deified will alone, in its capacity to stabilize "natural" human passions and instincts, can help us with our human fear of death, not a Savior who gnomically "deliberates" or calculates, and who is liable to lack resolve and to shrink from the "cup" of suffering that is handed him.

Fair enough. As Maximus makes clear, he is trying to avoid resurrecting a "Nestorian" Christ, a "mere man" (ψιλὸς ἄνθρωπος), a human *hypostasis* united to God only through γνώμη. But here is the rub—and I am certainly not the first to point it out. Does this reversal in his Christology, this denial of γνώμη in Christ, do justice to the drama of Gethsemane? If, as Maximus indicates, the Christ of the Passion has, in volunteering himself to die, "used" fear itself in a new mode (τρόπος),<sup>22</sup> redeeming those "natural" passions that are intrinsic to human beings and

17 *Disp. c. Pyrrho* (PG 91:297B); cf. also *Or. dom.* (CCSG 23:34-5); *Opus. theol. et pol.* 7 (PG 91:80D).

18 Cf. *Ad Thal.* 21 (CCSG 7:129-33); *ibid.* 42 (285).

19 Bathrellos, *The Byzantine Christ*, 148-62.

20 *Disp. c. Pyrrho* (PG 91:308D).

21 Cf. *Opus. theol. et pol.* 7 (PG 91:80D-81D); *ibid.* 3 (45B-49A).

22 *Disp. c. Pyrrho* (PG 91:297D-300A).

a part of their deep-seated inclinations and aversions, can he do so without himself experiencing the *vacillation* informed by the love of life and fear of death? And on a grander scale, can a Christ without *γνώμη* truly redeem the tragically individuated *γνώμαι* of created beings and thus achieve the “gnomic” reconciliation that Maximus earlier projects as a universal goal?

Lars Thunberg plays down the problem, suggesting that the perfected *γνώμη* of Christ in Maximus’ earlier works approximates Christ’s deified natural will in his later anti-Monothelite compositions. By contrast, Raymund Schwager, in his prolific study of the development of Christian understandings of atonement, *Der wunderbare Tausch*, sees Maximus’ denial of *γνώμη* in Christ as the critically tragic flaw in the Confessor’s whole soteriology. If “what is not assumed in not healed,” how can Christ redeem the individuated *γνώμαι* of sinners, the “deliberative” process that informs free choice in each one?<sup>23</sup> Other scholars, like Basil Studer, simply assume that this is a dilemma that Maximus has calculatedly chosen to leave hanging because of the higher stakes of christological orthodoxy.<sup>24</sup>

At last I have looked to John of Damascus as a possible aid in resolving this problem. The question, however, is whether John clarifies the matter or simply adds to the semantic confusion. As I have already noted, John follows Maximus very closely in virtually every consideration of the nature of human willing and the structure of volition in Christ. In two passages in his treatise *On the Orthodox Faith*, one of which directly depends on Maximus’ *Disputation with Pyrrhus*, John echoes Maximus’ categorical denial of gnomic will (*τὸ γνωμικὸν θέλημα*) in Christ and reaffirms the perfect deification of his natural human will by the divine will.<sup>25</sup> In the first of these passages, however, John seems to equivocate. Having just denied gnomic will in Christ, he defers to the fact that within the Trinity, nevertheless, there is one *γνώμη*, rooted in each of the three divine hypostases, but without variance of inclination with respect to the object of their willing. John in turn applies this principle christologically. If *γνώμη* can be understood narrowly in terms of being disposed toward a common end or object willed (*τὸ θελητόν*), it is possible to redeem the presence of a gnomic will shared by the two natural wills, divine and human, within Christ’s composite hypostasis.<sup>26</sup>

In his recent monograph on the Damascene, Andrew Louth notes the possible confusion here, but simply claims that John is reinforcing Maximus’ distinction between natural and gnomic will in Christ.<sup>27</sup> In my judgment, however, John’s apparent “reversal” is astonishing in its own right, for, in the spirit of Maximus’ recognition of the ambiguity of *γνώμη*, John refuses Maximus’ ultimate denial of its christological redeemability and once again exploits that semantic ambiguity for the

23 *Der wunderbare Tausch: Zur Geschichte und Deutung der Erlösungslehre* (Munich: Kösel, 1986), 141-7.

24 See Basil Studer, “Zur Soteriologie des Maximus,” in Felix Heinzer and Christoph Schönborn, eds., *Maximus Confessor: Actes du symposium sur Maxime le Confesseur, Fribourg, 2-5 septembre 1980* (Fribourg: Éditions Universitaires, 1982), 245-6.

25 *De fide orth.* 2.22 (PG 94:948A); *ibid.* 3.14 (1044B-C).

26 *Ibid.* 2.22 (PG 94:948B-C).

27 Andrew Louth, *St. John Damascene: Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 139.

sake of enriching the understanding of Christ's volition. In an age when, as Averil Cameron has argued, terminological precision is everything,<sup>28</sup> this is enormously risky. Undoubtedly John, however, did not see himself dissenting from Maximus. To equate γνώμη with the *willed objective* of Christ's composite hypostasis is basically in sync with Maximus' own assertion, citing Cyril of Alexandria, that in the agony of Gethsemane Christ showed that he willed the same thing—τὸ θελητόν—as the Father.<sup>29</sup> In his third *Opusculum*, moreover, Maximus captured the same idea deferring to the *scriptural* terminology whereby Christ demonstrated the Father's βουλή, or ultimate purpose (Eph. 1:11; cf. Acts 2:23).<sup>30</sup>

Further on in his treatise, John reopens the discussion on γνώμη. His conservatism persists, for "literally," he says, we must deny γνώμη in Christ in the sense of deliberating on the good. Yet he once again states, this time in negative terms, the oneness of γνώμη between Christ's human and divine wills within the composite hypostasis: "...it was not in γνώμη that the Lord's two wills differed from each other, but in natural power."<sup>31</sup> Stated positively, their γνώμη—as a commonly willed objective (τὸ θελητόν)—was one and the same.

In the passage immediately following, John reiterates Maximus' positive evaluation of Ps-Dionysius the Areopagite's famous principle of the "new theandric energy" in Christ.<sup>32</sup> Appropriately nuanced, because ἐνέργεια is a function of *nature*, there cannot technically be one ἐνέργεια in Christ, but there is a new "monadic mode" (μοναδικὸς τρόπος) in which the deified human ἐνέργεια is utterly at one with the divine ἐνέργεια.<sup>33</sup> John then simply transfers this principle from the level of the natures/energies to that of the hypostasis itself. Christ's composite person has one *willed objective*, one γνώμη. Even if John has opted to preserve this troubled term in a highly restrictive sense, no other term could better convey the mystery by which the divine freedom had infused and "liberated" human freedom in Christ. Even if there is no process of calculation, no forming of an opinion about the good, there is in Christ's person something of a sublime "process" in which the divine will shapes and forms the human will so as to perform an individual human's actions to a common purpose in the economy of salvation and deification.<sup>34</sup> John, it seems, is ultimately more willing than Maximus to tolerate some ambiguity and risk some confusion for the sake of a new clarity. Since he lived at a far greater historical remove from the heat

28 See her learned essays "Models of the Past in the Late Sixth Century: The *Life* of the Patriarch Eutychius;" "Disputations, Polemical Literature and the Formation of Opinion in the Early Byzantine Period;" and "Byzantium and the Past in the Seventh Century: The Search for Redefinition," all reprinted in her *Changing Cultures in Early Byzantium*, Variorum Collected Studies 536 (Aldershot, U.K. and Brookfield, VT.: Variorum, 1996).

29 Maximus, *Opus. theol. et pol.* 15 (PG 91: 165A), citing Cyril Alex., *Comm. in Joannem* (frag.).

30 *Opus. theol. et pol.* 3 (PG 91:48B-C).

31 John, *De fide orth.* 3.18 (PG 94:1076D).

32 Ps-Dionysius, *Ep.* 4 (PTS 36:161); Maximus, *Amb.* 5 (CCSG 48:29-34).

33 Maximus, *Amb.* 5 (PG 91:1045D-1060D, and esp. 1052A-D).

34 Maximus, *Opus. theol. et pol.* 7 (PG 91:80D). See Bathrellos, *The Byzantine Christ*, 148-53; cf. Vladimir Lossky, *An Introduction to Orthodox Theology* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press), 107, who argues that Maximus himself believed still in "gnomic" will in Christ solely as the presence of the divine freedom "kenotically" operative within him. The statement may better be applied to John!

of the Monothelite Controversy, we can understand the Damascene's confidence in arguing this way.

Returning, however, to my original dilemma—the absence from Christ of what we would normally acknowledge as “gnomic will,” i.e. the appetitive and decision-making process known to human beings in their fallen state, John of Damascus really provides no resolution. He seems to concur with Maximus in projecting that ultimately only the deified natural human will of Christ provides the model by which individuated gnomic wills of fallen creatures will be restored and deified, only with the added nuance that their reconciliation will entail conformity to that *γνώμη* which is the resolute purpose of Christ's composite person. Even if John ultimately errs on Maximus' side, however, he presents us with a fascinating exercise in reopening the discussion of the highly contentious christological vocabulary that descended from the Monothelite Controversy.